

## DISRUPTIONS AND NEW PATHWAYS INTO STUDENT MOBILITY

# Black African Refugee Students in an Era of American Isolationism

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This article examines the racialized transformation of U.S. refugee policy and its consequences for higher education, focusing on Black African refugee students. It argues that exclusionary federal actions marginalize displaced populations and erode longstanding humanitarian commitments. While universities remain contested but critical sites of resistance, these policies have compromised the country's moral authority. Intensifying U.S. ethno-political isolationism is undermining its global reputation as a leader in higher education.

Polarization has become a defining characteristic of contemporary politics. Globally, the ideological center has shifted to the right in many countries following the 2024 electoral cycle. The battleground has extended to previously inviolable arenas of policy making in democracies, like those associated with the protection and resettlement of refugees, while coinciding with unprecedented humanitarian crises. The United Nations Human Rights Council has projected that 2.9 million refugees will need resettlement in 2025 due to protracted conflict, climate change, and economic collapse. Many previously welcoming nations in Europe, stoked by right-wing rhetoric and xenophobia, have shifted toward restrictive national asylum policies, in contrast to the European Union pact on migration and asylum. Nowhere, however, has the shift been as abrupt or damaging as in the United States.

### Policy Transformations in the United States

In the initial months of the second Trump administration, federal policy shifts significantly curtailed refugee resettlement efforts, resulting in long-term impacts that will require years of strategic recovery and rebuilding. In January 2025, through an executive order titled “Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program,” the president claimed refugee entry as inimical to national interests, effectively halting a resettlement program that has been in operation since the 1980 Refugee Act. The executive order suspended decisions on pending applications, canceled all flights, and failed to establish any exemption process, leaving many rigorously vetted refugees stranded without recourse.

As part of a broader humanitarian aid freeze, the US State Department suspended funding to organizations that provide housing, job assistance, and other essential services to resettled refugees. Using these savings, the Trump Administration has proposed a Department of Remigration to expel and repatriate so-called “nonassimilated” migrants, primarily those from Africa

and the Middle East, echoing concepts used by European nationalist groups in place of “ethnic cleansing.” This exemplifies a racialized political strategy aimed at inculcating normative ideals of the “desirable” migrant.

### Racializing Refugee Resettlement

The executive order asserts that the United States should admit only those refugees who are capable of “assimilating” into US culture. Yet this requirement overlooks the structural and systemic barriers that make assimilation, already a contested and racialized concept, exceptionally difficult. Language barriers, cultural dislocation, economic precarity, and reduced access to education all impede integration, and the withdrawal of federal funding for refugee resettlement services has further intensified these challenges. Most significantly, however, the capacity to assimilate is shaped, and often constrained, by racism.

Recent estimates indicate that approximately 4.3 million Black immigrants, many of whom are refugees, live in the United States. Until recent shifts under the Trump Administration, the number of Black migrants entering the United States had been rising steadily. For instance, *The New York Times* reported that in 2022, US border security apprehended 13,406 African immigrants at the southern border; by 2023, that number had climbed to 58,462. In 2024, more than a third of admitted refugees came from African nations, primarily those in Central and Eastern Africa, where ongoing civil conflicts have displaced millions of Black Africans.

Despite this demographic reality, in May 2025, the only refugees permitted entry into the United States were 59 white Afrikaners from South Africa. This group did not meet the refugee eligibility standards under the prior policy and was admitted through an extrajudicial process. These shifts in refugee resettlement policy suggest that the program is no longer solely a humanitarian tool but is increasingly being leveraged as a mechanism to engineer an ethno-political state, privileging

certain racial and cultural groups in ways that reflect broader nationalist and exclusionary agendas.

## Positioning of Black African Refugee Students

The logic of exclusion evident in recent United States refugee policy is mirrored in higher education, where government actions, such as restrictions on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives, ICE (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement) raids on campuses, and state-level policies limiting access, have converged to undermine educational opportunities for racialized and marginalized populations. In this increasingly restrictive environment, Black African refugee students face compounded risks shaped by race, immigration status, and unfamiliarity with the United States educational systems. As a result, they often encounter barriers to admission, limited financial and academic support, and institutional environments unprepared to meet their needs. Research confirms that systemic discrimination, marginalization, and fears of violence significantly impede refugee students' academic success and well-being.

While Black student enrollment has grown significantly, these gains obscure the specific experiences of African refugees. Due to inconsistent data practices, institutions rarely track refugee status, country of origin, or migration history within racial categories. This lack of disaggregated data renders Black African refugee students invisible in policy, programming, and research. Their experiences, shaped by forced displacement, disrupted schooling, trauma, and transnational family separation, remain largely unacknowledged in higher education discourse and further contribute to their invisibility.

The isolation of Black African refugee students is intensified by recent immigration policies that limit movement. In June 2025, the Trump Administration expanded travel bans to 19 countries, including 10 in Africa. These policies have not only blocked prospective students from entering the United States but have left those already here all but immobilized. Fear of being denied reentry or facing deportation deters students from international travel, severing family connections, and restricts participation in study abroad or research programs. As they seek educational opportunities, they do so under the constant threat of exclusion.

## Universities as Sites of Resistance

Despite hostile policies, universities remain necessary sites of resistance. Through contested commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion, many continue providing refuge, resources, and advocacy for displaced and marginalized populations. Faculty, staff, and student initiatives challenge exclusion by creating spaces that affirm the identities and needs of threatened

communities. For Black African refugee students, these spaces are both arenas of struggle and opportunity, where they confront systemic barriers while building connections, community, and asserting their right to education. This duality highlights the complex role of higher education in both perpetuating and resisting exclusion.

Often driven by student demands, many colleges and universities in the United States have committed to being safe places for immigrant and refugee students. Rutgers University, Wesleyan University, Swarthmore College, and Portland State University, among many others, have declared themselves safe havens or adopted the label of "sanctuary campuses." These institutions often pledge noncooperation with ICE, provide confidentiality protections for immigrant students, safeguard student data, advocate for the rights of immigrant students, and make commitments to offer legal support.

However, the term "sanctuary" is politically fraught, due to concerns that using such a title will draw unwanted attention, prompting some institutions to avoid the label even as they enact policies that resemble the sanctuary movement in practice. In so doing, these campuses navigate a precarious balancing act, offering a measure of safety to and solidarity with vulnerable students, while contending with legal ambiguity and potential political backlash. As a result, these declarations serve not only as protective factors but also as symbols of institutional values and resistance in an increasingly polarized landscape.

## Global Reputation At Risk

As immigration policies grow increasingly racialized, especially targeting African and Global South populations, the United States risks deeply undermining its historic role as a global leader in higher education. In the first six months of 2025, more than 200 Fulbright awards to US scholars were rescinded, millions of dollars in federal funding for international university partnerships were withdrawn, and over 1,000 international student visas were canceled. Such actions will weaken vital research collaborations, stifle innovation, and diminish the United States' moral authority on the global stage.

The decline in influence will not result from a lack of institutional capacity or academic excellence, but rather from government actions that contradict the humanitarian values the United States once championed. This erosion of global engagement is not incidental, but intentional—a strategy seemingly aligned with a broader isolationist agenda that seeks to consolidate power by limiting international exchange, suppressing dissenting knowledge systems, and reasserting a racialized vision of national identity.

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