

LEGAL CATEGORIES FOR NEWCOMERS

INTERNATIONAL VISITORS include people who come as tourists, as students, as short-term workers and business people. They typically enter on various types of time-limited visas with specific restrictions and are not considered immigrants. Some people who work in the United States do so legally on time-limited visas because they fall into certain needed worker categories.

REFUGEES are a special category of immigrants who have come to the country through a special U.S. government and United Nations program for people who have had to flee their homeland because of a “well founded fear of persecution based on their race/ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, or place of birth.” Persons who apply for and attain this protective status after they arrive in the United States are called *asylees*. Refugees and asylees are eligible for most of the same types of rights and services as U.S. citizens. After a year in the United States they can become Legal Permanent Residents.

LEGAL PERMANENT RESIDENTS have been legally accepted as permanent residents in the United States by the U.S. government. At this point in U.S. history, legal permanent residents are denied many basic rights of citizens, and are eligible for only limited public services. Legal Permanent Resident status is a step in the process of becoming a U.S. citizen.

UNDOCUMENTED RESIDENTS, sometimes pejoratively called “illegal immigrants,” are persons residing in the United States without legal documents authorizing their presence. Some crossed U.S. borders without authorization, others have overstayed their time-limited visas, and others who might be eligible for legal status have been unable to get their papers processed by the federal government in a timely manner. The federal immigration system is extraordinarily dysfunctional.

The children of undocumented residents who are born in the United States are U.S. citizens and subject to citizen protections. Many are relatives of other U.S. citizens or permanent residents, and seeking legal status as family members. Their predicament is quite precarious and ambivalent. Many are dependent on work in the United States to support their families in Latin America. U.S. policy toward these people is ambivalent. Historically the border with Mexico was open, and people moved back and forth freely until the latter part of the 20th century. Now they are declared illegal and subject to deportation. However, the U.S. economy is dependent on their contributions to the labor force to maintain our economy and standard of living. Their tax contributions are an important part of our economic base. The business community solicits them as employees to maintain key industries.

Traditionally, the U.S. government has periodically made adjustments to allow some undocumented people to become legal residents, but in the meantime, these people live in precarious situations with few legal rights. Currently the political climate is very sensitive regarding immigrants. The federal government, business interests, and advocacy groups are exploring issues in the immigration laws and ways to address issues related to undocumented residents.