



Immigration Primer

Immigration is both an important biblical and missional issue and a central part of the American story, but the U.S. immigration system has become increasingly outdated, complicated and difficult to understand. What follows is a primer describing how the U.S. immigration system works today, how it has changed throughout U.S. history, how it too often fails to work optimally and how it might be improved in ways consistent with biblical principles.

A Biblical Approach

A great place to start a conversation on immigration is to explore what the Bible says on the topic. You can download our free guide, [*I Was a Stranger: What the Bible Says about Immigrants*](#). It highlights forty Scripture passages that might inform our approach to immigrants and immigration issues.

Here is a sampling of some of the most important of these passages:

- “And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19 NIV)
- “You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:34 ESV)
- “The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the way of the wicked” (Psalm 146:9 NIV)
- “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35 ESV)
- “Take care of God’s needy people and welcome strangers into your home” (Romans 12:13 CEV)

- “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1 NIV)

You can find additional resources on a biblical approach to immigration, including videos, a study guide, a church leaders’ guide and frequently asked questions on the Evangelical Immigration Table website at <http://evangelicalimmigrationtable.com/resources/>.

For more information:

[I Was a Stranger: What the Bible Says about Immigrants](#) (Evangelical Immigration Table)

[Thinking Biblically about Immigrants and Immigration Reform](#) (Evangelical Immigration Table)

Historical Overview

Immigrants have come to the United States since before the nation’s founding. Including the many Americans whose ancestors were victims of the involuntary migration of the slave trade, the vast majority of Americans today can trace their ancestry to somewhere else.

Throughout U.S. history, the majority of immigrants have been motivated by the same dynamics that continue to govern immigration: seeking economic opportunity, fleeing persecution or danger, reuniting with family or building a better life. However, the laws governing immigration to the U.S. have changed significantly over time.

For the first century after its founding, there were no federal restrictions on who could immigrate to the U.S. The first significant restrictions were created with the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which restricted most individuals from China from coming to the U.S. until the law was revoked in the 1940s.

After an era of unprecedented levels of immigration in the decades surrounding the turn of the 20th century — primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe — the U.S. dramatically restricted immigration beginning in the 1920s, with a preference for individuals from Northern and Western European countries.

In 1965, the law was significantly reformed, shifting away from a system where immigration eligibility was based primarily on national origin to a system primarily based on family relationships or employer sponsorship. With some revisions, the 1965 law continues to form the foundation of U.S. immigration policy.

For more information:

[“Mother of Exiles”](#) (Evangelicals for Social Action)

[“The Church and the Huddled Masses”](#) (Christianity Today)

[How U.S. Immigration Laws and Rules have changed through History](#) (Pew Research Center)

How the U.S. Immigration System Works Today

Under U.S. law, there are four primary ways that an individual could become an immigrant and gain legal status as a Lawful Permanent Resident (LPR, often colloquially referred to as a “green card” holder) of the United States, which is the prerequisite to becoming a naturalized U.S. citizen.

- 1) **Family Reunification:** Most immigrants come to the U.S. through family sponsorship. A U.S. citizen may generally only sponsor their spouse, children (of any age, married or unmarried), parents and siblings. Lawful Permanent Residents may petition for their spouse or unmarried children only. If a family reunification petition is approved and the relative is found to meet all eligibility requirements, they will be allowed to enter the U.S. as a Lawful Permanent Resident or adjust to permanent status from within the U.S. Depending upon the specific family relationship and the relative’s country of origin, these processes could take only a few months or as long as *twenty-four years*.
- 2) **Employer Sponsorship:** A limited number of immigrant visas are reserved annually for individuals sponsored by U.S.-based employers. These employers must generally demonstrate that no qualified U.S. citizen or Lawful Permanent Resident has applied for a particular job, and the vast majority of these immigrant visas are reserved for those considered “highly skilled.” A maximum of 5,000 employer-sponsored immigrant visas annually are allotted for those who are not classified as highly skilled (including most workers in industries like construction, farming, restaurants, etc.).
- 3) **Diversity Visa Program:** 55,000 immigrant visas are issued annually to individuals through the Diversity Visa Program, as well as to their spouses and minor children. Diversity immigrants come from particular countries of origin with historically low rates of immigration to the United States. Only individuals with either a high school education or equivalent work experience are eligible for a visa under the program. The number of applicants to the Diversity Visa Program far exceeds the annual allotment of visas, and the visas are allocated via lottery. The odds of winning, in recent years, have been between 1 in 400 and 1 in 500.
- 4) **Refugee Resettlement or Asylum:** Refugees are individuals who have fled their country of origin because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on his or her race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Each year, the president designates the maximum number of refugees to be resettled in the U.S. Refugees apply from outside the U.S. and are identified and screened abroad by the U.S. State Department and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Asylum seekers are those who seek these protections from persecution from inside the United States or at the border. To be granted asylum and allowed to stay, an individual must demonstrate that he or she has a credible fear of persecution under the terms of U.S. law. Both

resettled refugees and individuals granted asylum may eventually request Lawful Permanent Resident status.

