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Call for Papers

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The New Asylum Seekers: Subnational Dynamics of Migration Governance in the United States

The United States is home to roughly 13.7 million immigrants who lack a durable legal status, but this umbrella category includes a spectrum of people, and is shifting in its make-up (Van Hook, Ruiz Soto, and Gelatt 2025). With no broad channel by which to legalize status since the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, the largest group of undocumented immigrants—an estimated 71 percent of the total—includes those who entered without inspection at the border or overstayed visas and therefore lack any official status, often for decades. In 2023, for instance, 4.3 million immigrants had lived in the US for 18 years or more without papers (Passel and Krogstad 2025). A second growing group within the spectrum includes those with "liminal," in-between statuses providing revocable, short-term relief from deportation and work authorization but not long-term stability, rights, and security (see Menjívar 2006). This group, which amounts to an estimated 29 percent of the total, includes Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) holders and those with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), as well as an increasing number of asylum seekers, especially since the mid-2010s (Connor 2024; Menjívar 2024; Van Hook, Ruiz Soto, and Gelatt 2025). By May 2025, more than 2.17 million asylum cases were pending in the US, meaning that one in six people without durable legal status had declared themselves to the government with the intent to prove a well-founded fear of persecution in their countries of origin and to transition to permanent residency (TRAC 2025). The growing presence of asylum seekers matters not only numerically, but also because of the potential it holds to reshape the very category of "undocumented" in the US—altering relationships to the state, shifting pressures on institutions, and recasting the dynamics of migration governance and politics at the national and subnational levels.

Asylum-seeking is a long-standing legal pathway enshrined in international law through which migrants flee home-country persecution, arrive in another country, and pursue refugee status there. Yet unlike resettled refugees, who receive the refugee designation overseas and arrive in the US with legal status and dedicated services, asylum seekers come directly to the US without express invitation. This contributes to their routine conflation with unauthorized entrants and "illegality" in the political and public sphere. Contemporary asylum seekers are often framed by politicians as motivated by experiences—such as economic deprivation—that fall outside the scope of the refugee definition and thus make them unlikely to advance successful legal claims (Hamlin 2012; Menjívar 2024). Moreover, because asylum seekers arrive without invitation, they may resemble long-term unauthorized residents in their challenges accessing work and public services. At the same time, their formal pursuit of refugee status through legal channels differentiates them from both resettled refugees (who enter through pre-authorized programs) and undocumented migrants (who lack a pending legal claim). In highlighting these contrasts, this issue of *RSF* underscores how in-land asylum seekers occupy a distinctive position at the intersection of legality and illegality. As they increasingly concentrate in US

cities, subnational governments and institutions face urgent practical and political challenges that have become central to the national immigration debate**.**

In the US context, scholars, policy makers, and the public have not fully grappled with the distinctions between asylum seekers and other categories of legally vulnerable immigrants. Given their pending legal petition, for example, asylum seekers and their identities are fully visible to government (Salmenkari and Aldawoodi 2023). They thus have a different orientation to the state than many long-term undocumented immigrants, who manage decisions to engage or avoid government institutions from an alternative set of circumstances (see Asad 2024). Despite these and other differences, we know little about the implications of such distinctions for migration governance or for the broader "ecosystems" of institutions that shape migrants' lives—including not only state and local governments, but also schools, police, employers, landlords, NGOs, and even anti-immigrant organizations. Given that related work is more prevalent in the European context (e.g., Ambrosini 2020; Bazurli and Kaufmann 2023; Darling 2021; Oliver et al. 2020), our issue will focus on the US case to highlight both what is distinctive and what lessons might travel across other nation-states.

Accordingly, this issue examines the ways in which contemporary asylum seekers to the US resemble and differ from other immigrants, past and present; it considers how rising asylum-seeking shapes subnational responses among diverse state and non-state actors; it compares the experiences of asylum-seeking newcomers with long-term unauthorized immigrants; it analyzes the relationships of these groups with the US-born population; and, in turn, it assesses their influence on broader US immigration policies.

