

Glossary of Key Immigration Terms

Immigration policy is often discussed using specialized legal and policy terminology that can be unfamiliar to the general public. This glossary provides clear and concise definitions of commonly used immigration terms, acronyms, and programs that frequently appear in policy discussions, news coverage, and government documents. It is intended to serve as a practical reference for policymakers, advocates, journalists, employers, educators, and anyone seeking a better understanding of the U.S. immigration system.

Adjustment of Status (AOS)

The process to apply for lawful permanent resident status (also known as a Green Card) while present in the United States. This means that one may be able to get a Green Card without having to return to one's home country to complete visa processing.

Alien (Statutory term)

A legal term meaning any person who is not a U.S. citizen or national. It is a statutory term, though many advocates prefer terms like “noncitizen” in general writing.

Alien Registration Number (A-Number)

Unique identification number assigned by the U.S. government to certain noncitizens to track their immigration records. Also known as an Alien Registration Number or USCIS Number, it typically consists of seven, eight, or nine digits and remains with the individual throughout their immigration process.

Asylee

A person who meets the definition of a refugee and has already succeeded in their asylum proceedings to remain in the United States, after showing they cannot return to their home country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution.

Asylum

The protection or sanctuary granted by the United States to individuals already

present in the U.S. who have left their home countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

Asylum Seeker

A person present in the United States who has applied for asylum, seeking protection from the U.S. government due to a well-founded fear of persecution in their home countries based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. If their asylum case is successful, they become asylees.

Affirmative Asylum

The process of proactively applying for protection in the U.S. directly through US Citizenship and Immigration Services. It can be used by those who meet the legal definition of “refugee” and who are not currently in deportation or removal proceedings.

Defensive Asylum

Legal process that takes place before immigration courts in which a person facing deportation requests protection from the U.S. government due to fear of persecution in the country they are being sent back to. This process is generally undergone by either those who were denied affirmative asylum or those who were apprehended at the border or in the US without proper documentation.

Birthright Citizenship by Jus Soli

Constitutional principle that allows individuals born within the territory of the United States to automatically acquire American citizenship at birth, subject to a few narrow exceptions. It is primarily guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the Constitution, which grants citizenship to almost all individuals born on U.S. soil.

Birthright Citizenship by Jus Sanguinis

Right to acquire U.S. citizenship through a U.S.-citizen parent, regardless of where the child is born. Eligibility depends on meeting the citizenship transmission requirements established by U.S. law.

Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA)

The highest administrative body for interpreting and applying U.S. immigration laws. The BIA reviews decisions made by immigration judges and by the Department of Homeland Security, in specific cases.

Credible Fear Interview

A screening interview conducted at ports of entry or near the border for certain people who express fear of returning to their home country after arriving at the U.S. An asylum officer evaluates whether the person has a significant possibility of establishing eligibility for asylum or related protection.

Deferred Action

A discretionary decision by the government to delay or defer a person's removal from the United States for a certain period. Deferred action does not provide lawful immigration status, but it may allow the person to request work authorization.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

U.S. immigration policy that protects certain undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children from deportation and grants them renewable two-year work permits. To be eligible, applicants generally must have been under age 31 as of June 15, 2012, and have continuously lived in the United States since June 15, 2007, among other requirements. DACA does not provide a direct path to citizenship.

Deferred Enforced Departure (DED)

A temporary protection from removal authorized by the President for certain

groups of noncitizens. DED is not a formal immigration status, but people covered by DED are generally not subject to removal for a designated period and may be eligible to request work authorization.

Dreamer

An undocumented immigrant who arrived in the United States as a child. Raised and educated in the U.S., they consider the country their home. The term originated from the DREAM Act, a proposed congressional bill that would provide them with a pathway to legal status and citizenship.

Employment Authorization Document (EAD)

A government-issued document, often called a work permit, that authorizes a noncitizen to work legally in the United States for a specific period.

Emigrant

A person who leaves their country of origin or residence to live in another country. From the perspective of the country they leave, the person is an emigrant; from the perspective of the country they enter, the person may be called an immigrant.

E-Verify

An internet-based system that allows enrolled employers to confirm whether employees are authorized to work in the United States by comparing information from Form I-9 with government records

Green Card

The common name for a Permanent Resident Card, which serves as proof of lawful permanent residence in the United States. A green card allows a person to live and work permanently in the U.S.

