

Make Me Smart September 28, 2021 transcript

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Marielle Segarra: Hi, I'm Marielle Segarra in for Molly Wood. Welcome back to Make Me Smart, where none of us is as smart as all of us.

Kai Ryssdal: Marielle, it's been so long! I know, right? Well, you've been doing all kinds of other stuff. I'm Kai Ryssdal, it is Tuesday today, our deep dive into a single topic. And we're talking today about the refugee system in this country. It is confusing, it is dense, it is 40, 50 something years old, and it needs a little explaining of who gets to come here, what circumstances they get to come here under, and then what happens once they get here. It's a, it's a big, big deal.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah, I mean, right, after the Vietnam War and the resettlement of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese citizens, Congress created this formal process to help refugees come to America, it passed the 1980 Refugee Act which defined a refugee as a person with a well founded fear of persecution. And then fast forward to today, the US is in the process of resettling 10s of 1000s of Afghans. So we're gonna check in on how that resettlement effort is going. But we're also gonna take a look at the US refugee system more broadly and some of the discrepancies within it because we're resettling Afghans but we're also turning away a lot of Haitians and Central Americans at the southern border.

Kai Ryssdal: Krish O'Mara Vignarajah is the President and CEO of Lutheran immigration and refugee services. They're in the Baltimore, Washington DC area. They're a nonprofit that helps resettle Afghans, and has been helping resettle migrants and refugees in the United States for decades. Now, Kris, thanks so much for coming on.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Thanks for having me.

Kai Ryssdal: Could you help us understand just as a way to get some ground truth here what it means when somebody is a refugee versus an asylum seeker? And then also just because it's been in the news with the Afghans, a special immigrant visa holder, right, those three categories?

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Sure. So a refugee versus an asylum seeker, the reasons why they may be migrating are very similar in terms of fleeing persecution, war, violence. The difference is where they seek that legal relief. So an asylum seeker is someone who will come to the US and, you know, let's say, cross the southern border, and present in the US and ask for asylum. A refugee is someone who will cross an international border, go to a third country, you know, they may live in a refugee camp, for example. And they will seek asylum in order to move to a place

like the US or another host country, you know, many Western European countries remain host countries as well. And then a special immigrant visa holder is a third category that is related to refugee status. But these are people who worked for or on behalf of the US, and as a result are given special protection. They risked their lives in order to protect ours. And our promise was we would take care of them afterwards. And so many of the Afghans that were evacuated, or had come prior to the mass evacuation, came as special immigrant visa holders.

Marielle Segarra: And how does that differ, those different designations refugee, asylum seeker, special immigrant visa holder, how do those change what a person's experience will be like in their first few months or years in the US?

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Yeah, so if you're coming as an asylee, the honest truth is you receive very limited benefits or support. If you are lucky enough to not be summarily expelled along the southern border, you come into the US, you get an ICE meeting, a court hearing, and then basically you're fending for yourself. If you come as a refugee, there is, as you described, a well established federal program that provides support from the State Department as well as agencies like Health and Human Services. If you come in on a Special Immigrant Visa, you come in and you are resettled through the same program of refugee resettlement. But the one difference I would note when it comes to Afghans is the majority are going to come into the US under the humanitarian parole program. So they may be eligible in the sense that they qualify. It's the same circumstances that they face in terms, you know, as compared to, to a refugee or special immigrant visa holder, but because of the emergency evacuation, they were airlifted out of the country and they are coming in as a, as an, as a humanitarian parolee.

Kai Ryssdal: It seems kind of not very inviting to have people come to this country in whichever category, and not giving them support. That is, of course, intentional, right.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: It's, yeah, it is uninviting, that's a diplomatic way to put it. It's, it's, it's counterintuitive, especially when you think about people who worked for decades on behalf of the US, championing American ideals, protecting US troops, working at the US Embassy, but it is also altogether unwarranted. You know, there are communities of support all across the country, there are a majority of faith based nonprofits who do this work. And yet unfortunately, we have a very dysfunctional system that is, you know, incoherent to say the least.

Marielle Segarra: Who's generally in charge of doing the resettling? Is it, is it mostly the US government or is it work done by nonprofits like yours?