Rising Asylum-Seeking in the US

Asylum-seeking at the US-Mexico border began to increase in the mid-2010s, with a sharp rise around 2014 due to growing violence and instability in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, coupled with Obama administration policy shifts to parole a wider range of asylum seekers out of immigration detention (ICE 2009). Numbers rose again during the first Trump administration, despite restrictive policies such as family separation and the "Remain in Mexico" program (Migrant Protection Protocols). After a temporary decline during the COVID-19 pandemic due to border closures and Title 42 expulsions, asylum claims rebounded dramatically starting in 2021 under the Biden administration. Despite the Biden administration's introduction of a new humanitarian parole program to stem asylum claims – the CHNV Program for eligible people from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela – record-high encounters with asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border surpassed two million in the later years of Biden's term (Bush-Joseph 2024: 3). This increase has been driven by continued displacement from Central America, instability in Venezuela, Haiti, and Cuba, and shifting US policies that have again altered migrant flows and processing patterns. Further, crackdowns in the EU, particularly in the Mediterranean, may have led asylum seekers from Africa and the Middle East to seek new and alternative routes up through the Darien Gap to the US/Mexico border instead of attempting to enter Europe (UN OCHA 2023; Zarhloule 2025).

The policies of the second Trump administration may contribute to declining voluntary immigration; however, rising global inequality, ongoing regional instability, and the increasing intensity of climate crises are likely to continue to draw asylum seekers to the US for the foreseeable future. Whereas the viability of other forms of liminal legal status depends largely on shifting presidential priorities, asylum's enshrinement in international law potentially shields this pathway, even under restrictive executives.

The Asylum Legal Framework

Globally, asylum cases adjudicate whether a migrant meets the refugee definition established and protected by the 1951 United Nations Convention. In the US context, this requirement has been codified in 8 U.S.C. § 1158 which states that a person should be granted asylum if they are "unable or unwilling to return to their country due to persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion." Migrants to the US can apply for asylum defensively (to protect against a deportation), or affirmatively (proactively) within one year of entering the country. Those who cross the border without inspection or overstay visas typically apply defensively through the Executive Office of Immigration Review (EOIR), and their case is decided by an Immigration Judge (IJ). Those with a temporary status they hope to extend can apply affirmatively through US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and have their case considered by an Asylum Officer. Cases that are denied at the affirmative stage are also then sent to a defensive hearing before an IJ.

In fiscal year 2023, the United States received a record-high 431,000 affirmative and 316,000 defensive applications for asylum, a more than ten-fold increase since FY2013 (Bush-Joseph 2024: 3-4). Resources to adjudicate asylum claims have not kept pace with this growth, resulting in a massive backlog of 2.17 million pending cases across the two agencies (TRAC 2025). Practically, this means that millions of people are lingering in a precarious legal status for many years waiting for their case to be adjudicated. While this is a qualitatively different challenge than living indefinitely without any hope of legal status (see García 2026), navigating the asylum process can be extremely trying, and can compound stress on already traumatized people (Haas 2023, Menjivar and Cervantes 2024).

After filing an asylum claim, a migrant must wait 180 days to file for work authorization, through an Employment Authorization Document (EAD) (USCIS, 2025). Having made their presence visible to the US government through filing the claim, asylum seekers have a strong incentive to abide by the work restriction to avoid jeopardizing their case. Asylum seekers therefore face a quandary: they must somehow support themselves without working for more than six months (including EAD processing time) or run the risk of getting caught working in violation of US law (Mansoor 2023). Facing these constraints, many asylum seekers unsurprisingly turn to state and local authorities for help with food, housing, and other basic needs.

Legally Vulnerable Immigrants and Subnational Migration Governance

Asylum seekers arriving at the US-Mexico border have historically settled predominantly in border states like Texas and California. More recently, dispersion to interior and northern cities, including New York, Chicago, and Denver, among others, is increasing. This shift is influenced by social networks as well as high-profile political maneuvering by some Republican governors, notably in Texas and Florida, to relocate asylum seekers to large, traditionally Democratic cities (Goodman et al. 2024). As asylum seekers arrive, cities and states are struggling to adapt policies designed to serve other categories of immigrants, or other residents in need, to this distinct group. Throughout the issue, we consider how subnational institutions adapt policies originally crafted for resettled refugees and long-term undocumented immigrants to address the needs of this emerging third category—those pursuing asylum within US borders.

