

Australia's humanitarian intake: not keeping up with need

by Finn Clarke and Stephen Howes

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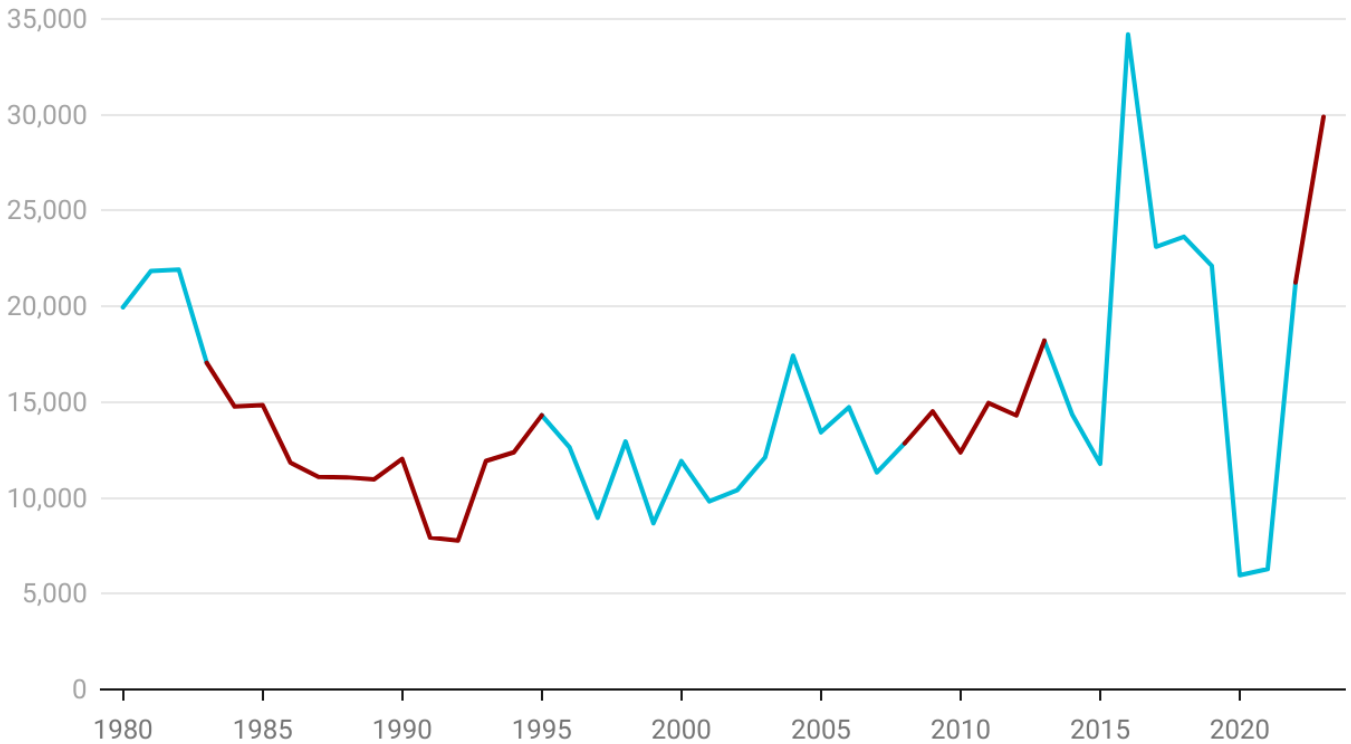
Hundreds of newly arrived refugees wait for food in Chad after fleeing across the border following violence in Tindelti, Sudan.

Photo Credit: UNCHR/ColinDelfosse

The world is facing its biggest humanitarian crisis since World War Two. The number of refugees worldwide has increased from 8.5 million in 1980 to 31.6 million in 2023. These figures exclude the much larger and also rapidly growing number of internally displaced persons.

The number of refugees accepted by Australia has been more or less flat over the last 40 years, as Figure 1 shows. Intake was high in the early 1980s, when Malcolm Fraser was prime minister and we resettled a large number of Vietnamese refugees. It then stabilised between 10,000 and 15,000, before shooting up a record of 34,000 in 2016, when a large number of Syrian refugees were accepted into Australia. There was a massive dip during the pandemic and then a recovery in 2022. The numbers are high in 2023 because [Labor recognised as refugees a large number](#) of those who had been on temporary protection visas since 2014, after arriving by boat.