Many individuals who wish to immigrate to the U.S. do not qualify under any of these processes. Even if they wanted to “wait in line,” no line exists for them. Not surprisingly, when immigrant visas are unavailable, many migrants seeking work and/or safety and security have either crossed a border unlawfully or overstayed a temporary (“non-immigrant”) visa. As a result, by the best estimates of the U.S. government and various non-partisan research groups, there are probably between 10.5 and 12 million individuals living unlawfully in the U.S. at present.

For more information:

[Reasons Immigrants are Undocumented in the U.S](#) (National Immigration Forum)

[How the United States Immigration System Works](#) (American Immigration Council)

[Frequently Requested Immigration Stats](#) (Migration Policy Institute)

How the Immigration System Is *Not* Working

Almost all Americans seem to agree that the U.S. immigration system is “broken,” although there is probably less agreement as to *how* our immigration system is not functioning optimally. A well-functioning immigration system would honor the rule of law, be compassionate to immigrants and maximize the benefits of immigration both for the United States and for immigrants themselves, while combating injustice. Some of the most significant problems with the U.S. immigration system at present include:

- **Erosion of the Rule of Law:** Our broken legal immigration system undermines respect for the rule of law by encouraging illegal work arrangements. Rather than adapting the U.S. legal immigration process to meet the needs of the country’s labor market, for decades the U.S. government has largely looked the other way as both immigrants and their employers have violated the law. Whenever particular laws are largely ignored and unenforced, the law itself begins to lose its meaning. The best way to address this problem is to reform the legal immigration system, adjusting laws so that they can be consistently enforced in ways that are both humane and economically constructive.
- **Unreasonable Backlogs to Family Reunification:** At present, U.S. citizens and LPRs who qualify under the law to petition for close family members to immigrate to the U.S. often must wait an unreasonable amount of time to be reunited with them. In some cases, the wait exceeds two decades.
- **Fewer Protections for Refugees Fleeing Persecution:** For many years, the U.S. has been a leader in affording protections to refugees fleeing danger. This focus has allowed the U.S. to offer safety and religious freedom to millions of people who have fled a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their race, religion, political opinion, national origin or particular social group, including many persecuted particularly for their

Christian faith. In recent years, however, the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. has declined sharply, including the number of Christians and other religious minorities facing the most severe persecution.

- **“Dreamers” At Risk:** Most Americans have long agreed that Dreamers, undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. as children, should be treated distinctly from others. Under the Department of Homeland Security’s 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy, many qualifying Dreamers were able to receive employment authorization and protection from deportation. The Trump administration announced it would be ending the policy in 2017, a decision that was halted in the courts. With the U.S. Supreme Court set to rule on the future of DACA in the coming weeks, Dreamers are stuck in limbo, at risk of losing their jobs and potentially facing deportation in the event of an adverse decision.
- **Insufficiently Secure Borders:** While the U.S.-Mexico border is much more secure today than it was a decade or two ago, there have been well-publicized influxes of children, families and others in recent years. While many of these individuals are legitimate asylum seekers, a number of entrants are simply trying to enter the U.S. without authorization to work or reunite with family. A well-functioning immigration system should reduce unlawful entries consistent with the rule of law and national security. Reforms are needed to address the migrants at the border in a manner that ensures our laws are being followed while we continue to treat those seeking humanitarian assistance with compassion.
- **Visa Availability Largely Unresponsive to Needs of a Dynamic U.S. Labor Market:** In recent decades, the number of U.S. employment opportunities open to immigrants have generally outpaced the number of immigrant visas. With the demand for legal workers regularly outpacing the supply, there are strong incentives for both unauthorized workers and employers to violate U.S. law. A better immigration system would facilitate lawful immigration at a level that meets the needs of the U.S. labor market.
- **Labor Abuses and Human Trafficking:** Immigrants who are unlawfully present are often uniquely at risk of unjust and unlawful labor practices — and even of human trafficking, when they are made to work under conditions of force, fraud or coercion — because they tend to be afraid to report to appropriate authorities when they are victims.
- **Separation of Children from Parents:** In the recent past, thousands of children apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border were separated from their parent(s), and in some cases were held in substandard conditions. In addition, deportation policies under various administrations have separated families, deporting one or both parents and leaving children behind.

