

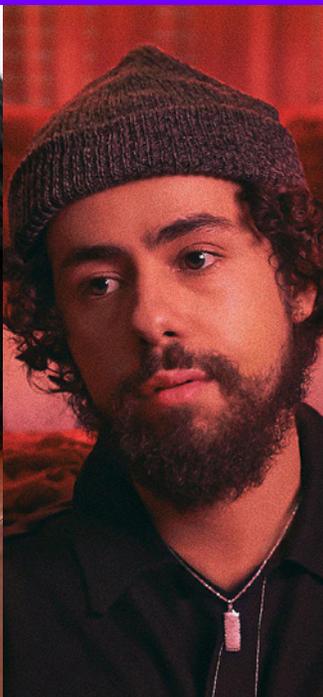
Telling Authentic Immigrant Stories:

A Reference Guide For The
Entertainment Industry

2021 Edition

DEFINE

AMERICAN



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A Letter from Jose Antonio Vargas

Everything I learned about the United States when I first arrived, I learned from TV and movies. As a 12-year-old from the Philippines entering sixth grade in California, I turned to film and television to make sense of my new home. I spent hours with Tim Allen and “The Taylors” watching *Home Improvement*. Betty White and *The Golden Girls* were my second set of aunts. I got lost in the worlds of *227*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *GoodFellas*. I immersed myself in all of it, gradually absorbing their slang and culture.

Native-born Americans can also come to understand their immigrant neighbors through entertainment. In our [2020 television study](#) published with the Norman Lear Center at USC Annenberg, we found that nuanced immigration storylines and humanized portrayals of immigrants actually fosters more inclusive attitudes and moves viewers to take real-world action. However, immigrants continue to be underrepresented and overcriminalized.

The 2020 Census marked the first time the absolute number of people who identify as white alone shrunk since a census started being taken in 1790. For the first time, the portion of white people dipped below 60 percent, and the under-18 population is now majority people of color. Immigration has altered and continues to shape the future of America; our narratives need to reflect that change.

Hollywood has a unique opportunity, a unique power, and a unique responsibility to meet the moment and make meaningful cultural change through authentic storytelling. We are

making great strides forward — more diverse and equitable hiring in front of and behind the camera, more inclusive stories, more immigrant writers — but we still have much work to do.

We invite you to use this guide as a starting point to help you navigate your characters’ journeys.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J. Vargas". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop for the letter 'J' and a long, sweeping underline that extends under the rest of the name.

Jose Antonio Vargas
Founder, Define American

Entertainment and pop culture are often the lenses through which we see the world. Hollywood has the power to tell stories that help us understand how to feel about other cultures, traditions, and people with differing world views from our own.

Why do authentic immigrant stories matter?

Define American's research has shown that TV shows with nuanced immigrant characters and immigration storylines can actually shift attitudes and inspire people to real-life action. When viewers develop parasocial relationships (imagined friendships) with fictional characters who are members of a marginalized community, it can actually reduce prejudice, particularly among those who have little or no real-life contact with members of that community.



“ Once people saw that type of representation, people did come out to me or messaged me; ‘OMG that’s just like my family,’ ‘that’s what happened to me,’ and it was special to be able to hear messages from people like that.”

Nico Santos *Chicago Tribune*

6 Things To Consider When Creating Projects About Immigrants

Best Practices for Telling Immigrant Stories

1 Hire more immigrants

Having writers, cast, and crew members who are reflective of the material and reflective of the world today can bring diverse perspectives and authenticity to your project — especially when telling stories about communities outside of your own.

2 Engage with immigrant communities

If writing about or producing a project about a culture or group outside of your own, it's important to speak to members of the community that you are working to portray to ensure that your characters and storylines are realistic. When speaking to someone who is undocumented, be conscious of and sensitive to the fact that they are taking a personal and sometimes legal risk by speaking to you about their situation or sharing their narrative.

3 Seek an expert opinion

Immigration is a very complex and evolving issue that many Americans don't fully understand. One of the ways we can work to counteract misinformation about immigrants and immigration is to seek out experts who represent the community when crafting storylines about immigrants, especially undocumented immigrants.

4 Focus on universal themes and community bondedness

Leverage universal and relatable themes to showcase how connected and shared our experiences as humans really are. Even if one hasn't lived in a community with new immigrants, we can all relate to ideas like wanting to belong, to succeed, to feel free, and to find love.