State and local governments are federally required to provide certain educational, health, and language access services to immigrants of all statuses (Williamson 2018, 2020). Beyond these limited mandates, federal government inattention to immigrant incorporation leaves subnational governments leeway to devise their own approaches to interfacing with legally vulnerable immigrants, including asylum seekers and undocumented residents (Bloemraad and de Graauw 2012; García 2019). In the law enforcement realm, for instance, states and localities may require or forbid police cooperation with federal enforcement (Armenta 2017; Collingwood and Gonzalez O'Brien 2019; Provine et al. 2016).

States and localities also can decide whether and how to provide immigrant residents with services, incorporate them in political life, or restrict their access and participation (García 2019; Ramakrishnan and Wong 2010; Steil and Vasi 2014; Varsanyi 2010; Walker and Leitner 2011; Williamson 2018). These policy choices impact not only immigrants' access to resources but also their sense of belonging and safety (Abrego and Leon 2025; Bloemraad 2006).

Responding to the recent influx of asylum-seekers, subnational jurisdictions and related local institutions have generally focused on essential services, such as food, housing, and legal assistance, with initiatives varying significantly across different regions, reflecting local priorities, politics, and resources (Chishti and Putzel-Kavanaugh 2024). As Republican governors publicly relocate asylum seekers without advance coordination, cities, states, and institutions on the receiving end – whether schools, police, employers, landlords, or NGOs – face logistical challenges and at times political backlash. The rise in asylum seeking has placed particular pressure on housing in major cities, with some estimates attributing 60 percent of the rise in shelter populations to asylum seeker arrivals (Meyer, Williams, and Wyse 2025). Amid growing polarization, Republicans are capitalizing on the struggles of largely Democratic big cities to advance their political aims. This nationalization of local politics (Hopkins 2018) may impact state and local responses across the broad range of subnational institutions engaged in migration reception.

Despite these significant shifts in US immigration patterns and their consequences for immigrants, the institutional ecosystems surrounding them, and politics on the local, state, and even national level, to date relatively little scholarship in the United States compares the reception and related settlement experiences of newly arrived asylum seekers with that of other categories of legally vulnerable immigrants. An issue focusing on asylum seekers, undocumented residents, and subnational responses in the US offers a timely opportunity to explore how the temporal, legal, and discursive dimensions of migration status shape vulnerable migrant groups, the locales in which they reside, and the broader political and social dynamics of immigration. While the issue's primary focus is migration governance, it aims to understand law and policy not as neutral frameworks, but as embedded in racialized, geopolitical histories.

Key Questions for Prospective Contributors

We seek original, empirical contributions across a range of social science disciplines and methodologies that respond to the questions below. We encourage contributions that carefully consider potential methodological and data limitations that hinder the advancement of understanding in this field, as well as the opportunities they present for advancing inquiry and theory. We especially prioritize pieces that emphasize how empirical findings inform implications and recommendations for policy reform.

Who are the new asylum seekers, and how are they perceived by the public?
The number of asylum seekers has grown rapidly in recent years, but is this group distinctive when compared to other categories of contemporary documented and undocumented immigrants with respect to their origins, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic characteristics, or settlement patterns? How do the new asylum seekers compare to previous waves of asylum seekers and resettled refugees, including in earlier moments when the US admitted large groups under parole or other temporary protections? For example, Cold War geopolitics and foreign policy interests helped secure entry and legal pathways for Cubans, Southeast Asians, and certain groups of displaced people after WWII—while Haitians, Central Americans in the 1980s, and more recently Venezuelans and others were often denied, reflecting

shifting notions of who counts as a "deserving" asylee. These patterns also illuminate the role of race, religion, and domestic and foreign policy in shaping asylum-seeking patterns and outcomes. Given the new asylum seekers' characteristics, what does public opinion data reveal about responses to these arrivals, compared to attitudes toward contemporary undocumented immigration more broadly, or to and historical waves of arrivals? How do attitudes toward race, ethnicity, or other social categories shape these patterns of public opinion? We particularly encourage analyses that compare asylum seekers' characteristics and institutional experiences with those of resettled refugees and long-term undocumented residents, to clarify how these groups overlap and diverge in their legal and social positions.

