

# Refugee Attitudes: Public Opinion & Perception

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## Introduction: Defining Attitudes and Contextualizing the Refugee Crisis

Attitudes toward refugees constitute a critical area of study within social psychology, reflecting complex interactions between individual beliefs, emotional responses, and socio-political contexts. Defined generally as evaluations, either favorable or unfavorable, of people, objects, or ideas, attitudes toward refugees specifically encompass the spectrum of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses directed toward individuals seeking asylum or protection in a host country. The global scale of forced displacement, driven by conflict, persecution, and environmental crises, necessitates a deep understanding of these attitudes, as they fundamentally shape policy implementation, resource allocation, and the ultimate success of integration efforts. This field of inquiry moves beyond simple measures of acceptance or rejection to explore the nuanced psychological mechanisms that underpin public sentiment in receiving nations, acknowledging that these attitudes are dynamic and highly susceptible to both internal predispositions and external environmental cues.

The contemporary discourse surrounding refugees is highly polarized, often pitting humanitarian obligations against perceived national interests and security concerns. Understanding attitudes requires acknowledging the inherent asymmetry in the refugee-host relationship: the refugee is typically characterized by vulnerability and dependency, while the host population possesses the power to grant or deny safety and opportunity. Furthermore, the sheer volume of global displacement—with tens of millions currently displaced—places continuous pressure on host communities, influencing perceptions of resource scarcity and cultural homogeneity. Consequently, research into attitudes must account for both stable, underlying belief systems, such as **ideology** and **authoritarianism**, and dynamic, situational factors, such as economic downturns or recent policy changes, that continuously modulate public opinion regarding those seeking sanctuary. The resulting public opinion landscape is often volatile, making the study of underlying psychological drivers essential for effective policy creation.

## Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Attitudes

Several established theoretical frameworks are employed to dissect and explain the variability in attitudes toward refugee populations. The most prominent among these is the **Integrated Threat Theory (ITT)**, which posits that negative attitudes arise primarily from the perception of threat, which is typically categorized into realistic threats and symbolic threats. Realistic threats involve fears concerning tangible resources, such as jobs, housing, or economic strain on public services, often leading to anxiety over resource competition. Symbolic threats, conversely, relate to perceived dangers to the host group's culture, values, traditions, or national identity, implying that the presence of the out-group undermines the established way of life. Research overwhelmingly demonstrates that symbolic threats often exert a stronger influence on negative attitudes than realistic economic concerns, suggesting that cultural anxiety is a dominant, often exploited, driver

of xenophobia directed at newcomers, particularly in culturally homogeneous receiving societies.

Complementing ITT is the **Social Identity Theory (SIT)**, which highlights the pervasive human tendency to categorize oneself and others into in-groups ('us') and out-groups ('them'). According to SIT, individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity, a goal often achieved by favoring the in-group and, in competitive or threatening contexts, derogating the out-group. When refugees are categorized as a distinct and potentially threatening out-group, negative attitudes serve to enhance the perceived status and distinctiveness of the host nation's in-group. This mechanism explains why nationalistic rhetoric and appeals to shared heritage often correlate strongly with anti-refugee sentiment, as they reinforce the boundaries separating 'deserving' citizens from 'undeserving' outsiders. This framework also helps explain variations in attitudes based on the perceived cultural distance between the host population and the refugee group; the greater the perceived distance, the more likely the activation of in-group favoritism and out-group derogation.

Furthermore, the **Scapegoat Theory** offers insight into the deflection of societal frustrations onto vulnerable out-groups. When host communities experience economic hardship, political instability, or social stress, individuals may displace their frustration and aggression onto a readily available and relatively powerless target--the refugees. This psychological mechanism allows the in-group to maintain a positive self-image by externalizing internal problems. While not a standalone theory, Scapegoat Theory often works in conjunction with ITT and SIT, providing a motivational explanation for why negative attitudes intensify during periods of national crisis or economic uncertainty, as refugees become convenient targets for generalized societal anxieties.

### Key Determinants of Negative Attitudes: Prejudice and Threat Perception

Negative attitudes toward refugees are frequently rooted in pre-existing ideological prejudices, which are largely sustained by cognitive biases and generalized stereotypes about immigrant or minority populations. Research consistently identifies several individual difference variables that predict lower acceptance of refugees. High levels of **Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)** emphasize submission to perceived legitimate authorities and adherence to social norms, often resulting in suspicion toward groups perceived as violating those norms or challenging the established order. Similarly, **Social Dominance Orientation (SDO)** reflects a desire for hierarchical group relations and the maintenance of inequality, making individuals high in SDO resistant to policies that support vulnerable out-groups and potentially challenge the existing social hierarchy. These ideological predispositions function as cognitive filters, determining how information about refugees is processed, often reinforcing pre-existing biases rather than allowing for objective evaluation of individual circumstances.