For more information:

[Immigration White Paper](#) (Christian Community Development Association)

[Uniquely Vulnerable: The Nexus between Human Trafficking and Immigration](#) (Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking)

[Evangelical Leader Statement of Principles on Dreamers](#) (Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention)

How the Immigration System Could Work Better

While no immigration policy will be perfect, the Evangelical Immigration Table has long urged our elected officials to come together on a bipartisan basis to reform our policies in ways that are consistent with biblical principles and which we believe could be a significant improvement over the status quo. Specifically, since 2012, thousands of national and local evangelical leaders have affirmed the need for an immigration policy solution that:

- Respects the God-given dignity of every person
- Protects the unity of the immediate family
- Respects the rule of law
- Guarantees secure national borders
- Ensures fairness to taxpayers
- Establishes a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and who wish to become permanent residents

As mentioned above, the Evangelical Immigration Table recently released an e-book, *Thinking Biblically about Immigrants and Immigration Reform*, exploring the biblical, theological and missiological thinking behind this approach to immigration. The Table then released a new “Evangelical Call for Restitution-Based Immigration Reform” clarifying in more detail how an immigration policy could be guided by these various principles, urging a way forward that would *both* honor the law *and* keep families together. By implementing a process by which immigrants in the country unlawfully could earn permanent legal status if they pay a significant fine as restitution for their violation of law, the system can be improved in a way that is consistent with these principles.

On occasion, evangelical leaders have also issued other letters to policymakers responding to specific challenges in immigration policy in ways guided by these principles.

For more information:

[Evangelical Statement of Principles for Immigration Reform](#) (Evangelical Immigration Table)

[Evangelical Call for Restitution-Based Immigration Reform](#) (Evangelical Immigration Table)

[Thinking Biblically about Immigrants and Immigration Reform](#) (Evangelical Immigration Table)

[Letters to Policymakers and Statements from Evangelical Leaders](#) (Evangelical Immigration Table)

Key Terms

Asylum Seeker	A person who is seeking protection from persecution – claiming to meet the definition of a refugee (see below) – who is already inside the United States or at the U.S. border
Dreamer	A young undocumented immigrant who came to the United States as a child. The term comes from a piece of legislation, the Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act – which has been introduced repeatedly since 2001 but has not yet been passed into law – that would provide permanent legal status to certain undocumented individuals who arrived in the U.S. as minors. Many Dreamers benefit from Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), explained above.
Immigrant	A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country.
LPR	“Lawful Permanent Resident,” a foreign-born person who has been granted an indefinitely renewable visa to live and work in the United States. Synonymous with: Green Card holder and Legal Permanent Resident
Migrant	Any person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions. Migrants can be “immigrants” if they intend to stay permanently in a country other than their place of birth or “non-immigrants” if they intend to stay temporarily.
Non-immigrant Visa	Visas for persons who have permanent residency outside the U.S. and are authorized to be in the country on a temporary basis. Non-immigrant visas may or may not include employment authorization. Examples of non-immigrant visas include tourist visas, student visas and temporary worker visas.

Refugee	<p>A person outside the country of his or her nationality, who is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of persecution, or a well-founded fear of persecution, based on his or her race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Refugees resettled to the U.S. are identified by the U.S. government abroad, flown to the U.S. and then resettled in partnership with faith-based or non-profit organizations that partner with the U.S. State Department.</p>
Temporary Protected Status (TPS)	<p>Temporary status granted to eligible foreign-born individuals who are unable to return home safely due to conditions or circumstances preventing their country from adequately handling the return.</p>
Unaccompanied Children (UAC)	<p>Children who cross the border alone or without their parents. Unaccompanied children receive more protections than other immigrants, including being housed in licensed Health and Human Services child shelters rather than Border Patrol detention facilities.</p> <p><i>Synonymous with:</i> Unaccompanied Minor</p>
Undocumented Immigrant	<p>A foreign-born person who does not have the legal right to be or remain in the United States. Immigrants become undocumented either by crossing the border illegally or by overstaying their temporary visas.</p> <p><i>Synonymous with:</i> Illegal alien, Illegal immigrant, Unauthorized immigrant</p>

U.S. Citizen

An individual who was born within the United States, who acquired U.S. citizenship when born abroad as a child of a U.S. citizen, who completed a naturalization process or who derived citizenship as the child of a parent who naturalized.

In order to naturalize, an individual must first qualify for Lawful Permanent Resident status and, in most cases, maintain that status for at least five years, in addition to complying with other requirements.

This resource was prepared by the Evangelical Immigration Table, adapted from resources prepared by World Relief, the Christian Community Development Association, the Migration Policy Institute and the National Immigration Forum.