Fact Sheet

SETTLING IN
A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States

By Julia Gelatt and Jie Zong

IMMIGRATION FACTS

The unauthorized immigrant population in the United States has plateaued since the Great Recession of 2008-09. Even as unauthorized arrivals from Mexico have waned significantly amid a changing demographic, economic, and labor-market picture there, illegal immigration from Central America, Asia, and Africa has increased, mostly offsetting the reduced Mexican inflows. The flattening of growth in the unauthorized population is also due to a sizeable deployment of immigration enforcement resources at the Southwest border and in the U.S. interior.[1]

This fact sheet provides an overview of the characteristics of the estimated 11.3 million un-authorized immigrants living in the United States, using a unique Migration Policy Institute (MPI) methodology of assigning legal status to data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS).

It examines these immigrants' countries of origin, U.S. destinations, length of U.S. residence, educational attainment and English proficiency, employment, income, and home ownership. And it includes a section on the children, most U.S. born, who have an unauthorized immi-grant parent.

The fact sheet draws from MPI's unauthorized immigrant data tool. The tool, available **here**, offers detailed sociodemographic profiles for the United States, 41 states (plus the District of Columbia), and 135 counties with the largest unauthorized populations.[2]

I. Countries and Regions of Origin

While 53 percent of unauthorized immigrants are from Mexico, the remainder are from a diverse set of countries. The other top countries of origin are El Salvador, Guatemala, China (including Hong Kong), and Honduras. Mexico was the top origin of the unauthorized popula-tion in 36 of the 41 states for which more detailed analysis could be done. In Rhode Island, however, Guatemala was the leading country, in Hawaii the Philippines was the leading source, and El Salvador was the top origin in Virginia, Maryland, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia.

In most states, the second most common origin was a country from the Northern Triangle of Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras (see Figure 1). Several states in the Midwest and Northeast had China or India as the second-most common origin.

Figure 1. Second Most Common Country of Origin for Unauthorized Immigrants by State, 2012-16
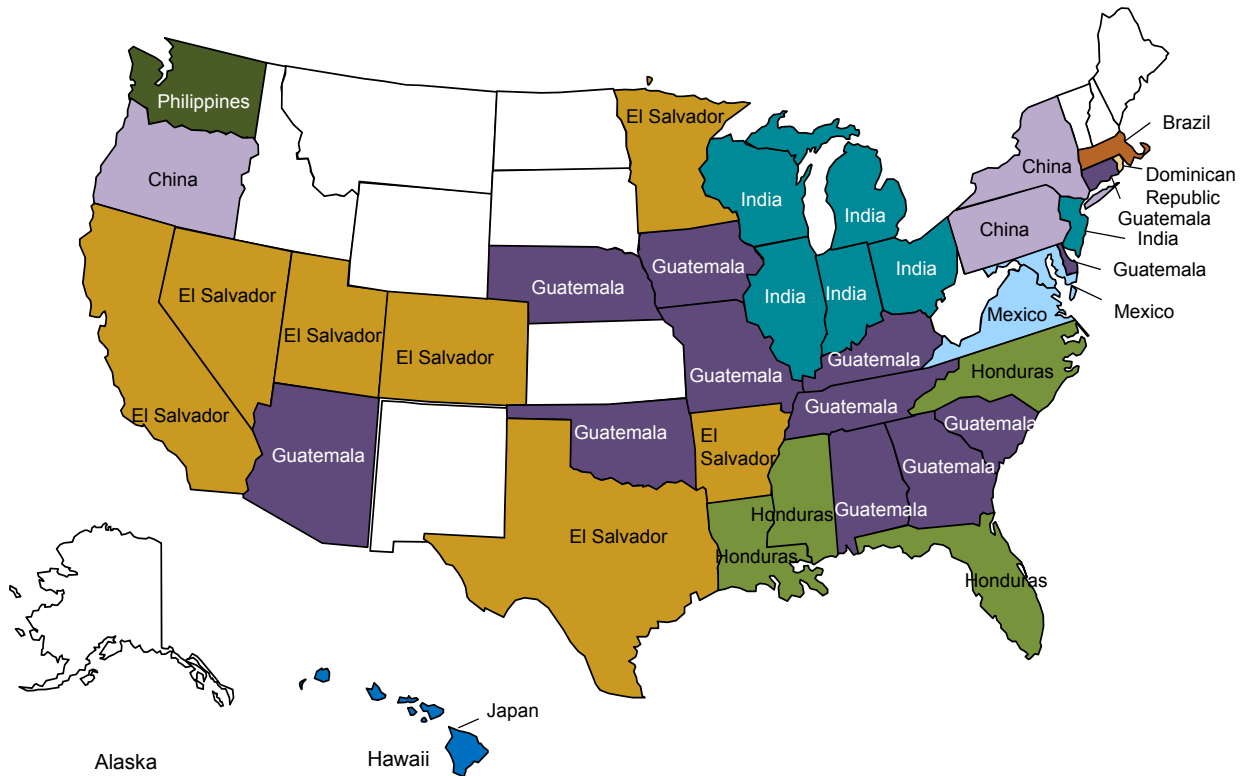
Notes: States shaded white are either those for which characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small samples (Alaska, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming) or those with an overwhelmingly Mexican unauthorized population and for which there was no significant second most common country-of-origin group (the District of Columbia, Idaho, Kansas, and New Mexico).

