

U.S. Visa Issuances in 2020 – H-2A Issuances Defy the Trend

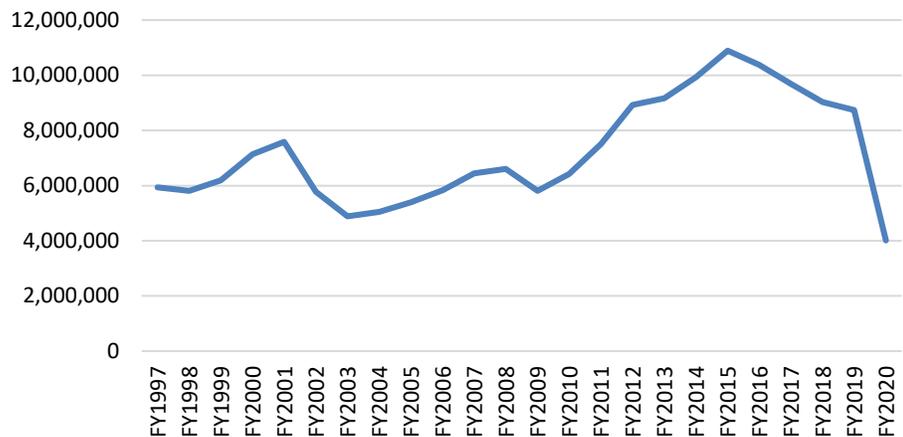
Jennifer Baumert Powell, Office of Industries
jennifer.powell@usitc.gov, 202-205-3450

In March 2020, the United States suspended processing of non-critical visa applications in response to the spread of COVID-19, and did not begin the process of restarting routine operations until July 2020. As such, preliminary data reveals a large drop in total U.S. FY2020 visa issuances across all source countries and most U.S. visa categories.¹ However, issuances of H-2A visas (which are granted to foreign agricultural workers) increased in FY2020 due to changes in program requirements and continued strong demand for agricultural labor.

U.S. visa issuances to workers and travelers fell markedly in FY2020.

Total U.S. issuances of nonimmigrant visas dropped by 54.1 percent in FY2020 (figure 1)² as the cross-border movement of persons was impacted by COVID-19 related border closures. This decrease was far greater than the declines posted in FY2002-2003 (following the events of September 11, 2001), FY2009 (during the global financial crisis), and FY2016-2019 (with the tightening of U.S. visa regulations), and it contrasted sharply with the 2.3 percent average annual growth in visa issuances seen over the FY1997-2019 period. Issuances to nationals from every source country decreased in FY2020. Among the top source countries in FY2019, particularly large FY2020 percentage declines were recorded for Poland (88.3 percent), China (74.8 percent), Saudi Arabia (65.0 percent), and Nigeria (64.5 percent), while the largest numerical declines were recorded for China (939,542), Mexico (511,053), India (486,256), and Brazil (383,645). Issuances in nearly all nonimmigrant visa categories also declined in FY2020, with the B-2 (tourist), G-2 (foreign government representative), F-1 (student), and J-1 (exchange visitor) programs experiencing particularly large decreases.

Figure 1: U.S. Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances, FY1997-FY2020



H-2A was the only major visa category in which issuances increased in FY2020.³

In FY2020, issuances of H-2A visas—which provide for the temporary entry of foreign agricultural workers—increased by 4.2 percent, slower than the average annual 13.1 percent growth rate in H-2A

¹ The U.S. Department of State publishes continuous data on visa issuances by category and source country for FY1997-2020 (FY refers to the U.S. government fiscal year, which extends from October 1 to September 30). U.S. Department of Homeland Security data on 2020 admittances of foreign nationals into the United States will likely be published in Fall 2021.

