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Exchange Visitor Program: J-1 Visa Overview and Policy Considerations

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The United States has a long history of supporting people-to-people exchanges to promote international cooperation and learning and to strengthen ties with other nations. The exchange visitor program (EVP), established in 1961, is one example.

Exchange visitors (EVs) use J-1 visas to travel to the United States to participate in educational and cultural exchange programs approved by the Department of State (DOS). Since 2015, about 300,000 foreign nationals from some 200 countries and territories have participated in the EVP each year. There are more than 1 million EVP alumni worldwide, "including more than 75 Nobel Laureates and nearly 450 current and former heads of state and government." DOS views the EVP as an important foreign policy tool intended to foster democratic principles and spread American values globally.

Over the years, various concerns about the EVP have arisen, including those related to child safety, national security, and adequate protections for U.S. workers and EVs. Congress has an ongoing interest in ensuring that the EVP fulfills the purposes for which Congress intended when it created the program.

Establishment and Purpose

The J visa category was added to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1961 with the passage of the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act (also called the Fulbright-Hays Act, P.L. 87-256). According to the act, the purpose of the EVP is

> to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries by means of educational and cultural exchange; to strengthen the ties which unite us with other nations by demonstrating the educational and cultural interests, developments, and achievements of the people of the United States and other nations, and the contributions being made toward a peaceful and more fruitful life for people throughout the world; to promote international cooperation for educational and cultural advancement; and thus to assist in the development of friendly, sympathetic, and peaceful relations between the United States and the other countries of the world.

J-1 visas are for exchange visitors, while J-2 visas are for their spouses and children. The length of time that EVs are admitted to the United States and whether they are authorized to work depends on the terms of the EVP categories in which they participate. There is no cap on J visa issuances, but regulations limit the number of participants and sponsoring organizations in the Au Pair and Summer Work Travel categories.

Exchange Visitor Program Categories

The EVP is administered by DOS's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) and encompasses 15 program categories. Each program category is governed by DOS regulations related to participant eligibility, program duration, and other criteria. In 2020, ECA rebranded the 13 private sector programs (all but Government Visitor and International Visitor) as "Bridge USA."

Exchange Visitor Program Categories

Au Pair: Young adults (18-26) live with American host families while providing child care and attending college classes.

Camp Counselor: Students, youth workers, teachers, and individuals with specialized skills work as counselors in summer camps.

College and University Student: Students study at degree-granting, post-secondary academic institutions or participate in student internship programs.

Secondary School Student: High school students study at accredited public or private U.S. high schools and live with American host families or at accredited boarding schools.

Government Visitor: "Influential or distinguished persons" selected by U.S. federal, state, or local government agencies participate in programs with their American counterparts involving observation tours, discussions, consultations, professional meetings, conferences, workshops, and travel.

Intern: College students and recent graduates receive hands-on experience in their occupational fields with U.S. businesses.

International Visitor: Recognized or potential foreign leaders selected by DOS participate in observation tours, discussions, professional meetings, conferences, workshops, and travel.

Physician: Medical school graduates participate in graduate medical education at accredited U.S. schools of medicine.

Professor: Visitors whose primary purpose is teaching, lecturing, observing, or consulting at post-secondary academic institutions, museums, libraries or similar types of institutions.

Research Scholar: Visitors whose primary purpose is conducting research, observing or consulting in connection with research projects at research institutions, corporate research facilities, museums, libraries, post-secondary academic institutions, or similar types of institutions.

Short-Term Scholar: Professors, research scholars, or other individuals with similar education or accomplishments enter the United States for up to six months for the purpose of lecturing, observing, consulting, training, or demonstrating special skills at research institutions, museums, libraries, post-secondary accredited academic institutions, or similar types of institutions.

Specialist: Experts in fields of specialized knowledge or skills whose primary purpose is observing, consulting, or demonstrating specialized knowledge or skills.

Summer Work Travel: College students travel in the United States and work at seasonal or temporary jobs for up to four months during the break between academic years.

Teacher: Teachers teach full-time at U.S. primary or secondary education institutions.

Trainee: Visitors with degrees or work experience participate in structured and guided work-based training programs in specific occupational fields.