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from pooled 2012-16 American Community Survey (ACS), and 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), with legal-status assignments using a unique MPI methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute. For more on the methodology, see Appendix.

In 24 of the 135 counties for which the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) was able to generate sociodemographic profiles, more than 90 percent of unauthorized immigrants were from Mexico or Central America. This group includes counties in the Western and Southern states of California, Texas, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, Georgia, and Arkansas. The highest shares of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico were found in Yakima County, Washington (97 percent); Hidalgo County, Texas (96 percent); and Yuma County, Arizona (96 percent).

In a smaller set of counties, the largest unauthorized groups are from South American or Asian countries. For example, in Essex County, New Jersey, 41 percent of the unauthorized were from South America, with the largest numbers from Ecuador and Brazil. The plurality of unauthorized immigrants was from Asian countries in places such as Honolulu County, Hawaii, where the largest group was from the Philippines; San Francisco, California, where the Chinese comprised the biggest group; and Oakland County, Michigan, where the largest group was from India.

II.   Places of Residence

Three out of every five unauthorized immigrants in the United States during the 2012-16 period resided in California, Texas, New York, Florida, and New Jersey. California alone accounted for 27 percent of the unauthorized population, with one county—Los Angeles—having nearly 10 percent of the U.S. total.

III.   Deep Roots in the United States

The unauthorized immigrant population is a long-settled group. Sixty-two percent of unauthorized immigrants had lived in the United States for at least ten years during the period analyzed, with 21 percent in the country for 20 years or more.

The states with the longest-settled unauthorized populations are those in the Southwest: California (where 71 percent had lived in the United States for a decade or more as of 2012-16), Arizona (70 percent), New Mexico (69 percent), Colorado (68 percent), and Illinois (67 percent). These are also states where relatively high shares of the unauthorized population had their origins in Mexico. Notably, states considered to be new destinations for unauthorized immigrants in the 2000s—such as North Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas—showed relatively long-term resident unauthorized populations by 2012-16.

Table 1. Top Ten Counties of Residence of Unauthorized Immigrants, 2012-16

County	Number of Unauthorized Immigrants	Share of U.S. Unauthorized Population (%)
United States	**11,300,000**	**100**
Los Angeles County, CA	1,051,000	9
Harris County, TX	412,000	4
Cook County, IL	307,000	3
Orange County, CA	271,000	2
Queens County, NY	256,000	2
Dallas County, TX	247,000	2
San Diego County, CA	211,000	2
Kings County, NY	191,000	2
Riverside County, CA	163,000	1
Maricopa County, AZ	158,000	1

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2012-16 pooled ACS and the 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

