

Immigration, Explained

**Answers to the Questions
Americans Ask Most**

Elizabeth M. Grieco

June 2026 Edition

Immigration, Explained:
Answers to the Questions Americans Ask Most

Elizabeth M. Grieco

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June 2026 Edition

To Monica Boyd
Teacher, Mentor, Friend

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The Questions Americans Ask

After three decades researching and writing about demographic change, including more than 25 years as an analyst at federal statistical agencies and think tanks, I have come to recognize the questions Americans most often ask about immigration and the foreign-born population.

These questions range from the relatively easy-to-answer (How many immigrants are there? Where do they live?) to the more complex (How many Americans have immigrant parents? Do immigrants have more children than the native born?) and even to the more controversial (Are the foreign born more likely to be incarcerated? How many immigrants are living in the country illegally?).

Over the years, I have never seen a single resource that answers these and other questions in one place using the latest available data and clear, accessible explanations. I have long wanted to write such a book.

Immigration, Explained: Answers to the Questions Americans Ask Most is a straightforward, data-driven analysis of the best evidence available. It is organized around a series of focused questions, with each chapter providing direct answers in a nonpartisan manner. The goal of this book is not to advance an argument or push a point of view, but to establish a shared factual foundation for understanding immigration and the foreign-born population.

Public discussions on these topics are too-often shaped by headlines, anecdotes, and assumptions rather than a clear presentation of the data and information available. Sometimes it's hard to tell facts from hyperbole. Even when reliable statistics exist, understanding what they measure—and what they do not measure—can be challenging for non-specialists, who may not have the background needed to evaluate competing claims. This book is an effort to close that gap by providing a general audience with a solid foundational knowledge they can use to better understand the country today.

Whether you are a student, policymaker, journalist, or casual reader, this book offers a concise and accessible guide to the numbers behind one of the most discussed issues of our time.

How Many Foreign Born Live in the United States?

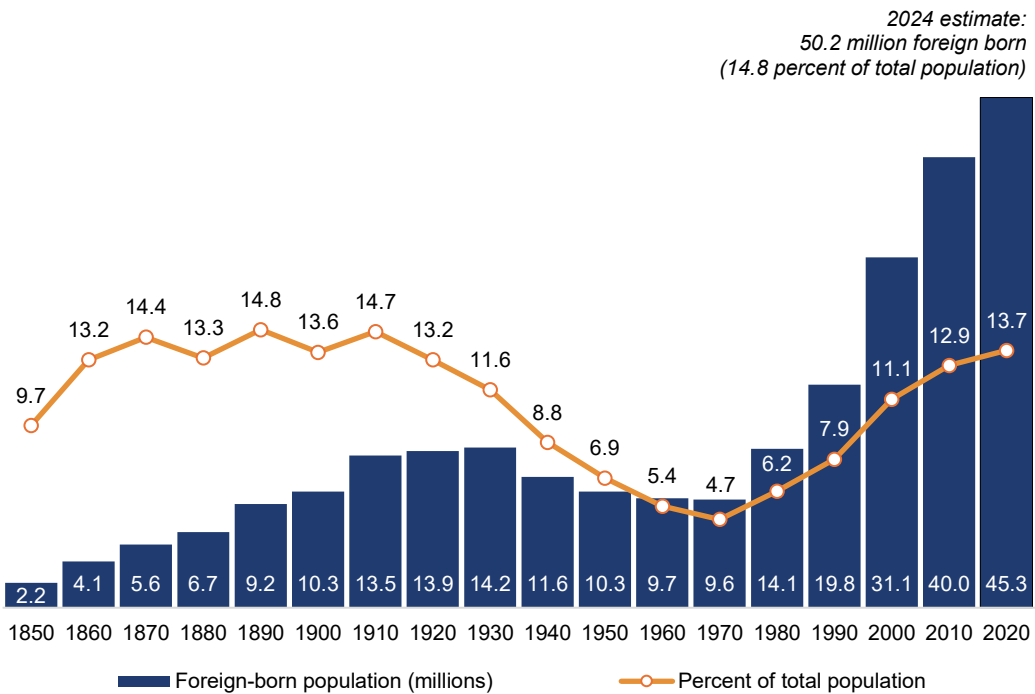
Today, there are more than 50 million foreign born living in the United States.

According to recent estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, there were 50.2 million foreign born in the country in 2024, representing nearly 15 percent of the 340.1 million total residents.

The current share of the foreign-born population is notable because the United States is once again approaching a level not seen since the late 1800s and early 1900s, during the period often referred to as the “Great Wave” of migration.

Between 1880 and 1930, the foreign-born population grew rapidly, doubling in size from 6.7 million to 14.2 million. During this period, immigrants represented roughly 12 to 15 percent of the total U.S. population (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1.
Foreign-Born Population and Share of Total Population: 1850 to 2020



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1960 to 2000 (in Gibson and Jung, 2006) and American Community Survey, 2010, 2018–2022, and 2024, Table B05002.

After 1930, immigration slowed considerably. As the existing foreign-born population either died or emigrated, the total number of foreign born declined, falling to 9.6 million in

1970—the lowest level of the 20th century. At that time, the foreign born accounted for less than 5 percent of the total population, or fewer than 1-in-20 residents.

Beginning in 1970, the foreign-born population again started to grow steadily in both size and share of the total U.S. population. By 2020, it had increased nearly fivefold to 45.3 million, representing nearly 14 percent of the total population.

In 2024, the foreign-born share of the U.S. population was 14.8 percent, placing it near historic highs. This level is comparable to the peak periods of 1890 (14.8 percent) and 1910 (14.7 percent), underscoring how today’s foreign-born population is large both in absolute size and as a share of the total population.

Who Are the Foreign Born?

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the foreign-born population based on two factors: place of birth and citizenship at birth.

The foreign born are people who were born outside the United States and were not U.S. citizens at birth. This group includes both:

- Naturalized citizens — immigrants who later became U.S. citizens
- Noncitizens — including lawful permanent residents (green card holders), temporary visa holders, those in other temporary statuses, and unauthorized immigrants

The native born are people who were:

- born in the United States
- born in a U.S. Island Area (Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, or Northern Mariana Islands)
- born abroad of a U.S. citizen parent or parents

Data Sources

Historical estimates of the foreign-born population (1850–2000) are from Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung. *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000* (POP-WP081). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2006.

Estimates for 2010 are from Elizabeth M. Grieco et al. *The Size, Place of Birth, and Geographic Distribution of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 1960 to 2010* (POP-WP096). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2012.

Estimates for 2020 and 2024 are based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), using Table B05002, *Place of Birth by Nativity and Citizenship Status*, accessed via data.census.gov. The 2020 estimate uses the 2018–2022 ACS 5-year file because a 2020 ACS 1-year file was not published; the 2024 estimate uses the ACS 1-year file.

Where Are the Foreign Born From?

Most foreign born living in the United States today are from Latin America, followed by Asia and Europe.

As of 2024, 25.8 million were from Latin America, accounting for over half (51 percent) of the 50.2 million foreign born, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Immigrants from Asia, at 15.5 million, were the next-largest group, representing nearly one-third (31 percent) of the foreign-born population. The number of immigrants from Europe was smaller, at 4.9 million, or 10 percent of the foreign-born population. All other regions accounted for about 8 percent of the foreign born.

While the growth of the foreign-born population over the last half-century is widely recognized, less appreciated is how dramatically the origins of immigrants have changed over time. Today's distribution by region of birth differs markedly from that of the mid-20th century.

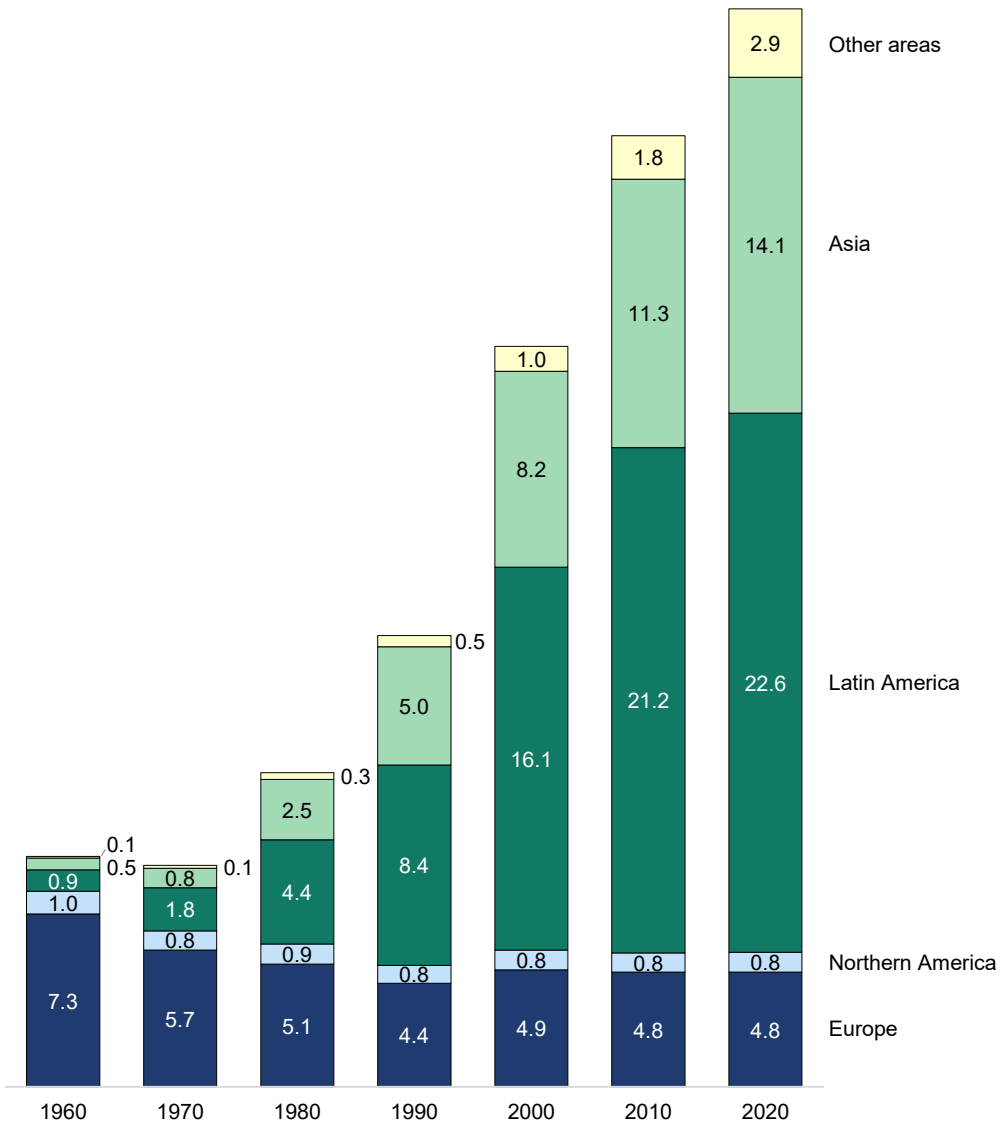
During the 1960 to 2020 period, the number of foreign born from Latin America and Asia grew rapidly, while the number from Europe first declined, then remained relatively stable. In 1960, there were fewer than 1 million foreign born from Latin America, but by 2020, there were 22.6 million (see Figure 2). The number of foreign born from Asia increased from fewer than one-half million in 1960 to 14.1 million in 2020. By comparison, the foreign-born population from Europe declined from 7.3 million in 1960 to 5.1 million in 1980, then remained between 4 and 5 million from 1990 to 2020.

