

# What are human rights?

By Encyclopaedia Britannica, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.23.17

Word Count **687**

Level **690L**



The flag of the United Nations. This group works to protect human rights around the world. Human rights are the rights all people are born with. Photo from: Sanjit Bakshi via Flickr

Human rights are ideas about what people need to live safe and free. Human rights come in different forms. One of the most basic rights is the right to live. Another is the right to believe what one chooses. Many people think governments have a responsibility to help protect people's human rights.

There are many kinds of human rights. Some limit government power so people can live the way they want. The right to free speech is an important human right. So is the right to practice a religion without being bullied.



Other human rights sometimes need government support. These include the right to safe water and food. Other rights require countries to work together. The right to peace and a healthy environment are examples of these kinds of human rights.

### **Countries Define Human Rights In Different Ways**

Different countries and cultures define human rights in different ways, though. Some governments give men more rights than women, for example. Some groups are treated badly because of their religion or race. Human rights groups work to protect these people.

Hundreds of years ago, most people had few rights. Instead, they had to obey a ruler. Kings or other top leaders had the final say on how people were treated. They could take someone's land for no reason. If they wanted, they could throw their opponents in jail.



## Government's Job Is To Protect People's Rights

As time passed, the idea of fairness and rights grew. In Europe, the 1600s and 1700s were a period known as the Enlightenment. John Locke was an important English thinker at that time. He wrote that people's rights are more important than government power. In France, a man named Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a similar idea. He said a government's main job is to protect the rights of its people.

The American Revolution (1775–83) embraced these ideas. So did the French Revolution of 1789. The U.S. Declaration of Independence lists “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” as rights that “all men” get from God. French thinkers wrote the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. These important documents described what it meant for people to be free and safe.

Many people still did not enjoy full human rights, though. In the United States, slaves had almost no rights. It took the Civil War (1861–65) to end slavery. Only then did African-Americans secure the basic human right of freedom. Women also had limited rights. They could not own property or vote. In the United States, American women did not win the right to vote until about 100 years ago.



## The Holocaust And The UN

For many people, World War II (1939–45) changed ideas about human rights forever. After the war, the world learned that Nazi Germany had committed terrible crimes. The Nazis killed millions of Jews and other people in Europe just because of their religion or race. This event is known as the Holocaust. Nazi leaders were tried in court. Many were found guilty of "crimes against humanity." The Holocaust convinced many countries that they had to do more to protect human rights around the world.

Dozens of countries formed the United Nations (UN) after the war. In 1948, this organization issued the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document lists the rights all people deserve. They include the right to an education. It also says people have the right to flee to another country to escape danger.

Protecting human rights is still a big challenge. The UN investigates abuses around the world. They try to protect the rights of men, women and children everywhere.

## Quiz

- 1 Read the summary of the article. Choose the answer that best goes into the blank to complete the summary.  
  
Human rights are ideas about what things people need in order to live safely and freely.  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
  
Many people still do not have full human rights, and countries have to work together to protect rights.  
  
(A) The American Revolution and the French Revolution were both fought for the pursuit of happiness.  
(B) John Locke was an important English thinker who lived in the 1600s and 1700s.  
(C) Human rights can come in different forms and look different in each country and culture.  
(D) Jean-Jacques Rousseau said that the rights of the people are more important than the government.
  
- 2 What effect did the Holocaust have on human rights?  
  
(A) The terrible crimes committed in the Holocaust made people want to do more to protect human rights.  
(B) The Holocaust made governments around the world realize that they need to give people the right to vote.  
(C) The Nazis who killed millions of people during the Holocaust were punished for their horrible crimes.  
(D) The people who did not have human rights during the Holocaust decided to start the United Nations.
  
- 3 Which detail from the section “Government’s Job Is To Protect People’s Rights” suggests that the Declaration of Independence did not give everyone in the United States human rights?  
  
(A) He wrote that people’s rights are more important than government power.  
(B) The American Revolution (1775–83) embraced these ideas.  
(C) The U.S. Declaration of Independence lists “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness” as rights that “all men” get from God.  
(D) Only then did African-Americans secure the basic human right of freedom.

- 4 Which selection from the article helps you understand what the American and French revolutions had in common?
- (A) In France, a man named Jean-Jacques Rousseau had a similar idea.
  - (B) These important documents described what it meant for people to be free and safe.
  - (C) Many people still did not enjoy full human rights, though.
  - (D) They could not own property or vote.