Figure 2. Share of Unauthorized Immigrants Resident in the United States for a Decade or More, by State, 2012-16
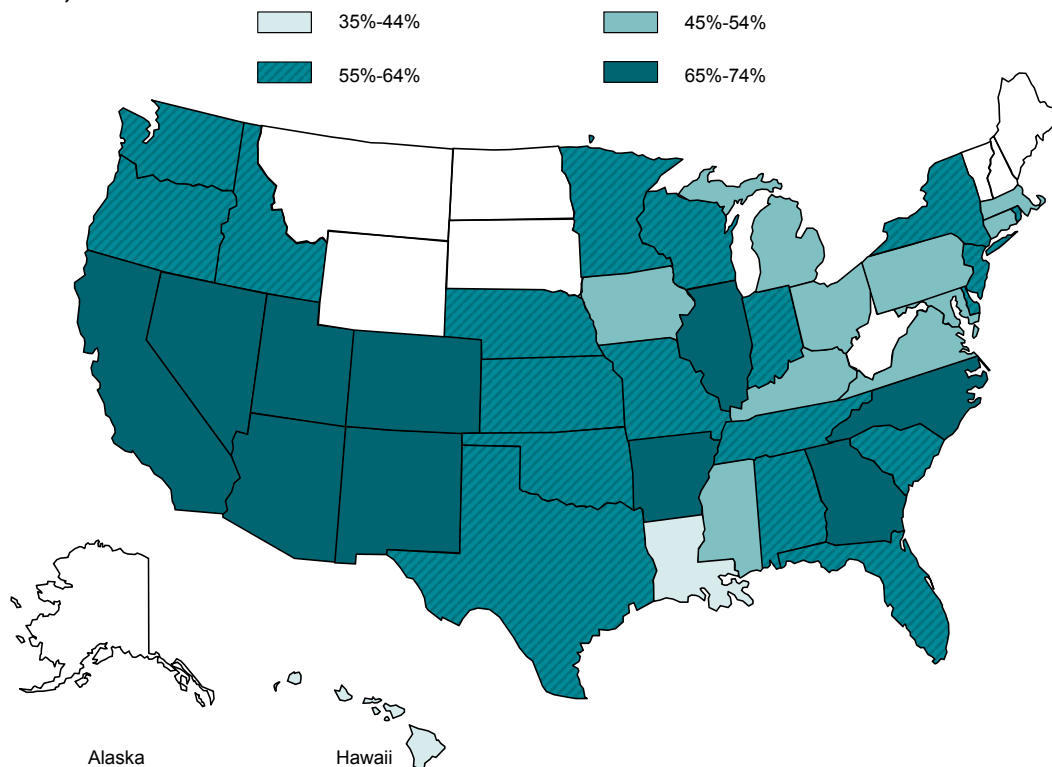
☐ 35%-44%	☐ 45%-54%
☐ 55%-64%	☐ 65%-74%

Alaska   Hawaii

Note: States shaded white are those for which characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small samples.
Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

Family Ties and U.S.-Born Children

Many unauthorized immigrants have strong family ties in the United States. Forty percent of unauthorized immigrants age 15 and older were married and living with a partner during the period analyzed. Of those, 29 percent were married to a U.S. citizen, 17 percent to a legal permanent resident (also known as a green-card holder), and 53 percent to a temporary visa holder or unauthorized immigrant.

In the 2012-16 period, 5.1 million U.S. children under age 18 resided with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent. Approximately 80 percent (4.1 million) of these children were born in the United States and had U.S. citizenship at birth; 1 percent (33,000) were naturalized citizens; 3 percent (167,000) were legal immigrants; and 16 percent (809,000) were unauthorized themselves. Many times, U.S.-citizen

children and older noncitizen children live in the same families.[3]

Of the 4.1 million U.S.-born children with unauthorized immigrant parents, 1.3 million resided with two unauthorized parents and 909,000 with a single unauthorized parent. The remaining 1.8 million lived with one parent who was unauthorized and another who was a citizen or legal immigrant. Proposals to restrict birthright citizenship for children born in the future to unauthorized immigrant parents have recently resurfaced. Under most of these proposals, children born to at least one citizen or legal immigrant parent would still be granted citizenship. See Table 2 for the ten states with the largest numbers of U.S.-born children of unauthorized immigrants, and the share with only unauthorized parents in each state. For estimates for all states, see **here**; and for top counties, **here**.

Settling In: A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States.

