



Fact Sheet: Reasons Immigrants are Undocumented in the U.S.

- **Legal immigration to the U.S. is very limited.** Permanent legal immigration to the U.S. excludes millions of people because it is limited to the following three paths:
 - **Family:** This category is limited to individuals with close family relationships, such as spouses, parents, children, and some siblings. The number of people who can immigrate legally based on this category is capped every year, which leads to long wait times. For instance, the [visa bulletin](#) for May 2017 shows that Mexican siblings of U.S. citizens must wait at least 20 years to come legally to the U.S.
 - **Employment:** This category generally requires that a person have a job lined up in the U.S. and usually must meet specific education or skill level requirements. This category is also capped every year.
 - **Humanitarian protection:** This category is limited to refugees or asylum seekers who come to the U.S. to escape persecution and violence back home.
- **The U.S. immigration system is outdated.** Many people come to the U.S. without documentation or stay after their visas expire for economic opportunity. Because our immigration system has not been updated significantly in more than 30 years, the options to come to the U.S. for economic opportunities are limited.
- **Undocumented immigrants cannot easily gain legal status.** Undocumented immigrants already in the U.S. have very limited ways to gain legal status. The most common path is to marry a U.S. citizen, but even in this case they face significant barriers. The process requires leaving the U.S., but immigration laws bar anyone who has been undocumented for more than a year from re-entering the U.S. for 10 years, serving as a strong incentive for individuals not to leave the U.S. and adjust their status.

Background Facts on the Undocumented

- An estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the United States. About two-thirds (66 percent) have lived in the U.S. for 10 years or more.
- The number of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. has stayed at the same level since 2009 (about 11 million).
- As of 2012, Mexicans [represented](#) a slim majority — 52 percent — of the entire undocumented population, followed by El Salvador (6 percent) and Guatemala (5 percent).
- Approximately 8 million U.S. citizens share a household with at least one undocumented family member.
- About 3.4 million undocumented immigrants have or reside with at least one U.S.-citizen child under age 18.