Changes in the proportional distribution of the foreign-born population by region of birth were even more dramatic. In 1960, 75 percent of the foreign-born population was born in Europe (see Figure 3). By 1980, 39 percent were born in Europe, while over half (52 percent) were born in Latin America or Asia. Beginning in 2010 and continuing through 2020, more than 80 percent of the foreign-born population was born in either Latin America or Asia, with half born in Latin America alone.

Why Did the Origin Countries of Immigrants Change After 1960?

New waves of immigrants began arriving in the United States following amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 that abolished the national-origins quota system established in the 1920s. This change marked a shift away from policies that favored traditional source countries toward greater diversity in the origins of the foreign born. Unlike during the “Great Wave” of migration in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when most immigrants to the United States came from countries in Europe, most of those who arrived after 1970 were from countries in Latin America and Asia.

FIGURE 2.
Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: 1960 to 2020
 (millions)



2024 estimates:

Latin America – 25.8 | Asia – 15.5 | Europe – 4.9 | Other areas – 3.3 | Northern America – 0.8

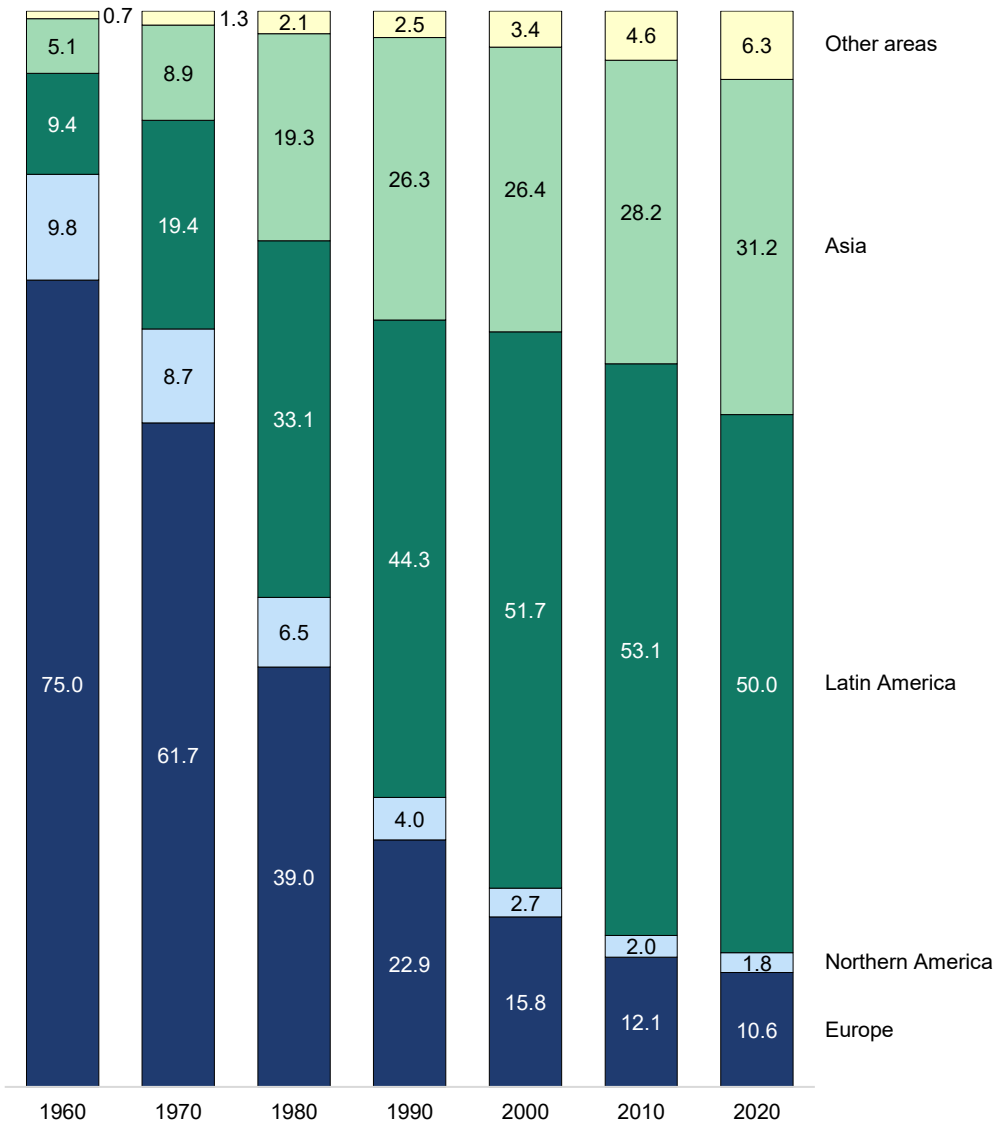
Note: Excludes region of birth not reported. Latin America includes Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Other areas include Africa and Oceania.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1960 to 2000 (in Gibson and Jung, 2006) and American Community Survey, 2010, 2018–2022, and 2024, Table B05006.

FIGURE 3.

Share of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: 1960 to 2020

(percent distribution)



2024 estimates:

Latin America – 51.4 | Asia – 30.8 | Europe – 9.7 | Other areas – 6.5 | Northern America – 1.7

Note: Excludes region of birth not reported. Latin America includes Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Other areas include Africa and Oceania.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1960 to 2000 (in Gibson and Jung, 2006) and American Community Survey, 2010, 2018–2022, and 2024, Table B05006.

The growth in the foreign-born population from Latin America was fueled primarily by immigration from a single source country, Mexico, which accounted for the largest share between 1960 and 2020. By 2024, there were 11.1 million foreign born from Mexico in the United States, representing 43 percent of immigrants from Latin America and 22 percent of all foreign born.

Unlike immigration from Latin America, movement from Asia has not been dominated by a single country of birth but has been more evenly distributed among several groups. Since 1960, the foreign-born populations from India, China (including Hong Kong and Taiwan), the Philippines, Vietnam, and Korea have all increased steadily, each reaching 1 million or more by 2010. By 2024, these five country-of-birth groups represented 70 percent of the foreign born from Asia and about 22 percent of all foreign born.

The two largest groups from Asia—the foreign born from India (3.2 million) and China (3 million)—each accounted for about 20 percent of the foreign born from Asia and about 6 percent of the total foreign-born population.

Data Sources

Historical estimates of the foreign-born population (1960–2000) used in this chapter are from Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000* (POP-WP081). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2006.

Estimates for 2010 are from Elizabeth M. Grieco et al. *The Size, Place of Birth, and Geographic Distribution of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 1960 to 2010* (POP-WP096). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2012.

Estimates for 2020 and 2024 are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), using Table B05006, *Place of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population in the United States*, accessed via data.census.gov. The 2020 estimate uses the 2018–2022 ACS 5-year file because a 2020 ACS 1-year file was not published; the 2024 estimate uses the ACS 1-year file.

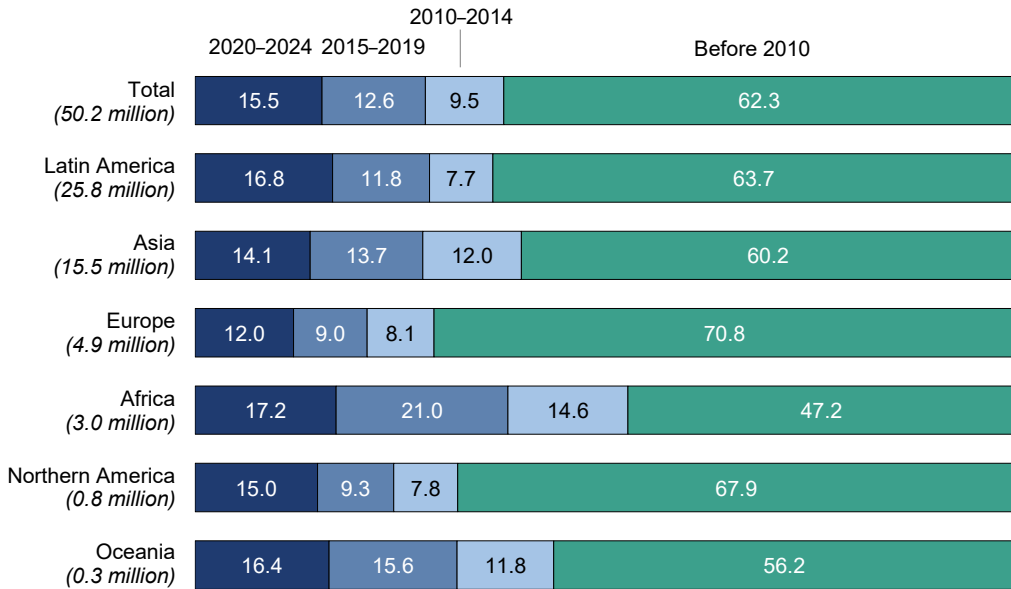
Additional information about the Immigration and Nationality Act can be found in the Congressional Budget Office report *Immigration Policy in the United States* (2006), available at: <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/109th-congress-2005-2006/reports/02-28-immigration.pdf>.

When Did the Foreign Born Come to Live Here?

Most foreign born in the United States have lived in the country for many years, though the length of residence varies by region of birth.

About two-thirds (62 percent) of the 50.2 million foreign born came to live in the United States more than 15 years ago, according to U.S. Census Bureau 2024 estimates (see Figure 4). The remaining third arrived more recently, including about 15 percent in 2020–2024 and 13 percent in 2015–2019.

FIGURE 4.
Foreign-Born Population by Period of Entry and Region of Birth: 2024
 (percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file, 2024

The foreign born from Africa have the highest share of recent arrivals. Over half (53 percent) arrived in 2010 or later, including 17 percent in 2020–2024 and 21 percent in 2015–2019. Immigrants from Oceania—Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands—follow a similar pattern, with 44 percent arriving in the United States in the last 15 years.

By comparison, a greater share of the foreign born from Europe and Northern America (primarily Canada) are long-term residents. Nearly 7-in-10 foreign born from Europe (71 percent) and Northern America (68 percent) came to live in the country before 2010.