Table 2. Parental Legal Status of U.S.-Born Children (under age 18) with at Least One Unauthorized Immigrant Parent, U.S. and Top Ten States, 2012-16

| State	Total	Children Residing with One Parent		Children Residing with Two Parents			
		Parent Is Unauthorized		Both Parents Are Unauthorized		One Parent Is Unauthorized; Other Is U.S. Citizen or Legal Immigrant	
		Number	Share (%)	Number	Share (%)	Number	Share (%)
United States	**4,076,000**	**909,000**	**22**	**1,328,000**	**33**	**1,839,000**	**45**
California	1,153,000	269,000	23	400,000	35	485,000	42
Texas	698,000	156,000	22	204,000	29	338,000	48
New York	242,000	55,000	23	78,000	32	109,000	45
Florida	183,000	44,000	24	58,000	31	82,000	45
Illinois	174,000	38,000	22	56,000	32	81,000	46
Georgia	145,000	30,000	21	63,000	44	51,000	35
North Carolina	142,000	31,000	21	65,000	45	47,000	33
New Jersey	142,000	34,000	24	48,000	34	59,000	42
Arizona	99,000	26,000	26	21,000	21	53,000	54
Washington	88,000	17,000	20	26,000	30	45,000	51

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

IV. Educational Attainment and English Proficiency

While 47 percent of unauthorized immigrants age 25 and older had less than a high school diploma, 15 percent had a bachelor's or higher degree. High shares of unauthorized immigrants in the District of Columbia, Michigan, and Ohio had college degrees, all exceeding 30 percent, a level on par with the educational attainment of the U.S.-born population nationally. But those in a wide range of mostly Southern and Western states (e.g. Arkansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, North Carolina, Nevada, and Arizona) had lower educational attainment (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Educational Attainment of Unauthorized Immigrants (age 25 and older), by Geography, 2012-16
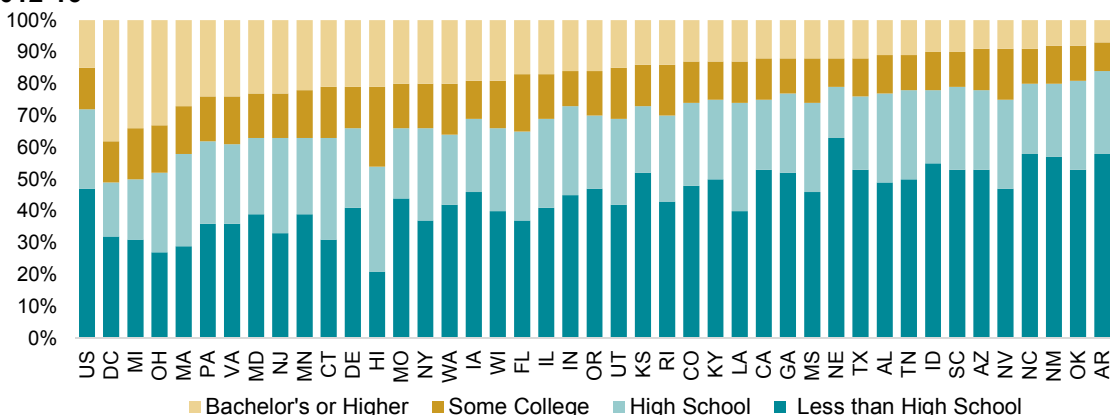
Note: Some states omitted, due to small sample sizes of unauthorized immigrants.
Source: MPI analysis of Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

English Proficiency

Thirty-six percent of unauthorized immigrants spoke English very well or as a primary language. Another 20 percent spoke English well, while 44 percent spoke English not well or not at all. The U.S. Census Bureau considers people who report speaking English less than "very well" to be Limited English Proficient (LEP).

Spanish was the most common home language of unauthorized immigrants in all states except Hawaii (where Pacific Island languages dominated).

English, Chinese, Tagalog, and Korean were the other top languages spoken by unauthorized immigrants nationally.

Table 3. Top Languages of Unauthorized Immigrants (age 5 and older), United States and Ten States with Largest Unauthorized Populations, 2012-16

State	Language 1	Language 2	Language 3	Language 4	Language 5
United States	Spanish	English	Chinese	Tagalog	**Korean**
California	Spanish	English	Tagalog	Chinese	Korean
Texas	Spanish	English	Chinese	Vietnamese	Tagalog
New York	Spanish	English	Chinese	Bengali	Korean
Florida	Spanish	English	Haitian Creole	Portuguese	Tagalog
New Jersey	Spanish	English	Korean	Chinese	Tagalog
Illinois	Spanish	English	Polish	Chinese	Tagalog
Georgia	Spanish	English	Korean	Sub-Saharan African	Chinese
North Carolina	Spanish	English	Chinese	Sub-Saharan African	Vietnamese
Virginia	Spanish	English	Korean	Tagalog	Chinese
Maryland	Spanish	English	Sub-Saharan African	Chinese	Tagalog