5 Be sensitive to risk and privacy

Undocumented immigrants are assuming a risk when they speak to members of the news media and entertainment communities. Many people in this situation choose to hide their immigration status rather than risk deportation due to the unwanted attention this type of exposure would attract. It's important to keep in mind the risk that undocumented immigrants face in coming forward with their personal journeys.

6 Empower your immigrant characters to take control over their own narratives

Many times, immigrants are portrayed as helpless, not having agency over the outcome of their situation, or in need of rescuing. Other characters — who are often white — then swoop in to save them. In reality, immigrants are resilient individuals with agency over their own lives.

Stereotypes & Language To Move Away From

Too often, we see reductive, repetitive, and harmful portrayals of immigrants on screen — sometimes in ways we do not realize or even when writing with the best intentions. Below are themes or language that are overrepresented or dehumanizing.

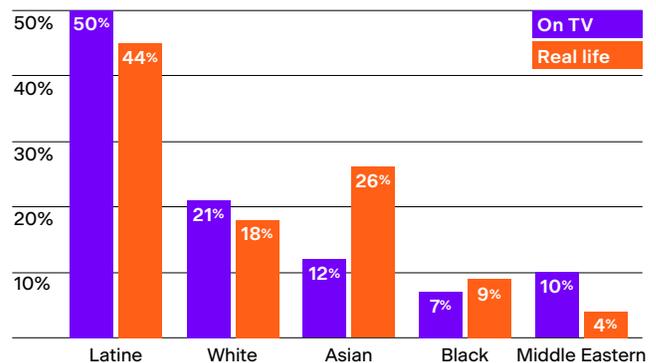
✘ Immigrants are not criminals

Immigrants are far less likely than the native-born population to commit crimes and be incarcerated, but we often see immigrants portrayed on screen committing crimes or engaging in criminal activities. According to [Define American's research](#), 22% of immigrant characters we studied in 2019 were associated with some sort of crime.

✘ Immigrants are not just Latine*

Immigrant communities are incredibly diverse, but there is a misconception that immigration is only a Latine issue. Our [research](#) found that AAPI and Black immigrants as well as other marginalized communities are underrepresented on TV: AAPI immigrants comprised only 12% of immigrants on TV, when in reality, AAPI immigrants represent 26% of the U.S. immigrant population.

Race of Immigrant Characters on TV vs. Actual U.S. Immigrant Population



Watch: *Fresh Off the Boat* (ABC) depicts the lives of a Taiwanese immigrant family in Florida

For more about AAPI immigrants, check out our deep dive.



Watch: *Angolan immigrants in Farewell Amor* (IFC Films/MUBI)

For more about Black immigrants, check out our deep dive.



*Also known as Latinx. [Define American](#) uses “**Latine**,” which originated within the Latine genderqueer community, because it’s easier to conjugate in Spanish and due to criticisms of the anglicization of “Latinx.” Like identity, language is constantly evolving, and we look forward to seeing how this conversation continues.

✘ The “Good Immigrant”

A common narrative is the myth that only “good” immigrants who are “hard-working” and/or “contribute to the economy” are worthy of living in the United States. Though these depictions are usually well-meaning, reducing people to an economic value-add or taking away their right to be flawed, complex individuals is still dehumanizing. An immigrant character does not have to be perfect or experience/overcome every form of adversity in order to have rights or worth.

✘ The “Marriage Miracle”

Marriage to a citizen or permanent resident does not necessarily mean that a person who is undocumented has a path to citizenship, yet it has been used as an “easy” solution on screen. In reality, there are restrictions which can include the requirement of a legal method of entry into the country. Additionally, the spouse of a citizen can also be deported.

✘ Fear-Based Stories Are Overrepresented

Many of the undocumented immigrant portrayals we see in TV and film today are what have been termed “fear-based” narratives. These narratives portray immigrants as either living in fear (of deportation or other types of discrimination) or causing fear in others when they are depicted as terrorists or criminals.

✘ Problematic terms

illegal, illegal immigrant, alien, illegal alien

The bottom line is, the term *illegal* is dehumanizing and replaces complex legal circumstances with an assumption of guilt.

The Associated Press writes in the AP Stylebook, “Except in direct quotes essential to the story, use *illegal* only to refer to an action, not a person. *Illegal immigration*, but not *illegal immigrant*.”

