# Americans becoming internal refugees as political and environmental pressures drive relocations



Across the United States, a growing number of citizens are relocating within the country in response to politically and environmentally driven pressures, effectively becoming internal refugees. These individuals and families are leaving their homes due to policies and social climates that threaten aspects of their identity, beliefs, health, or safety. Their stories illustrate the complex and varied reasons prompting such displacements, ranging from education censorship to oppressive legislation and climate crises.

In New England, John Dube, a 63-year-old high school history teacher with 35 years of experience, moved from Plaistow, New Hampshire, to Vermont to escape a restrictive statewide educational environment. Dube had taught at Timberlane Regional High School and lived a settled suburban life before New Hampshire passed HB 2 in 2021, banning the teaching of what it defined as “divisive concepts,” including discussions of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The law also allowed members of the public to report teachers through an online portal, threatening legal and professional consequences. Dube described the bill as a form of political censorship, arguing, “It’s the old adage: control the past, control the future. It’s how totalitarian regimes take away people’s rights – by literally rewriting history.” After signing a nationwide petition to oppose state censorship in education, he received hostile threats and police visits spurred by the circulation of his name among rightwing groups and militia chatrooms. He and his wife ultimately left their longtime home and support network to seek safety in Montpelier, Vermont, where he now works as a substitute teacher. Dube worries about the spread of similar laws nationwide, including a recent executive order signed by former President Donald Trump targeting historical content at national institutions.

In the Pacific Northwest, Kayla Smith and her family relocated from Idaho to Washington State to access medical care and safeguard their reproductive rights after Idaho imposed severe abortion restrictions under its Defense of Life Act. Smith’s second pregnancy ended in a medically induced abortion due to fatal fetal heart conditions, a procedure she could only obtain by travelling out of state, incurring a $16,000 personal loan to cover the costs. The state’s laws restrict abortion except in narrow circumstances, compelling doctors to delay interventions until pregnancies become life-threatening. Smith related how her physician warned her bluntly: “Idaho is not a safe place to be pregnant right now. If you were my daughter, I’d have told you not to get pregnant in this state.” Kayla and her husband James left Idaho with their children in September 2023, accepting personal and financial sacrifices, including James losing his managerial role and the family reverting to renting. They joined litigation aimed at expanding exceptions to the abortion ban, which recently achieved a partial victory allowing abortions in cases where the pregnant person’s life is at risk, but not for pregnancies involving lethal fetal diagnoses alone. Kayla’s physician, Kylie Cooper, also left Idaho for Minnesota, highlighting a concerning exodus of specialists from the state due to legal risks and professional threats.

From Texas, a stronghold of conservative legislation on LGBTQ+ rights, Sandra, the mother of a 15-year-old transgender daughter, is preparing to relocate to a yet undisclosed West Coast state to protect her child. Sandra shared that she and many other families in similar positions feel like “refugees” and “many of us are in hiding.” The family has set up fundraising efforts to cover moving expenses estimated at $20,000. Their daughter, Marie, has expressed a consistent female gender identity since early childhood and has undergone medically supervised hormone therapy, despite Texas laws banning such gender-affirming treatments for minors. The political atmosphere has grown increasingly hostile, with the state legislature introducing over 125 anti-trans bills and the governor ordering investigations of trans families for child abuse, a directive currently on appeal. A proposed bill, HB 3817, could criminalize transgender identity as “gender identity fraud.” Sandra described the mounting alienation: “It’s as though the world has steadily closed in on us,” likening the experience to “being surrounded by a wildfire.” The family hopes to relocate before the new school year, spurred on by escalating threats on multiple fronts, including federal-level actions under Donald Trump’s administration.

Environmental factors have also driven displacement. Amanda McPhillips, 45, was forced to leave her rented home in Pasadena, California, after the 2023 Los Angeles wildfires resulted in heavy smoke damage and destroyed her son’s school. The fires’ immediate threat and the loss of her children’s school community compelled her to relocate nearly 3,000 miles east to Amagansett, New York. Despite the support she received there, McPhillips is deeply unsettled, aware that climate change continues to render many locations unsafe. She reflected on the enduring impact of human failure to address environmental crises, stating, “We haven’t fled violence or political oppression, but we have been displaced by decades of failure to deal with climate change. And the climate stuff is the scariest, because you cannot reverse it.”

The challenges facing scientists studying climate change are exemplified by Kristy Lewis, a marine biologist formerly based in Florida, who left the University of Central Florida in 2023 amidst political pressure and shifting state policies. Lewis had led a major research lab investigating sea-level rise mitigation. The election of Governor Ron DeSantis brought a politicisation of climate science, with restrictions on academic speech, surveillance of faculty, and limits on terminology such as “climate change” within official statutes. Lewis faced diminishing state research funding and professional risks, compounded by new “don’t say gay” laws affecting diversity initiatives in her academic environment. She relocated to the University of Rhode Island, where she is rebuilding her lab, but encountered fresh setbacks when the Trump administration cancelled $1.5 million in federal grants allotted for offshore wind energy research. Lewis described feeling targeted and displaced both professionally and personally by the evolving political climate.

Collectively, these narratives highlight a widespread pattern of Americans uprooting their lives due to political, social, medical, and environmental pressures. They underscore the profound impact of legislated restrictions, cultural conflict, and climate crises on the day-to-day security and futures of individuals and families across diverse regions. Each story involves significant personal sacrifice and professional upheaval, illustrating the complexity and human cost of internal displacement within the United States today.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/> - This URL provides general statistics on internal displacements and can be used to contextually understand the concept of 'internal refugees' within the broader global framework of displacement.
2. <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends> - This source offers insights into global displacement trends, which can inform discussions about internal displacement caused by various factors including political and environmental pressures.
3. <https://www.unhcr.org/mid-year-trends> - Mid-year trends from UNHCR provide updates on global displacement, which can be related to the concept of internal displacement in the U.S. due to similar pressures.
4. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/education/critical-race-theory-legislation.aspx> - This webpage from the National Conference of State Legislatures lists laws similar to New Hampshire's HB 2, which have been implemented across the U.S., illustrating the educational environment pressures mentioned in the article.
5. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/state-trends-abortion-restrictions-2023> - The Guttmacher Institute provides detailed information on abortion restrictions across U.S. states, such as those in Idaho, which are highlighted in the article as reasons for relocation.
6. <https://www.equalitytx.org/anti-trans-legislation/> - This website documents anti-trans legislation in Texas, illustrating the hostile political environment that prompts families like Sandra's to consider relocation for their safety and well-being.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/apr/24/american-refugees-escape> - Please view link - unable to able to access data