How do long-term subnational governance responses to undocumented migrants compare to new approaches to asylum-seekers?
While subnational jurisdictions have responded to immigrants in a range of accommodating and restrictive ways over time (García 2019), on the whole local government officials have tended toward pragmatism, serving immigrants in the ways that federal law and professional ethics dictate (Jones-Correa 2008; Marrow 2012; Williamson 2018, 2020). Large cities have been particularly active, with more than three-quarters of the nation's 100 largest cities reporting efforts to hire immigrants or bilingual employees in local government, provide in-kind support to immigrant organizations, partner with NGOs to serve immigrants, and celebrate immigrant presence through events (Dias and Williamson 2025, de Graauw 2021). In response to asylum seekers, many local officials have scrambled to provide housing and other services. Yet recent public statements (Johnston et al. 2023) and policy shifts (Marcelo 2024) from big city mayors suggest that willingness to accommodate asylum seekers may be wearing thin. Submissions addressing this focus area may ask how the rise in asylum-seeking will impact cities with historical policy trajectories that aim to include or exclude residents based on their immigration status. Contributions might address a diverse range of subnational policy arenas, including responses in education, housing, economic development, law enforcement, and other realms. How will the harsh immigration policies of the second Trump administration impact cities' willingness to serve or turn away from asylum seekers, or to embrace or reject federal immigration enforcement efforts?

What factors explain variations in local and state government responses to asylum seekers, and how do they intersect with broader national immigration policies?
A variety of factors influence how towns and cities respond to immigrants, including exposure to differing state and federal policies, local economic factors, racial/ethnic composition of both the new arrivals and the local population, political ideology, and political entrepreneurs (Williamson 2018, 2020). The central debates in the literature have focused on the relative importance of ethnic composition – the size and growth of various racial/ethnic or foreign-born groups (Hopkins 2010, Steil and Vasi 2014; Walker and Leitner, 2011) – versus political ideology (Gulasekaram and Ramakrishnan 2015; Ramakrishnan and Wong, 2010; Walker and Leitner, 2011). Papers addressing this focus area may identify how, amid growing asylum-seeker inflows and increasing political polarization, the factors that shape local responses to immigrant residents are changing.

How have changes in asylum-seeking altered the strategies of non-state actors, including those who typically have served or opposed long-term undocumented immigrants?
We know that non-profits have historically been major players in shaping the local integration of immigrants (de Graauw 2016). Which NGOs, advocates, or other non-state institutions are serving newly arrived asylum seekers, and how do their strategies align with and depart from those serving

resettled refugees or long-term undocumented immigrants? Conversely, which groups are opposing these newcomers (i.e. anti-immigrant organizations, militias, think tanks) and in what ways? Papers submitted in this focus area may explore whether new actors are emerging as advocates or opponents, and whether organizations that typically serve or oppose undocumented immigrants are shifting to asylum seekers. What new coalitions are forming between advocacy organizations at the local or national level? As organizations serve both asylum seekers and other types of vulnerable immigrants, how do they manage advocacy and fundraising, while prioritizing supports and resources across groups with diverse and urgent needs? Do organizations that oppose immigrants shift their approaches when it comes to asylum seekers versus immigrants of other legal statuses?

What are the implications of evolving subnational responses to immigrants for diverse groups of legally vulnerable migrants, including their access to services, legal protections, and social integration?
Given the deep heterogeneity of the 'liminally legal' population with precarious revokable statuses in the United States today, how do these variations in status impact the lived experiences of the different segments of this population (Connor 2024)? At present, we have limited knowledge about how variation in status type can affect integration outcomes (Menjívar, Agadjanian, and Oh, 2022; Sigmund 2025). Submissions responding to this question take the diverging subnational institutional responses to undocumented immigrant and asylum-seeking residents as a point of departure. Papers submitted under this theme would investigate the sharp contrasts in migrants' experiences depending on where they settle, the state's determination of their legal classification, the public's perception of their status, and how their classification relates to the law. These disparities may affect access to basic services, such as food assistance, shelter, and legal aid, as well as economic and workforce integration and social mobility over time.

