

Cameroonian Asylum Seekers Increasingly Detained, Denied Asylum Under Trump Administration

Between fiscal years (FY) 2010 and 2019, more than three-quarters of Cameroonian asylum seekers (76 percent on average) were granted asylum in U.S. immigration courts. Refugees from Cameroon are fleeing what the U.S. State Department human rights [reports](#) describe as egregious human rights violations, including torture, carried out by Cameroonian government officials, police, and armed forces, the continued persecution of women and LGBTQ persons, and serious abuses committed by armed groups. As of September 2020, more than [3,000](#) Cameroonians – the vast majority of them likely asylum seekers – were awaiting U.S. immigration court hearings. Tens of thousands of Cameroonians have fled their home country and received or are seeking refugee protection in various countries around the world, according to the [U.N. Refugee Agency](#). However, **in FY 2020, asylum grant rates for Cameroonian refugees seeking protection in the United States plummeted**. Under the Trump Administration asylum grant rates for all asylum seekers have fallen, reaching a record low of 29.4 percent in FY 2020, according to Syracuse University Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse ([TRAC](#)).

In late 2019, immigration judges increasingly denied asylum to Cameroonians as well as Cubans, Congolese (DRC), Eritreans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, Salvadorans, and Venezuelans, among others, after the Trump Administration issued its [third-country transit asylum ban](#). The transit ban bars refugees who travel through third countries en route to seek protection at United States' southern border. The administration also used the transit ban to effectively raise the standard in preliminary fear screenings to block thousands of refugees from even applying for asylum. In June 2020, a federal court [vacated](#) the transit ban, and in a separate suit, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit [upheld](#) a preliminary injunction against it. However, the same month, the Trump Administration [proposed](#) additional regulations, which, if finalized, would revive and expand a variation on the asylum transit ban to apply to asylum seekers regardless of where they sought protection in the United States.

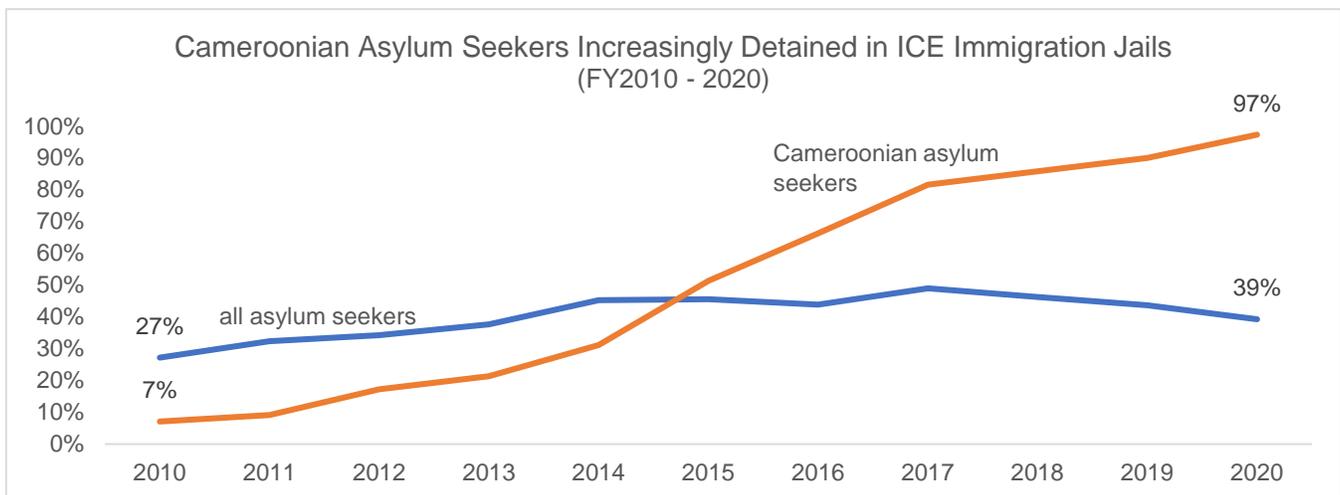
Thousands of asylum seekers, including many Cameroonians, are currently unable to seek protection at the U.S.-Mexico border. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is blocking and expelling asylum seekers under a highly flawed and roundly criticized [order](#) issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (over [objections](#) of senior CDC officials and following [instructions](#) by Trump administration officials) that effectively bans people seeking humanitarian protection at the border. Additionally, as the DHS [Office of Inspector General](#) recently confirmed, beginning in 2018, the administration instituted a policy to reduce and limit the number of asylum seekers processed at southern border ports of entry. As a result of this “metering” policy U.S. border officers have turned away many asylum seekers, including [Cameroonians](#), forcing them to wait, often for months, in dangerous areas of the Mexican border region.

