



GLOSSARY PER CATEGORY

A practical glossary for journalists covering U.S. immigration should blend formal legal definitions with how terms are used (and misused) in policy, advocacy, and everyday coverage. Below is a curated, reporter-focused glossary you can adapt into your own style guide or newsroom reference.

Status and identity labels

- Noncitizen: Neutral umbrella term for anyone who is not a U.S. citizen, including lawful permanent residents, visa holders, and people without lawful status.
 - Alien: Formal legal term in federal statute for a person who is not a U.S. citizen or national; widely considered dehumanizing in everyday language, and many newsrooms avoid it except in direct quotations or when referencing specific legal text.
 - Foreign national: Common policy and diplomatic term for a person who is a citizen of a country other than the United States; sometimes used instead of “alien” in agency communications.
 - Undocumented immigrant: Person in the U.S. without current lawful immigration status—because of entry without inspection, overstaying a visa, or violating visa terms; many journalist style guides recommend this instead of “illegal immigrant.”
 - Unauthorized immigrant: Policy term similar to “undocumented,” often used in government and research contexts focusing on legal status rather than documents carried.
 - Lawful permanent resident (LPR): Noncitizen authorized to live and work in the U.S. permanently, commonly called a “green card holder.”
 - Conditional permanent resident: Person granted permanent residence on a conditional basis (often through a marriage less than two years old) who must file a petition to remove conditions within a set timeframe.
 - Nonimmigrant: Person admitted temporarily for a specific purpose (tourism, study, work) under a nonimmigrant visa category (such as B-2 visitor or F-1 student).
 - Dual national/dual citizen: Person recognized as a citizen or national of two countries simultaneously; U.S. law tolerates but does not formally encourage dual citizenship.
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Core humanitarian protection terms



- Refugee: Person outside their country of nationality who cannot return because of a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group, and who is processed through the U.S. refugee resettlement system abroad.
 - Asylum seeker: A person who requests protection (asylum) after arriving in or at the border of the U.S., using similar legal criteria to refugees but a different application path and location.
 - Asylee: Person who has been granted asylum in the U.S., which can lead to permanent residence and eventually citizenship.
 - Withholding of removal: Protection that bars the government from deporting someone to a country where their life or freedom would be threatened on protected grounds but does not provide a full path to permanent residency.
 - Convention Against Torture (CAT) protection: Relief that prevents deportation to a country where the person is more likely than not to be tortured, under international and U.S. implementing law.
 - Temporary Protected Status (TPS): Time-limited protection from deportation and work authorization for nationals of certain countries facing armed conflict, natural disaster, or other extraordinary conditions designated by the U.S. government.
 - Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS): Pathway for certain noncitizen children in the U.S. who have been abused, neglected, or abandoned and for whom a state court has issued specific findings; can lead to permanent residence.
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Enforcement, detention, and court terms

- Removal (formerly “deportation”): Formal process by which the government orders a noncitizen to leave the U.S., usually after proceedings in immigration court; “deportation” is still used colloquially, but “removal” is the current statutory term.
- Removal proceedings: Administrative hearings in immigration court to determine whether a person can remain in the U.S. or will be ordered removed.
- Expedited removal: Fast-track process allowing certain arriving or recently entered noncitizens to be removed without a full immigration court hearing, with limited review.
- Voluntary departure: Permission granted for a person to leave the U.S. at their own expense instead of a removal order, which can reduce future legal consequences.
- Notice to Appear (NTA): Charging document that starts immigration court proceedings, listing the government’s allegations and the grounds for removability.



- Detainer (immigration hold): Request from federal immigration authorities to a local or state law-enforcement agency asking them to keep a person in custody for transfer, not a standalone judicial warrant.
 - Immigration detention: Civil confinement of noncitizens while their immigration cases or removal proceedings are pending, distinct from criminal incarceration but often in similar facilities or under similar conditions.
 - Bond (immigration): Money paid to secure a detained noncitizen's release while proceedings continue; set by ICE or an immigration judge.
 - Prosecutorial discretion: Authority of immigration agencies to decide how and whether to pursue enforcement in individual cases, including decisions to pause or close a case.
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Relief, waivers, and discretionary programs

- Adjustment of status: A process by which a person already in the U.S. applies for lawful permanent residence without leaving the country, if they qualify.
 - Cancellation of removal: Immigration court relief that can allow certain noncitizens to become permanent residents if they meet strict requirements (such as long-term presence and “exceptional and extremely unusual hardship” to qualifying relatives).
 - Waiver of inadmissibility: Legal forgiveness that allows a person who is otherwise barred (for example, by unlawful presence or certain misrepresentations) to receive a visa or immigration benefit in specific circumstances.
 - Parole (immigration): Permission to enter or remain in the U.S. temporarily for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit, without formal “admission” and without itself conferring permanent status.
 - Deferred action: Case-by-case decision to delay deportation for a noncitizen, which can include access to work authorization but does not itself create lawful status.
 - DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals): Program (created by executive action) granting certain people who came to the U.S. as children temporary protection from deportation and work authorization under the broader category of deferred action.
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Humanitarian and crime-victim visas

- U visa: Nonimmigrant status for certain crime victims who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse and are helpful to law enforcement; can lead to a green card after a period in status.



