

Public Opinion Fact Sheet 4

Asylum seekers

March 2017

There has been a polarised and emotional debate in Australia over the issue of asylum seekers arriving by boat.

To further understanding of the asylum issue, the Scanlon Foundation surveys have considered if Australians **draw a distinction between asylum seekers applying overseas and those who arrived in Australian waters by boat and then claimed asylum.** In 2012 three out of four respondents (75%) were positive to asylum seekers who arrived after having been assessed overseas. In 2016, 80% were positive to those who were assessed overseas

‘Do you feel positive, negative or neutral about refugees who have been assessed overseas and found to be victims of persecution and in need of help coming to live in Australia as a permanent or long term resident?’ 2012, 2016

Response	2012	2016
Very positive	39%	45%
Somewhat positive	36%	34%
Total positive	75%	80%
Neutral	14%	4%
Somewhat negative	5%	8%
Very negative	4%	6%
Total negative	9%	14%
Refused/Don't know	2%	3%
Total	100%	100%

In contrast, only a minority support asylum seekers who arrive by boat. In 2016, in response to the question ‘Do you approve of asylum seekers who try to reach Australian by boat?’, 32% indicated that they approved, 61% disapproved.

Another form of question, employed in six Scanlon Foundation national surveys between 2010 and 2015, presented respondents with four policy options and asked which came closest to their own view. In 2015, 33% of respondents favoured the turning back of boats (31% in 2014); a further 9% (10%) favoured detention and deportation; **31% (30%) temporary residence only; and 24% (24%) eligibility for permanent settlement.**

‘Which of the following four statements comes closest to your view about the best policy for dealing with asylum seekers trying to reach Australia by boat?’ 2015 (2014)

Response	Percent
They should be allowed to apply for permanent residence	24% (24%)
They should be allowed to apply for temporary residence only	31% (30%)
They should be kept in detention until they can be sent back.	9% (10%)
Their boats should be turned back	33% (31%)
Other/ Refused/ Don't know	4% (5%)
Total	100%

These findings indicate that **a majority of Australians are positive towards a humanitarian program which assesses refugees overseas, but they are negative towards asylum seekers arriving by boat.**

The findings of the Scanlon Foundation surveys are in large measure consistent with other surveys. A Nielsen poll in August 2012 asked respondents for their view of the Gillard government’s resumption of offshore processing in Papua New Guinea and Nauru: 67% indicated support, 27% opposition.

In July 2013, Essential Research asked for views on ‘the announcement by the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd that all asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat will be sent to New Guinea for processing and none will be resettled in Australia’: 61% indicated approval, 28% disapproval.

On three occasions between January and July 2014 Essential Research asked: ‘Do you think that the the ‘Federal ... Government is too tough or too soft on asylum seekers or is it taking the right approach?’ A minority, in the range 22%-27%, responded ‘too tough.’

The large measure of consistency of survey findings indicates that attitudes towards asylum seekers **correlate with values and outlook on life, not the tenor of media coverage: values and outlook do not change in the short term.**