Europe was among the regions with the smallest share of recent arrivals, with 12 percent arriving in 2020–2024 and 9 percent arriving in 2015–2019.

The foreign born from Latin America and Asia broadly mirror the distribution of the total foreign-born population by period of entry, with similar shares of recent arrivals.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file, available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/microdata/access.html>.

Where Do the Foreign Born Live?

The foreign-born population in the United States is highly concentrated in a small number of states—but the pattern changes when measured by the share of each state’s population.

Of the 50.2 million foreign born in the United States in 2024, over half (53 percent) lived in just four states: California (10.9 million), Texas (5.8 million), Florida (5.4 million), and New York (4.6 million), according to the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 5). California alone accounted for 22 percent—more than one in five—of the total foreign-born population.

An additional 10 states each had at least 1 million foreign-born residents, including New Jersey (2.4 million), Illinois (2 million), Massachusetts, Georgia, and Washington (each with about 1.3 million), Virginia (1.2 million), North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Maryland (each about 1.1 million), and Arizona (1 million). Together, these 14 states accounted for 80 percent of the foreign-born population.

In contrast, 10 states each had fewer than 100,000 foreign-born residents, including New Hampshire, Mississippi, Maine, Alaska, North Dakota, South Dakota, West Virginia, Vermont, Montana, and Wyoming.

A different pattern emerges when the foreign-born population is measured as a share of each state’s total population (see Figure 6). California again ranks highest (28 percent), followed by New Jersey (25 percent), New York and Florida (each 23 percent), and Nevada (20 percent).

At the national level, nearly 15 percent of the population was foreign born in 2024. Eight other states and the District of Columbia matched or exceeded this share, including Massachusetts and Hawaii (each about 19 percent), Texas (18 percent), Maryland (17 percent), Washington, Connecticut, and Rhode Island (each about 16 percent), and Illinois and the District of Columbia (each about 15 percent).

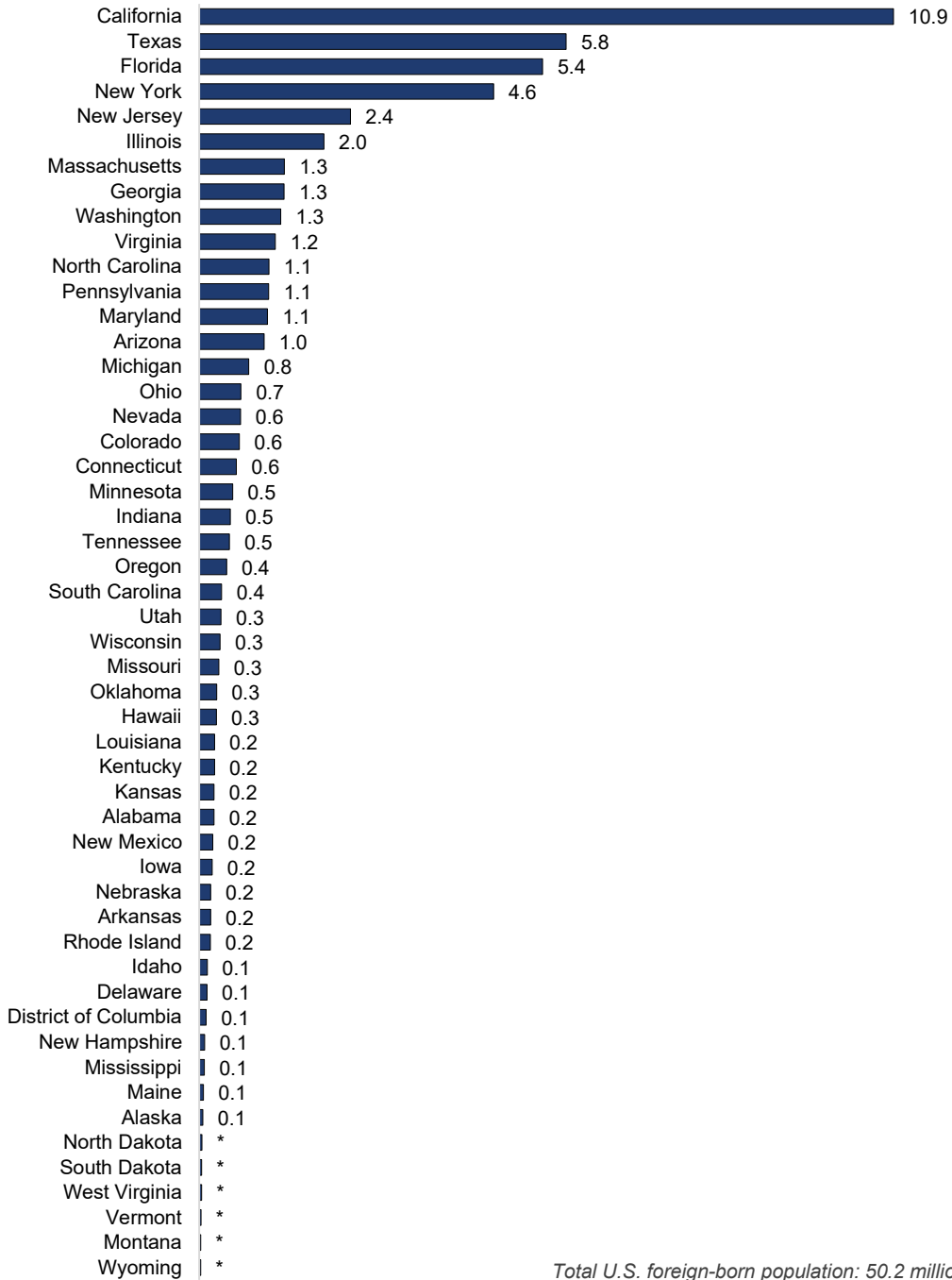
Most states have much lower shares. In 32 states, the foreign-born share was 10 percent or less, including 12 states where the share was 5 percent or less. Montana and West Virginia, at about 2 percent each, were among the states with the smallest shares.

At both ends of the distribution, a similar pattern holds: the largest foreign-born populations and highest shares are concentrated in states such as California, Florida, New York, and New Jersey, while the smallest populations and lowest shares largely overlap in South Dakota, West Virginia, Montana, and Wyoming.

FIGURE 5.

Foreign-Born Population by State: 2024

(millions)



Total U.S. foreign-born population: 50.2 million

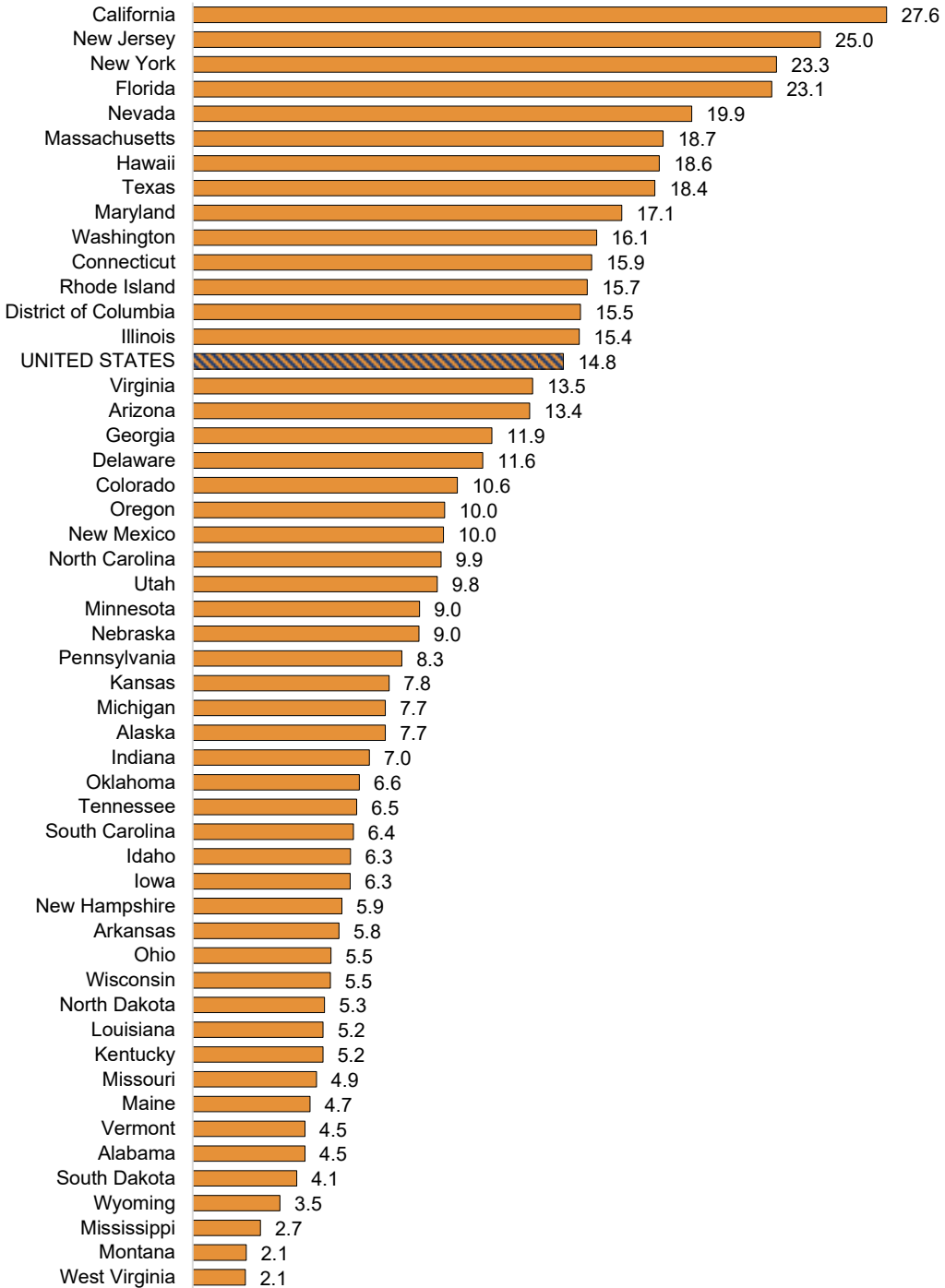
* = less than 50 thousand.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Table B05001.

FIGURE 6.

Share of the Foreign-Born Population by State: 2024

(percent of state population that is foreign born)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Table B05001.

Between these extremes are a number of states where the two measures diverge, underscoring how population size and concentration capture different dimensions of immigrant settlement. For example, Alaska, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia rank much higher by foreign-born share than by total foreign-born population, while Missouri, Ohio, and Pennsylvania rank higher by population than by share.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS), Table B05001, *Nativity and Citizenship Status in the United States*, accessed via data.census.gov.

How Many Foreign Born Are Citizens?

