The US immigration system

A primer on temporary and permanent admissions, including categories and annual limits

February 22, 2018

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There are a number of different categories for temporary, non-immigrant admissions

Temporary, non-immigrant admissions, 2016

B-1 business visitors: **5,147,037**
Visa waiver: **3,142,597**
L 1-2 intracompany transfers with multinationals: **954,394**
H-1B professional specialty workers: **534,365**
H-2A agricultural guest workers: **348,052**
H-2B non-agricultural guest workers: **119,446**
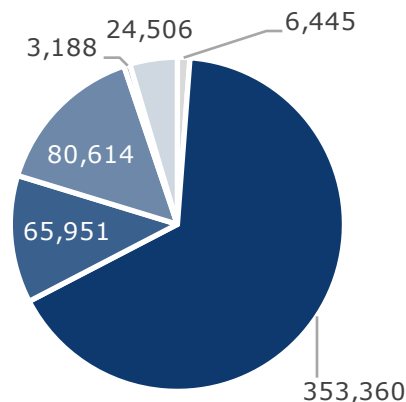**J** cultural exchange visitors: **574,617**
F/M foreign students, academic & vocational: **1,954,373**

Workers in specialty occupations (H1B) by region, 2016

- Africa
- Asia
- Europe
- North America
- Oceania
- South America

3,188 24,506 6,445

80,614

65,951

353,360

Sources: DHS, "2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics."

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There are four main categories for permanent immigrants under the Immigration and Nationality Act

Categories for permanent immigrants & underlying principles

- **Family-based** – family reunification
- **Work-based** – contribution to labor market
- **Diversity lottery** – diversity of country of origin
- **Refugees & asylees** – humanitarian assistance

Annual limits on permanent immigration

Under the INA, there is a **"permeable" annual limit of 675,000** people, broken down into:

- **480,000** family-sponsored immigrants
- **140,000** employment-based immigrants
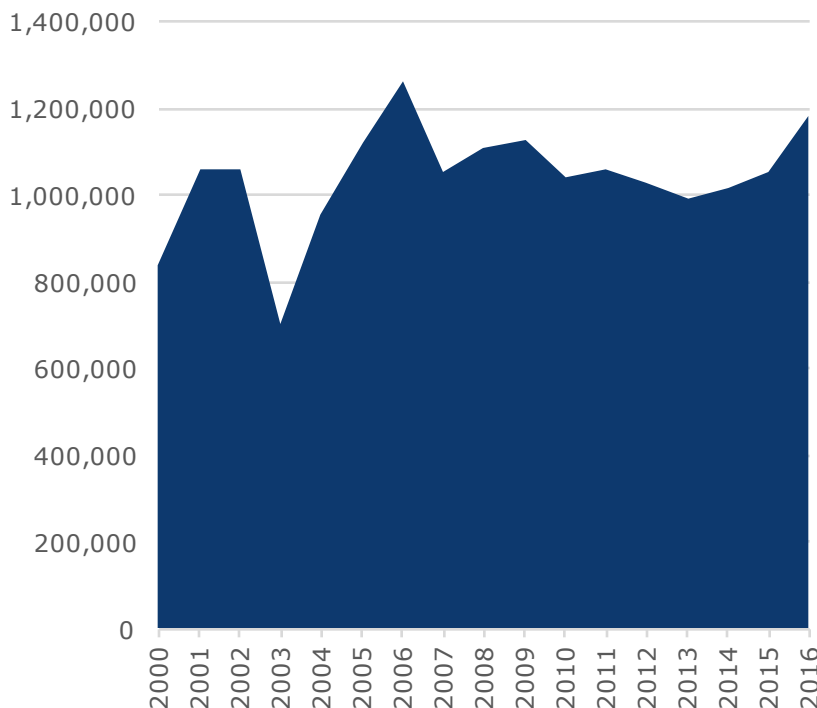- **55,000** diversity visa immigrants

