



Since the birth of the United States, immigrants have been integral factors in the country's growth and prosperity. Through pioneering spirit, innovative science, advanced intellect and exceptional art, immigrants have helped drive the nation's future successes and forward advancement.

Immigrants are defined by US immigration law as persons lawfully admitted for permanent residence in the US. Depending on a foreign national's residence, there are two paths that can be taken to attain lawful permanent residency. Foreign nationals living outside the US apply for an immigration visa at a consular office of the Department of State (DOS). When approved for admission at a port of entry, they become legal immigrants. Foreign nationals already living in the US, including temporary workers, foreign students and refugees, file an application for adjustment of status from temporary to lawful permanent residence with US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). At the time they apply for adjustment of status, they may also apply for work permits. Adjustment of status applicants receive lawful permanent residence when their applications are approved. New legal immigrants are automatically authorized to work and receive permanent resident cards, which are commonly referred to as green cards.

The Immigration Act of 1990 specified annual limits for certain immigration categories. Those categories and their limits are family-sponsored preferences (226,000 to 480,000), employment-based preferences (140,000) and diversity immigrants (55,000). In the 2003 fiscal year, family-sponsored immigrants accounted for 69.7 of the total immigrants admitted; employment-based preferences, 11.6; diversity program, 6.6; and other categories, 12.0.

Official immigration records were started in the 1820 fiscal year (FY) when 8,385 immigrants came to the US by vessel at Atlantic or Gulf ports. That year saw the fewest number of immigrants in an annual period, and so far, the highest number was recorded for FY 1991 when the country welcomed nearly two million immigrants. The most recent available immigration statistics are for FY 2003. In that year, 705,827 people become US immigrants. Forty percent of these immigrants came from five countries. Leading the list is Mexico (115,864), and it is followed by India (50,372), the Philippines (45,397), China (40,659) and El Salvador (28,296).

While the US welcomes a notable number of immigrants every year, the country welcomes an even larger number of nonimmigrants. Nonimmigrants are defined as persons admitted to the US for a specified purpose and temporary period but not for permanent residence.

It is estimated there were nearly 181 nonimmigrant admissions during FY 2003. Half of all nonimmigrants arriving in FY 2003 were citizens of one of four countries: the United Kingdom (16.3 percent), Mexico (15.5 percent), Japan (12.9 percent) and Germany (5.2 percent). In the same year, the most popular US destinations for temporary visitors were Florida, California, New York, Texas and Hawaii.

There are numerous categories of nonimmigrants; although, the great majority of them are tourists. Second in volume to tourists are business people coming to the US to engage in commercial transactions. Other categories include foreign students, treaty traders, treaty investors, visitors connected with a foreign government and representatives of international organizations. Temporary workers also fall under the nonimmigrant classification, and this category includes workers in specialty occupations; workers performing temporary services; exchange visitors who enter to study, teach or conduct research; intracompany transferees; entertainers; athletes; and industrial trainees.

There is no annual limit for the total number of nonimmigrant admissions; however, there are limits on a few categories, including initial employment for temporary workers.