The perception of threat is rarely objective; it is heavily mediated by the perceived characteristics of the refugee group itself. Factors such as perceived group size, cultural visibility, religious

affiliation, and perceived economic burden all contribute to heightened threat perception. For instance, refugees arriving from culturally distant nations or those perceived as having distinct religious practices often elicit significantly higher levels of symbolic threat, leading to stronger opposition and feelings of cultural incompatibility. This perception is exacerbated when refugees are framed by political actors or media outlets as an undifferentiated mass rather than as individuals with unique circumstances and skills. The phenomenon of **dehumanization**, where refugees are stripped of their human qualities and reduced to mere symbols of a problem, significantly lowers the emotional barrier to expressing and acting upon negative attitudes, justifying exclusion and harsh treatment.

A crucial determinant is the perceived legitimacy and authenticity of the asylum claim. When the public perceives that the refugee status is being exploited or that individuals are 'economic migrants' rather than genuine refugees fleeing persecution, negative attitudes intensify dramatically. This skepticism is often fueled by political narratives that conflate legally defined refugees with illegal immigration, thereby undermining the moral and legal basis for providing protection. Attitudes are thus intrinsically linked to the perceived deservingness of the group, highlighting the cognitive effort individuals exert in justifying their exclusionary beliefs. The public's willingness to accept refugees is directly correlated with their belief that the newcomers are both genuinely suffering and temporally committed to integration, rather than being seen as permanent outsiders or exploiters of the welfare system.

## The Role of Media and Political Discourse

Media representation and political rhetoric serve as powerful mediating forces that shape and often amplify public attitudes toward refugees. Traditional and social media platforms frequently employ specific framing techniques that influence emotional responses and cognitive evaluations. Negative framing often relies on themes of threat, portraying refugees as a potential source of crime, disease, or economic drain, or using militaristic language such as "influx," "tide," or "invasion" to suggest overwhelming danger. This consistent negative representation increases perceived realistic and symbolic threats, leading to a measurable decrease in public acceptance and a rise in support for restrictive immigration policies. Conversely, framing that focuses on individual stories of suffering, resilience, and contribution tends to activate empathy and humanitarian sentiment, promoting more positive, nuanced attitudes by humanizing the abstract concept of the refugee.

Political discourse plays an equally critical, often strategic, role. Political leaders frequently utilize refugees as a wedge issue, employing nativist or populist rhetoric to mobilize their electoral base. By linking refugee arrivals to national security failures or cultural erosion, politicians validate and normalize pre-existing negative sentiments within the populace. This process is known as **elite cueing**, where political leaders provide signals that guide how citizens interpret complex social issues. When high-status political figures express anti-refugee sentiments, it grants social license

for others to express similar views without fear of social sanction, thus shifting the Overton window of acceptable public discourse toward exclusion and hostility. The repetition of these cues reinforces negative stereotypes, making them more accessible in public memory and judgment.

Social media introduces unique complexities, allowing for the rapid dissemination of unverified information and emotionally charged content. While social media can facilitate connection and advocacy, it also serves as an echo chamber where anti-refugee disinformation and hate speech can proliferate unchecked, often targeting specific ethnic or religious groups. The viral nature of emotionally loaded, often inaccurate, narratives contributes to the formation of strong, affectively driven attitudes that are highly resistant to factual correction or logical debate. The challenge for policymakers and proponents of integration is to counter these pervasive negative narratives with evidence-based, humanizing counter-narratives that emphasize shared values, legal obligations, and mutual benefit, demanding a proactive strategy to combat organized disinformation campaigns.

## Psychological Mechanisms of Empathy and Compassion

While threat perception and prejudice drive negative attitudes, empathy and compassion are the primary psychological drivers of positive attitudes and willingness to help. Empathy, defined as the capacity to understand or feel what another person is experiencing, is crucial in bridging the psychological distance between the host population and refugees. Studies show that inducing empathy--for example, through narrative exposure to individual refugee experiences or virtual reality simulations--significantly increases willingness to donate, volunteer, or support pro-integration policies. This mechanism works by shifting the cognitive focus from the refugee as a threatening member of an out-group to the refugee as a vulnerable individual facing profound hardship, thereby activating universal humanitarian values and overriding exclusionary social identities.

However, the activation of empathy is not automatic and is subject to significant psychological limitations. The concept of **compassion fatigue** describes the emotional exhaustion and desensitization that can occur when individuals are repeatedly exposed to large-scale suffering, particularly when the problem seems intractable or overwhelming. When media focus exclusively on the staggering numbers of displaced individuals, the affective response can become muted, leading to avoidance, apathy, or defensive psychological withdrawal. Furthermore, the **identifiable victim effect** suggests that people are far more likely to feel empathy and provide aid to a single, identifiable victim (e.g., a child whose story is told in detail) than to a statistically large group of anonymous sufferers, demonstrating the cognitive difficulty in translating large-scale statistics into meaningful emotional responses that motivate action.

