Who are legal immigrants, and how do they come to the U.S.?

There are 35.2 million legal immigrants living in the United States today, making up three-quarters of the foreign-born population. More than half are naturalized citizens (immigrants granted U.S. citizenship). Most of the rest were admitted to the U.S. with a visa or other permission and later acquired legal permanent residency status, also known as a green card. A smaller number of legal immigrants are in the U.S. on temporary visas.
The majority are U.S. citizens.

Fully 21 million legal immigrants are naturalized citizens, who have taken an oath swearing allegiance to the United States. Citizenship gives them the right to vote, protection from being deported and other legal rights.

Among immigrant adults who are eligible to become citizens, about two-thirds have done so, and the percentage has gone up in recent decades, though citizenship rates vary widely by birthplace. Only about four-in-ten eligible immigrants from Mexico are citizens, compared with eight-in-ten from the Middle East. In a Pew Research Center survey of Latino adults, lawful Mexican immigrants who had not applied for citizenship cited reasons including lack of English proficiency, limited interest in applying and the financial cost of the application.

A green card is one requirement for citizenship.

To become citizens, immigrants must have first lived in the U.S. as legal permanent residents (or green card holders) for a certain amount of time (usually five years) and meet other requirements. About a million immigrants a year receive a green card that gives them permission to work, travel outside the U.S., receive some federal benefits and be eligible for citizenship. About half of the immigrants who receive green cards already were living in the U.S., often on temporary visas. Let’s look at the most common ways immigrants receive green cards.

Most green card holders enter the U.S. to join family members.

Family-based immigration – referred to as “chain migration” by some who want to reduce it – has long been the most common way people gain green cards. About two-thirds of new green cards granted each year go to immigrants sponsored by family members who are U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents.
Immediate relatives of adult U.S. citizens – spouses, minor unmarried children and parents – received 46% of green cards in 2017, with no quotas on how many can receive them each year.

Another 21% of green cards went to other relatives of U.S. citizens, and to immediate relatives of legal permanent residents. Annual quotas for these categories result in long waiting lists, sometimes of 20 years or more.

**Green cards for refugees could decline because fewer are admitted.**

![13% (146,000) of green cards went to refugees and asylum seekers in 2017.](image)

An additional 13% of those who got green cards are already in the U.S. either as refugees or people granted asylum. To qualify, both groups must prove they would be persecuted or have a realistic fear of persecution in their home countries. Refugees apply from abroad, while asylum seekers apply after arriving in the United States. Refugees must file paperwork for a green card after living in the U.S. for a year; asylum seekers are eligible, but not required, to apply.

The number of refugees admitted to the U.S. annually has fluctuated over the years, and **has declined** since President Trump took office. The **top birth countries** for U.S. refugees differ from those of other immigrant groups, often reflecting the conflict zones they come from: D.R. Congo, Burma (Myanmar), Ukraine, Bhutan and Eritrea were the largest sources in 2018. Past regional conflicts have resulted in different origins in earlier decades, including Southeast Asia in the 1970s and Europe in the 1990s.

**Most who receive job-related green cards are in the U.S. already.**

There are **2.2 million people** living in the U.S. on temporary visas, mainly students, temporary workers and their immediate families.
In 2017, 12% of green cards went to immigrants and their families based on the immigrant’s employment or skill, usually with employer sponsorship. Most of these employees were high-skilled workers, and most already were in the U.S. on temporary visas.

The largest temporary employment visa program is the H-1B visa for high-skilled workers, mainly for occupations in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). There is high demand for the limited number of these visas. Other temporary work categories include agricultural workers and seasonal employees.

When it comes to foreign students, the U.S. has more in its colleges and universities than any other country.

**Millions apply for 50,000 visas in the diversity lottery.**

About 8% of legal permanent residents are admitted under smaller green card categories. The largest is the “diversity” lottery, which grants about 50,000 visas a year – 5% of green cards – to applicants from nations with relatively few immigrants in the U.S. In 2017, more than 22.4 million people applied. In the recent past, applicants have come mainly from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. As with all visa programs, successful applicants must pass a background check.

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