

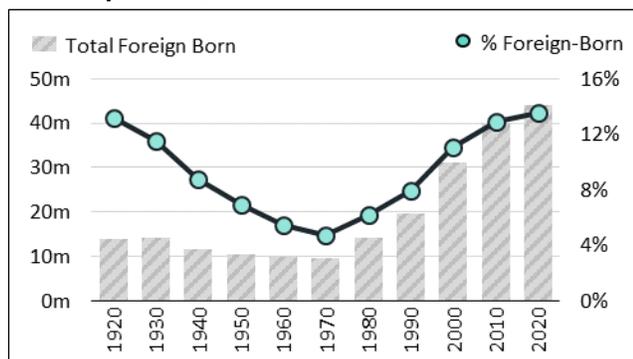
Updated July 18, 2022

Citizenship and Immigration Statuses of the U.S. Foreign-Born Population

The U.S. foreign-born population consists of individuals living in the United States who were not U.S. citizens at birth. In 2020—the most recent data from the American Community Survey (ACS)—an estimated 44.1 million foreign-born people resided in the United States, representing 13.5% of the total U.S. population. The ACS is a U.S. Census Bureau survey conducted each month with a sample of households in 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

The proportion of foreign-born individuals among the total U.S. population has changed over time. The percentage of foreign-born persons in 1920 (13.2%) was similar to current levels. It then declined over the next five decades, reaching a low of 4.7% in 1970. Over the last five decades, the proportion has increased (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. U.S. Foreign-Born: Total and Percentage of Total Population, 1920-2020



Source: 1920-2000: Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000,” U.S. Census Bureau Population Division, 2006. 2010 and 2020: ACS, Table B05001, at <http://data.census.gov>.

The foreign-born are heterogeneous with regard to citizenship and immigration status. They include the following:

- **resident nonimmigrants**, who are a subset of nonimmigrant (temporary) visa holders admitted for a limited period of time and specified purpose whose classes of admission are associated with U.S. residency, including temporary workers, students, exchange visitors, and diplomats;
- **lawful permanent residents** (LPRs, or *green card* holders), who can reside and work lawfully and permanently in the United States;
- **naturalized U.S. citizens**, who acquired U.S. citizenship generally after fulfilling residency and other requirements established by Congress and outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act (Title 8 of the U.S. Code); and

- **unauthorized immigrants** who have entered the United States without inspection or have overstayed their period of lawful admission, including those who hold a temporary, discretionary status such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

Resident Nonimmigrants

Nonimmigrant visas are issued to foreign nationals for specific purposes and on temporary bases. Typically, the Department of State (DOS) has issued 9 million to 10 million nonimmigrant visas annually. Nonimmigrant visa issuances were substantially lower in FY2020 (4 million) and FY2021 (2.8 million) due to COVID-19-related closures at U.S. embassies and consulates, the temporary suspension of entry for some categories of nonimmigrants during those years, and travel disruptions.

The majority of nonimmigrant visas issued are in categories related to nonresidential purposes (e.g., tourists). However, some nonimmigrants are admitted for purposes associated with U.S. residence. Approximately 3.2 million nonimmigrant workers, students, exchange visitors, diplomats, and their relatives were residing in the United States in 2019, according to the most recent Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimate. Temporary workers represented the largest category of nonimmigrant residents (1.4 million).

LPRs

DHS estimates that 13.1 million LPRs lived in the United States in 2021. Typically, approximately 1 million people become LPRs each fiscal year. In FY2020, LPR admissions were relatively low (707,362)—again, likely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. That year, 38% of individuals who became LPRs were new arrivals to the United States; the other 62% adjusted to LPR status from a nonimmigrant status within the United States.

The largest number of LPRs are admitted through family-sponsored categories, followed by employment-based categories, grants of refugee status and asylum, and the diversity visa (DV) program (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2. LPRs by Category of Admission, FY2020



Source: Department of Homeland Security, 2020 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Table 6.

Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding

Statutory caps limit the annual number of individuals who can be granted LPR status through the DV program (55,000), employment-based system (140,000), and family-sponsored system (480,000). The latter includes numerically limited (226,000) preference immigrants and numerically unlimited *immediate relatives* of U.S. citizens. Therefore, the number of persons who acquire LPR status through the family-sponsored system may, and regularly does, exceed its annual *permeable* limit. LPRs from any single country cannot exceed 7% of the total annual limit of numerically limited family-sponsored and employment-based *preference* immigrants.

