
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT Diversity Visas

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Prepared by UndocuBlack Network and National Immigration Law Center

What are diversity visas?

The Diversity Immigrant Visa Program is a program created in 1990 by bipartisan legislation to encourage immigration from countries that are relatively underrepresented in terms of immigrants entering the United States. It provides an opportunity to a limited number of people from countries with historically low immigration rates into the U.S. to immigrate here.

Though the law provides that no more than 55,000 diversity visas may be issued each fiscal year, since 2000 the actual number of diversity visas Congress has made available per year is 50,000. In 2015, 47,934 “green cards” were issued to diversity visa recipients and their families.¹

To be eligible to apply for a diversity visa, a person from one of the designated countries must participate and be selected in the diversity visa lottery. In 2015, there were over 9.3 million qualified entries in the lottery.² To be granted a diversity visa, an applicant selected through the lottery must show that they have passed a thorough security and criminal background check and that they have a high-school education or its equivalent as well as at least two years of work experience in an occupation that requires at least two years of training or experience.

Which countries do diversity visa immigrants come from?

People from countries that traditionally have sent large numbers of immigrants to the U.S. — such as Mexico, the Philippines, and China — generally are not eligible to enter the diversity visa lottery. The visas are available to people in six geographic regions according to a formula, with a maximum of 7 percent of the visas available to people born in any single country. The six geographic regions are: (1) Africa; (2) Europe; (3) Asia; (4) North America (the Bahamas); (5) Oceania; and (6) South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.

In 2015, 37 percent of diversity visa recipients had professional or management-related occupations and 36 percent were students or children.³ (Diversity visas may also be issued to the dependents of the “main” diversity visa applicant.)

The U.S. State Department website provides the [breakdown by country](#) of who registered for a diversity visa in 2015, the latest year for which there is data.⁴ The numbers show that the Diversity

¹ Department of Homeland Security, Table 7. Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Type and Detailed Class of Admission: Fiscal Year 2015, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table7>.

² U.S. Department of State, DV 2015- Selected Entrants, <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/diversity-visa-program-entry/dv-2015-selected-entrants.html>.

³ Department of Homeland Security, Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status By Broad Class Of Admission And Selected Demographic Characteristics: Fiscal Year 2015, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2015/table9>.

⁴ <https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/diversity-visa-program-entry/dv-2015-selected-entrants.html>.

Visa Program balances the tendency of the U.S. immigration system to favor certain countries and immigrants and allows for fair consideration of underrepresented countries. In FY 2015, the largest number of visas went to countries such as Nepal (3,471 visas), Egypt (2,890), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2,596), and Ethiopia (2,507).⁵

Why is it important to keep the Diversity Visa Program?

- The program enhances our country's diversity, as people from various regions of the world are given fair consideration to come to the U.S., **helping keep the nation strong, vibrant, and diverse**.
- The Diversity Visa Program helps to ensure that our country is able to accept aspiring Americans from around the world, **adding to our rich multicultural society**.
- The Diversity Visa Program is essential because it's an **integral part of the country's immigration system and a beacon of hope** to people around the world who are seeking freedom, safety, stability, and economic opportunity.
- If the Diversity Visa Program were to be terminated, not only would our country lose the energy and potential that diversity visa immigrants bring with them, but **white supremacists would be further emboldened to continue targeting and scapegoating immigrants**. We cannot afford to let xenophobia, islamophobia, and racism win.
- There are few ways through which people can legally immigrate to the U.S. People who do not have U.S.-based eligible family members or employers able to sponsor them for visas have very few opportunities for permanent, legal immigration to the U.S. — even if they have other promising attributes that could benefit the country. **There is no reason to eliminate one of the very few options available to immigrate legally**.
- As Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-NY) commented in a November 2017 press briefing, “The diversity visa lottery program was designed to ensure that the United States remains a multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith nation for the benefit of us all. **The program has provided opportunity to immigrants who have historically been discriminated against in their pursuit of the American Dream**, due in large part to immigration laws that prohibited their participation” (emphasis added).
- **There would be real negative consequences to ending the program**. We would be stripping away opportunities from immigrants such as 48-year-old Tom Gitaa, publisher and owner of *Mshale: The African Community Newspaper*. He said, “I came to the U.S. as an international college student on an F-1 visa in 1990. About five years later I graduated and was winding up what is called Optional Practical Training for F-1 students and trying to figure out my options. The Diversity Visa Program was a relief as it opened me up to opportunities of not being fearful of what the future holds. I was able to go on and eventually have a successful business that has been a source of employment for Americans (including immigrants) up to now.”



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More background information on the Diversity Visa can be found in this American Immigration Council publication: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/diversity-visa-system-fact-sheet>.



⁵ See note 1, above.