“Alien” is also dehumanizing. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has actually **removed** this term from its guidelines.

✔ Preferred terms

undocumented immigrant, unauthorized immigrant

“Undocumented” or “unauthorized” offer options for neutral terminology. People can also be described in detail, for example: *a native of Cameroon whose asylum application is pending. A 20-year resident of Brooklyn, originally from Mexico.*

Alternatives: *non-citizen, foreign national*

Define “Immigrant”

Be specific when referring to people. Immigrants are not a monolith. They are individuals with hopes, dreams, and struggles. Some are in the process of applying for asylum or waiting their turn in front of an immigration judge to adjust status. Some are waiting for their legal permanent resident cards to arrive. Some were brought to the country as children on a tourist visa that lapsed, and they grew up without documentation. The list goes on and everyone’s experience is unique. We encourage you to understand the differences among the categories of migrants.

Asylum Seeker or Asylee

A person applying for protection in the United States because they cannot return to their home country for fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political affiliation or membership in a particular social group. Unlike the refugee process, those who apply for asylum must do so at a land border or from inside the United States.

Climate Migrant or Climate Refugee

A person forced to move from increasingly non-viable areas of their countries due to growing problems like water scarcity, crop failure, sea-level rise and storm surges.

(World Bank)

For more about climate displacement, check out our deep dive.



DACA Recipient

A subset of “DREAMers” who applied and received DACA status following President Obama’s 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy.

Dreamer

The term “DREAMer” has often been used when referring to undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children without documentation.

Immigrant

An immigrant is defined as a person who migrates to another country, usually for permanent residence.

Migrant

A broad term for people who go to another country without status. Migrants may remain on the move for extended periods of time, and some may wish to return home one day.

Migrant Worker

An individual who travels seasonally for temporary work. Not all migrant workers are undocumented, and not all undocumented individuals are migrant workers. Many migrant workers who once came seasonally now stay and live as undocumented immigrants.

For more about DACA & Dreamers, check out our deep dive.



Mixed-Status Family

When individuals within a family unit have different citizenship and/or immigration statuses. For example: An undocumented mother may give birth in the United States, resulting in a citizen child. Or, someone married to a citizen could have their visa fall out of status. It is estimated that eight million U.S. citizens live with an undocumented family member. ([American Immigration Council](#))

But having a child here doesn't guarantee the parent any right to remain. Citizen children cannot sponsor a parent until the child is 21 years old; even then, there are usually legal barriers to the parent qualifying for status.

Refugee

An individual who has been forced to flee their home country due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion. Refugees could also be fleeing a natural disaster, famine, or war. Congress gave the President authority to set a quota each year on the number of refugees to admit. The United States fell out of the top countries resettling refugees under Trump.



Watch: A mixed-status family says goodbye in *Freeform's Party of Five* reboot



Watch: A South Sudanese refugee couple at the forefront of *His House* (Netflix)



Watch: Afghan refugee Amin in *Flee* (Participant/Neon)

Undocuqueer

Refers to the intersection of the Undocumented and LGBTQ struggles to give voice to those living in both worlds and embracing both identities. ([Northern Illinois University](#))



Watch: *I Carry You With Me* (Sony Pictures) follows the complicated romance between two gay characters who are undocumented

Undocupreneur or Undocumented Entrepreneur

An undocumented immigrant residing in the US who has started a business. Because the US doesn't require work authorization or a social security number to start a business, entrepreneurship is often the only way that undocumented immigrants can have a career and a substantial income without using false documentation. In 2016, undocumented entrepreneurs earned a total of \$15.2 billion in business income. ([CalMatters](#))



Watch: Meet undocupreneur Tobore Oweh in *L.A. Made*

Photo: Paige S. Wilson

On assimilation

Assimilation implies that immigrants give up their customs and culture to become American, and not always willingly. Sometimes the arbiters of what it means to be an American force this on people as a condition for being the "right" kind of citizen. Integration is a more humanizing term, embracing the culture that immigrants bring, and allowing for foreign-born people to blend into a diverse reality that is the United States.

Deportation

Deportation

Deportation occurs when the federal government orders the removal of an individual from the United States. It means that a person lost an appeal in immigration court, failed to prove they had grounds for asylum or other forms of relief to stay in the country or were deemed inadmissible due to pandemic restrictions enacted in 2020.

