



Family Immigration: Visas and Backlogs

The principle of family unity has long been a hallmark of U.S. immigration. Many Americans are here today because they were reunited with their family through a petitioning relative. Today, about two-thirds of all immigrants come through this family-based system. While this is one of the few pathways for people to be able to immigrate to the U.S., serious updates are needed for the system to work as intended.

Family Visas

Recognizing that communities are stronger when all families can thrive, Congress created the family immigration system in the 1960s. It has not been updated since the 1990s to address the realities of current immigration patterns or how society defines family today. While many people believe that family members can easily immigrate to the U.S. by waiting in “line”, families actually face multiple barriers to reunification.

U.S. citizens and Legal permanent residents can sponsor certain relatives that fall under each of the following categories:

- **Immediate Relatives**, including spouses, parents, and the minor children of U.S. citizens
- **Family Preference** categories who are adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens, minor children and unmarried children over 21 of permanent residents.

A U.S. citizen can petition for their **immediate relatives** without facing visa limits, only if no other immigration bar applies. Furthermore, people in the **family preference category** are subject to numerical limits (under current law and based on demand, they cannot exceed more than 226,000 per fiscal year) and per-country limits (no country can exceed 7% of the visas available). In practice, this has meant that there are hundreds of thousands more families waiting to be reunited than there are visas available for them.

Visa Backlogs

Although this pathway is technically available for families to reunify, processing delays, technical errors, and funding shortages have led to approximately four million people stuck abroad in visa backlogs waiting years to be reunified. Today, some U.S. citizens have to wait over 20 years to be reunified with their siblings through the family immigration system. These delays have resulted in family members having to risk their lives to seek asylum at the U.S. border, since for many it will be years before their visas are processed.

Given the magnitude of the current visa backlog and the continuous need for families to reunite, permanent changes to the system are needed. A one-time increase of a few thousand visas, as outlined in the Senate Supplemental, is not even close to sufficient to address the issues with our family-based immigration system.