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Yeah, so it's an interesting system in the sense that before 1980, and the Refugee Act that would pass Congress with bipartisan support, this was the work of faith based national nonprofits. So Lutheran immigration refugee service, we began in 1939 resettling Lutheran pastors, professors, others around the time of the Second World War who were fleeing from Nazi Germany. But we're not alone in this work. The Catholics have a resettlement agency. You know, there's the Jewish resettlement agency called highest, the majority of the nine resettlement agencies that partner with the State Department are faith

based. So that is, you know, something that is consistent across the board. We work with communities all across the country, we know that it's incredibly important for us to have coordination at the federal, state and local level. And we work with congregations, community based organizations, other nonprofits, companies, foundations, it really is a holistic effort because we know that's what it takes in terms of not just those first few weeks of support, but to successfully integrate them into the communities that they're going to call home.

Kai Ryssdal: So can we talk about the southern border for a minute, and the news there the last 10 days, two weeks. 10s of 1000s of migrants, most of them are Haitian, some of them sent back to Haiti no matter where they had come from. And others, it's my understanding, admitted, and I wonder who decides that and how?

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Yeah, and the people who are making those decisions are to some extent playing God. So I just want to be clear, there is very little difference between traditional refugees and the Haitians trying to enter at the southern border. Both are fleeing violence and persecution, and are unable to return to their home countries. The only difference between refugees and asylum seekers, you know, as I said, is where they apply. And then the difference between those that are lucky enough to enter the US and those that are turned back is a matter of circumstance. The government makes a decision that some are more vulnerable. We've seen more Haitians who are bringing small children, for example, who were lucky enough to come to, you know, to Texas, Houston is where they were being processed, and then to ultimately go to different parts of the country. And so that is, I think, a real concern, because what we are seeing is an inconsistent application of an obscure public health rule called title, title 42. It was put in place during the Trump administration, and it's still being used, although to a lesser extent by the Biden administration.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah, I mean, I wonder, I think a lot of people say, okay, well, Afghan refugees, we have a responsibility to help them. And then I feel like there's this argument that, that there isn't that same responsibility towards Haitians or Central Americans. But I wonder if you can talk about the history there of the US intervening in these places and, and creating some of the conditions that are, are forcing people out of their countries.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Who we admit is honestly as much a reflection of who we are as it is who these different groups are and why they come. The fact is that we see people amassing on the southern border because they don't have access to a fair orderly system. And they may be fleeing circumstances like we've seen in Haiti over the last few years. Sudden onset disasters in terms of the earthquake and, of course, a recent hurricane. The instability politically that led to the fall of the government, obviously the US has been very involved in Haiti over the years. And it's not unique to Haiti. You know, we see this as true in Central America as well. Many of the migrants who are coming to the southern border are coming from Central America, countries where the US intervened. In terms of Foreign Affairs, the US has been a critical player in terms of the foreign assistance. I think there are a lot of questions about whether that assistance is going to the appropriate stewards of that money, of that foreign assistance, or if it's actually just propping up corruption and dictatorship. And then, of course, the hurricanes that have hit

Central America, too. In the recent past, you know, we've obviously played a key role in terms of the carbon emissions that are leading to the dramatic fluctuations when it comes to climate. And so, you know, I think even things like MS 13, Americans don't fully appreciate that that is actually made in America and then exported to these regions. So there are definitely a range of reasons for why the US has certainly played a part, if not is responsible for some of the conditions that people are fleeing.

Kai Ryssdal: So let's talk about the flip side of that responsibility, right, which is, we've created some of the conditions. But per capita, we don't perhaps take as many refugees and asylum seekers as other countries do. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Historically, the US has been the global humanitarian leader. You know, for decades, since the program has been in place, we have welcomed more refugees than any other country in the world. But that obviously has changed significantly over the last several years. To put this in context, so under Trump, we saw year after year, record low annual refugee caps, going from about 100,000 per year in President Obama's last year to just 15,000 in Trump's final year. But it's also worth noting that in this current fiscal year that ends, you know, at the end of September, the Biden administration did away with Trump's all time low cap, and raised this year's annual ceiling to 62,500. But through the 11 months of this fiscal year, the US only resettled 7,500 refugees through its formal program, much less than 1% of refugees that are registered with the UN ever get resettled. And when we think about the global crises that have led to mass migration, we're talking about more than 80 million displaced around the world.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah. So given everything we've talked about, and this really kind of complex system for refugees, and the changes that have taken place over the past few years, how do you think the refugee system should look different so that it feels more just?