A common misconception is that deportation is only pursued when criminal laws have been violated. But immigration cases are, by nature, civil law. They become criminal when an immigrant is found to have already been deported. That's called "illegal re-entry" and it's considered a felony.

Detainee

A person who is taken into custody by Immigration Enforcement (ICE) officers. This is a civil action, not a criminal one. Congress mandates that some people be detained. In other cases, ICE decides detention is required to ensure the person attends his or her hearings.

Family Separation

The process by which parents were separated from their children at the U.S.-Mexico border due to the Trump Administration's "zero tolerance" policy implemented in April 2018. Family separation has caused a record number of children to be detained in children-only facilities while their parents were sent elsewhere. Some parents were ultimately deported without their children.



Watch: A Million Little Things (ABC)

When Haitian American teen Tyrell learns his mother has been detained, everyone is affected by his story.



Neurodivergent Negress
@dukejamdoggmom

I really appreciate that [#AMillionLittleThings](#) ([@AMillionABC](#)) is featuring a storyline involving a Black teen whose Black mother was deported by ICE & a storyline in which a Korean American boy is navigating being on the receiving end of anti-Asian hate during the pandemic.

5:09 PM · Apr 2, 2021 · Twitter Web App



FanGirlforever
@BooksmartBabe8

Poor Tyrell. The reality check he needed as heartbreaking as it is. His mom has to rebuild her whole life. She wants more and better for her son.
[#AMillionLittleThings](#)

10:48 PM · Apr 21, 2021 · Twitter Web App



Crane Gma
@RICrane9418

Oh. No. Tyrell mom might be deported.
[#AMillionLittleThings](#)

1:08 AM · Apr 22, 2021 · Twitter for Android

Pathways to Citizenship

Under current immigration law, for most undocumented Americans, there is no pathway to American citizenship. Yet there is a wide misconception that one can easily “apply,” “take a test,” or “get in line” to become a citizen. If you are writing for an undocumented character, here the options that are available to them.

Asylum

A status granted because a person cannot or is unwilling to return to their home country for fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political affiliation or membership in a particular social group. Past persecution can also be a basis for asylum. These people meet the definition of a “refugee.” But unlike the refugee process, those who apply for asylum do so at a land border or from inside the United States.

Family-Based Migration or Family Reunification

Family-based immigrant visas have, since 1952, been the primary way people come to the United States legally. Even employment-based visas bring families. About 60% of all the employment-based permanent resident visas go to the immediate family. The Trump administration and immigration restrictionist groups often referred to it as Chain Migration. Preferred term: *Family-based migration*.

Family is narrowly defined: children, parents or siblings. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, etc. are not included in the narrow legal definitions and the agencies don’t have discretion to make exceptions.

In order to help a family member immigrate, you must be either a: U.S. citizen, a green card holder (permanent resident), or refugee admitted as a refugee within the past 2 years or asylee granted asylum within the past 2 years. (USCIS)

Green Card

A green card is an informal name for a legal permanent resident card which allows immigrants to live and work permanently in the United States. The card isn’t actually green.

H-1B Visa

A specialty visa that allows U.S. employers to hire foreign workers into specialty occupations. 65,000 are administered per year via lottery. (USCIS) An additional 20,000 are given to foreign professionals who graduated with a Master’s degree or Doctorate from a U.S. university.

✘ Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

Contrary to what some think, TPS does **not** provide a pathway to citizenship. TPS is a **temporary** status allowing a person to live and work in the United States for a limited period of time. People may be granted TPS if their country of origin has been designated by the Secretary of Homeland Security as a country where conditions, such as war and natural disasters, prevent immigrants from returning to the country safely. The Trump administration terminated TPS for thousands of immigrants who came from many of the countries that were granted the designation previously. Litigation ensued and some were temporarily restored. A full list of designated countries can be found on the USCIS website.

Naturalization

The process of being granted U.S. citizenship after meeting the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act. Individuals under a certain age must answer a number of questions about U.S. history and laws, and prove they can speak English. The process culminates in a public ceremony. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services agency processes these applications. (USCIS)

Unfortunately, this process doesn't apply to most undocumented immigrants. And for those who are eligible, the process is expensive and not simple. There are some exceptions to the tests if you are disabled or elderly. If parents naturalize before their children turn 18, those children are naturalized with them without any formal process or testing.

Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) Visa

For people under 21 who can prove they were neglected, abandoned or abused by one parent in another country.