Form I-94

Document issued by the U.S. government that records a noncitizen's arrival to and departure from the United States. It shows the person's immigration status, the date they were admitted, and how long they are authorized to remain in the country.

Humanitarian Parole

A temporary, discretionary permission for certain people outside the United States to enter the country because of urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit. Humanitarian parole does not provide permanent immigration status.

Immigration Judge (IJ)

An official within the immigration court system who conducts immigration court proceedings and decides cases, including removal, asylum, and other immigration matters. Immigration judges are part of the Executive Office for Immigration Review under the Department of Justice.

Immigrant

A person who comes to a country intending to live there permanently.

Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR)

A noncitizen who has been granted permission to live and work permanently in the United States. LPRs, commonly known as green card holders, may be eligible to apply for naturalization after meeting certain requirements.

Migrant

A broad term for a person who moves from one place to another, either within a country or across international borders. The term can include immigrants, emigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, temporary workers, and others.

Mixed Status Family

A family whose members have different immigration or citizenship statuses, such as U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents, temporary visa holders, or undocumented immigrants.

Naturalization

The process by which an eligible lawful permanent resident applies to become a U.S. citizen. Applicants generally must meet requirements related to residence, physical presence, good moral character, English proficiency, knowledge of civics, and attachment to the U.S. Constitution.

Nonimmigrant

A person admitted to the United States temporarily for a specific purpose, such as tourism, study, temporary work, business, or diplomatic service. Nonimmigrants are generally expected to leave when their authorized stay ends unless they lawfully extend, change, or adjust status. For a full list of nonimmigrant work visas, visit the [following link](#).

Optional Practical Training (OPT)

Temporary employment authorization for eligible F-1 international students to gain practical work experience related to their field of study. OPT may be used before or after graduation, and certain STEM graduates may qualify for an extension.

Parole

Permission for a noncitizen to enter or remain temporarily in the United States without being formally admitted. Parole is granted on a case-by-case basis for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit and does not itself confer lawful permanent status.

Port of Entry

A designated location where people may lawfully enter the United States and where U.S. immigration officers inspect travelers. Ports of entry may include airports, seaports, and land border crossings.

Public Charge

A ground of inadmissibility that may apply when the government determines that a person seeking admission to the United States or adjustment of status is likely to become primarily dependent on the government for support.

Refugee

An individual who is outside of their country of nationality and is unable or unwilling to return due to well-founded fear of persecution in their home country based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group(Refugees apply for

status outside the U.S. as opposed to asylees)

Removal Proceedings

Formal civil cases in U.S. immigration courts that decide whether a noncitizen can remain in the U.S. or must be deported.

Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ)

A federal immigration classification that provides a legal pathway to a green card for undocumented children in the U.S. who have been “abused, abandoned, or neglected” by a parent.

Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

Government protection granted by the Department of Homeland Security to eligible foreign-born individuals who are unable to return home safely due to conditions or circumstances that prevent their country from adequately handling their return.

Unauthorized Immigrant

A foreign-born individual residing in the U.S without valid legal status or federal government permission. Commonly referred to as an “undocumented immigrant.”

Unaccompanied Child (UAC)

A person who is under 18 years of age, has no lawful immigration status in the U.S., has no legal parent or guardian in the U.S., or no legal parent or guardian available to provide physical custody.

Visa

Conditional authorization granted by a government allowing a foreign national to enter the government’s country.

Non-Immigrant Visas

Legal documents required for those who plan to temporarily stay in the U.S. for either work, study, tourism, business, etc.

Immigrant Visas

Legal documents issued by the government for foreigners who intend to live permanently in the U.S. For a full list

of the work immigrant visas, visit the [following link](#).

Visa Overstay

Remaining in a country past the authorized departure date granted by immigration officials and the government.

Visa Waiver Program (VWP)

Program that enables most citizens or nationals of participating countries to travel to the U.S. for tourism or business for 90 days or less without obtaining a visa.

Voluntary Departure

A way to avoid an order of removal by agreeing to leave the U.S. at their own expense and on their own accord. It is a way to leave the country with fewer negative penalties than being “removed” by DHS.

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