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Well, I think part of it is we've got to end this roller coaster ride, you know, when you look at the historic average across both Democratic and Republican administrations, you know, excluding the Trump administration just because those numbers were so, such an anomaly, the historical average was we would accept 95,000 refugees per year. And it's important to note, President Reagan resettled the highest number of refugees of any president, we've resettled more refugees under Republican administrations than Democratic ones. And so one key fix is that rather than just setting a ceiling on refugees, that we also set a floor. So there has been some legislation that has proposed this, because otherwise that rollercoaster ride is experienced in American communities by basically kind of a massive, quick influx of refugees, and then all of a sudden, the infrastructure gets dismantled, and then we quickly try to rebuild it. And it's, it's just not a smart system. It's also really important for us to have legal pathways that are robust when people say, well, they should come the right way. Oh, we don't really have a right way to come right now. You know, when we're talking about asylum, we're talking about a 1.3 million backlog. When we're talking about refugees, as I said, people are waiting literally years, you know, failing to comply with the legal requirements that are set by Congress. And there's ramifications of that when we talk about Afghan allies,

interpreters, drivers, you know, just to give you one example, we had an interpreter who had waited more than 10 years and just this past year, he was going to celebrate Ramadan with his sister. He was stopped at a Taliban checkpoint. He was pulled out of his car and he was brutally beheaded. So this is not just bureaucratic backlog that causes inconvenience. It leads to life and death implications.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah. Wow, that story. Well, thank you so much, Krish. Krish O'Mara Vignarajah is president and CEO of Lutheran immigration and refugee service, a nonprofit organization that is helping to resettle Afghans in the US. Thank you. I learned a lot.

Kai Ryssdal: Krish, thanks a lot.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah: Appreciate you having me.

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah, there are a few, few public policy decisions that are made in this country that are more fraught than immigration for a lot of reasons. And this is, this is this is one of them. And it's, it's people at their most vulnerable, right? That's the thing that gets to me, it's people that are at their most vulnerable and we can't make up our minds. That's what I'm saying.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah, and just that story, I mean, the implications of, of a policy is, you know, maybe somebody gets beheaded.

Kai Ryssdal: Let us know, email voice memo, you can send it to us, makemesmart@marketplace.org let us know what you think. Or you can call us. Leave us a voice message. Our number is 508-827-6278, 508-UB-SMART.

Marielle Segarra: If you haven't already, please subscribe to the podcast. Maybe leave us a rating or a review if you can, and we will be right back.

Kai Ryssdal: Funny, I was just looking up going Drew, what's taking us so long, man? And there he hit it. Alright, so top of the news fix, your, your first in the rundown Ms. Segarra, you go first.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah, tough transition. But well, so this is also kind of an, an immigrant story. The the state of California just passed a law that says garment workers have to be paid by the hour, they can no longer be paid by the item.

Kai Ryssdal: I totally missed that. That's crazy.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah. Yeah. And I mean, the garment industry here is huge, there are a lot of garment workers, many of which are, are immigrants. And when you get paid by the item, you make very often I think it's like a third of workers are making less than minimum wage. And also, it's just, you know, goes along with the fact that many don't have benefits and have just really long working hours and are more likely to get hurt because they're trying to work more quickly.

So this is a big, this is a big change. You know, it makes me wonder, California is often influential when it comes to its laws. And I guess there are a few reasons for that. But it, I wonder if this will have any effect on the rest of the country. And you know, like I know there's a big garment industry in kind of New York, New Jersey area. So maybe we'll see a change there too.

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah, that's, that's a big deal. The idea of going from piecework to hourly wages is actually huge is huge. I've done I'm amazed and annoyed with myself that I missed that. That's good. That's good stuff. Okay, so I've got two, they're relatively quick and they're of a theme. First of all, I'm Evergrande is, remember the Chinese property developer who has \$300 billion dollars in debt, due to make another bond coupon payment tomorrow, that's Wednesday after missing one last week. Nobody knows what's gonna happen because the company's not saying anything, and that is a very bad thing. Number two and related about not paying debts. Janet Yellen said to Congress today in a letter, hey, you've got till the 18th of October until I cannot find any more money in the couch cushions to pay the bills. So please do something about this. There are no signs that Republicans in Congress are going to participate with the Democrats in raising the debt limit and so I think in the next three weeks there's gonna be a lot of volatility, interest rates are gonna go up, money's gonna get more expensive, stocks are gonna crash out a little bit. Not gonna be pretty. So that's what happens when you don't pay your debts.

