

GLOSSARY OF IMMIGRATION RELATED TERMS

The main topic is in bold and anything further on each topic is below it. Where an external link offers more in-depth information, it is included. **This is not the definitive voice on these terms.**

These definitions are intentionally top level so as not to get caught in the weeds, and are terms that one may come across in media consumption or a workplace. Where it seemed appropriate, there are some details offered to illustrate terms that may be more confusing such as the section under the refugee definition.

Border security policy is not the same thing as immigration policy. The reality is that there is a border problem in part because the United States does not have robust, business supporting, human centered immigration policy. [Ronald Reagan](#) and [George H.W. Bush](#) have the distinction of some of the most progressive immigration policies in recent history.

IMMIGRANT: a person who comes to live permanently in a country other than their own

This is the formal definition - one is an immigrant when they're here permanently or on a pathway to citizenship; however, this is not common usage. Informally, it is more of an umbrella term referring to anyone who is foreign-born and here for anything other than tourism. For instance, someone who is studying here on a student visa (F1 or M1) and may be here for undergrad, graduate, or vocational studies is colloquially considered as an immigrant by society at large. Common usage is to think of it as someone who is living/working/functioning here for a length of time. *Immigrants can arrive to the US under many different statuses. Some of them are defined below.*

MIGRANT: "an umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from their place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons"¹

This is a term fraught with misunderstanding. It is commonly used in different ways depending on which side of the political spectrum is using it. It is sometimes used to insinuate criminal or nefarious intentions of individuals from Latin America. It is also used to evoke sympathy and most often applied to those who work in agriculture. Professionals and others in the immigrant sector may use migrant to refer to individuals who do not come through via a more recognized status such as refugee, J1, H1B, etc. and may move around to find work, education, housing, etc. Technically, there are three categories of migrant: Asylum Seeker, Refugee, and Economic Migrants. Many Americans think of migrant farm workers when they hear the term. Migrant does not equate to undocumented.

REFUGEE: a person forced to leave their home due to war, persecution, or natural disaster/climate issues. Essentially, someone who has lost the protection of their country of origin and is unwilling or cannot return there due to a well-founded fear of persecution/destruction.

As an example, in Metro Detroit, most of us know that Chaldeans (and other Iraqi Christian groups), Arab Iraqis, Yemenis, and Syrians are large and well-established refugee populations. However, like the term "immigrant," there are a lot of other groups of people that are often referred to as refugee such as humanitarian parolees (i.e., Ukrainians, Afghans) and Special Immigrant Visa holders (i.e., some Afghans and some Iraqis) but technically they are not refugees. Refugee is a special immigration status which means they have been deeply vetted (the most vetted immigrant status in the US) overseas, have been classified as refugee, and come with certain funds attached as well as work authorization and access to certain services such as Medicaid and other human service programs.

¹ <https://www.iom.int/who-migrant-0#:~:text=IOM%20Definition%20of%20%22Migrant%22,for%20a%20variety%20of%20reasons.>

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Refugee Assistance: When they arrive in US, refugees are assigned to a local refugee resettlement agency (Samaritas, Catholic Charities, UNCRI in SEMI) which assists from arrival. Through the Reception and Placement program the government pays a one-time payment to the resettlement agency (per family member) of which a certain amount is retained by the agency for programming and the remainder is used for such things as housing, car, food, etc. during the first 30-90 days. After that a hodge podge of sources/partner agencies are pieced together to assist refugees for up to 8 months. Then they are on their own, although no agency will turn them away if they return for assistance.

Essentially, refugees are given very little and expected to be functional in the US very quickly, usually in a culture very different than their own, often laden with unresolved trauma in a language they may not speak (and are quickly enrolled in school and ESOL classes), can be compelled to work in fields unrelated to advanced degrees, licensures, and experience, have few personal belongings left... It is not easy for them.

UNHCR: **UN High Commissioner for Refugees – The official UN Refugee Agency** According to UNCHR, 2.4 to 3.3 million people are displaced and in need of resettlement around the world. In 2024, President Biden maintained his commitment to resettling 100,000+ individuals (same number since 2022) in the US through the status of refugee. This number does not include special status groups like asylum seekers or TPS (see below).

PRIVATE SPONSORSHIP (I.E., WELCOME CORPS): **individuals choose to be responsible for refugee from raising funds, greeting at airport, arranging housing, helping connect to resources/employment/ESOL/etc. Private sponsors can choose the person they sponsor, which is often a family member or close friend.** However, many churches and community groups are operating in this sector. Meant to be well trained by Welcome Corps before accepting refugees.

COMMUNITY SPONSORSHIP: **very similar to private sponsorship but done as a group and they cannot choose who they sponsor but have agreed to accept any UNCHR vetted refugees assigned to them.**

HUMANITARIAN PAROLE: **status usually reserved for imminent need or danger such as the death of a loved one or immediate danger that can be proven in your homeland such as a dissident artist.** In recent years, this status has been muddled by the need to invoke it for entire populations of people such as Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans (CHNV), and Uniting for Ukraine (U4U). This status does not include much support as individuals are meant to have a private sponsor in the US and it depends on which country you are from which assistance you receive.