Notes: "Chinese" includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages; "English" includes English, Jamaican Creole, Krio, Pidgin Krio, and other English-based Creole languages; "Tagalog" includes Tagalog and Filipino; and "Sub-Saharan African" includes Swahili or other Bantu languages, Mande, Fulani, Kru, and other African languages.
Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

V. Employment

Unauthorized immigrants are employed at high rates and tend to be concentrated in certain industries. Nationwide, 67 percent of unauthorized immigrants age 16 and older were employed in the period surveyed, a higher share than the 58 percent employment rate reported by the U.S. born. With a strong recovery of the U.S. economy and low unemployment overall, employment rates for unauthorized immigrants were high across the board, with the highest in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Connecticut, and Minnesota. Just 5 percent of unauthorized immigrants were unemployed, equivalent to the rate for the U.S.-born population.

Industries of Employment

Unauthorized workers are concentrated in service industries, construction, and manufacturing. The top industry groups where unauthorized immigrants are employed are (1) accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, recreation; (2) construction; (3) professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services; (4) manufacturing; and (5) retail trade.

The top industries for unauthorized immigrant workers vary by state. In the Pacific Northwest—Oregon, Washington, and Idaho—agriculture was the top industry of employment during

Figure 4. Most Common Industry of Employment for Unauthorized Immigrants (age 16 and older), by State, 2012-16
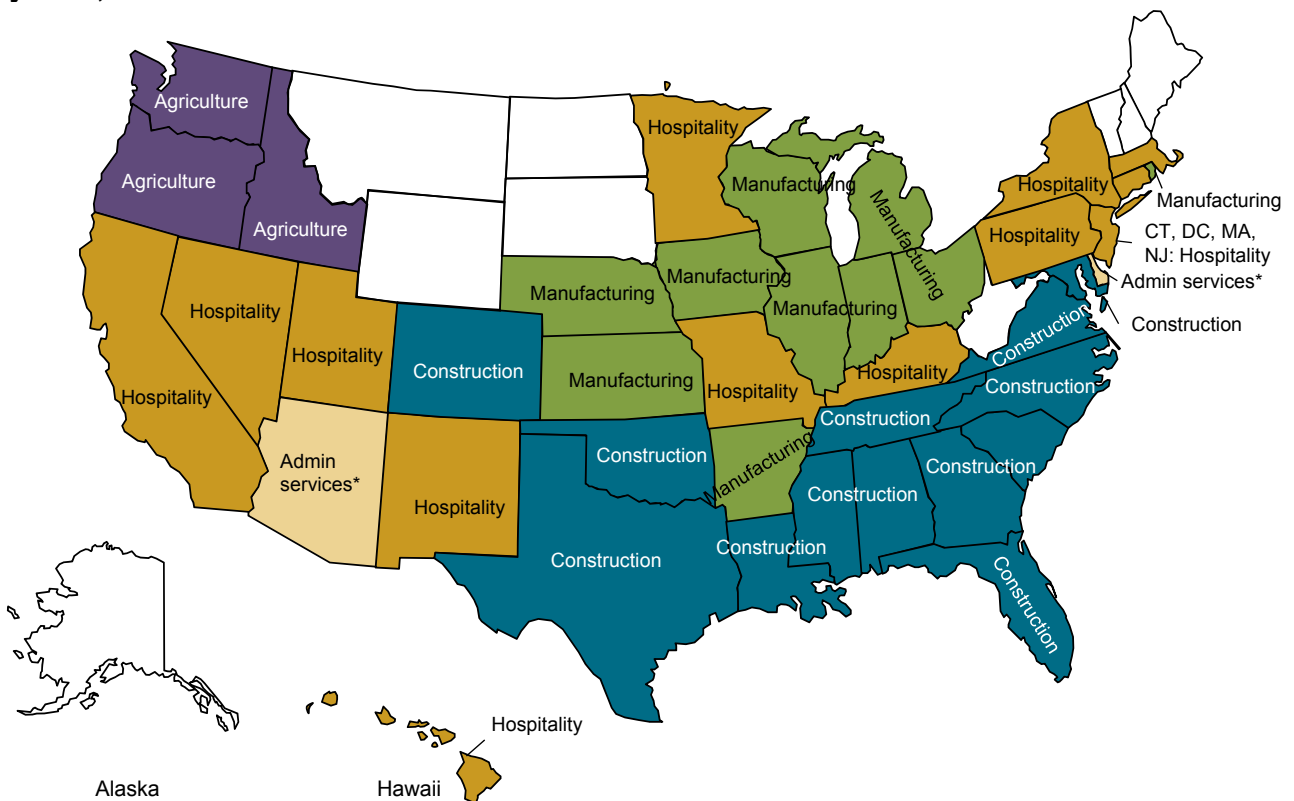
Notes: States shaded white are those for which characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small samples. Admin services refers to professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services. Hospitality refers to accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation.
Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