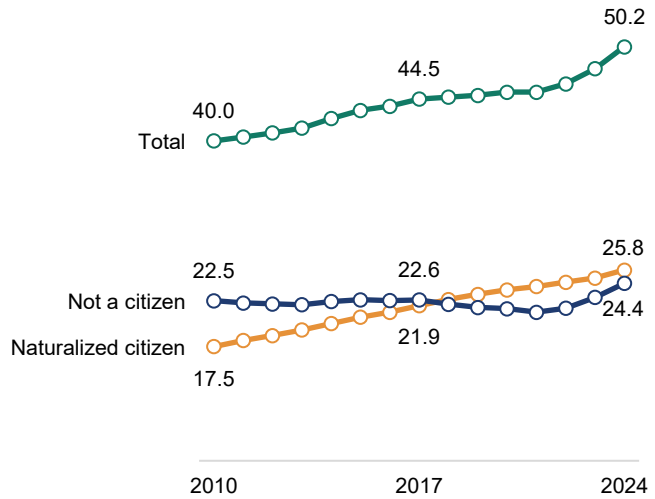
About half of the foreign-born population in the United States are naturalized citizens.

Of the 50.2 million foreign born in the United States in 2024, 25.8 million, or 51 percent of the total, were naturalized citizens, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates. The remaining 24.4 million were noncitizens, representing 49 percent of the total foreign-born population. This group includes lawful permanent residents (also known as green card holders), temporary residents, and unauthorized immigrants.

Over the last 15 years, the number of naturalized citizens has steadily increased, broadly in line with growth in the total foreign-born population.

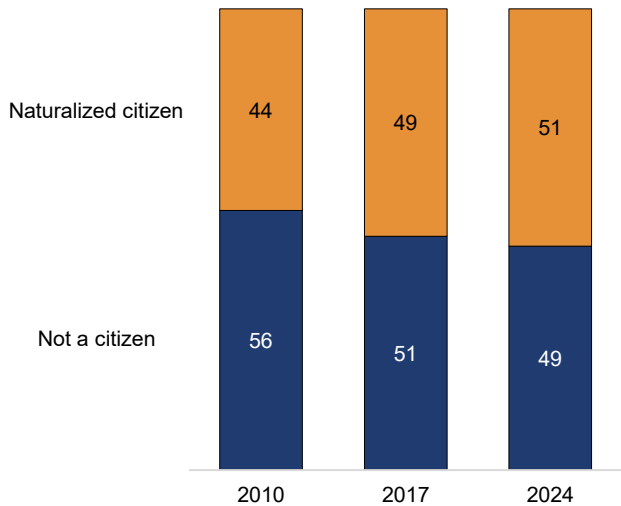
Between 2010 and 2024, the foreign-born population grew from 40 million to 50.2 million, an increase of roughly 10.3 million people (see Figure 7). The majority of that growth (81 percent) came from the increase in the number of naturalized citizens. Naturalized citizens grew steadily, from 17.5 million in 2010 to 25.8 million in 2024, an average of about 600,000 people per year.

FIGURE 7.
Foreign-Born Population by Citizenship Status: 2010 to 2024
(millions)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010–2024, Table B05002.

FIGURE 8.
Share of the Foreign-Born Population by Citizenship Status: 2010, 2017, and 2024
(percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2010–2024, Table B05002.

In contrast, the noncitizen population showed little net change between 2010 and 2017, hovering around 22.4 million. It then declined to 21.2 million in 2021 before edging back up in subsequent years. The number of noncitizens fell below that of naturalized citizens starting in 2018, and by 2024, with 24.4 million, noncitizens remained fewer in number than naturalized citizens.

Because the numbers of naturalized citizens and noncitizens grew at different rates, their shares within the foreign-born population shifted over time.

In 2010, noncitizens made up 56 percent of the total, compared with 44 percent naturalized citizens (see Figure 8). Over time, the relatively flat growth and later decline in the noncitizen population, combined with the steady rise in naturalized citizens, shifted the balance. By 2024, naturalized citizens represented a slight majority at 51 percent, while noncitizens accounted for 49 percent.

What Drives Changes in the Size of the Foreign-Born Population?

Changes in the size of the foreign-born population reflect the net effect of several processes. For the total population, differences over time capture arrivals, offset by deaths and emigration.

The sources of growth differ, however, for naturalized citizens and noncitizens.

The number of naturalized citizens increases primarily as noncitizens transition to citizenship. It decreases through death and emigration, with some contribution from return migration among those already naturalized.

These status transitions also reduce the size of the noncitizen population. Noncitizens also change in size through emigration and death.

In contrast, growth of the noncitizen population primarily reflects arrivals, making it the main driver of overall increases in the foreign-born population.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), using Table B05002, *Place of Birth by Nativity and Citizenship Status*, accessed via data.census.gov. The 2020 estimate uses the 2018–2022 ACS 5-year file because a 2020 ACS 1-year file was not published. All other estimates use the ACS 1-year file.

How Many Immigrants Become Permanent Residents Each Year?

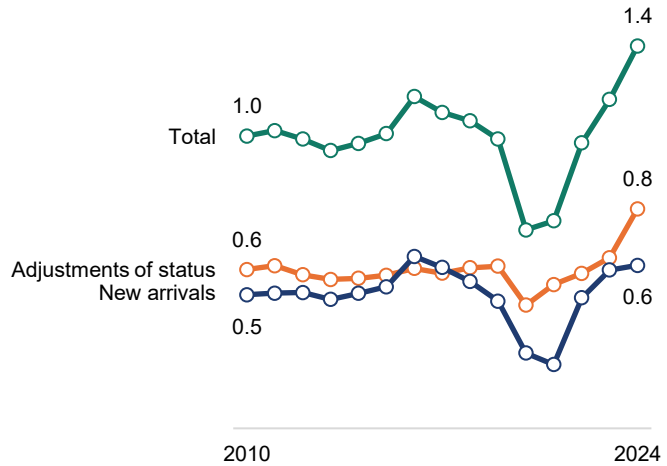
Each year, about 1 million foreign born obtain lawful permanent resident (LPR) status and receive permanent resident cards, commonly referred to as “green cards.”

This figure is often misinterpreted in the media as the number of new immigrants entering the United States, but it includes both new arrivals from abroad and individuals already living in the country who adjust to LPR status.

In 2024, 1.4 million foreign born obtained LPR status, including about 581,000 new arrivals from abroad and about 783,000 foreign born already living in the United States who adjusted status (see Figure 9). Most adjustments of status occur among individuals already in the country in a temporary or other eligible migrant status, according to administrative data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

There was a dramatic drop in the number of foreign born obtaining LPR status during the COVID-19 pandemic. New arrivals fell sharply, reaching a low of about 227,000 in 2021 before recovering, while the adjustments of status were comparatively more stable over the same period. Overall, however, the balance between new arrivals and adjustments has remained relatively constant over time, with adjustments generally exceeding new arrivals, including during and after the COVID-19 disruption.

FIGURE 9.
Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Type of Admission: 2010 to 2024
(millions)



Source: Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2024 edition (2015 to 2024 data) and 2019 edition (2010 to 2014 data), Table 6.

What Does the “1 Million Green Cards” Figure Measure?

The number of persons obtaining lawful permanent resident (LPR) status each year is a flow measure, not a count of the total foreign-born population living in the United States. It reflects the number of individuals who are granted LPR status in a given year, including both new arrivals from abroad and individuals already living in the United States who adjust status. These counts are based on administrative records from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Because it measures annual transitions into LPR status, it should not be interpreted as the size of the immigrant population.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 2024 edition (2015–2024 data) and 2019 edition (2010–2014 data), Table 6, *Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Type and Major Class of Admission*, available at: <https://ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration/yearbook>.

Additional background on U.S. immigration policy is available in the Congressional Budget Office report *Immigration Policy in the United States* (2006), available at: <https://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/109th-congress-2005-2006/reports/02-28-immigration.pdf>.

How Many Foreign Born Are Illegal Immigrants?

There is no direct count of the number of illegal immigrants—generally referred to as unauthorized immigrants—residing in the United States. Instead, estimates produced by multiple independent research organizations fall within a relatively narrow range.

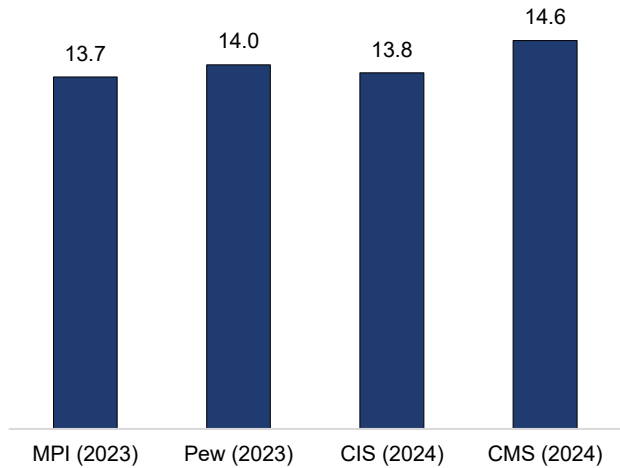
Recent estimates for the 2023–2024 period place the unauthorized immigrant population at about 14 million (see Figure 10).

These estimates are based on broadly similar methods that combine U.S. Census Bureau survey data with administrative records of lawful immigration from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Differences across organizations primarily reflect alternative modeling assumptions rather than different data sources.

In 2024, there were 50.2 million foreign born in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Based on an estimated population of 14 million, unauthorized immigrants represented about 28 percent of the total foreign-born population.

FIGURE 10.

Recent Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population by Source and Year
(millions)



Note: Estimates are based on the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) or Current Population Survey (CPS) data combined with Department of Homeland Security administrative records on legally resident immigrants, using residual methods that infer the unauthorized population as a statistical remainder. Differences across sources reflect data vintage and modeling assumptions.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI, 2023); Pew Research Center (Pew, 2025); Center for Immigration Studies (CIS, 2024); Center for Migration Studies (CMS, 2026).

How Are Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Produced?

Estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population are based on a demographic “residual” method. Researchers start with U.S. Census Bureau survey data on the total foreign-born population and subtract estimates of legally resident immigrants constructed from administrative records and demographic data from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The remaining population is interpreted as unauthorized.

Because this population cannot be directly measured, estimates depend on modeling choices such as survey coverage adjustments and assumptions about emigration and legal status, which helps explain why estimates differ across research organizations.

Data Sources

Estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population presented in the chapter are based on the following sources:

Van Hook, Jennifer, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Julia Gelatt. February 2025. “The Unauthorized Immigrant Population Expands Amid Record U.S.-Mexico Border Arrivals.” *Migration Policy Institute*. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/unauthorized-immigrant-population-mid-2023>.

Passel, Jeffrey S. and Jens Manuel Krogstad. August 2025. “U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population Reached a Record 14 Million in 2023.” *Pew Research Center*. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2025/08/21/u-s-unauthorized-immigrant-population-reached-a-record-14-million-in-2023>.