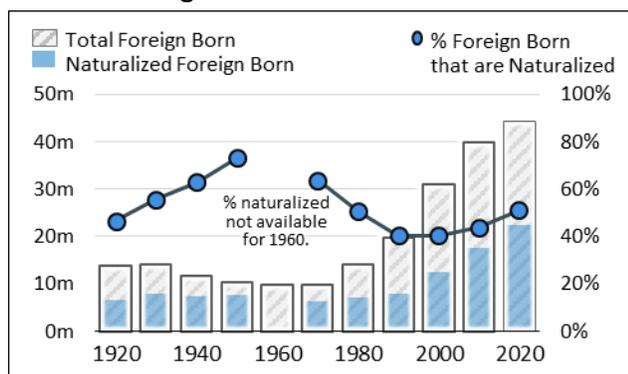
DHS estimates that 9.2 million LPRs were eligible to *naturalize*, or become U.S. citizens, in FY2021 based on meeting the residence (typically five years in LPR status) and other requirements for application.

Naturalized Citizens

LPRs who meet certain U.S. residence and other legal requirements may apply to naturalize and become U.S. citizens. Approximately 22.5 million foreign-born individuals in the United States are naturalized citizens, representing about half (51%) of the foreign-born population in 2020. In FY2021, 855,000 individuals naturalized.

The proportion of naturalized citizens relative to the total foreign-born population peaked in 1950 (74.5%) and then declined, reaching its lowest point (40.3%) in 2000, before increasing again to just over half of all foreign-born individuals in 2020 (**Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Naturalized Foreign-Born as a Proportion of the Total Foreign-Born



Source: 1900-2000: Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 2000,” U.S. Census Bureau Population Division, February 2006. 2010 and 2020: ACS data, Table B05001, at <http://data.census.gov>.

Note: The 1960 Decennial Census did not ask respondents about their citizenship status.

Unauthorized Population

The unauthorized population is challenging to measure. There are no official counts of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in administrative data. Census

Bureau surveys like the ACS measure whether an individual is foreign-born and whether they are a U.S. citizen but most do not collect information on immigration status. However, federal agencies and nongovernmental researchers have long produced estimates of the unauthorized population, drawing on survey data and various methodologies.

Recent analyses from DHS and the Congressional Budget Office, along with nongovernmental research institutes, including the Center for Migration Studies and Migration Policy Institute, estimate that there were 10.3 million to 11.4 million unauthorized individuals living in the United States in 2018 and 2019. Based on these estimates, the unauthorized population represents about 23% to 26% of all foreign-born individuals living in the United States.

There is generally consensus among researchers that the unauthorized population grew during the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s until it reached a peak of approximately 12 million around 2007. The unauthorized population then declined following the Great Recession. Some researchers estimate the unauthorized population has declined further in recent years while others estimate that the population has plateaued.

Some programs allow certain foreign nationals to remain in the United States regardless of whether they were legally admitted, but they do not provide pathways to LPR status. Individuals covered by these programs are generally included in unauthorized population estimates. They include individuals granted TPS (354,625 as of February 2022, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS]), which is a blanket form of humanitarian relief; and DACA (611,470 as of December 31, 2021, according to USCIS), which is granted to certain eligible persons brought to the United States as children, among others.

Researchers find that government surveys tend to undercount the foreign-born population, particularly the unauthorized, compared with the native-born population. Because of these undercounts, the sum of the subgroups enumerated in each section of this In Focus exceeds the total foreign-born population as measured by the ACS (44.1 million).

Additional Sources of Information

- CRS Report R42866, *Permanent Legal Immigration to the United States: Policy Overview*
- CRS Report R45040, *Immigration: Nonimmigrant (Temporary) Admissions to the United States*
- CRS Report R43366, *U.S. Naturalization Policy*
- CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure*
- CRS Report R45995, *Unauthorized Childhood Arrivals, DACA, and Related Legislation*

Holly Straut-Eppsteiner, Analyst in Immigration Policy

IF11806

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.