Figure 1: Refugees accepted by Australia, by party in power

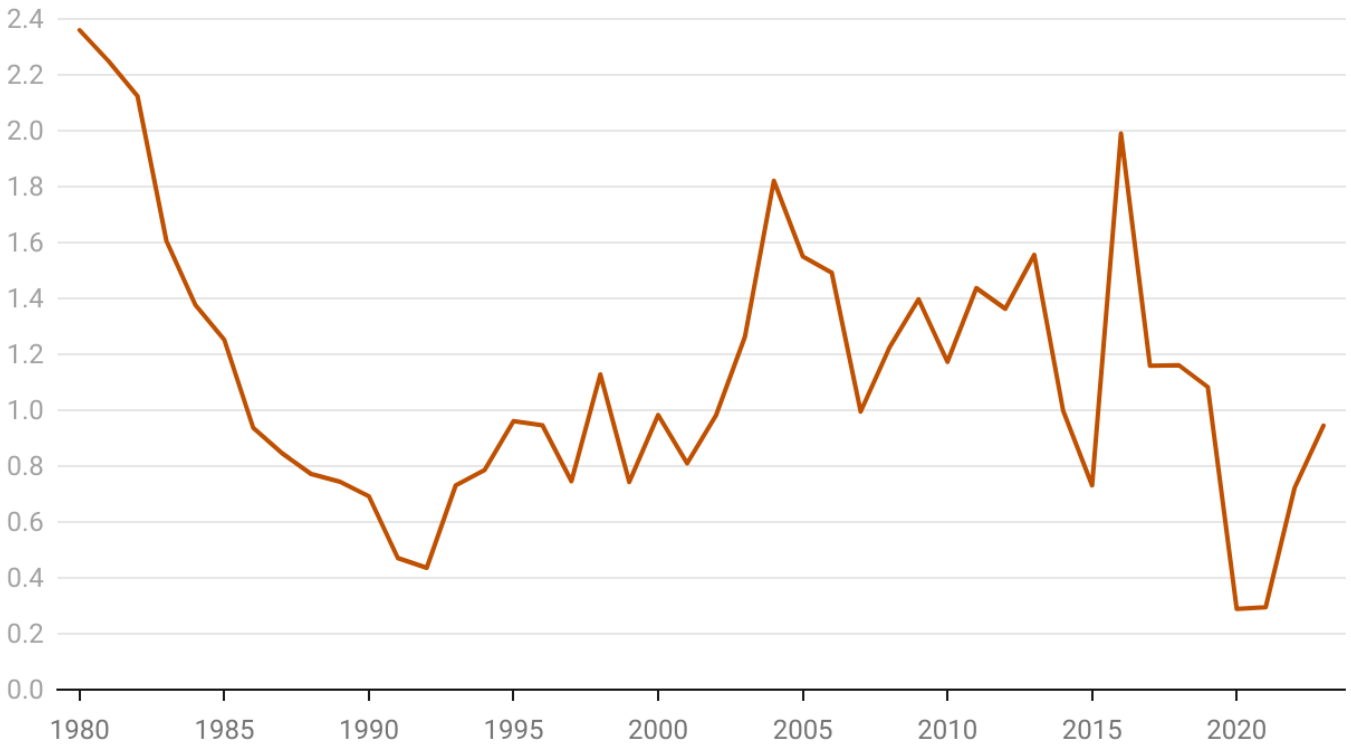


Note: Sorted by party in power for the majority of the year in the case of election years. Refugees accepted include those resettled from offshore and those who seek asylum and are recognised as refugees in Australia.

Source: Refugee Council of Australia • Created with Datawrapper

Australia’s intake of refugees has not been keeping up with the growing number of refugees worldwide (figures according to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR). This ratio was at almost 2.5 per 1,000 in 1980, but is now below one (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Refugees accepted by Australia as a ratio of global refugees per 1000, 1980-2023



Note: See Figure 1 for the number of refugees accepted by Australia.

Source: UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency • Created with Datawrapper

While Labor has increased the humanitarian intake in the last couple of years, it has backed away from its long-held goal of **an annual intake of 27,000**, with the cap for both **2023-24** and **2024-25** remaining at 20,000.