Camarota, Steven A. and Karen Zeigler. February 2026. “Welfare Use by Immigrants and the U.S.-Born, 2024.” *Center for Immigration Studies*. Available at: <https://cis.org/Report/Welfare-Use-Immigrants-and-USBorn-2024>.

Allen, Ryan and Bob Warren. May 2026. “Understanding the U.S. Undocumented Population: New 2024 Estimates from CMS.” *Center for Migration Studies of New York*. Available at: <https://cmsny.org/event/2024-undocumented-estimates>.

The estimate of the size of the foreign-born population in 2024 is based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), using Table B05002, *Place of Birth by Nativity and Citizenship Status*, accessed via data.census.gov.

What Share of Americans Have Immigrant Parents?

As the share of the foreign-born population has grown, so has the share of native-born Americans with an immigrant parent.

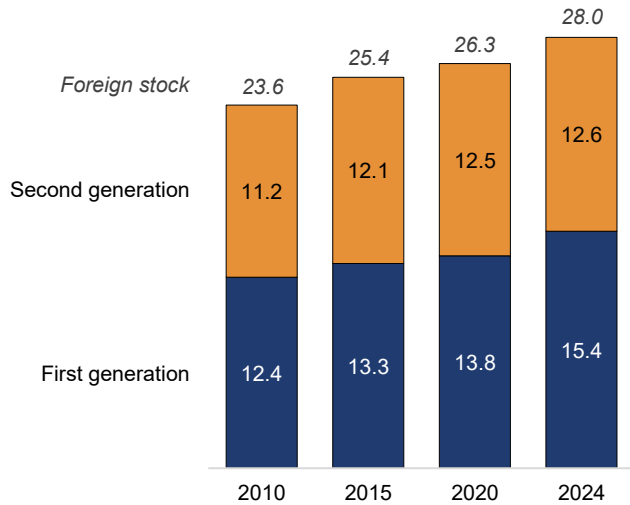
In 2024, first-generation immigrants made up about 15 percent of the total population. The second generation—native-born Americans with at least one foreign-born parent—accounted for roughly 13 percent, according to estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 11).

Both have increased gradually over the past 15 years: in 2010, first-generation immigrants represented about 12 percent of the population, while the second generation accounted for roughly 11 percent.

Taken together, a growing share of the U.S. population has ties to immigration.

“Foreign stock” refers to the share of the population directly shaped by immigration, either through migration itself or through immigrant parentage. In 2024, more than a quarter of Americans—28 percent—were either first-generation immigrants or second-generation children of immigrants, up from 24 percent in 2010.

FIGURE 11.
First- and Second-Generation Populations as a Share of the Total Population: 2010 to 2024
(percent)



Note: Foreign stock combines first- and second-generation population.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), 2024 Foreign-Born CPS Data Tables, Table 1.

How Do Analysts Define Immigrant Generation Groups?

The first generation refers to the foreign-born population.

The second generation, often referred to as the “children of immigrants,” includes native-born Americans with at least one foreign-born parent.

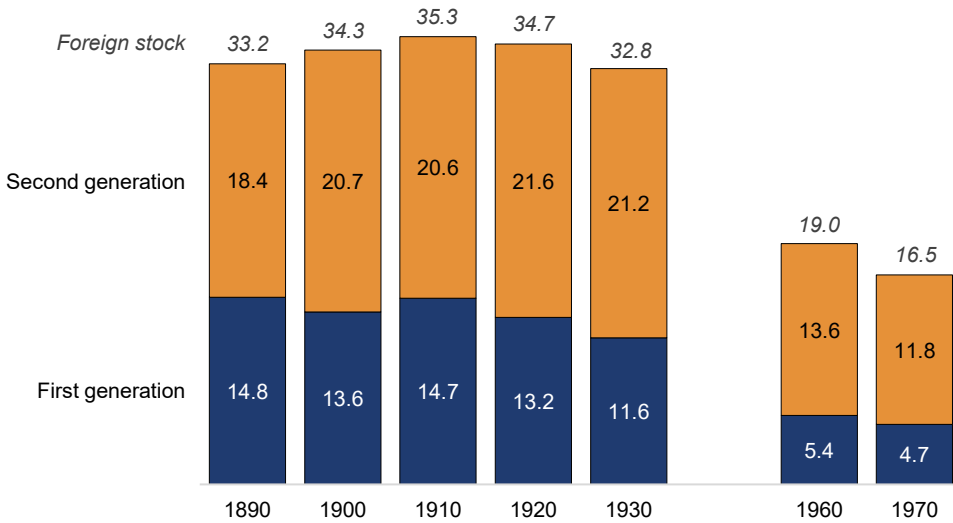
The third-and-higher generation includes native-born Americans with two native-born parents.

“Foreign stock” combines the first and second generations to capture the share of the population directly shaped by immigration.

Still, today’s share of Americans with immigrant ties remains below the levels reached during the Great Wave of immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the early 20th century, immigrants and the second generation made up more than one-third of the U.S. population, peaking at about 35 percent in 1910 (see Figure 12). The share then fell substantially by the mid-20th century, reaching a low of roughly 17 percent in 1970. Today, the foreign stock population remains historically high by modern standards, though still below levels reached in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

FIGURE 12.
First- and Second-Generation Populations as a Share of the Total Population:
1890 to 1930 and 1960 to 1970
 (percent)



Note: Foreign stock combines first- and second-generation population.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census of Population, 1890 to 1930 and 1960 to 1970 (in Gibson and Jung, 2006).

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter for 2010–2024 are based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey (CPS), *2024 Foreign-Born CPS Data Tables*, using Table 1, *Population by Generation: 2005 to 2024*, available at: <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2024/demo/foreign-born/cps-2024.html>.

Note: The 2024 CPS estimate of 15.4 percent for the first generation differs slightly from ACS 2024 estimates used elsewhere in this report, which place the foreign-born share at 14.8 percent.

Historical estimates of the foreign-born population by generation group (1890–1930 and 1960–1970) are from Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung. *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000* (POP-WP081). Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division, 2006.

Do Immigrants Have More Children Than Native-Born Americans?

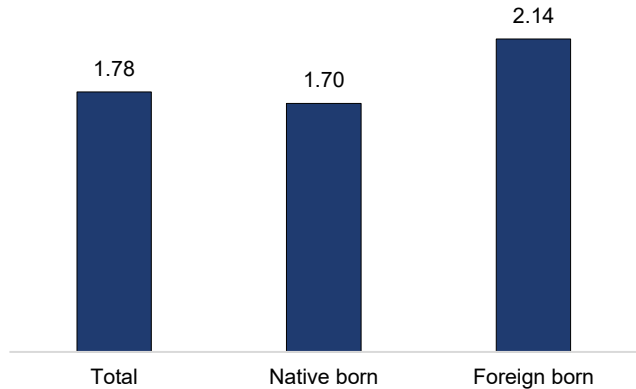
Foreign-born women in the United States typically do have more children than native-born women, but their higher fertility rate has only a modest impact on total births.

The average foreign-born woman can be expected to have 2.1 births during her lifetime, compared with 1.7 births for the typical native-born woman, according to 2020–2024 data from the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 13).

This measure, known as the “total fertility rate,” estimates the number of births a woman would have by the end of her reproductive years, assuming she bears the current average number of children all women are having at each age.

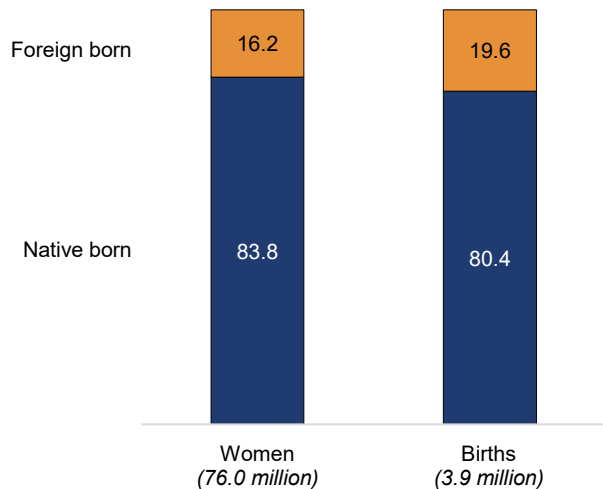
Overall, the total fertility rate in the United States is 1.8, slightly higher than that of native-born women. Native-born women represent 84 percent of all women aged 15 to 49 and therefore largely drive the national rate (see Figure 14). As foreign-born women account for only 16 percent of this age group, their higher fertility has a smaller influence over the total rate.

FIGURE 13.
Total Fertility Rate by Nativity: 2020–2024
(women aged 15–49)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020–2024, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file.

FIGURE 14.
Population of Women Ages 15–49 and Births in the Last 12 Months by Nativity: 2020–2024
(percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2020–2024, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file.

Additionally, the contribution of foreign-born women to total births is broadly in line with their share of women in their childbearing years. Among women aged 15 to 49 who reported a birth in the previous 12 months (during the 2020–2024 period), about 20 percent were to foreign-born women, compared with 80 percent who were native born.

Today, the higher fertility rate of foreign-born women is not enough to boost the overall U.S. fertility rate above “replacement level,” generally defined as about 2.1 births per woman.

What is “Replacement Level” Fertility?

Replacement level fertility occurs when women have enough children to maintain the size of a population over time. To replace the population, women would have to have, on average, at least two children. Assuming all women survive to the end of their childbearing years, then the replacement level total fertility rate would be close to 2.0.

For most industrialized countries, however, the replacement fertility rate is approximately 2.1, a bit higher than two births per woman. As not all children survive into adulthood, women must have an additional 0.1 births, on average, to account for these deaths.

Assuming no immigration, below replacement fertility rates—if sustained over a sufficiently long period—can result in population decline.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2020–2024 American Community Survey (ACS) Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file, available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/microdata/access.html>.

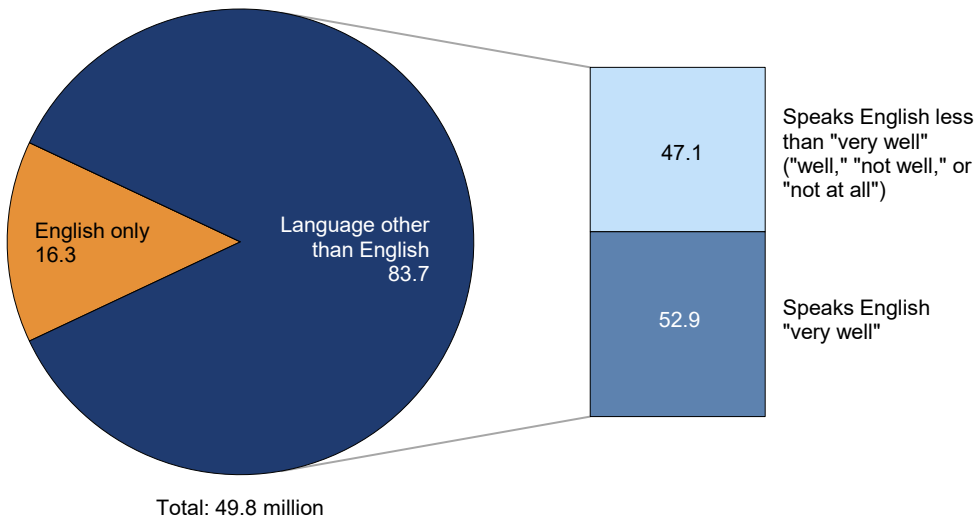
Official federal statistics on births are produced by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). NCHS uses vital records, such as birth certificates, together with U.S. Census Bureau population estimates to calculate fertility measures. The fertility rates presented in this chapter are derived from ACS survey data and may differ from official NCHS estimates.