U Visa

A visa for victims of violent crimes here in the United States. Many undocumented victims are afraid to report assaults due to fear of deportation and not having valid evidence of the crime and the number of U Visas available is small, so this solution is not common.



Watch: Superstore (NBC) explains the U Visa.

Government Agencies

Who's who? Know the difference.

Homeland Security Investigations (HSI)

This is the lesser-known investigative arm of ICE. They have operations around the world and also try to coordinate with other agencies to deter smuggling of goods and people.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)

A federal law enforcement agency under the United States Department of Homeland Security that enforces laws governing border control, customs, trade, and immigration. One of its key functions is managing the detention centers.



Watch: Docuseries *Immigration Nation* (Netflix) gives viewers an unprecedented look at how ICE operates

United States Border Patrol

An agency that is part of CBP. [Note: do not call Border Patrol 'CBP.'] Border Patrol officers are responsible for enforcing immigration laws at and around international land borders. They can arrest and detain people who cross illegally and can stop people within 100 miles of the international land border.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

A component of the Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) is the federal agency that oversees lawful immigration to the United States.

United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP)

The federal law enforcement agency that monitors, administers and protects the 328 legal ports of entry into the United States.

Places Often Associated with Immigration

Border Wall

The disputed 2,000+ mile southern barrier that exists between the United States and Mexico that aims to keep undocumented individuals from entering into the country illegally.

Constitution-Free Zone or 100-Mile Border Zone

A zone within 100 miles of the U.S. border (including inside U.S. airports) where Border Patrol authorities can operate immigration checkpoints at random. All DHS officers including TSA agents at airports only need a “reasonable suspicion” of a probable crime or immigration violation to make traffic stops at checkpoints. This could lead to undocumented immigrants being immediately detained. ([ACLU](#))

Detention Center

A facility where non-citizens are held after being detained. The vast majority of detention centers operate on a “for profit” model. Some states and cities are passing laws to prevent the renting of space to DHS.



Watch: Characters in *A Better Life (Lionsgate)* talk at a detention center



This Georgia detention center made headlines in 2020 for their unethical practices. [Read more.](#)



Did you know?

Two thirds of the U.S. population lives within the 100-Mile Border Zone.



Sanctuary

A location that offers temporary security, safety, and protection for undocumented immigrants. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has viewed churches, hospitals, and schools as “sensitive locations” where they do not conduct enforcement actions such as arrests — although they do not always honor the policy.

Sanctuary City

This usually refers to a city that limits its cooperation with law enforcement in turning over individuals to ICE after they serve criminal sentences. This is important because it allows anyone, regardless of immigration status, to report crimes without fear of deportation. The Trump administration punished certain cities like New York, Philadelphia, Denver, and Chicago by withholding federal grants if they followed so-called Sanctuary Laws. ([America's Voice](#))

DACA

What you need to know

What is DACA?

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, is a program that allows individuals who came to the United States as children and meet several requirements to apply for temporary protection from deportation and work eligibility for a period of two years. The Obama administration's Department of Homeland Security created it with a formal memo in 2012. The Trump administration canceled it on Sept. 5, 2017, but court rulings kept it open for existing applicants to renew their status.

The Biden administration officially reopened it to all eligible applicants, including first-timers, but Texas Judge Andrew S. Hanen declared that Obama's executive branch had exceeded its powers in creating DACA.

Where does it stand now? Due to contradictory lower court orders, new applications for DACA are not currently being processed. The program is only open to those who currently have DACA status and are applying to renew. Litigation continues.



Who are “Dreamers”?

The term “Dreamer” (sometimes stylized “DREAMer”) refers to undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States as children. The term comes from the acronym for the legislation: the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act. The DREAM act was first introduced in Congress in 2001, and there have been 11 versions of it, all of which have failed to pass. Some Dreamers became eligible for DACA. Many Dreamers and their families entered the U.S. lawfully and overstayed their visas; not all Dreamers entered without authorization.



Read: “Inside the Making of ‘Grey’s Anatomy’s’ DACA-Themed Episode” (Variety)



DACA Recipients Cannot

- ✗ DACA recipients cannot receive amnesty, a path to citizenship, or legalization.
- ✗ DACA recipients cannot leave the country without advanced travel authorization.
- ✗ DACA recipients cannot vote.
- ✗ DACA recipients cannot receive certain federal benefits, like college financial aid or food stamps.