In October 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic and despite [continuing](#) violence in Cameroon, DHS deported at least [50](#) people to Cameroon, including asylum seekers who reported having been [forced to sign deportation orders](#) after being [pepper-sprayed](#) and [assaulted](#), and Cameroonian asylum seekers with pending complaints against the Irwin County Detention Center for subjecting them to [forced gynecological procedures](#). At least one Cameroonian asylum seeker initially placed on the [deportation](#) flight had not passed a fear screening interview due to the [asylum transit ban](#).

As this factsheet demonstrates, the Trump Administration's regulations and increased jailing of Cameroonian asylum seekers, among other factors, have eroded the ability of Cameroonians to gain U.S. asylum protection.

Analysis of government data shows:

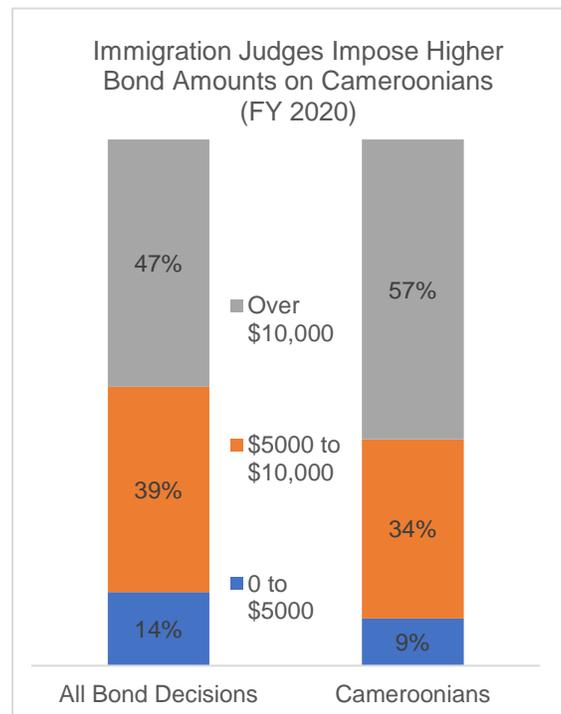
- ✔ **The asylum grant rate for Cameroonian asylum seekers plummeted by 32 percent in FY 2020** compared to the prior year (from 81 percent to 55 percent) and fell by 28 percent compared to the average grant rate for Cameroonian asylum claims between 2010 and 2019 (from 76 percent to 55 percent), according to data from the TRAC [Asylum Decision](#) tool.
- ✔ As Human Rights First reported in July 2020, the steep decline in grant rates for Cameroonian asylum applicants began after the administration issued the third-country transit ban. Some of the Cameroonian refugees denied asylum protection due to the transit ban include:
 - an Anglophone Cameroonian woman whose father, nephew, uncle, and eight-year-old son were killed and whose home was burned down by a unit of the Cameroonian military;
 - a Cameroonian refugee who was detained and beaten during a government crackdown on Anglophone teachers and activists;
 - a Cameroonian refugee who was brutally tortured by the military for his opposition politics; and
 - a Cameroonian man who was detained because of his political opinion and tortured for over a year without being brought before a court or charged with a crime.
- ✔ The Trump Administration has increasingly subjected Cameroonian asylum seekers to detention. While the percentage of all asylum seekers placed in ICE immigration jails has grown since FY 2010, **the percentage of Cameroonian asylum seekers held in immigration jails for some or all of their immigration court proceedings skyrocketed from 7 percent of asylum decisions rendered in FY 2010 to 97 percent in FY 2020**, as the graph below demonstrates. Detention of other African asylum seekers including those from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea and Mauritania, among others, has also climbed under the Trump Administration.



