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Australia's Humanitarian Program: a quick guide to the statistics since 1947

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Australia has a long [history](#) of accepting refugees and other humanitarian entrants from all parts of the globe, including those in need of assistance during and immediately after World War II. Since 1945, when the first federal immigration portfolio was established to administer Australia's post-war migration program, over 800,000 refugees and displaced persons have [settled](#) in Australia. However, it was not until Indochinese asylum seekers, fleeing conflict during the Vietnam War, began to arrive by boat that the Australian Government developed a specific refugee policy. Australia's first planned [Humanitarian Program](#) designed to deal with refugee and humanitarian issues, including the determination of onshore protection claims, was subsequently established by the Fraser Government in 1977.

Since then, permanent migrants have entered Australia via one of two distinct programs—the Migration Program for skilled and family migrants or the Humanitarian Program for refugees and those in refugee-like situations. The Australian Government allocates places, or quotas, each year for people wanting to migrate permanently to Australia under these two programs. Annual statistics on [Migration](#) and [Humanitarian](#) Program 'outcomes' (visa grants) published by the Immigration Department since the 1970s, provide the most accurate source of data on the number of people granted visas to migrate to Australia.

It is important to understand that there are two main components of Australia's [Humanitarian Program](#)—offshore and onshore:

- the offshore component of the Humanitarian Program offers resettlement in Australia to refugees and humanitarian entrants from overseas under two categories. Most offshore refugees are referred to Australia by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and are formally accepted and resettled under the 'Refugee' category. These entrants have been assessed and accepted as refugees under Refugee Convention criteria. The Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) also offers resettlement to those offshore who, while not necessarily being refugees, face human rights abuses in their home country and have a connection with Australia. Applicants must have a sponsor (e.g. a permanent resident, Australian citizen or organisation). Applications from family members of people already in Australia are referred to as 'split family'.
- the onshore component of the Humanitarian Program offers protection to people who have arrived in Australia, lodged an asylum claim, and been granted protection. Onshore humanitarian entrants may have been found to be refugees under Refugee Convention criteria or may otherwise engage Australia's protection obligations under other human rights conventions.

This quick guide includes humanitarian entrant estimates between 1947–48 and 1976–77 (provided to the Parliamentary Library by the Department of Immigration in 2001) and Humanitarian Program visa grants since 1977–78. For more detail specifically on Australia's Migration Program see [Migration to Australia: a quick guide to the statistics](#).

Table 1: Refugee and humanitarian entrants by category since 1947–48

Year	Assisted refugees* (estimated)	Unassisted refugees* (estimated)	Total
1947–48 to 1974–75	264 053**	33 000	297 053

Year	Refugee (offshore)	Special Humanitarian (offshore)	Special Assistance Category (offshore)	Protection Visas (onshore)	Safe Haven	Total	Government planning figures
1975–76	4374					4374	
1976–77	8124					8124	
1977–78	9326					9326	
1978–79	12 750	700				13 450	
1979–80	17 677	2277				19 954	
1980–81	20 795	1675		75		22 545	
1981–82	20 195	1722				21 917	
1982–83	16 193	861				17 054	
1983–84	12 426	3059				15 485	
1984–85	9520	4687				14 207	
1985–86	7832	3868				11 700	
1986–87	5857	5434				11 291	
1987–88	5514	5878				11 392	
1988–89	3574	7735				11 309	
1989–90	1238	10 451		726		12 415	
1990–91	1497	8287		1500		11 284	
1991–92	2424	4360	2363	2862		12 009	
1992–93	2893	2392	5657	903		11 845	
1993–94	4315	2524	5840	1391		14 070	
1994–95	3992	3675	5545	1646		14 858	
1995–96	4643	3499	6910	1200		16 252	13 000
1996–97	3334	2470	3848	2250		11 902	12 000
1997–98	4010	4636	1821	1588		12 055	12 000
1998–99	3988	4348	1190	1830		11 356	12 000
1999–00	3802	3051	649	2458	5900***	15 860	12 000
2000–01	3997	3116	879	5741		13 733	12 000
2001–02	4160	4258	40	3891		12 349	12 000
2002–03	4376	7280		869		12 525	12 000
2003–04	4134	7669		2020		13 823	12 000
2004–05	5511	6585		1082		13 178	13 000

2005–06	6022	6736		1386		14 144	13 000
2006–07	6003	5313		1701		13 017	13 000
2007–08	6004	5110		1900		13 014	13 000
2008–09	6499	4586		2417	5***	13 507	13 500
2009–10	6003	3233		4534		13 770	13 750
2010–11	5998	2973		4828		13 799	13 750
2011–12	6004	714		7041		13 759	13 750 (revised from 14 750 October 2011)
2012–13	12 012	503		7504		20 019	20 000 (revised from 13 750 August 2012)
2013–14	6501	4515		2752		13 768	13 750 (revised from 20 000 September 2013)

Sources:

- Data on refugee and humanitarian entrants from 1947–48 to 1976–77 provided by the Department of Immigration to the Parliamentary Library in 2001.
- Data on Humanitarian Program visas granted since 1977–78 sourced from ministerial press releases (various years); and Department of Immigration [annual reports](#) and [Australia's refugee and humanitarian program](#), (fact sheet 60—various years). For more historical background and statistics see E Karlsen and J Phillips, [Seeking asylum: Australia's humanitarian program](#), Background note, Parliamentary Library, 2011.