DACA Recipients Can

- ✓ DACA recipients can get a temporary stay against their deportation for 2 years at a time.
- ✓ DACA recipients can apply for employment authorization.
- ✓ DACA recipients can apply for driver's licenses in **several states**. The licenses are clearly marked that they cannot be used for federal purposes, like voting.
- ✓ DACA recipients are required to pay federal income taxes and are eligible to apply for a social security number.
- ✓ DACA recipients are eligible for in-state tuition in **certain states**.

History of Immigration Law 101

Are you tackling a period piece or flashback sequence? Wondering which immigration laws passed when? Here are some key dates you should know.

1790

Nationality Act of 1790

This was the first law to establish standards and procedures by which immigrants became U.S. citizens.

1882

Chinese Exclusion Act

This law targeted Chinese immigrants for restriction— the first such group identified by race and class for severely limited legal entry and ineligibility for citizenship.

Immigration Act of 1882

Expanded the ranks of excludable aliens to include other undesirable persons and attributes such as “convicts,” “lunatics,” and “those likely to become a public charge.”

1924

Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act)

To further limit immigration, this law established extended “national origins” quotas, a highly restrictive and quantitatively discriminatory system. The quota system would remain the primary means of determining immigrants’ admissibility to the United States until 1965.

1965

Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (Hart-Celler Act)

This law set the main principles for immigration regulation still enforced today. It applied a system of preferences for family reunification (75 percent), employment (20 percent), and refugees (5 percent) and for the first time capped immigration from within the Americas.

1996

Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA)

Allowed for legal immigrants (including green card holders) to be deported if convicted of certain crimes. Triggered 10-year bans if some undocumented people tried to adjust their status.

2002

Department of Homeland Security

Following 9/11 attacks, the Department of Homeland Security was created. This eliminated the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) and divided it into agencies including U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

2002–2016

Deportations and detentions increase

Deportations under President George W. Bush rise. Barack Obama: Obama became known as “Deporter in Chief” because he deported more than 3.2 million people. Congress raised the allowable number of immigrants detained to 47,000 people a night. Approximately 400,000 people a year are detained.

2012

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

Trying to cope with the long-term residence of millions of unauthorized immigrants, this memo from the Department of Homeland Security (Not an Executive Action) provided protection from deportation and work authorization to persons who arrived as minor children and had lived in the United States since June 15, 2007.

2017–2020

Restrictive Trump policies

President Donald J. Trump, and his senior advisor Stephen Miller, radically restrict legal and illegal immigration with more than 400 policy changes. Most notable: 3 travel bans that were essentially Muslim bans; a policy of “zero tolerance” for asylum seekers at the southern border which resulted in family separation as a deterrence; Remain in Mexico Program (Migrant Protection Protocols); and Title 42, a public health decree.

2021

Biden policies

President Joseph Biden starts to overturn Trump’s immigration policies. But court rulings keep MPP in place. Biden keeps Title 42, which Trump enacted when the COVID-19 pandemic began, shutting the border due to concerns the coronavirus would spread. In October, health advisor Dr. Anthony Fauci said immigrants did not contribute to the spread of the disease, but nonetheless, the CDC keeps it in place.



(Immigration History)

Deep Dive: AAPI Immigrants

Define American's research has found that AAPI immigrants are the most underrepresented immigrant group on television: In 2019, AAPI immigrants comprised only 12% of immigrant characters on TV, when in reality, AAPI immigrants represented 26% of the U.S. immigrant population — the largest disparity between representation and real life of any other immigrant group. And that population is growing. By the year 2055, the Pew Research Center projects that Asian Americans will be the largest immigrant group in the country. There is an urgency to accurately reflect the diverse Asian diaspora on screen.

Produced in Partnership with Asian Americans Advancing Justice

What You Need To Know

- Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities are shaped by immigration, yet they are often left out of policy discussions and media narratives about immigration.
- Over 12 million Asian American immigrants and 220,000 Pacific Islander immigrants live in the United States today — that's 27% of the entire foreign-born population!
- The Asian American immigrant population grew four times as fast as the total population between 2010 and 2017. The Pacific Islander immigrant population grew 12% in the same time period.
- Nearly three-quarters of Asian American businesses are immigrant owned, numbering over 1.1 million businesses in the country.

