

10 Things you need to know about: Temporary Worker Visa Programs

Under U.S. immigration law, approximately 21 visa categories are classified as “temporary workers.” These visas allow people to work in the United States for a specific period of time. The categories generally determine what type of work can be done on the visa.

- 1** About 840,000 foreign temporary workers [live](#) in the United States. Nearly half are ages 25–34, and about 60 percent are men.
- 2** The most commonly discussed temporary worker programs are H-1B specialty occupation workers, H-2A agricultural workers, H-2B seasonal workers, and L intracompany transferees. The letters and numbers refer to the sections of immigration law that authorize each program. Other examples of temporary worker categories include athletes, foreign media, and religious workers.
- 3** The United States’ first temporary worker program was the Bracero Program for agricultural workers, which existed from 1942 to 1964. The H category for temporary workers and trainees first admitted workers in 1953, and subsequent changes in law split it into the categories described above.
- 4** The H-1B visa for specialty occupation workers is the best-known temporary worker program. It requires the worker to have a bachelor’s degree or equivalent in a particular specialty that is necessary for their job. There is a cap of 65,000 visas per year on the category, which was set in 1990. An additional 20,000 visas per year for advanced degree holders were added in 2005.

- 5** Most H-1B visa holders (65 percent of new approvals in FY 2014) work in computer-related occupations, and smaller percentages [work](#) in occupations in engineering, education, health, and science. More than half of current H-1B workers hold advanced degrees, and nearly three-quarters are ages 25 to 34.
- 6** The H-2A program for seasonal agricultural workers was created in 1986, replacing the defunct Bracero program. Despite the lack of an annual numerical cap, utilization in the category has historically been low, which is often [blamed](#) on the program’s process difficulties for employers and the availability of unauthorized immigrant workers.
- 7** The H-2B program was also created in 1986. The program admits up to 66,000 workers annually to work in jobs that are temporary in nature. To sponsor a worker, employers must demonstrate that the need for the worker is either a “one-time occurrence” or a “seasonal,” “peakload,” or “intermittent” need.
- 8** Though no skill level is officially associated with the H-2B category, it is primarily used for jobs requiring less than a bachelor’s degree. Most H-2B visa holders [work](#) in landscaping and grounds keeping, forestry, and amusement parks and recreation.

- 9** L visas allow multinational companies to transfer executives and managers (L-1A) or workers with specialized knowledge (L-1B) to their business operations in the United States. There is no specific degree requirement for the category, although because of the nature of the positions, most L-1 workers do have degrees.
- 10** Because the permanent immigration system provides more green cards to higher-skilled workers, more H-1B and L-1 temporary workers eventually settle in the United States permanently than other workers. About 77 percent of all employment-based green cards go to H-1B or L-1 visa holders, including their spouses and children. By comparison, less than 0.1 percent of employment-based green cards go to H-2A or H-2B visa holders.ⁱ

ⁱ USCIS data obtained by BPC under Freedom of Information Act