

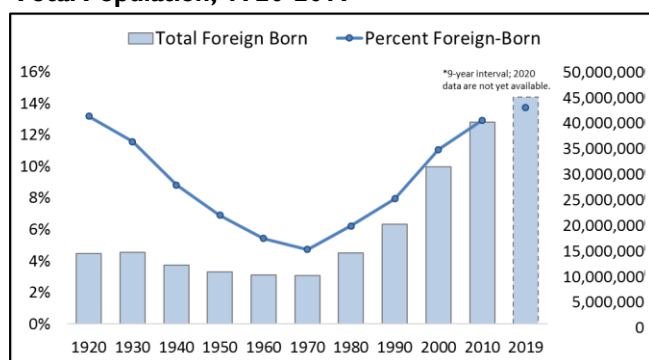
April 9, 2021

# 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. An estimated 44.9 million foreign-born people live in the United States, representing 13.7% of the total U.S. population in 2019 (the most recent data from the American Community Survey [ACS]).

The proportion of foreign-born has changed over time. The 1920 percentage of foreign-born (13.2%) was similar to current levels, 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, 1920-2019**



**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 2019: ACS, Table B0500 I, at <http://data.census.gov>.

The foreign-born are a heterogeneous population with regard to citizenship and immigration status. Subgroups include

- **resident nonimmigrants**, a subset of nonimmigrant visa holders admitted for purposes as associated with U.S. residence in categories ranging from students to diplomats to workers;
- **lawful permanent residents (LPRs)** granted *green cards* through family-sponsored and employment-based preference categories, refugee and asylee status, the diversity immigrant visa (DV) program, and other pathways;
- **naturalized U.S. citizens**, who gained U.S. citizenship after fulfilling requirements established by Congress and outlined in the Immigration and Nationality Act; and
- **unauthorized and quasi-legal immigrants**, including those who have entered the United States without inspection or have overstayed their period of lawful admission (*overstays*), and those who hold a temporary, discretionary

status such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS).

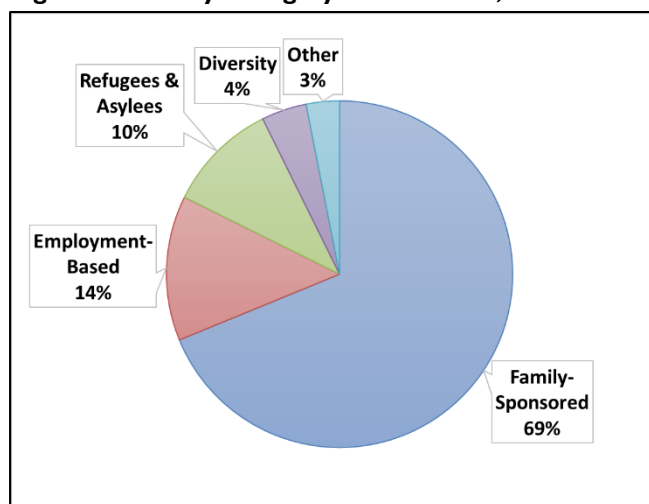
## Resident Nonimmigrants

Nonimmigrant visas are issued to foreign nationals for specific purposes and on temporary bases. In recent fiscal years, the Department of State (DOS) has issued 9 million to 10 million nonimmigrant visas annually—the majority in categories related to non-residential purposes. However, some nonimmigrants are admitted for purposes associated with U.S. residence. An estimated 2.3 million nonimmigrant workers, students, exchange visitors, diplomats, and their relatives were residing in the United States in 2016, according to the most recent Department of Homeland Security (DHS) estimate.

The largest category of nonimmigrant visa issuances, excluding tourism and business visitors, is temporary workers, particularly H-2A visas (agricultural workers), H-1B visas (specialty occupation workers), and H-2B visas (nonagricultural workers). In FY2019, DOS issued 204,801 H-2A visas, 188,123 H-1B visas, and 97,623 H-2B visas.

## LPRs

An estimated 13.6 million LPRs lived in the United States in 2019, according to DHS. Approximately 1 million people become LPRs each year. In FY2019, 45% of individuals who became LPRs were new arrivals to the United States and 55% adjusted to LPR status from a temporary (nonimmigrant) status within the United States. The largest number of LPRs are admitted through family-sponsored categories, followed by employment-based categories, refugee and asylee status, and the DV program (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2. LPRs by Category of Admission, FY2019**


**Source:** Department of Homeland Security, *2019 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, Table 6.

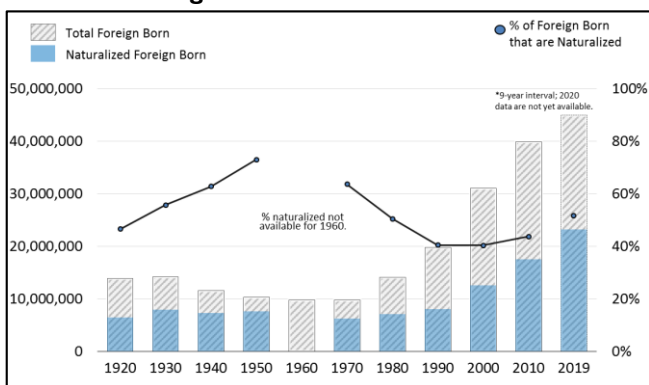
Statutory caps limit the annual number of individuals who can be granted LPR status through the DV program (55,000), employment-based system (140,000), and family-sponsored system (480,000). The latter includes numerically limited (226,000) preference immigrants and numerically unlimited *immediate relatives* 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- and employment-based preference immigrants.

DHS estimates that 9.2 million LPRs were eligible to *naturalize*, or become U.S. citizens, in FY2019 based on meeting the residence requirements (typically five years in LPR status) for application.

## Naturalized Citizens

LPRs who meet certain U.S. residence and other legal requirements may choose to naturalize and become U.S. citizens. Approximately 23.2 million foreign-born individuals in the United States are naturalized citizens, representing more than half (52%) of the foreign-born population in 2019. In FY2019, 843,593 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 2019 (**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 2019: ACS data, Table B05001, at <http://data.census.gov>.

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

## Unauthorized and Quasi-legal Population

The unauthorized population is challenging to measure. There are no official counts of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in administrative data. Government surveys do not collect information on immigration status. However, federal agencies and non-governmental researchers have produced estimates of the unauthorized population, drawing on survey data using various methodologies.

Recent estimates from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) and non-governmental research institutes, including Pew Research Center, the Center for Migration Studies, and the Migration Policy Institute, estimate that there were 10.5 million to 11 million unauthorized individuals living in the United States in 2018 and 2019.

There is generally consensus among researchers that the unauthorized population increased in size starting in the late 1990s until it reached a peak of approximately 12 million in 2007. Some researchers estimate the unauthorized population has declined in recent years while others (including CBO) estimate that the population has plateaued.

Some foreign-born individuals have quasi-legal statuses that grant temporary relief from deportation and the ability to apply for work authorization. These groups are included in some counts of the unauthorized. Quasi-legal groups include individuals granted TPS (319,465 as of March 2021, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS]), which is a blanket form of humanitarian relief; and DACA (636,390 as of December 31, 2020, according to USCIS), which is granted to certain eligible childhood arrivals, among others.

Researchers find that government surveys tend to undercount certain foreign born individuals, particularly the unauthorized. Because of these undercounts, the sum of the subgroups enumerated in each section of this In Focus exceeds the total foreign born population provided in the introduction (44.9 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: Overview and Current Issues*
- CRS Report R45995, *Unauthorized Childhood Arrivals, DACA, and Related Legislation*

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