How does the role of time and length of residence of historical undocumented migration and contemporary asylum-seeking influence subnational institutional responses, conceptualizations of who belongs and does not belong within the polity, and immigrants' experiences on the ground?
Time is a critical variable in the legal, political, and social life of migration—for both asylum-seekers and undocumented immigrants (see Cohen 2018; García 2026; Gatter 2023). How do factors related to time—such as years of residence, legal status, or life-course trajectories—influence state and local policies, public attitudes, and adaptation? Submissions may explore how long-settled undocumented immigrants leverage time to make claims to moral legitimacy (see Andrews 2018), community belonging, or access to rights, in contrast to newly arrived asylum seekers, who may leverage their engagement with the government's legal channels for claims-making. Focusing on states and cities, work may also investigate how subnational institutions differentiate between "deserving" and "undeserving" migrant residents based on duration of stay, or how bureaucratic timelines (e.g., asylum adjudication backlogs or the wait for comprehensive immigration reform) produce forms of governance (and traumas) through delay (Haas 2023). Overall, papers submitted within this theme center how the intersection of time and legal status mediate experiences of inclusion/exclusion, adaptation, and the boundaries of the polity.

How do these policies shape the broader political landscape, including partisan divides and intergovernmental conflicts among states, localities, and the federal government?
There is a long history of state and local frustration with Congress about a lack of action on comprehensive immigration reform, with some states taking action to reduce or disincentivize undocumented immigration to their territories in lieu of federal legislative reform. That kind of

subnational action has generally been found to be unconstitutional, because immigration power is held at the national level, but states have some leeway in controlling the services they offer to new arrivals (Guttentag 2013). Are conservative states pushing this envelope in terms of their attempts to restrict services to asylum seekers or ship them elsewhere (i.e. Cornelius and Varsanyi 2024)? Are so-called blue states and liberal cities taking a stand in providing services to asylum seekers in opposition to more anti-asylum policies at the national level? Has there been political backlash to such actions in either direction? How have state level politicians stepped into this area in new ways, such as when the Texas and Florida governors collaborated to transport asylum seekers to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts? What kinds of impacts have these high-profile acts of subnational asylum politics had on the broader multilevel governance of immigration policy (Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018), and the larger landscape of American politics?

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Anticipated Timeline

Prospective contributors should submit a CV and an abstract (up to two pages in length, single or double spaced) of their study along with up to three pages of supporting material (e.g., tables, figures, pictures, etc.) no later than 5 PM EST on January 7, 2026, to:

https://rsf.fluxx.io

In other words, your submission may be up to five pages in length. This includes everything, abstract, references, etc. Note that if you wish to submit an abstract and do not yet have an account with us, it can take up to 48 hours to get credentials, so please start your application at least two days before the deadline. All submissions must be original work that has not been previously published in part or in full. Only abstracts submitted to **https://rsf.fluxx.io** will be considered. Each paper will receive a $1,000 honorarium when the issue is published. All questions regarding this issue should be directed to Suzanne Nichols, Director of Publications, at journal@rsage.org. **Do not email the editors of the issue.**

A conference will take place at the Russell Sage Foundation in New York City on **September 25, 2026** (with a group dinner the night before). The selected contributors will gather for a one-day workshop to present draft papers (due a month prior to the conference **on 8/28/26**) and receive feedback from the other contributors and editors. Travel costs, food, and lodging for one author per paper will be covered by the foundation. Papers will be circulated before the conference. After the conference, the authors will submit their revised drafts by 1/12/27. The papers will then be sent out to three additional scholars for formal peer review. Having received feedback from reviewers and the RSF board, authors will revise their papers by 4/5/27. The full and final issue will be published open access on the RSF journal website in spring 2028, as well as in several digital repositories, including JSTOR and UPCC/Muse

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