

Citizenship and Residency in the U.S.

There are two different ways that someone can live in the United States, by being a citizen or getting status as a legal resident. While most Americans are citizens simply by virtue of being born here (“birthright citizenship”), over a million people around the world legally immigrate to the U.S. every year, many either pursuing citizenship in a multi-year process called “naturalization”, or gaining permanent resident status. While each group has the right to live here, native-born (birthright) citizens, naturalized citizens, and permanent residents all possess different rights and privileges.

Birthright citizenship is obtained in one of two ways: either by being born on U.S. soil, or by being born to parents who are U.S. citizens. This includes being born in a U.S. territory or being born to U.S. citizen parents who are living or traveling abroad. Birthright citizens enjoy the most extensive rights and privileges, which are guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and laws. Naturalized citizens are foreign-born individuals who have completed the process of becoming U.S. citizens through naturalization as defined by federal law.

Other than the constitutional requirement that the President and Vice President be natural-born citizens, birthright and naturalized citizens enjoy almost all of the same rights and protections, including the ability to vote, run for public office, and hold government positions. All citizens, no matter their origin, are eligible for U.S. passports, have unrestricted rights to live and work in the United States, and are protected by the Bill of Rights, granting them freedoms of speech, religion, and assembly. Lastly, all citizens have the same responsibilities that accompany citizenship: to pay taxes, to serve on juries, and to defend our country if called upon.

Permanent residents, also known as green card holders, are not citizens, but are foreign nationals who have applied for and been granted the right to permanently reside and work in the United States. They possess various rights and protections, such as the right to work, attend public schools, and receive legal protection under U.S. laws. While U.S. permanent residents are required to pay taxes, they do not have the right to vote in federal elections, although they may be eligible to vote in some local and state elections. Permanent residents are also subject to certain restrictions, such as maintaining their residency and adhering to immigration laws, in order to avoid jeopardizing their status.