How Well Do the Foreign Born Speak English?

The vast majority of the foreign born in the United States speak a language other than English at home, and among those who do, nearly half speak English less than “very well.”

Of the 49.8 million foreign born aged 5 and over, 84 percent spoke a language other than English at home while 16 percent spoke English only, according to 2024 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 15). Among those who spoke a language other than English at home, 47 percent spoke English less than “very well” (including those who spoke English “well,” “not well,” and “not at all”), while 53 percent spoke English “very well.”

FIGURE 15.
Foreign-Born Population by Language Spoken at Home and Ability to Speak English: 2024
(population age 5 and over; percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Table S0501.

Patterns of language use and English proficiency vary considerably by region of birth.

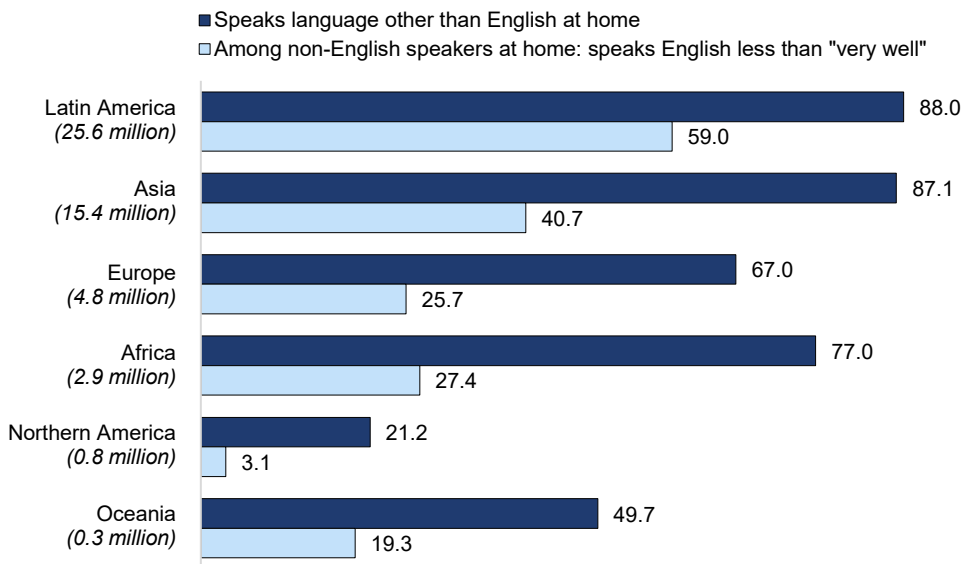
The foreign born from Latin America and Asia have similarly high rates of non-English language use at home but markedly different levels of English proficiency. In 2024, 88 percent of the 25.6 million foreign born from Latin America spoke a language other than English at home, and among those speakers, 59 percent spoke English less than “very well” (see Figure 16). By comparison, 87 percent of the 15.4 million foreign born from

Asia spoke a language other than English at home, but only 41 percent of those speakers spoke English less than “very well”.

Immigrants from Europe, Africa, and Oceania also commonly spoke a language other than English at home, but comparatively smaller shares spoke English less than "very well." Among those who spoke another language at home, only about one-quarter of immigrants from Europe (26 percent) and Africa (27 percent) and one-fifth of those from Oceania (19 percent) spoke English less than "very well."

Northern Americans, who are primarily from Canada, exhibited the highest English proficiency of all region-of-birth groups, with only 3 percent of those speaking a language other than English at home reporting that they spoke English less than "very well."

FIGURE 16.
Share of Foreign-Born Population Who Speak a Language Other Than English at Home and Who Speak English Less Than "Very Well" by Region of Birth: 2024
(population age 5 and over; percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Tables S0503, S0504, S0505, and S0506.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). The following tables were used:

- Table S0501, *Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations*
- Table S0503, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Europe*
- Table S0504, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Africa, Northern America, and Oceania*
- Table S0505, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Asia*
- Table S0506, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Latin America*

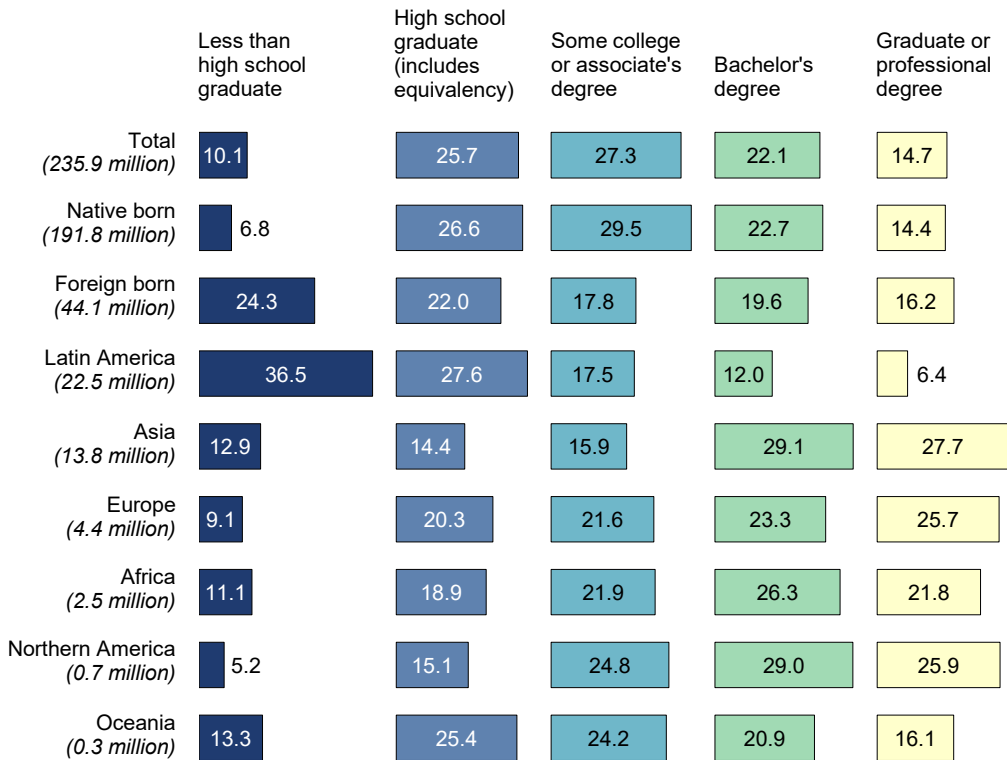
All tables were accessed via data.census.gov.

How Educated Are the Foreign Born?

Overall, the foreign born in the United States are less educated than the native born, but notable differences exist by region of birth, especially at higher levels of educational attainment.

In 2024, nearly a quarter of the 44.1 million foreign born aged 25 and over—24 percent—had not graduated from high school, compared with just 7 percent of the 191.8 million native born in the same age group, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 17). The foreign born were less likely than the native born to have graduated high school, attended college, or earned an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. However, they were slightly more likely to hold a graduate or professional degree (16 percent versus 14 percent).

FIGURE 17.
Educational Attainment by Nativity and Region of Birth: 2024
 (population age 25 and over; percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Tables S0501, S0503, S0504, S0505, and S0506.

Educational attainment varies substantially by region of birth, especially between the two largest groups: immigrants from Latin America and Asia.

Over a third (37 percent) of the 22.5 million foreign born from Latin America had less than a high school education, while only 18 percent had a bachelor's degree (12 percent) or a graduate or professional degree (6 percent). By comparison, over half (57 percent) of the 13.8 million foreign born from Asia had a bachelor's (29 percent) or a graduate or professional (28 percent) degree, while 13 percent had less than a high school education.

The remaining region-of-birth groups also had relatively high levels of educational attainment. More than half of immigrants from Northern America (55 percent) had a bachelor's, graduate, or professional degree, as did nearly half of those from Europe (49 percent) and Africa (48 percent), and a third (37 percent) from Oceania.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). The following tables were used:

- Table S0501, *Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations*
- Table S0503, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Europe*
- Table S0504, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Africa, Northern America, and Oceania*
- Table S0505, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Asia*
- Table S0506, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Latin America*

All tables were accessed via data.census.gov.

How Many Foreign Born Are in the Labor Force?

The foreign born in the United States are more likely to participate in the labor force than the native born, but the bulk of the labor force is still made up of native-born workers.

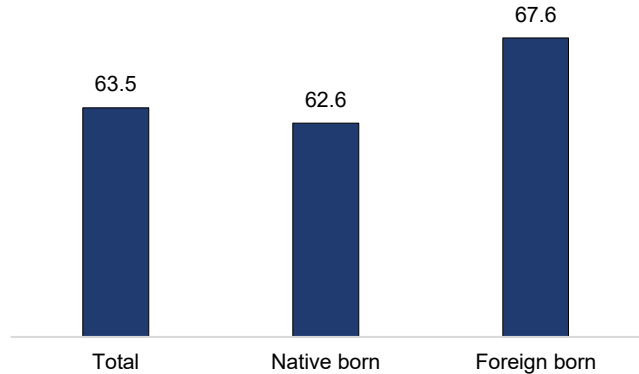
In 2024, 68 percent of the 47.6 million foreign born aged 16 and over were in the labor force, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (see Figure 18). By comparison, 63 percent of the 228.6 million native born were in the labor force, a modest difference of about 5 percentage points.

The higher foreign-born labor force participation rate translates into a somewhat larger share of employment relative to their population size.

Among those aged 16 and over, the foreign born accounted for 17 percent of the population but 18 percent of the 167.3 million people in the civilian employed population in 2024 (see Figure 19). The native born remained the majority, representing 83 percent of the population and 82 percent of those employed.