Designated Sponsoring Organizations

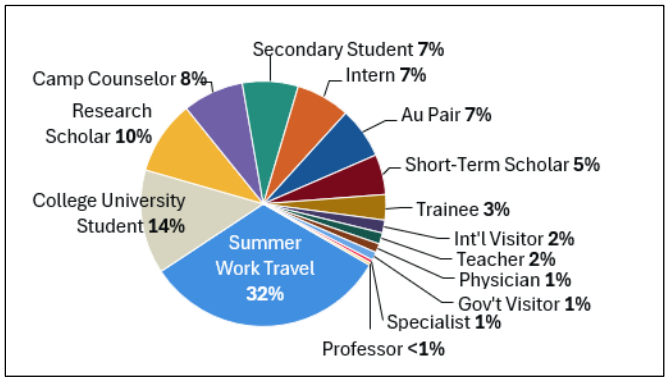
Before applying for a J visa, a foreign national must obtain sponsorship from one of the entities that ECA has designated to conduct exchange programs. To be eligible as a program sponsor, an entity must demonstrate its ability to comply with EVP regulations (22 C.F.R. §62) and be financially able to administer an exchange program. Program sponsors are responsible for initial screening and selection of participants in their designated program categories, as well as supporting and monitoring EVs during their stays in the United States.

DOS consular officers screen applicants before issuing them visas. For an illustration of the processes by which foreign nationals obtain J visas and sponsoring organizations are designated, see CRS Infographic IG10039, *Foreign Students: Screening and Monitoring*.

EVP Trends, 2015-2025

Annual participation in the EVP averaged about 328,250 EVs in the five years before the COVID-19 pandemic. After a sharp drop in 2020, participation gradually increased to about 300,000 in 2024 before falling to 275,000 in 2025. In total, there were almost 3 million participants over the 11-year period. (This number includes EVs who participate more than once.) Summer Work Travel accounted for the most participants, followed by College Student and Research Scholar (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. EVP Participation by Program Category, CY2015-2025



Source: CRS presentation of data from https://j1visa.state.gov/facts-and-figures-2015-2025/.

China accounted for the most participants over the 2015-2025 period (8%), followed by Germany, the United Kingdom, Mexico, France, Brazil, Spain, Korea, Thailand, and Colombia. California has hosted the most EVs (10%), followed by New York, Massachusetts, Florida, Texas, Pennsylvania, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Wisconsin, and Virginia.

Two-Year Foreign Residence Requirement

After completion of their exchange programs, some EVs are required to spend at least two years in their home countries before they could be eligible for lawful permanent residence (LPR) or certain nonimmigrant statuses in the United States. Congress's stated purpose for this requirement was

> to make certain that the visitors who have had the assistance of the exchange program will go back home and communicate to their compatriots something of what they had learned about the United States.

EVs subject to foreign residence requirements are those who (1) participated in programs funded in whole or in part by the U.S. or their home countries' governments or international organizations, (2) participated in programs involving fields of specialized knowledge deemed necessary for the development of their home countries, or (3) received graduate medical education. The Secretary of State has the authority to designate countries as "clearly requiring" certain fields of specialized knowledge or skills necessary for their development. The Exchange Visitors Skills List is published in the *Federal Register*, was last updated in 2024, and contains a list of 44 countries/areas and the knowledge/skills deemed required for each one.

Current law allows for waivers of the two-year foreign residence requirement on five bases: (1) persecution, (2) exceptional hardship to a U.S. citizen (or LPR) spouse or child of an EV, (3) no objection statement from the EV's home government, (4) a request by an interested U.S. federal government agency, and (5) a request by a designated state public health department or its equivalent (i.e., Conrad 30 Waiver Program).

Conrad 30 Waiver Program

Established in 1994 as a temporary program, the Conrad 30 Waiver Program allows states to obtain up to 30 waivers of the foreign residence requirement per year on behalf of J-1 physicians who have completed their required training. In return, the physician must agree to work for three years in an area in that state designated by the Department of Health and Human Services as having a shortage of health care professionals. After three years, the physician is eligible to apply for LPR status. The program's objective is to encourage immigration of physicians to medically underserved areas. Congress has extended the program multiple times.

Policy Considerations

Policy considerations vary across EVP program categories. Some observers have raised concerns that EVP categories involving employment may disadvantage U.S. workers. Some assert that U.S. employers have a financial incentive to hire EVs over U.S. citizens because employers are not required to pay certain payroll taxes for J-1 employees. Concerns have also been raised regarding the exploitation of EVs in the au pair, summer work travel, intern, and trainee programs.

National security concerns have been raised about EVs who have access to sensitive research or technology (e.g., research scholars, professors, university students).

Some stakeholders and Members of Congress have expressed support for making the Conrad 30 Waiver Program permanent or expanding it to address the shortage of physicians in medically underserved areas.

DOS has published rulemaking plans for (1) the au pair program to "address childcare hours, compensation, host family and au pair agreements, stronger au pair protections, and provide additional education options"; (2) the camp counselor program to "better align the program with … public diplomacy purposes"; and (3) the college and university student program related to allowing students to gain practical experience in their fields.

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