Source: TRAC [Asylum Decision](#) tool

- ✔ Cameroonian asylum seekers detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) during their asylum hearings in FY 2020 were **39 percent less likely to receive asylum** than non-detained Cameroonians in immigration court (51 percent compared to 83 percent), according to analysis of government data provided by TRAC. Like other detained asylum seekers, Cameroonians in immigration jail face many barriers to preparing and presenting their asylum claims, including finding legal counsel to represent them. Detained Cameroonian asylum seekers were **24 percent less likely** to have a lawyer compared to non-detained Cameroonian asylum seekers in immigration court in FY 2020, according to government data analyzed by TRAC. Multiple studies have found that individuals in immigration jails who have legal representation are far more likely to submit applications for relief and to be granted that relief.

ICE and immigration judges have authority to release certain asylum seekers on bond and typically conduct a “risk classification assessment” that examines: how likely the individual is to appear for court hearings; community or family ties; prior appearances at hearings; manner of entry and length of time in the United States; and whether they are a danger to the community. Many Cameroonian asylum seekers have family in the United States, and virtually none (0.24 percent) of the Cameroonians placed in removal proceedings in FY 2020 were in immigration court because of criminal charges (just 5 of 2,110 new cases). Yet immigration court data analyzed by TRAC shows that immigration judges **denied bond to 46 percent of detained Cameroonians** in FY 2020 and imposed disproportionately high bond amounts when bond was set. **Fifty-seven percent of Cameroonian asylum seekers were issued bonds over \$10,000** compared to 47 percent of bond determinations generally. In more than two dozen cases, immigration judges **set bond for Cameroonians at more than \$17,500** in FY 2020.



According to the 2009 DHS Parole Directive, asylum seekers who have established a credible fear of persecution should be granted parole in the “public interest” and released from immigration jail during the pendency of their asylum claims, if they establish their identity and demonstrate they are not a flight or security risk. However, the Trump Administration has systematically denied parole to arriving asylum seekers. For instance, in 2018, the New Orleans ICE Field Office denied parole to asylum seekers in more than 98 percent of its parole determinations. Many Cameroonian asylum seekers are among those denied release on parole from ICE immigration jails under the Trump Administration.

Jailing asylum seekers who have escaped government-sponsored torture and imprisonment, as many Cameroonian asylum seekers have experienced, can have particularly severe impacts on mental and physical health and effect their ability to recount past trauma in a manner that adjudicators find credible. Many asylum seekers, including Cameroonians, also report that immigration jails fail to provide adequate medical and psychological care and leave serious conditions untreated for months. In 2019, a Cameroonian asylum seeker who had been detained at Otay Mesa died after ICE failed to provide medical attention for his hypertension. A Cameroonian refugee as granted asylum after being denied parole and detained for six months in the Adelanto immigration jail testified to the House Judiciary Committee in September 2019 that “[t]he detention center is a house of tears.”

The immigration court with jurisdiction over an asylum seeker can also have a major impact on whether protection is granted. While immigration judges are randomly assigned to cases, ICE has discretion to determine the immigration jail where asylum seekers are held. A number of immigration courts responsible for the immigration jails where ICE has transferred Cameroonian asylum seekers have extraordinarily high asylum denial rates. For instance, immigration judges for the Lasalle, Stewart and Laredo immigration jails, where many Cameroonian asylum seekers are detained by ICE, **deny asylum applications in nearly 90 percent of cases** (89.6 percent, 88.5 percent, and 87.5 percent, respectively, in FY 2020). In April 2020, dozens of asylum seekers, including many Cameroonians, were transferred to the Laredo detention center in retaliation for a peaceful, sit-in demonstration the women staged at another detention facility to protest poor medical treatment.