

Factsheet

THE COST OF AUSTRALIA'S ASYLUM AND REFUGEE POLICIES: A SOURCE GUIDE

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The exact financial cost of Australia's asylum seeker policy can be very difficult to establish. This is because expenditure ranges across a number of government programs and portfolios. Sources detailing expenditure in this area of policy are listed below.

How much does it cost to detain asylum seekers?

According to figures compiled by the [Refugee Council of Australia](#) and published in March 2019, in the previous financial year the annual cost of detention per person was as follows:

- more than \$573,000 a year to hold an asylum seeker in offshore detention;
- more than \$346,000 to hold them in detention in Australia;
- \$103,343 for an asylum seeker to live in community detention in Australia; and
- \$10,221 for an asylum seeker to live in the community on a bridging visa while their claim is processed

Other resources

In 2016 UNICEF Australia and Save the Children published a report titled '[At What Cost?](#)' outlining the human, financial and reputational costs of Australia's asylum seeker policies. This report stated that Australia's policy of onshore and offshore detention, and of [turning back boats](#), had cost [\\$9.6 billion](#) between 2013 and 2016.

In April 2014, the National Commission of Audit [reported](#) that between 2009-10 and 2013-14 spending on the detention and processing of asylum seekers who arrived by boat increased from \$118.4 million per year to \$3.3 billion per year.

A 2015 [report](#) by the International Detention Coalition on alternatives to detention found that Australia spends [twice as much](#) detaining an asylum seeker onshore than the United States, Canada, or countries within Europe, at an estimated \$655 per person per day. A 2011 study indicated that the cost of mental health care over the course of one person's lifetime can [increase considerably – by up to 50% more than the average person, or \\$25,000](#) – if that person has been held for a lengthy period in immigration detention.

Some additional details on expenditure for individual detention centres, both onshore and offshore, can be found through Senate Estimates [transcripts and related documents](#), and

through [federal budget](#) papers. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Library has a [guide](#) to terminology and concepts in the Budget, and a [publication](#) outlining costs of asylum policy.

Reports from committee inquiries relating to asylum policy may include references to the cost of services or facilities. Examples include:

- Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network, [2012 report](#);
- Select Committee on the Recent Allegations relating to Conditions and Circumstances at the Regional Processing Centre on Nauru, [2015 report](#); and
- Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Incident at the Manus Island Detention Centre from 16 to 18 February 2014, [2014 report](#)

What economic contribution do refugees make to a community?

Studies have shown that refugees can bring material, cultural and demographic benefits to the communities in which they settle. While refugees may find it difficult to get jobs initially, over time their labour participation rate increases and they can make a significant economic contribution. This contribution can be facilitated by appropriate policy responses. Studies examining the economic contribution of refugees are listed below.

Australian resources

- Deloitte Access Economics found that if Australia's annual humanitarian resettlement program was gradually increased over a five-year period to 44,000 people per year, this would boost the nation's economy and sustain 'on average an additional 35,000 full-time equivalent jobs' annually for the next 50 years. The study, titled [Economic and Social Impact of Increasing Australia's Humanitarian Intake](#) (2019) was commissioned by Oxfam Australia.
- National Centre for Longitudinal Data found the vast majority of newly resettled refugees are literate in their own language and just over half understood spoken English on arrival: [Building a New Life in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Humanitarian Migrants, initial findings](#), September 2015
- A large study commissioned by the Department of Immigration found that refugees are a young and entrepreneurial cohort: G. Hugo, [A Significant Contribution: the economic, social and civic contributions of first and second generation humanitarian entrants: summary of findings](#), Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011
- A study of Karen refugees in the Victorian town of Nhill found their resettlement helped address labour shortages and demographic decline, and boosted the local economy by \$41.5m: AMES & Deloitte Access Economics, [Small Towns. Big Returns: economic and social impact of the Karen resettlement in Nhill](#), March 2015.
- There is as yet no evidence that refugees pose a net cost to the host community over the long-term: R. Parsons, [Assessing the economic contribution of refugees in Australia](#), Multicultural Development Association, 2013
- Those who arrive in Australia under the Humanitarian Program have been found to be more entrepreneurial than other migrants: Australian Bureau of Statistics, [Linking Migrant Settlement Records to Personal Income Tax Data](#), Report on Personal Income of Migrants, Experimental, Australia, 2015

International resources

- [*Refugees Work: A Humanitarian Investment that Yields Economic Dividends*](#), a 2016 Tent Foundation and Open Political Economy Network report, shows that investing one Euro in welcoming refugees can yield nearly two Euros in benefits in five years.
- [*The Refugee Surge in Europe: Economic Challenges*](#), a 2016 study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), finds that if appropriate policies are implemented – particularly facilitating labour market integration – refugees can make a lasting positive contribution to economic growth.
- A 2014 study from the University of Oxford Refugee Studies Centre, [*Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions*](#) critically examines five myths about the economics of hosting refugees using qualitative and quantitative data.
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has found that migrants contribute positively to three key areas: labour markets, the public purse and economic growth. See [*Is migration good for the economy?*](#)
- The German Institute for Economic Research (DIW) released a 2015 report called [*Integrating refugees: A long-term, worthwhile investment*](#).