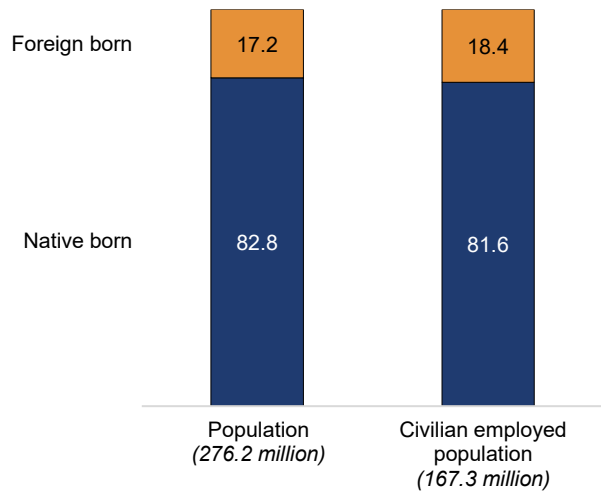
Although the foreign born are more likely to participate in the

FIGURE 18.
Civilian Labor Force Participation Rate by Nativity: 2024
(population age 16 and over)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Table S0501.

FIGURE 19.
Population and Civilian Employed Population Age 16 and Over by Nativity: 2024
(percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Table S0501.

labor force, they remain a relatively small share of the population. As a result, their higher participation rate has only a modest effect on the national labor force participation rate, which was 64 percent in 2024, slightly above that of the native born.

What Is the Civilian Labor Force?

The civilian labor force (or labor force) includes all people aged 16 and over who are either employed or unemployed and actively looking for work. It excludes active-duty members of the U.S. armed forces and people who are not employed and not seeking work.

The labor force participation rate represents the share of the population that is in the labor force.

The civilian noninstitutionalized population is the base population used to calculate labor force participation rates. It excludes active-duty members of the U.S. Armed Forces and people living in institutions such as prisons or nursing facilities. Foreign citizens residing in the United States are included in this population, unless they live in diplomatic housing.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS), Table S0501, *Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations*, accessed via data.census.gov.

Labor force concepts follow standard definitions used by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and applied in U.S. Census Bureau ACS tabulations. Additional information on labor force statistics and definitions is available from the BLS at: <https://www.bls.gov/cps/definitions.htm#population>.

What Jobs Do Immigrants Do?

Foreign-born workers play an important role in the U.S. labor force, but the jobs they do vary substantially by region of birth.

In 2024, there were 167.3 million people in the civilian employed population, including 136.6 million native-born workers and 30.7 million foreign-born workers, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The foreign born made up 18 percent of all employed workers in the United States—or nearly one in five workers.

Foreign-born workers are represented in all major occupation groups but are more likely than the native born to work in service and blue-collar jobs. Even so, management, business, science, and arts occupations still account for the largest share of employment among foreign-born workers.

In 2024, 21 percent of foreign-born workers were employed in service occupations compared with 16 percent of the native born. They were also more likely to work in production, transportation, and material moving occupations (15 percent vs. 12 percent) and natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations (12 percent vs. 7 percent) (see Figure 20).

By comparison, native-born workers were more likely than foreign-born workers to be employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations (45 percent vs. 38 percent) and sales and office occupations (20 percent vs. 14 percent).

Notable differences exist in job patterns among foreign-born workers by region of birth.

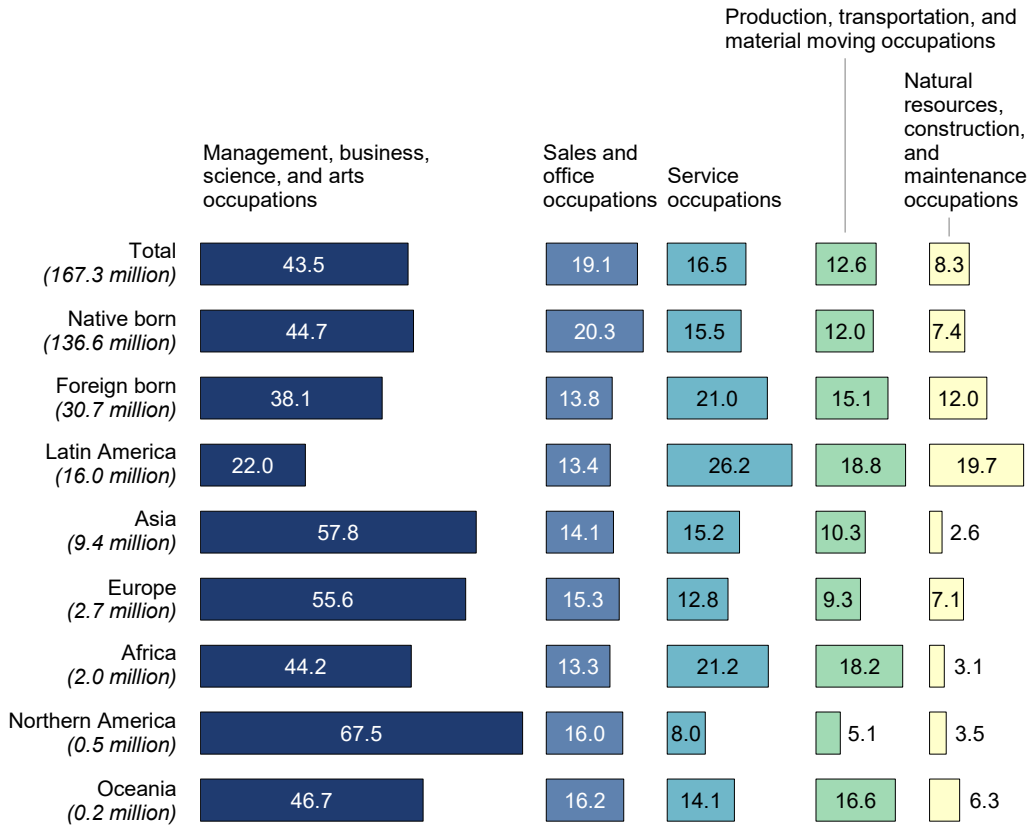
Over half of foreign-born workers from Asia (58 percent), Europe (56 percent), and Northern America (predominantly Canada, 68 percent) were employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations, shares considerably higher than the total foreign-born rate (38 percent).

Latin American foreign-born workers are more evenly distributed across the major occupation groups but are relatively more concentrated in service and blue-collar jobs than foreign-born workers from other regions. About two-thirds (65 percent) were employed in service occupations (26 percent), natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations (20 percent), and production, transportation, and material moving occupations (19 percent).

FIGURE 20.

Occupation by Nativity and Region of Birth: 2024

(civilian employed population age 16 and over; percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Tables S0501, S0503, S0504, S0505, and S0506.

What Types of Jobs Are in Each Occupation Group?

Management, business, science, and arts occupations include managers, engineers, software developers, accountants, teachers, and physicians and surgeons.

Sales and office occupations include retail sales workers, cashiers, administrative assistants, and clerical workers.

Service occupations include food service workers, cleaners, personal care aides, home health aides, nursing assistants, and security guards.

Production, transportation, and material moving occupations include machine operators, factory workers, truck drivers, and warehouse workers.

Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations include construction laborers, carpenters, electricians, and agricultural workers.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). The following tables were used:

- Table S0501, *Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations*
- Table S0503, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Europe*
- Table S0504, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Africa, Northern America, and Oceania*
- Table S0505, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Asia*
- Table S0506, *Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth: Latin America*

All tables were accessed via data.census.gov.

The broad occupation categories used in this chapter follow the ACS occupation classification scheme used in the ACS summary tables. For additional information on occupations included in each category, see Table S2401, *Occupation by Sex for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over*, available via data.census.gov.

How Likely Are the Foreign Born to Be Incarcerated?

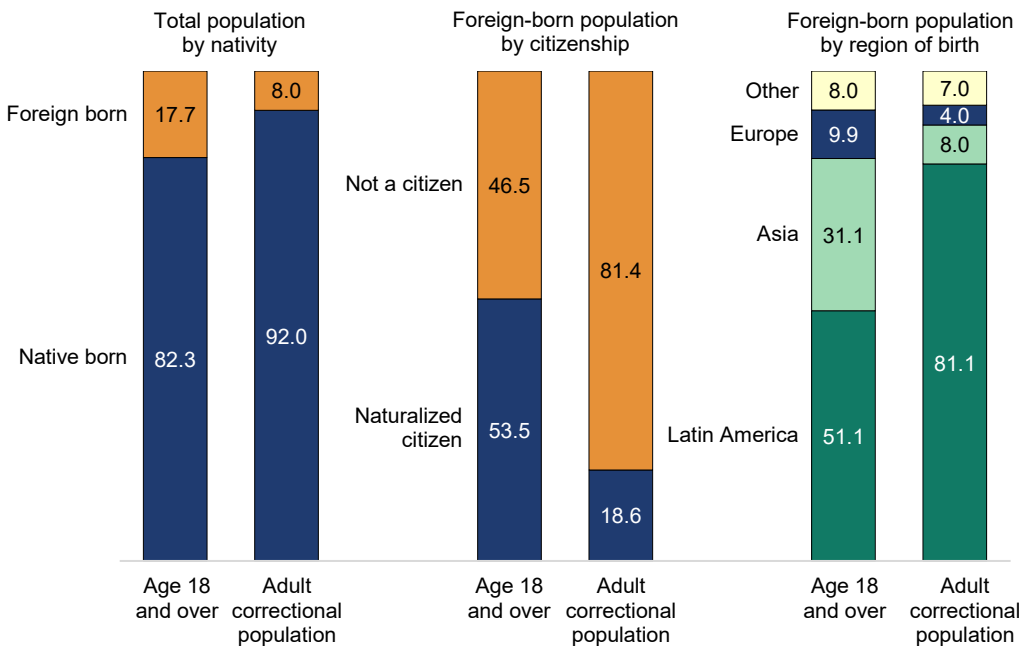
The share of foreign born in adult correctional facilities is lower than their share of the total adult population. Foreign-born adults in these facilities are much more likely to be noncitizens and to be from Latin America.

In 2024, there were 1.9 million people in adult correctional facilities, including about 149,000 foreign born, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The foreign born made up about 8 percent of this population, notably lower than the 18 percent share they represented of the population aged 18 and over (see Figure 21).

The majority of the foreign born in correctional facilities are noncitizens.

Among the foreign born in these facilities in 2024, 81 percent were not American citizens. This share is dramatically higher than the 46 percent noncitizens represented in the foreign-born population aged 18 and over. By comparison, naturalized citizens represented 54 percent of the adult foreign-born population but only 19 percent of the foreign-born population in correctional facilities.

FIGURE 21.
Population Age 18 and Over and the Adult Correctional Population by Nativity, Foreign-Born Citizenship Status, and Foreign-Born Region of Birth: 2024
 (percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2024, Table S2603 and American Community Survey, 2024, Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) file.

Additionally, the majority of the foreign born in correctional facilities are from Latin America.