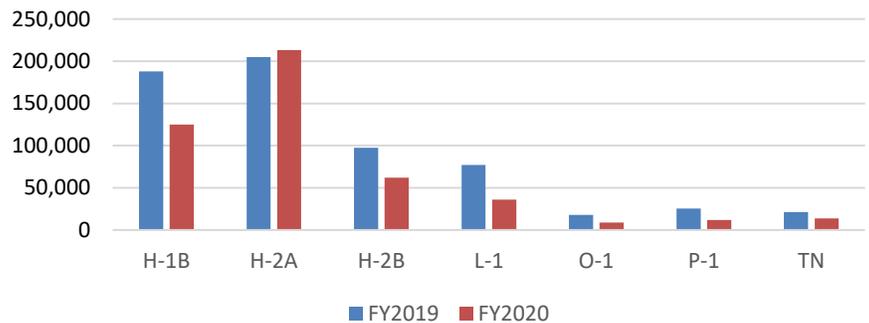
² This total reflects all U.S. issuances of temporary travel visas for either business or nonbusiness purposes.

³ The T-6 is the only other visa category that posted an increase in FY2020. Issuances of these visas—which are granted to the children of human trafficking victims—rose from 15 to 24 in FY2020.

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issuances during 1997-2019, but similar to the 4.3 percent increase posted in FY2019. This was in stark contrast to issuances of other widely-used work visas, which posted declines of between 33 and 55 percent in FY2020 (figure 2). Quarterly data on certified H-2A jobs also show the continued strength of H-2A visa use, as the number of H-2A jobs certified in calendar year 2020 topped 2019 certifications in most quarters.⁴

Figure 2: Issuances of Top U.S. Work Visas, FY 2019 and FY 2020



H-2A visas are valid for a maximum of 1 year and can be extended for up to 3 years, after which a national must leave the United States for at least 3 months before applying for a new visa. H-2A employers must show that they are employing foreign nationals due to the unavailability of U.S. workers, and they must offer transportation, housing, special wage rates, and a minimum number of work hours to H-2A employees. Mexican nationals account for the vast majority of H-2A issuances (with 92.7 percent in 2020), followed by South Africa (2.6 percent) and Jamaica (2.2 percent).

The U.S. government facilitated employment of H-2A workers early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The suspension of visa services in March 2020 raised U.S. food security concerns due to U.S. growers' heavy reliance on foreign workers, particularly from Mexico. In response, the Department of Homeland Security adopted a temporary rule in April 2020 that allows H-2A holders to transfer from one U.S. employer to another as soon as the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services had received the second employer's petition for the worker's extended stay, rather than waiting for the petition's approval. This rule—which permits H-2A holders to work under a pending petition for as long as 45 days—was renewed in August and December 2020, with the most recent renewal covering petitions that are submitted on or before June 16, 2021. Despite this rule, H-2A applications were over 9 percent lower in April-June 2020 compared to a year earlier due to the shortage of personal protective equipment for workers and transportation challenges.⁵ As uncertainty decreased, applications exceeded 2019 levels in the third and fourth quarters of 2020, demonstrating a high and increasing level of demand for foreign agricultural workers. Some observers suggest that the difficult and remote nature of agricultural work or the payment of additional unemployment benefits to U.S. workers may explain why demand for H-2A workers continued to rise in spite of elevated domestic unemployment.⁶

Sources: U.S. Department of Homeland Security; U.S. Department of State; U.S. Department of Labor; Congressional Research Service; The Federal Register; American Farm Bureau; Neifach, "[Relaxed H-2A Rules Continue](#)," The National Law Review, August 21, 2020; Charlton and Castillo, "[Potential Impacts of a Pandemic on the US Farm Labor Market](#)," Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy, 2021; Khimm and Silva, "[Lured to America—Then Trapped](#)," NBC News, July 29, 2020.

⁴ July-September 2019 certifications exceeded July-September 2020 certifications by 0.2 percent. To hire H-2A workers, employers must obtain U.S. Department of Labor Certification that there is a shortage of qualified workers and that H-2A employment will not negatively impact U.S. workers' labor conditions or wages.

⁵ However, the share of H-2A applications processed at least 30 days prior to an H-2A worker's proposed start date rose from 86 percent in April-June 2019 to 96 percent in April-June 2020.

⁶ Looking over a longer period, however, Charlton and Castillo (2021) find an association between increased unemployment and decreased demand for H-2A workers during 2007-19.

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