Marielle Segarra: It's just why do we keep doing this to ourselves? How is this country that, how is this the way that we operate?

Kai Ryssdal: Yeah, yeah, no I know, I mean the history goes back to World War One and 1917 and blah blah blah but it's just dumb. It's a dumb way to run an economy. There you go. Yeah. All right. I'm done. Let's go, Drew, please.

Kai Ryssdal: We asked you last week if you listen to this podcast with your child or perhaps with your parent. And we got some calls. Here you go.

Sarah: Hey, Molly and Kai. This is Sarah from Rockville, Maryland. I heard your show talking about parent and child listening teams. I was introduced to your podcast by my parents and I've been a daily listener and a subscriber ever since. My parents have been making me smart for a lifetime. Now you are also making me smart. Thanks so much.

Kai Ryssdal: That's kind of cool. That's kind of cool.

Marielle Segarra: I love that my parents are still making me smart too. My dad dropped some wisdom on me every day. Alright, Maddie in California also has a make me smart listening team.

Maddie: Hi Molly. We have a little bit of a parent child listening situation at our home. So here is someone who wants to share some thoughts with you. Hi, my name is June and I'm seven years old. And I live in Dublin and that's the only, which is a misnomer. So when I get bored and

my mom and dad are playing, I just listen to your voice when my dad plays the podcast in the car. Thanks for making me smart, bye. Have a good day.

Kai Ryssdal: Oh, my god. Oh man.

Marielle Segarra: That is so sweet, that just warmed my heart.

Kai Ryssdal: That is cray cray right there. Tell you what, my kids, on the other hand, they will turn off the radio if this comes on. But that's all. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. For years, my kids have wanted nothing to do with what, what puts food on their kitchen table. But that's a whole different podcast.

Marielle Segarra: Well, maybe their friends think it's cool. Or their friends' parents or something?

Kai Ryssdal: I don't know. I don't know. I don't think so. Their teachers every now and then say hey, is your dad Kai Ryssdal? They're like, yes, yes. Anyway, alright, we're on the way out here. We're gonna leave you with this week's answer to the Make Me Smart question which is once again, something you thought you knew you later found out you were wrong about. Here you go.

Heidi: Hey, this is Heidi from Naples, Florida. One thing I thought I knew but later found out I was wrong about it is I thought I would get over Ivan been from Brooklyn, New York, but I haven't. I have not. In fact, I find myself not only saying it along with the intro of the mailbag, but throughout the day. Sometimes I just mutter Ivan from Brooklyn, New York. That's all true. Thanks for keeping us smart, sane and informed.

Kai Ryssdal: Oh my god. Oh my goodness.

Marielle Segarra: It's one of those things like if you hear it enough, I was telling Donna I woke up with the song Hakuna Matata in my head the other day and I was like, where did this come from? Why?

Kai Ryssdal: That's, that's, that's the, that's the magic of audio.

Marielle Segarra: Yeah, it's an ear worm.

Kai Ryssdal: Oh my gosh. Well, it's great. That's a good little mailbag. Yeah.

Marielle Segarra: So send us a voice memo with your answer to the make me smart question or you could call us and leave us a voice message at our new number, 508-82-SMART or 508-UB-SMART.

Kai Ryssdal: There we go. Nicely done everybody. All right. Here we go. Make Me Smart is produced by Marissa Cabrera who by the way today has been with us for one, one year which is kind of amazing. And also I have never met her in person, she's been working with us for over a year, never met her. These are weird times, man. Tony Wagner writes our newsletters. Our intern is Grace Rubin.

Marielle Segarra: Today's program was engineered by Drew Jostad and mixed by Liana Squillace. Ben Tolliday and Daniel Ramirez, miss them, composed our theme music. Donna Tam was senior producing today and the executive director of on demand is the amazing Sitara Nieves.