While the foreign born from Latin America made up 51 percent of the foreign-born population aged 18 and over in 2024, they represented 81 percent of the foreign-born population in correctional facilities. In contrast, the foreign born from Asia made up 31 percent of the adult foreign-born population but only 8 percent of the foreign-born population in correctional facilities.

Citizenship status is strongly associated with incarceration rates among the foreign born.

Although the incarceration rate of the foreign-born population (0.3 percent) was substantially lower than that of the native-born population (0.8 percent), rates differed markedly by citizenship status. Noncitizens (0.6 percent) were considerably more likely than naturalized citizens (0.1 percent) to reside in correctional facilities.

What Institutions are Classified as Adult Correctional Facilities?

The U.S. Census Bureau's category of adult correctional facilities includes federal and state prisons, local jails, detention centers, correctional residential facilities, and military disciplinary barracks and jails. These facilities are classified as institutional group quarters because residents live under formal correctional custody or supervision rather than in households.

The population is intended to represent adults under correctional authority and is overwhelmingly aged 18 and older. In rare cases, individuals under age 18 may be included if they are housed in an adult facility.

Data Sources

Estimates in this chapter are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2024 American Community Survey (ACS), Table S2603, *Characteristics of the Group Quarters Population by Group Quarters Type (5 Types)*, accessed via data.census.gov.

Definitions of adult correctional facilities and other group quarters categories are available in the U.S. Census Bureau's *American Community Survey Subject Definitions* and *Group Quarters Definitions and Code List*, available at: <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/code-lists.html>.

How Does Immigration Shape the Foreign-Born Population?

The foreign-born population in the United States is shaped by two interacting processes: migration flows—both immigration and emigration—which determine its size, and status transitions, which shape its composition by moving immigrants across legal and administrative categories.

The size of the foreign-born population increases through immigration, which occurs through a limited set of entry pathways. Foreign-born individuals are admitted by the federal government as lawful permanent residents (also known as “green card” holders), nonimmigrants on temporary visas, or refugees, while others enter without authorization (see Figure 22).

These inflows add to the size of the corresponding legal status groups. For example, lawful permanent residents who enter the United States increase the size of the lawful permanent resident population. The same process applies to the nonimmigrant, refugee, and unauthorized populations.

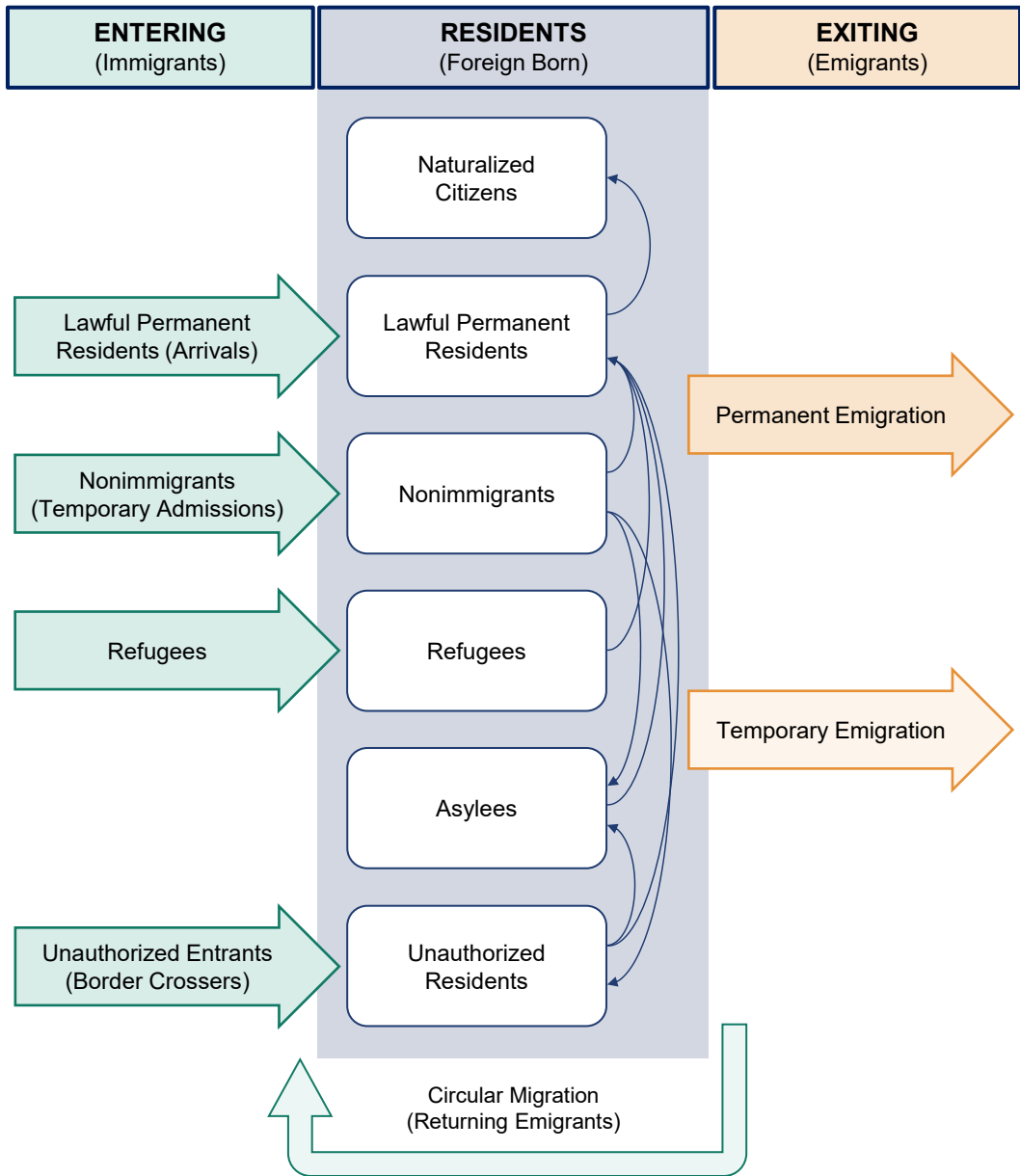
The size of these groups is also affected by status transitions, as immigrants already in the country obtain permission to move between legal categories. Nonimmigrants and refugees may transition to lawful permanent residence. Nonimmigrants may become unauthorized immigrants by remaining in the country beyond their authorized stay. Even unauthorized immigrants may, under certain circumstances, obtain a lawful status.

In addition, two categories—naturalized citizens and asylees—change only through status transitions. Immigrants who become naturalized citizens must first obtain lawful permanent residency. No other legal status can transition directly to citizenship, which highlights the importance of “getting a green card.” The asylum program applies to immigrants already in the United States or seeking admission at a port of entry. Asylees may transition to lawful permanent resident status, and nonimmigrants and unauthorized immigrants may apply for asylum.

The foreign-born population decreases in size through emigration (and, like all populations, through death). All resident categories are subject to both permanent and temporary emigration. Except for naturalized citizens, temporary emigrants who later return to the United States (often referred to as “circular” migrants) generally re-enter through the same pathways available to new arrivals and do not necessarily return in the same immigration category they held before leaving.

FIGURE 22.

Migration System of Entry, Status Transitions, and Exit Flows in the United States



Note: Note: Resident categories represent population stocks rather than admission pathways. Lawful permanent residents include both new arrivals and status adjusters; unauthorized residents include both border entrants and visa overstayers. The arrows within the resident population indicate that individuals may move among statuses through adjustment, expiration, legalization, asylum decisions, or other administrative changes. All resident categories are subject to both permanent and temporary emigration. Source: Author's illustration.

What Immigration Categories Make Up the Foreign-Born Population?

Naturalized citizens: Naturalized citizens are foreign-born individuals who have fulfilled the requirements for U.S. citizenship established in the Immigration and Nationality Act.

Lawful permanent residents: Lawful permanent residents are foreign-born individuals who are lawfully authorized to live permanently within the United States. They are also known as “green card” holders.

Nonimmigrants: Nonimmigrants are foreign nationals granted temporary admission to the United States. This includes temporary visits for business or pleasure, academic or vocational study, temporary employment, or as representatives of foreign governments or international organizations.

Refugees: The United States admits refugees who are unable or unwilling to return to their home country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution, along with their immediate relatives. The refugee program applies to people outside the United States.

Asylees: The United States provides asylum to individuals who meet the definition of a refugee and are already present in the United States or are seeking admission at a port of entry, along with their immediate relatives. The asylum program applies to people already in the United States.

Unauthorized immigrants: Unauthorized immigrants (commonly referred to as illegal immigrants) are foreign nationals not authorized to be in the country. Most entered the country without inspection or were nonimmigrants who stayed past the date they were required to leave.

Data Sources

Definitions of immigration statuses and related immigration processes discussed in this chapter are based on materials published by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), available at: <https://ohss.dhs.gov/topics/immigration>.

Figure 22 is the author's own construction and is intended to illustrate the major immigration statuses, migration flows, and status transitions discussed in the chapter. The figure is a conceptual summary and does not represent a statistical accounting framework used by any federal agency.

About the Author

Elizabeth (Liz) Grieco is a sociologist, demographer, and journalist whose work focuses on immigration, demographic change, and the foreign-born population in the United States. Her career has included positions at federal statistical agencies—including the U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Homeland Security, and National Science Foundation—as well as at Pew Research Center and Migration Policy Institute.

Her work has examined a wide range of topics, including women and migration, remittances, the children of immigrants (the second generation), race and ethnicity, newsroom employment trends, and the use of administrative records in federal statistics. She is the author of numerous publications, including books, journal articles, policy reports, and journalism research.

Liz is an independent writer and researcher, and *Immigration, Explained* draws on more than three decades of research and writing about demographic change and immigration in the United States.

Reader Feedback

Immigration, Explained is intended to answer questions Americans commonly ask about immigration using publicly available data and research.

If you have comments, corrections, suggestions, or questions you would like considered for future editions, please visit:

www.elizabethgrieco.com/contact

Future editions may incorporate new data releases and reader feedback.

June 2026 Edition

Immigration, Explained: Answers to the Questions Americans Ask Most

Elizabeth M. Grieco

How many immigrants live in the United States? Where do they come from? How many become citizens? How many are living in the country illegally? Do immigrants have more children than the native born? Are they more likely to be incarcerated?

Immigration is one of the most discussed—and often misunderstood—subjects in American public life. Yet reliable answers to basic questions are frequently scattered across government reports, academic studies, and media coverage, making it difficult for non-specialists to separate fact from hyperbole.

In *Immigration, Explained*, demographer Elizabeth M. Grieco brings together the latest available data to answer the questions Americans ask most often about immigration and the foreign-born population. Drawing on decades of research and federal statistical experience, she presents clear explanations, accessible graphics, and concise analyses covering the size, characteristics, and changing composition of the immigrant population.

Accessible, nonpartisan, and grounded in evidence, *Immigration, Explained* offers readers a shared factual foundation for understanding one of the most important demographic forces shaping the country today.