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


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

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.

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).
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