Notes:

*The majority of these refugees and displaced persons were 'Assisted', that is provided with passage and other Government support. A small number were permitted to enter and settle as unassisted migrants.

**Includes an estimated 170,700 displaced persons (DPs) who arrived between 1947 and 1954. Displaced persons included those who had been forced to leave their country of origin, but who were not necessarily considered to be refugees, such as prisoners of war or slave labourers.

***Includes 5900 Safe Haven visas, comprising 4000 grants to Kosovars offshore and 1900 grants to East Timorese onshore; and another 5 Safe Haven visas issued in 2008–09 to people living in IOM facilities in Indonesia for five years or more (Department of Immigration, *Annual report 2008–09*).

The increase in humanitarian entrants in the late 1980s and early 1990s reflected a Government decision to allow Chinese nationals affected by the Tiananmen Square incident to remain in Australia.

The increase in refugee entrants in 2012–13 was due to a Government decision to increase the Humanitarian Program to 20,000 in that program year.

The increase in the SHP category in 2002–03 was partly due to the cessation of the Special Assistance Category in 2001 which was then absorbed into the Special Humanitarian Program.

Glossary:

Refugee = an individual found to be a refugee under the UN 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) = introduced in 1981 for people who have suffered discrimination or other violations of their human rights, but are not refugees under the terms of the Refugees Convention.

Special Assistance Category (SAC) = introduced in 1992 to assist groups in vulnerable positions overseas with close links to Australia that did not fit into traditional humanitarian categories (closed in 2001 and now included in the SHP category).

Safe Haven = a temporary Humanitarian Stay (subclass 449) visa created in 1999 to offer safe haven in a humanitarian crisis (most notably for Kosovars and East Timorese).

Table 2: Migration and humanitarian program visa grants compared since 1984–85

Year	Migration Program				Humanitarian Program	Humanitarian as percentage of total migration and humanitarian intake
	Family	Skill	Special Eligibility	Total		
1984–85	44 200	10 100	200	54 500	14 207	20.7
1985–86	63 400	16 200	400	80 000	11 700	12.8
1986–87	72 600	28 500	600	101 700	11 291	10.0
1987–88	79 500	42 000	600	122 100	11 392	8.5
1988–89	72 700	51 200	800	124 700	11 309	8.3
1989–90	66 600	52 700	900	120 200	12 415	9.4
1990–91	61 300	49 800	1 200	112 200	11 284	9.1
1991–92	55 900	41 400	1 700	98 900	12 009	10.8
1992–93	43 500	21 300	1 400	67 900	11 845	14.9
1993–94	43 200	18 300	1 300	62 800	14 070	18.3
1994–95	44 500	30 400	1 600	76 500	14 858	16.3
1995–96	56 700	24 100	1 700	82 500	16 252	16.5
1996–97	44 580	27 550	1 730	73 900	11 902	13.9
1997–98	31 310	34 670	1 110	67 100	12 055	15.2
1998–99	32 040	35 000	890	67 900	11 356	14.3
1999–00	32 000	35 330	2 850	70 200	15 860	18.4
2000–01	33 470	44 730	2 420	80 610	13 733	14.6
2001–02	38 090	53 520	1 480	93 080	12 349	11.7
2002–03	40 790	66 050	1 230	108 070	12 525	10.4
2003–04	42 230	71 240	890	114 360	13 823	10.8
2004–05	41 740	77 880	450	120 060	13 178	9.9
2005–06	45 290	97 340	310	142 930	14 144	9.0
2006–07	50 080	97 920	200	148 200	13 017	8.1
2007–08	49 870	108 540	220	158 630	13 014	7.6
2008–09	56 366	114 777	175	171 318	13 507	7.3
2009–10	60 254	107 868	501	168 623	13 770	7.5
2010–11	54 543	113 725	417	168 685	13 799	7.6
2011–12	58 604	125 755	639	184 998	13 759	6.9
2012–13	60 185	128 973	842	190 000	20 019	9.5
2013–14	61 112	128 550	338	190 000	13 768	6.7

Sources: Department of Immigration, [Migration Program](#) reports, [annual reports](#) and [Australia's refugee and humanitarian program](#), fact sheet 60 (various years). For further historical background and statistics see J Phillips, M Klapdor and J Simon-Davies, [Migration to Australia since Federation: a guide to the statistics](#), Background note, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 27 August 2010; and J Phillips, [Migration to Australia: a quick guide to the statistics](#), Quick guide, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 14 May 2014.



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