the period analyzed. In 13 mostly Southern states, construction was the top industry. In ten mostly Midwestern states, it was manufacturing. And in two states—Arizona and Delaware—it was professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services.

VI. Income and Homeownership

Through employment and lengthening ties to the United States, many unauthorized immigrants have achieved financial success in terms of income and home ownership.

While 28 percent of unauthorized immigrants lived in households with incomes below the federal poverty level in 2012-16, a greater share (40 percent) had household incomes of at least twice the poverty level. Nonetheless, unauthorized immigrants are much more likely than the U.S.-born population to be poor. The poverty rate for the U.S. born during this period was 17 percent, and 68 percent had household incomes at least twice the poverty level.

The states with the highest poverty rates for unauthorized immigrants were in the Southwest and Southeast: New Mexico, Kentucky, Arizona, Mississippi, and Alabama. The states where the largest shares of unauthorized immigrants had incomes at or above 200 percent of poverty were Hawaii and the East Coast states of Maryland, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia (see Figure 5). These are five of the ten states with the highest household incomes in the general population, and where the cost of living tends to be relatively high.[4]

Figure 5. Share of Unauthorized Immigrants with Household Incomes at Least Twice the Poverty Level, by State, (%), 2012-16
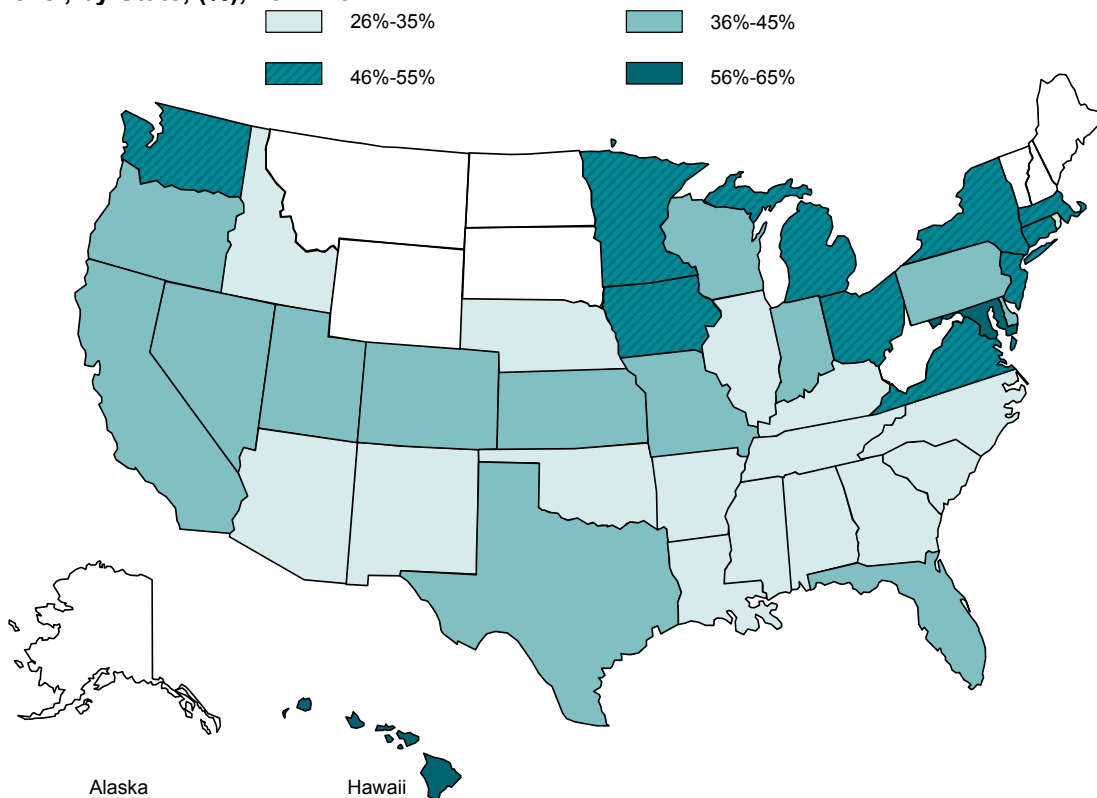
Note: States shaded white are those for which characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small samples.
Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