There is a **7% cap** on family-sponsored and employment-based immigrants from any one country in each category

Source: Congressional Research Service, "A Primer on U.S. Immigration Policy," November 14, 2017.
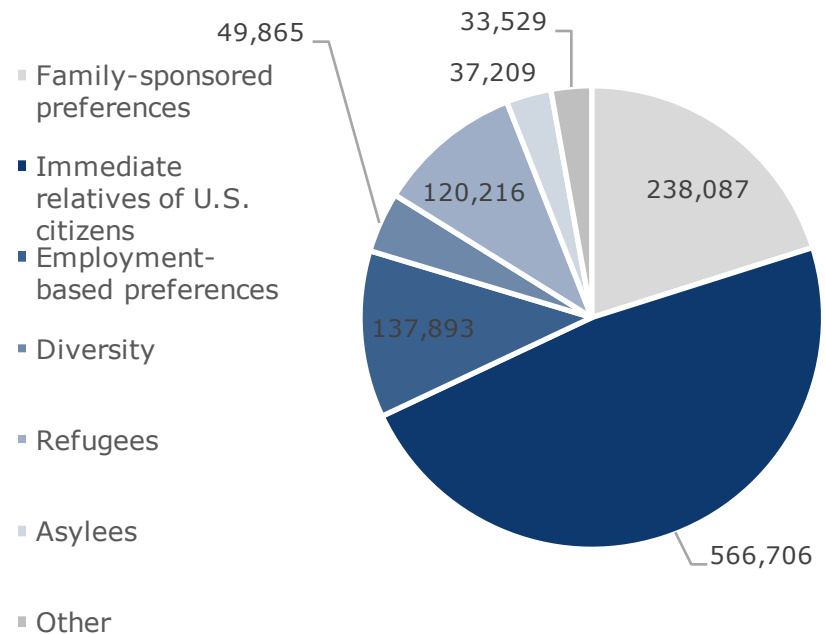
Most LPR status recipients are family-sponsored or immediate relatives of US citizens

Lawful permanent residents

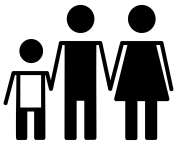The total number of lawful permanent residents has **averaged around 1m per year** over the past decade

People obtaining LPR status by type, 2016

Legend:
- Family-sponsored preferences
- Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens
- Employment-based preferences
- Diversity
- Refugees
- Asylees
- Other

Pie chart values: 49,865 · 33,529 · 37,209 · 120,216 · 238,087 · 137,893 · 566,706

Sources: DHS, "2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics."
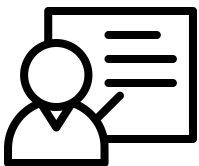
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The two largest categories for permanent immigrants are family-based and employment-based immigration

Family-based immigration

- There are two groups that are eligible: **immediate relatives and preference immigrants**
- Accounts for **around two-thirds of all immigrants**
- **No limits** on qualified immediate relatives, **annual limit of 226,000** on preference immigrants and **7% annual per-country cap**
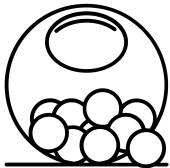
Employment-based immigration

- There are five preference categories for **workers based on ability, training/education and need; "special immigrants;" and investors**
- Limited to **140,000 admissions** per year and subject to the **7% per-country cap**

Source: Congressional Research Service, "A Primer on U.S. Immigration Policy," November 14, 2017.

The diversity lottery and the refugee & asylee system account for around 15% of permanent immigrants granted LPR status

Diversity lottery system

- The diversity lottery system is designed to **promote immigration from countries that typically send few immigrants** to the US
- Recipients are **chosen by lottery** from applicants

Refugees & asylees

- Refugees and asylees are people who are unable or unwilling to return to their home country because of **persecution or the risk of persecution**
- Their annual number – **the refugee ceiling** – is **set directly by the president**

Source: Congressional Research Service, "A Primer on U.S. Immigration Policy," November 14, 2017.