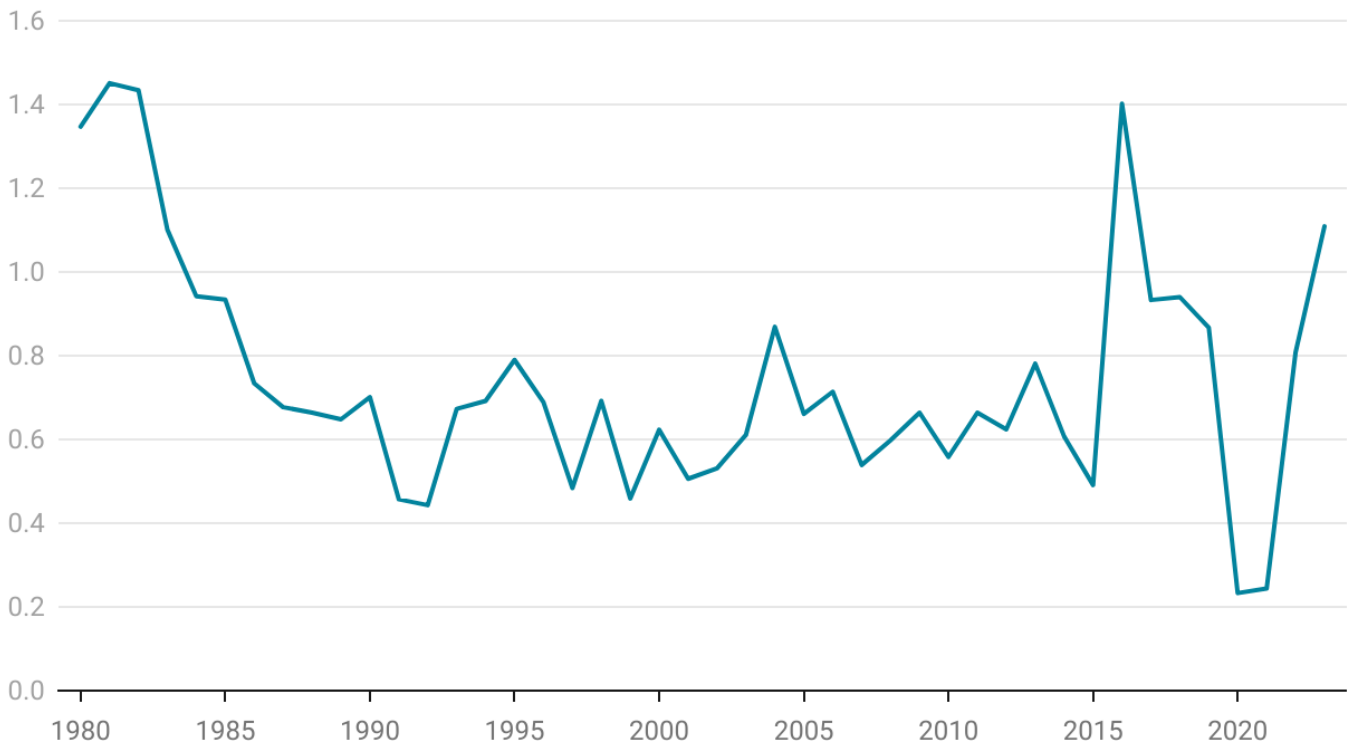
The Coalition has promised to cut the refugee intake if elected. In his 2024 Budget reply speech, Leader of the Opposition **Peter Dutton announced** that, under a Coalition government, the humanitarian intake would be reduced to 13,750 – **a target figure** used by previous Coalition governments. Note that this cap, under both Coalition and Labor, includes both those who are resettled and those who successfully apply for asylum in Australia.

Given the current number of refugees worldwide, under Dutton’s plan, our refugee intake would be only 0.43 per 1,000 refugees worldwide, an all-time low.

A less demanding standard is to judge the adequacy of Australia’s humanitarian intake against the country’s population. This ratio, shown in Figure 3, has averaged around 0.7 per 1,000. **Dutton has stated** he wants to bring refugee numbers “back to the long-run average”. But a bigger country can afford to take in more refugees. Keeping to the average of 0.7 per 1000 would require an intake of 21,146 in 2027. Under Dutton’s plan, humanitarian intake would be only 0.5 per 1,000 Australians,

well below the long-run average.

Figure 3: Refugees accepted by Australia as a ratio of the Australian population per 1000, 1980-2023



Note: See Figure 1 for the number of refugees accepted by Australia.

Source: Australian population data from Australian Bureau of Statistics - 1977-2020 and 2021-2023.

Created with Datawrapper

Another interesting point illustrated by Figure 3 is that the two most generous years of refugee intake (measured relative to Australia’s population) have been both under Coalition governments.

While Labor should increase its humanitarian intake in response to the global humanitarian crisis, the Coalition should definitely reconsider its plan to cut our humanitarian intake to an all-time historical low as a share of our population. Australia has never had a bigger economy or population, and there have never been more refugees looking for somewhere safe to resettle.

This blog updates our [2019 analysis](#).

Note: Data are by calendar year. The full dataset is [available here](#).

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/australias-humanitarian-intake-not-keeping-up-with-need-20250211/>