- T visa: Nonimmigrant status for survivors of severe human trafficking who meet cooperation and other criteria; may lead to permanent residence.
 - VAWA self-petitioner: Survivor of qualifying abuse by a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident spouse, parent, or adult child who can file for immigration relief independently under the Violence Against Women Act.
 - Special immigrant: Category covering several distinct groups (such as certain religious workers, employees of the U.S. government abroad, or SIJS recipients) eligible for specific immigrant visas.
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Visas, entries, and travel documents

- Visa: Travel document (usually a sticker in a passport) issued by the U.S. Department of State that allows a person to seek admission at a port of entry; it does not guarantee entry.
 - Admission: Legal term for formal entry into the U.S. after inspection and authorization by immigration officers at a port of entry.
 - Entry without inspection (EWI): Crossing into the U.S. at a place or time not authorized by immigration officials, without going through inspection.
 - Overstay: Noncitizen who entered the U.S. with a valid visa but remained beyond the authorized period or violated the terms of admission.
 - B-2 visitor visa: Common nonimmigrant visa for tourism, visiting friends or relatives, and certain short-term purposes.
 - H-1B visa: Nonimmigrant visa for certain professional workers in specialty occupations, usually requiring at least a bachelor's degree.
 - Diversity visa (DV) lottery: Program providing a limited number of immigrant visas each year to individuals from countries with relatively low rates of immigration to the U.S., selected by lottery.
 - Advance parole: Travel document allowing certain noncitizens already in the U.S. to leave and return without abandoning an application for another immigration benefit (such as adjustment of status).
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Agencies, courts, and key institutions

- Department of Homeland Security (DHS): Cabinet department that houses most immigration enforcement and services agencies, including USCIS, ICE, and CBP.
- U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS): DHS agency that adjudicates most immigration applications and petitions, including green cards, naturalization, many humanitarian protections, and work authorization.



- U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE): DHS agency primarily responsible for interior immigration enforcement, detention, and deportation operations.
 - U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP): DHS agency responsible for border security and inspections at ports of entry, including Border Patrol and the Office of Field Operations.
 - Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR): Justice Department office that oversees immigration courts and the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA).
 - Immigration judge: DOJ official (not an Article III federal judge) who presides over removal proceedings and certain applications for relief in EOIR courts.
 - Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA): Administrative body within EOIR that reviews decisions of immigration judges and some DHS determinations.
 - Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR): Office within the Department of Health and Human Services that, among other tasks, cares for unaccompanied migrant children referred from DHS custody.
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Legal standards and bars

- Inadmissible: Legal label for a person who is barred from being admitted to the U.S. or receiving certain immigration benefits because of specific grounds such as criminal history, prior immigration violations, or health-related issues.
 - Deportable: Noncitizen who has already been admitted to the U.S. but falls within grounds that make them subject to removal (for example, certain crimes or immigration violations).
 - Three- and ten-year bars: Periods of inadmissibility triggered when a person accrues more than 180 days or more than one year of unlawful presence in the U.S. and then departs, usually requiring them to remain outside or seek a waiver.
 - Good moral character (GMC): Legal standard used in immigration law (for example, in naturalization or cancellation of removal) that looks at a person's conduct over a specific period.
 - Public charge: Ground of inadmissibility connected to whether a person is likely to depend primarily on certain government cash assistance or long-term institutional care; the precise policy approach has changed over time and remains politically contentious.
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Children, families, and border-specific terms

- Unaccompanied child (UC) / unaccompanied alien child (UAC): Person under 18 with no lawful immigration status and no parent or legal guardian in the



U.S. available to provide care; UAC is the statutory term, but “unaccompanied child” is often preferred in journalism.

- Family unit/family group: DHS term for migrants—typically a parent or guardian traveling with one or more children—encountered together at the border.
 - Metering: Practice of limiting the number of asylum seekers processed at ports of entry per day, forcing others to wait—often in Mexico—before they can approach.
 - Title 42: Public health authority used during the COVID-19 pandemic to expel migrants at the border quickly, nominally on disease-control grounds, without the usual asylum processing.
 - Safe third country/transit ban: Policies that restrict asylum eligibility for those who transited through other countries without seeking protection there first, or that require seeking protection in designated “safe” countries.
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Documentation, forms, and identifiers

- A-Number (Alien registration number): Unique identifier assigned by DHS to many noncitizens, typically an eight- or nine-digit number preceded by “A.”
 - Receipt notice (Form I-797): Notice of action from USCIS confirming receipt of an application or petition and often listing a case number; can also communicate approvals or other decisions.
 - Employment Authorization Document (EAD): Photo ID card issued by USCIS proving that a noncitizen is authorized to work in the U.S. for a specific period.
 - I-94 arrival/departure record: DHS record showing a noncitizen’s date of entry, visa class, and authorized period of stay; often accessed electronically.
 - Visa bulletin: Monthly State Department publication showing which immigrant visa categories are “current” or backlogged, reflecting numerical caps and country limits.
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Politicized or contested language to flag

In newsroom style, many journalist-oriented guides urge careful use of, or avoidance of, these.

- “Illegal immigrant” / “illegal alien”: Legally rooted but widely criticized terms; many style guides recommend reserving “illegal” for actions (“entered the country illegally”), not people.
- “Invasion”: A politicized term sometimes used to describe migration flows; experts note it has a specific meaning in international law related to armed conflict and is inaccurate for migration.



- “Catch-and-release”: Rhetorical shorthand for the practice of releasing certain migrants from custody while their cases proceed, often without acknowledging the legal obligations and reporting requirements that may apply.
- “Chain migration”: Political term used to criticize family-based immigration; the underlying legal concept is family-sponsored migration governed by numerical limits and preference categories.