To sustain positive attitudes, interventions must move beyond transient emotional appeals toward

fostering long-term, stable compassion rooted in moral identity and civic responsibility. This involves framing the responsibility toward refugees not merely as an act of charity, but as a commitment aligned with core national or universal moral principles of justice, fairness, and human rights. Successful strategies often involve facilitating perspective-taking and highlighting shared human experiences, reducing the psychological distance created by cultural or geographic separation, and transforming the abstract concept of 'refugee' into concrete, relatable human beings who share common aspirations for safety and stability. This shift from purely affective response to cognitive moral commitment ensures greater durability of positive attitudes.

## Impact of Contact and Intergroup Relations

The **Contact Hypothesis**, a foundational principle in intergroup relations, suggests that under specific conditions, direct contact between members of different groups can reduce prejudice and foster positive attitudes. The conditions critical for successful contact, as outlined by Allport, include equal status between groups, shared goals, cooperation, and support from relevant authorities or institutions. When these stringent conditions are met, contact allows host populations to gain personalized, stereotype-disconfirming information about refugees, challenging negative generalizations and reducing the intergroup anxiety associated with the out-group, ultimately leading to greater trust and acceptance. This process of decategorization shifts the focus from group membership to individual personality.

However, contact is not uniformly positive; the context matters significantly. Poorly managed contact, or contact characterized by unequal status, intense competition for resources, or high pre-existing anxiety, can actually reinforce negative attitudes and increase intergroup tension, potentially leading to overt conflict. For example, contact occurring in contexts where refugees are perceived as dominating shared public spaces or competing directly for scarce entry-level jobs might exacerbate realistic threat perceptions and solidify exclusionary beliefs. Therefore, the quality and structure of the interaction are far more significant than the mere frequency of exposure. Effective interventions often require structured, supervised settings, such as shared community projects, sports leagues, or educational initiatives, designed specifically to promote mutual dependence, shared effort, and a sense of common purpose.

Furthermore, indirect forms of contact have also proven effective in promoting positive attitudes, especially in areas where direct interaction is logistically difficult or limited. These forms include **parasocial contact** (exposure through positive media narratives or fictional representations of refugees) or **extended contact** (knowing someone in the in-group who has a positive, close relationship with a refugee). These indirect mechanisms successfully mitigate the anxiety associated with direct interaction while still providing personalized, stereotype-disconfirming information. Leveraging these mechanisms is particularly important in regions with low refugee density, allowing for the widespread dissemination of positive intergroup experiences and helping

to normalize the presence of newcomers before direct contact is widespread.

## Strategies for Promoting Positive Attitudes and Integration

Promoting positive attitudes toward refugees requires a multi-faceted approach targeting both individual psychological biases and systemic societal structures. Educational programs designed to increase knowledge about the root causes of displacement, the legal definitions of refugee status, and the positive economic and cultural contributions of refugees can directly challenge cognitive ignorance and misinformation. These programs should utilize evidence-based information to actively counter the pervasive myths disseminated through extremist political and media channels. Furthermore, educational initiatives focusing on critical media literacy can equip citizens to recognize and resist manipulative framing techniques that rely on fear, prejudice, and misinformation, thereby building resilience against negative elite cues.

Policy interventions must focus on reducing the perception of threat by ensuring that integration efforts are adequately resourced, managed transparently, and are perceived as fair by the host population. When integration is perceived as orderly and supported by robust public services, the anxiety associated with resource strain diminishes significantly. Policies should proactively highlight the reciprocal nature of integration, emphasizing that refugees are not merely passive recipients of aid but active contributors to the social and economic fabric of the host society. This includes facilitating rapid professional accreditation, language training, and employment opportunities, effectively shifting the narrative from a perceived burden to one of mutual investment and long-term societal gain, thus weakening the realistic threat component of negative attitudes.

Finally, community-level interventions are essential for fostering localized, grassroots acceptance. These include establishing mentorship programs, neighborhood welcome initiatives, and shared cultural or civic events that facilitate high-quality, equal-status contact between host residents and newcomers. The creation of a **superordinate identity**--a shared identity that encompasses both the host population and the refugee group (e.g., "fellow community members" or "citizens of the region")--is key to successful long-term integration. By fostering a sense of shared destiny and common goals, these strategies aim to permanently shift attitudes away from exclusion and toward inclusive solidarity, ensuring that humanitarian principles translate into sustainable, positive social action and systemic change.