

**MYTH 6: Refugees are given cars, mobile phones, clothes, free education, houses and jobs when they arrive in Australia.**

**FACT:** Refugees often arrive in Toowoomba with the clothes that they are wearing and one small bag of belongings. The federal government provides them with a basic settlement kit. This includes a washing machine, refrigerator, television, cutlery, crockery, linen, simple table and chairs, beds, and other basic furniture. These items are not always new. They are adequate but are only the bare basics for starting a new life in a new country.

Members of refugee families have particular needs with regard to education, especially learning English. All schools are able to access a small amount of government funding for the provision of support for learners of English as a Second Language. Primary and Secondary school students who arrived as refugees receive support through these programs. All newly arriving adult refugees are entitled to 510 hours of English classes at TAFE.

People from a refugee background receive no special welfare benefits. They are entitled to the same benefits as all Australian residents. There are programmes to support former refugees in finding employment but there are no "refugee identified" positions in any workplace. Similar programmes exist for a range of people from disadvantaged backgrounds living in the Australian community.

Upon arrival in Toowoomba former refugees are helped to find a house through the private rental market and may also apply for public housing. Once again there are no "refugee identified" houses. Any cars, clothes, mobile phones, computers or other such items belonging to these people have been purchased through savings or loans in the same way as the rest of the Australian community provide for their personal belongings. Within the broader community, people of different backgrounds and with different experiences have different priorities when it comes to decisions about spending their money. This applies also to families of refugee background.



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## Myths and Facts about African Refugees in Toowoomba

Welcome



Toowoomba has a much more multi-cultural face these days than perhaps ten years ago. This is partly due to the arrival of a large number of African families, who have arrived in Australia under the Humanitarian Resettlement Program—that is as Refugees.

A refugee is defined as a person outside of his or her country of origin who is unable or unwilling to return because of persecution or a well founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinions. Nobody willingly chooses to be a refugee.

Many residents of Toowoomba have offered a generous and supportive welcome to newly arriving refugee families from Africa. However, there is still much misunderstanding about these people and their situation. Many **Myths** can be contradicted by a clarification of the **Facts**.

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**MYTH 1: There is an African invasion happening. They are coming day and night – we are always seeing new people. There are too many of them and we can't cope.**

**FACT:** It is true that a significant number of new arrivals in Toowoomba have come from Africa, and, specifically from Sudan. More recently, families have also come from Liberia, Burundi, Chad, The Democratic Republic of the Congo and other African countries. It is estimated by a number of service providers that the African population with a refugee background in Toowoomba would number around 1500. This would be about 1.2% of the total population.

Toowoomba has excellent health, education, sport and cultural facilities, and a relatively low unemployment rate. In a global sense we are a wealthy community and well and truly have the capacity to support a number of people from a refugee background. It is true that some support services need to be better targeted and improved but as a community we can be proud of the story of refugee resettlement to date. And we have the capacity to continue to accept refugees looking for a safe home.

**MYTH 2: African Refugees all live in the one area and refuse to integrate.**

**FACT:** The 2005 study of the local situation, *Finding a Home on the Range*, found that families of refugee background live in a variety of suburbs throughout the city. Some of the locations where rent is more affordable have a larger proportion of newly arrived residents. There is not one identifiable "African" suburb. A small number of African community members are now in the process of purchasing their own homes.

Over the past fifteen years people with an African background have become involved in the broader life of the community. On a weekly basis they participate in churches, schools and sporting clubs. They are keen to find work in Toowoomba, or in the surrounding areas. Many adults spend a significant amount of time learning English so that they can fully participate as community members.

**MYTH 3: Refugees in Australia receive significantly more financial support than age pensioners.**

**FACT:** Refugees arriving in Australia are eligible for Centrelink payments as are any other Australian residents. There are no separate rates of payment for refugees, and they are not eligible for more assistance from Centrelink than any other customers. As with any other people who access financial support through Centrelink, the rates of payment available to a person of refugee background depends on individual circumstances. A refugee from Africa who is eligible for the Age Pension would receive exactly the same rate as an Australian citizen whose income, assets and relationship circumstances were the same. Similar criteria apply to other Centrelink payments.

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**MYTH 4: African refugees are violent and bring crime to our city.**

**Fact:** Local Police report that they have no reason for greater concern about the members of the Toowoomba African community, than about any other sectors of the community, in terms of their willingness to abide by the law. Sometimes African people are involved in traffic incidents; so are the rest of Toowoomba's citizens! From time to time crimes occur involving African people. This is simply because they are part of our community and the same factors are operating for them as for other members of society. There is nothing "African" that is inherently violent or criminal.

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**MYTH 5: There is now peace in Sudan so they should go back home.**

**FACT:** When the government of Sudan and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army (SPLA) signed a peace agreement in January 2005 it brought Africa's longest running civil war to an official end. The previous twenty years of conflict have left the country with an almost complete lack of infrastructure which makes healthcare and basic education beyond the reach of most people. The majority of Sudanese settled in Toowoomba come from Southern Sudan and they are now celebrating a peaceful referendum and declaration of a new nation. However, due to a 5 year drought, there is ongoing conflict over crops and animals. Renewed fighting is occurring in the border areas between North and South with rebels wanting to disrupt the new nation.

Cholera, meningitis, and malnutrition remain prevalent throughout many parts of Sudan. Some Toowoomba Sudanese residents have family members living in villages where there is no access to safe drinking water. A number of newly arrived people in Toowoomba have been on the move for over ten years. Many have encountered violence, hunger and trauma along the way. In Toowoomba they have finally found a secure place to call home. To uproot this settled lifestyle and return to Southern Sudan would cause enormous hardship and create an added burden on this new nation.