However, the Afghan population was also brought into the US initially as humanitarian parolees and the US was their sponsor, but they had no assistance (i.e., funding) attached even though they were helped by resettlement agencies. Eventually, Congress added a variety of assistance for them.

TEMPORARY PROTECTED STATUS (TPS): **The Secretary of Homeland Security may designate a foreign country for TPS due to conditions in the country that temporarily prevent the country's nationals from returning safely, or in certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately. This status is updated approximately every 18 months with work authorization but little/no other funding.** Currently, there are 16 countries on the list, but they are not all treated equally. For example, Ukraine is on the list along with Afghanistan, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (notice not Cuba). But individuals from each of these countries receive vastly different levels of funding assistance and even accessibility to arrive here. As of September 2024 the 16 countries are: Afghanistan, Burma, Cameroon, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen.

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SPECIAL IMMIGRANT VISA (SIV): Special immigrant category reserved for those who helped the US in their homeland such as interpreters in Iraq or Afghanistan. Their family members also qualify.

ASYLUM SEEKER: In accordance with US and International law, a foreign individual may seek asylum either at a port of entry or if they are already in the US. Until their case has been adjudicated, an individual remains an asylum seeker. They may file for work authorization only after 6 months in the US. The time for processing work authorizations (regardless of status) is anywhere from 90 days to 9 months depending on the workload and how short-staffed USCIS is. *It is not illegal to enter the US at a port of entry and claim asylum.*

If they successfully win their asylum case, they are then called asylees but until then, they are called asylum seekers. Please understand that this categorization is incredibly complex and nuanced making it very confusing, so this definition is intentionally very basic.

UNDOCUMENTED/UNAUTHORIZED: Individual who enters the US without legal status. Often referred to as “illegals” or “illegal aliens.” They do not qualify for any assistance although there are community-based organizations that will offer them basic needs services. However, generally this population does pay into the tax system, and more importantly, the social security system, and they do not reap any benefits from it.

DEFERRED ACTION FOR CHILDHOOD ARRIVALS (DACA) PROGRAM: The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Program was created by the Obama administration in 2012. President Trump ordered the end of the program in 2017, but successful court cases kept it going throughout his term. In 2021, President Biden directed Homeland Security to take appropriate action to preserve and fortify DACA consistent with applicable law. To qualify, immigrants had to have come to the United States before turning 16 years old and have never been convicted of a felony, among other requirements.²

A DACA Recipient is someone who officially filed and was recognized under the DACA program. This is not a pathway to citizenship nor is it citizenship. This status only allows them to remain in the US, but do not qualify for federal financial aid, in-state tuition³, Medicaid (certain states allow), and other federal services.

DREAMER: Refers to larger population of unauthorized migrant children who arrived as minors in the US and may or may not have formal DACA recognition.⁴

UNACCOMPANIED MINOR: is defined by U.S. law as someone who enters the United States under the age of 18, without lawful status, and most importantly, without an accompanying parent or legal guardian. Over the last few years, there have been many stories about unaccompanied minors in the U.S. which can be divisive fear mongering, but the reality is that these are children who have fled dire and possibly deathly circumstances in their home countries. They are not appointed counsel at immigration hearings, so the ecosystem relies on non-profits such as Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) or the National Immigrant Justice Center to represent them. If you would like to read more about this population, [the National Immigrant Justice Center](https://immigrantjustice.org/issues/unaccompanied-immigrant-children) has a good overview.

NATURALIZED CITIZEN: Someone who has become a citizen of the United States with all its rights and privileges. To do so, they undertake a long process, take a test, pay a large fee, and then take an oath.

² <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/top-10-facts-daca-and-dreamers/#:~:text=DACA%20recipients%20and%20%E2%80%9CDreamers%E2%80%9D%20are,minors%20to%20the%20United%20States.>

³ Some states choose to offer it to DACA recipients

⁴ <https://immigrantjustice.org/issues/unaccompanied-immigrant-children>

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OTHER TYPES OF IMMIGRANT STATUSES THAT YOU MAY HAVE HEARD OF:

Green Card (Permanent Resident card) - Allows persons in [special categories](#) to live and work in the US permanently. Part of a “pathway to citizenship.”

J1 – typically exchange programs

H1B – what most employers use to bring over foreign worker

Visitor Visa – Commonly thought of as tourist/business travel visa but not all foreign visitors are required to have them, it is dependent on their country of origin, just like when Americans travel to many countries simply with a passport like traveling to Ireland or the UK.

Investor/entrepreneur visa – special requirements around money they’re required to invest or have liquid to create businesses here in USA

Diversity lottery – intended to make visas available to countries with low immigration rates. Winners are randomly “pulled” in this lottery system.

Primary responsibility for the enforcement of immigration law within Department of Homeland Security rests with U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).⁵ Immigration is a federal matter.

- CBP enforces immigration laws at and between the ports of entry.
- ICE is responsible for interior enforcement and for detention and removal operations.
- USCIS adjudicates applications and petitions for immigration and naturalization benefits.
 - majority of funding comes from fees with little government funding; 20K employees across the country; consider it the service agency for processing immigration claims.

⁵ <https://www.dhs.gov/ohss/topics/immigration/enforcement-afr#:~:text=CBP%20enforces%20immigration%20laws%20at,for%20immigration%20and%20naturalization%20benefits.>