



A GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE

Estimated Torture Survivor Prevalence Among Refugees, Asylees and other forced migrants in the United States

Based on a rapid review of research published 2016-2026



The Center for Victims of Torture

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) provides direct mental health and physical rehabilitation services to survivors of torture and other forms of trauma in the United States and internationally. CVT also strengthens the capacity of local rehabilitation and justice-sector providers, conducts evaluation and research activities, and advocates for policies that prevent torture, advance human rights, and promote accountability for atrocities.

Approach to Determining Prevalence Rate

CVT conducted a rapid review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2016 and 2026 to update estimates of torture prevalence among refugees, asylees, asylum seekers, and other forced migrants in the United States. Building on a similar assessment conducted in 2015, targeted database searches were used to identify and synthesize relevant studies reporting torture prevalence. The review was intended to provide an updated synthesis of key studies in the last 10 years (in the end, leaning heavily on one systematic review), rather than a comprehensive review of all published literature.

PREVALENCE

An estimated 27% of refugees, asylees and other forced migrants in the U.S. and other high income countries have experienced torture.

A systematic review of 41 studies involving 12,020 forced migrants in high-income countries, including nine studies conducted in the United States, found a median prevalence of torture of 27% across studies reporting primary torture survivorship. Prevalence estimates varied substantially across studies, with the range observed in U.S. studies closely mirroring that reported internationally. Among studies using broader definitions that included witnessing torture and other forms of secondary torture exposure, the median prevalence increased to 39% (Sigvardsson et al., 2016).

***Interpretations and Limitations:** Prevalence estimates should be interpreted cautiously because the included studies used differing definitions and methods for identifying torture survivors and were conducted primarily among selected refugee, forced-migrant, community, or clinical populations rather than nationally representative samples. As a result, estimates provide an evidence-informed indication of the potential prevalence of torture among forced migrants but should not be interpreted as precise national estimates. Additionally, due to underreporting, systemic denial by states, and the hidden nature of the crime, the true prevalence of torture is likely to be higher than official reports. Furthermore, estimates derived from high income countries do not reflect the prevalence of torture in low and middle income countries.*

Estimated Number of Torture Survivors in the United States

Available U.S. administrative data indicate that more than 3.9 million asylum and other protection-related cases and applications were pending as of September 2025. When considered alongside the substantial numbers of refugees, asylees, and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) beneficiaries residing in the U.S., these data suggest that at least **5 million individuals with forced migration-related protection needs were living in the country in 2025**. Based on multiple administrative data sources (DHS OHSS; Migration Policy Institute), this figure is used as an evidence-informed denominator for estimating torture survivors currently residing in the United States. **Applying a literature-derived torture prevalence estimate of 27% suggests that more than 1.3 million individuals living in the U.S. may have experienced torture.** This estimate should be interpreted with caution, but suggests a substantial population of torture survivors who may benefit from specialized rehabilitation and support services.

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