From Coast To Coast & Everywhere In Between

- California has the largest Asian American (3,665,172) and Pacific Islander (69,339) immigrant populations in the country, but...
- Indiana and North Carolina have the fastest-growing Asian American immigrant populations in the country, with both populations growing 41% from 2010–2017.

Not All Asians Are "Crazy-Rich"

- Approximately 28% of Asian American immigrants are low-income, a rate higher than native-born Asian Americans (25%).



Watch: A Korean American family makes a life on an Arkansas farm in Lee Isaac Chung's *Minari* (A24)

AAPI Immigrants Are Diverse



Watch: Indian American teen Devi in *Never Have I Ever* (Netflix)



Watch: Undocumented Filipina trans woman Olivia in Isabel Sandoval's *Lingua Franca* (Array)

Ethnic Group	Number (2017)
Indian	2,922,710
Chinese (except Taiwanese)	2,915,753
Filipino	1,894,566
Vietnamese	1,215,401
Korean	1,048,802
Pakistani	326,153
Japanese	324,269
Thai	160,670
Cambodian	150,765
Burmese	145,183
Nepalese	144,848
Bangladeshi	129,135
Laotian	122,564
Taiwanese	116,211
Hmong	105,103
Indonesian	55,773
Samoan	9,489
Guamanian or Chamorro	5,951
Native Hawaiian*	5,197

* While Native Hawaiians and many Pacific Islanders born in Hawaii, Guam, or the Northern Mariana Islands are U.S. citizens, some Pacific Islanders are foreign-born and may hold different immigration statuses.

(AAJC - Inside The Numbers: How Immigration Shapes Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities)

Deep Dive: Black Immigrants



Since 1980, the Black immigrant population has increased fivefold. Today, one in every 10 Black Americans is an immigrant. Despite this group's rising numbers, Black immigrant stories are often erased from TV and film and from the broader immigrant conversation altogether. Additionally, according to Define American's research, there were zero undocumented Black characters on TV in 2019. In reality, there are estimated to be over 600,000 undocumented Black immigrants in the U.S.

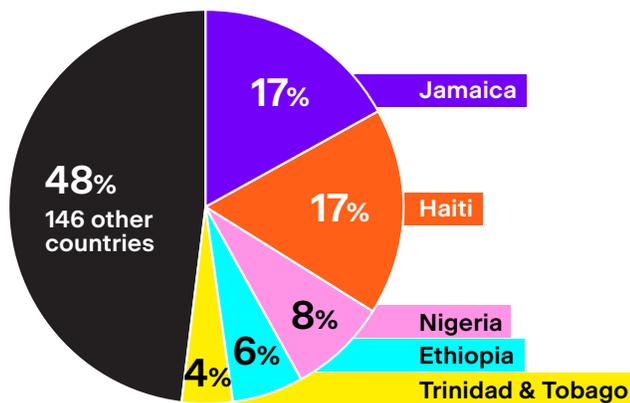
Produced in Partnership with The UndocuBlack Network

Undocumented Black Immigrants Are Unrepresented

In reality	On TV (2019)
600,000	0

Black Immigrants Come From Over 150 Different Countries

Top Five Countries of Birth Among Black Immigrants



Estimated Black Immigrant Population in the United States

3,960,876 (George Mason University Institute for Immigration Research)



Watch: Bob Hearts Abishola (CBS) follows Nigerian-born nurse Abishola, her family and the U.S.-born man who falls in love with her.

What You Need To Know

- Black immigrants face unique challenges, mirroring those faced by Black Americans: Because of their Blackness, Black immigrants are disproportionately racially profiled, targeted for deportation, stopped, and arrested by law enforcement agencies of all kinds. An overwhelming **76% of Black immigrants are deported on criminal grounds**, compared to only 45% of immigrants of all races. (Life on Hold)
- U.S. immigration authorities locked detainees from African and Caribbean countries in solitary confinement cells **six times as often** as the population at large. (RAICES)
- FFI (Freedom for Immigrants) noted an increase in reports of anti-Black racism and racially motivated abuse in detention, including severe beatings and sexual assault. (Freedom For Immigrants)
- Many Black immigrant and refugee women and girls move to the U.S. to escape war, violence, persecution, or to reunite with their families, as well as for education and employment purposes. (BAJI)
- **44%** of the families locked in detention at the U.S.-Mexico border were of Haitian descent in July 2020. This ongoing issue continues to affect thousands of Haitian families seeking refuge today. (RAICES)

More Haitians have been removed per the Title 42 policy in the weeks since President Biden took office than during all of Fiscal Year 2020. Read more on Haitian migrants at the border.