Settling In: A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States.

Home Ownership

Thirty-four percent of unauthorized immigrants in the United States owned their own homes during the period analyzed. In four states—Michigan, New Mexico, Kansas, and Texas—at least 45 percent of unauthorized immigrants owned their own homes. In three jurisdictions with high average home prices—Rhode Island, New York, and the District of Columbia—fewer than one-quarter of unauthorized immigrants owned their homes (see Figure 6).

At the county level, home ownership rates were highest in Fort Bend County, Texas (67 percent); Yuma County, Arizona (61 percent); Will County, Illinois (59 percent); and Hidalgo County, Texas (58 percent). Fort Bend County is a suburb of Houston and Will County is a suburb of Chicago, while Yuma and Hidalgo counties are located along the U.S.-Mexico border. Homeownership rates were lowest in three counties within New York City—Bronx (8 percent), New York (10 percent), and Kings counties (14 percent)— as well as DeKalb County, Georgia (15 percent), and Marin County, California (15 percent).

Figure 6. Share of Unauthorized Immigrants Residing in Owned Home, by State, 2012-16
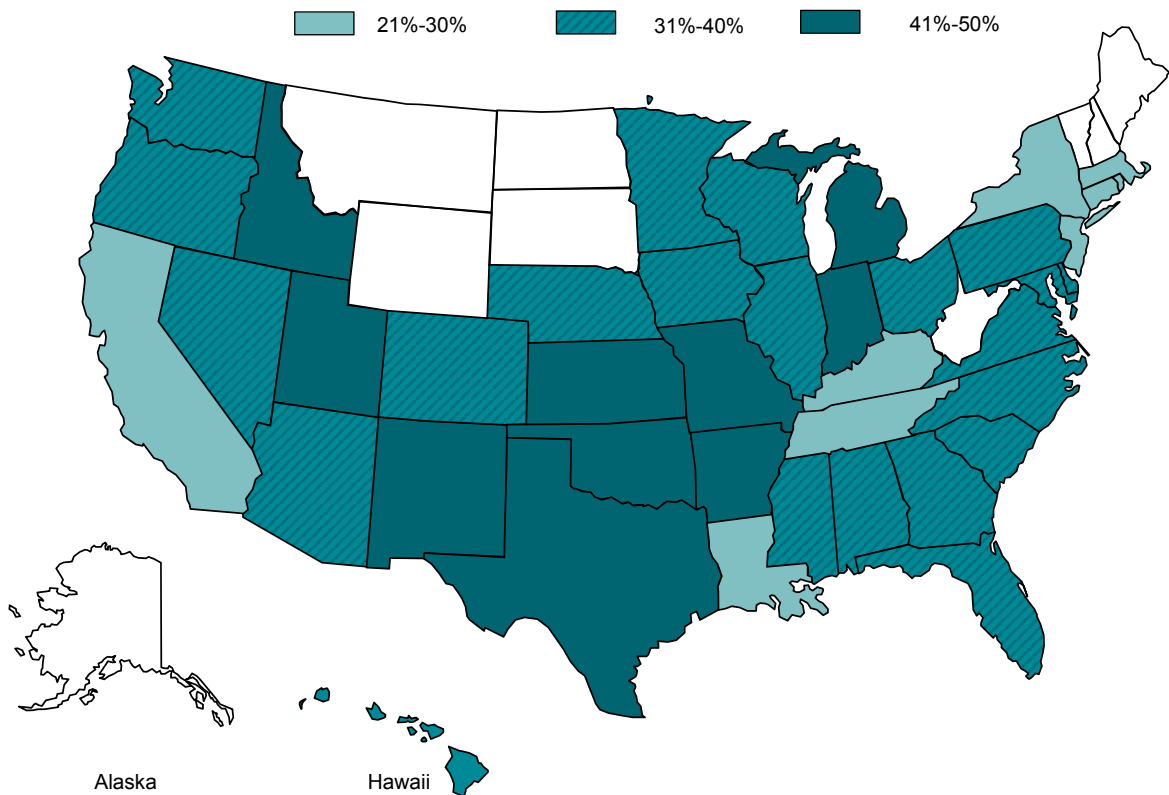
Note: States shaded white are those for which characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small samples.
Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