Deep Dive: Climate Displacement

Climate change is here, now, and in America, reshaping our landscape and forcing people from their homes. Of the many push factors that force people to migrate, climate change is an increasingly salient reason.

Produced in Partnership with NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council) and the International Refugee Assistance Project



What You Need To Know

- Climate-related slow-onset disasters such as drought and sea level rise, and sudden-onset disasters such as hurricanes and floods, are increasingly forcing people to flee their homes. ([IRAP](#), p.8)
- The impacts of climate change often fall the hardest on marginalized communities, sometimes intersecting and overlapping with the types of persecution that international and U.S. refugee law recognizes as warranting protection. ([IRAP](#), p.5)
- Climate change contributes to both “internal displacement” (i.e., displacement inside a country) and cross-border displacement. While most people displaced by climate change are likely to resettle in their own countries and regions — and sustained foreign aid will be essential to help people safely resettle and rebuild their livelihoods — some people are forced across international borders in search of safety. ([The Hill](#))
- Don’t use crisis language (‘mass migration’, ‘unprecedented migration’, ‘crisis,’ ‘waves’, ‘flood’) when talking about climate-linked mobility. Such language feeds into fear-based narratives that can dehumanize people and fuel xenophobia. ([350.org](#))

Climate Displacement Is Already a Reality

- As of December 2020, at least 7 million people were internally displaced by disasters in 104 countries and territories. ([Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre](#))
- Central America has been buffeted by climate disasters in recent years, including a multi-year drought, widespread crop failure, and the devastating back-to-back hurricanes of 2020. Many rural families have lost their homes, their livelihoods, and their access to food and water, and some sought safety in the United States. ([Vox](#))
- In Alaska, Alaska Native communities—facing erosion and land collapse caused by diminishing Arctic sea ice and thawing permafrost—are grappling with the difficult decision whether to relocate their whole communities to safer ground. Some have already decided that relocation is necessary to protect people’s lives and ensure their communities’ cultural survival. ([Robin Bronen, Alaska Institute for Justice](#))
- In Vanuatu, the government developed a national policy on climate displacement to guide partners in working with displacement-impacted communities or including them in development planning. ([Vanuatu National Disaster Management Office](#))



Watch: We Rise ([Teen Vogue](#))

“ Earth is our home. It gives you air, water, and shelter. Everything we need. All it asks is that we protect it.”

Xiye Bastida Patrick

19-year-old climate justice activist

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About & Contact

Define American

Define American is a culture change organization that uses the power of narrative to humanize conversations about immigrants. Our advocacy within news, entertainment, and digital media is creating an America where everyone belongs.

We've been recognized by Fast Company as one of the most innovative companies in the world for causing a stir by leveraging the power of television networks to make the world more equitable and for reshaping American public opinion. Our Entertainment Partnerships & Advocacy Team has consulted on more than 100 film and television projects, such as Grey's Anatomy and Superstore, spanning networks like ABC and NBC and streaming platforms such as Netflix and Hulu.

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Partner Organizations

Asian Americans Advancing Justice

Since 1991, AAJC has fought for Asian Americans in the national conversations that determine policies that shape our lives. Asian Americans have been part of the American story since its earliest days, and are now the U.S.'s fastest-growing racial group with the potential and power to shape our nation and the policies that affect us. Their mission is to advance civil and human rights for Asian Americans and to build and promote a fair and equitable society for all.

UndocuBlack Network

The UndocuBlack Network (UBN), founded in 2016, is a multigenerational network of currently and formerly undocumented Black people that fosters community, facilitates access to resources, and contributes to transforming the realities of our people so we are thriving and living our fullest lives.

NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council)

NRDC works to safeguard the earth—its people, its plants and animals, and the natural systems on which all life depends. They combine the power of more than three million members and online activists with the expertise of some 700 scientists, lawyers, and policy advocates across the globe to ensure the rights of all people to the air, the water, and the wild.

International Refugee Assistance Project

The International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) organizes law students and lawyers to develop and enforce a set of legal and human rights for refugees and displaced persons. Mobilizing direct legal aid, litigation, and systemic advocacy, IRAP serves the world's most persecuted individuals and empowers the next generation of human rights leaders.

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