Appendix. Methodology in Brief

Because the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask respondents on the decennial census or surveys if they are in the country without authorization, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has developed a methodology to assign legal status within Census data, permitting study of the size and characteristics of the unauthorized population.

Using information from the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), MPI assigns legal status to noncitizens in the American Community Survey, a much larger survey that is conducted annually. In the SIPP, noncitizens report whether they have lawful permanent resident (LPR) status—i.e., a green card. Those without LPR status may be recent refugees or asylees who have not yet adjusted to LPR status, temporary visa holders (e.g., students or high-skilled temporary workers such as H-1B visa recipients), or unauthorized immigrants. Mapping characteristics such as country of birth, year of U.S. entry, age, gender, and educational attainment between the two surveys, MPI assigns LPR status to noncitizens in the ACS with similar characteristics to LPRs in the SIPP, and unauthorized status to those in the ACS with similar characteristics to unauthorized immigrants in the SIPP. MPI identifies recent refugees and asylees as those from countries with high shares of refugees and asylees among recent arrivals, and temporary visa holders as those with characteristics in the ACS that have qualifications for student, H-1B, and other temporary classifications. This method, which is based on the statistical process of multiple imputation, was developed by Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University and James Bachmeier of Temple University and refined in consultation with MPI.

In 2018, MPI changed its status-assignment methodology in response to policy shifts and recent demographic trends in the United States, making its latest set of estimates not directly comparable to prior ones. Immigrants with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) are now included in MPI's unauthorized immigrant counts due to decisions by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to terminate TPS for nationals from El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, and other countries; in past estimates, MPI excluded TPS holders from the unauthorized population. To accurately reflect recent immigration trends, MPI adjusted topline numbers of unauthorized immigrants by world regions, yielding a population that is slightly more Asian and slightly less Mexican or Central American than in MPI's prior estimates.

For more detail on the methods, see Jeanne Batalova, Sarah Hooker, Randy Capps, and James D. Bachmeier, *DACA at the Two-Year Mark: A National and State Profile of Youth Eligible and Applying for Deferred Action* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2014), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/daca-two-year-mark-national-and-state-profile-youth-eligible-and-applying-deferred-action. These estimates use commonly accepted benchmarks from other research studies to determine the size of the unauthorized population and response rates to surveys. These estimates have the same sampling and coverage errors as any other survey-based estimates that rely on ACS and other Census Bureau data.

Endnotes

1 Doris Meissner, Donald M. Kerwin, Muzaffar Chishti, and Claire Bergeron, *Immigration Enforcement in the United States: The Rise of a Formidable Machinery* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2013), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigration-enforcement-united-states-rise-formidable-machinery.

2 The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) data tool on unauthorized immigrants also provides topline estimates of the size of the unauthorized population for 48 states (plus the District of Columbia) and 194 counties. For more, see MPI Data Hub, "Unauthorized Immigrant Population Profiles," www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/us-immigration-policy-program-data-hub/unauthorized-immigrant-population-profiles.

3 Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Jie Zong, *A Profile of U.S. Children with Unauthorized Immigrant Parents* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2016), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/profile-us-children-unauthorized-immigrant-parents.

4 U.S. Census Bureau, American Factfinder, "Median Income in the Past 12 Months (In 2016 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)," Table S.1903, 2012-16 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_5YR_S1903&prodType=table.

About the Authors

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12

Settling In: A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States.

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