Understanding Poverty Declines among Immigrants and Their Children in the United States

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Executive Summary

The last decade witnessed a historic decline in poverty in the United States. National poverty rates fell from 15 percent in 2009 to 12 percent in 2019, lifting close to 8 million people out of poverty. Then, in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, upending the economic and social lives of most Americans. Counterintuitively, poverty rates continued to fall, dropping to 8 percent in 2021. Child poverty fell particularly sharply: from 12 percent in 2019 to 5 percent in 2021, a low in both relative and absolute terms. Behind the 2019–21 declines were massive new and expanded income support and transfer programs that the federal, state, and local governments introduced to blunt the economic impacts of the public-health crisis. The pandemic-driven aid programs included three rounds of stimulus payments and expansions of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also called food stamps), the Child Tax Credit, and unemployment insurance.

This issue brief draws on an analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement to look at how poverty rates changed among immigrants and their children overall and by citizenship status, both before and during the pandemic. This analysis found that the patterns of falling poverty rates documented among the total U.S. population can also be seen among the nation's immigrants—findings that hold for naturalized citizen and noncitizen immigrants

alike and for immigrants across all major racial and ethnic categories. To explore these trends, the analysis uses the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure. Since 1959, poverty levels have been determined using what is called the Official Poverty Measure, which considers only cash income in its estimates and provides a single nationwide poverty standard. In contrast, the Supplemental Poverty Measure takes a wide range of cash and noncash benefits and expenditures into account and factors in the differing cost of living across states and localities.

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, upending the economic and social lives of most Americans. Counterintuitively, poverty rates continued to fall.

Poverty rates for immigrants, as for the U.S. population overall, declined sharply from 2009 through 2019, the decade following the Great Recession of 2007–09 and preceding the pandemic. Despite an increase in the total number of immigrants nationwide over the decade, the number of immigrants experiencing poverty fell from more than 9.6 million in 2009 to slightly less than 8 million in 2019, and the share of immigrants in poverty fell from 25 percent to 18 percent. Following national trends, the number and share of immigrants in poverty also fell precipitously between 2019 and 2021 (from 8 million to 6.1 million, and from 18 percent to 13 percent), with the

introduction of large-scale government aid packages during the pandemic.

Even steeper declines in poverty could be seen within the nation's child population. The number of U.S.-born children with only U.S.-born parents in poor families fell from 7.5 million in 2009 to about 2 million in 2021, a 73 percent drop. Over the same period, the number of children of immigrants in poor families fell from 4.6 million to 1.5 million, a 68 percent decline. Among children in immigrant families, particularly precipitous drops could be seen among U.S.-citizen children with noncitizen parents, whose numbers fell from 2.3 million to 684,000, or by 71 percent, between 2009 and 2021.

The near universality of these poverty trends among immigrants and their children is striking. To illustrate, poverty rates for noncitizens fell by half, from 31 percent in 2009 to 16 percent in 2021, while those for naturalized immigrants dropped from 17 percent to 10 percent. At the same time, significant declines in immigrants' poverty rates occurred across all major racial and ethnic groups in 2009–21. Moreover, the wide gaps between White U.S.-born citizens—the population with the lowest poverty rate—and other groups by race/ethnicity and citizenship narrowed.

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Nonetheless, differences in poverty rates persist along nativity, citizenship, and racial and ethnic lines. Immigrants represented 14 percent of the U.S. population in 2021, but they were 24 percent of those experiencing poverty that year. Noncitizens were more than twice as likely to be poor as their U.S.-born counterparts (16 percent versus 7 percent). And for all citizenship categories (noncitizens, naturalized citizens, and U.S.-born citizens), Latino and Black individuals were more likely to experi-

ence poverty than either Asian American and Pacific Islander or White individuals. The data also reveal that parental citizenship is highly correlated with poverty: children of immigrants with *only* noncitizen parents were three to four times more likely to experience poverty than children with one or more U.S.-citizen parents.

The poverty declines documented here reflect several factors. These include a strengthening economy following the Great Recession. They also include an expansion in the nation's safety net over the past three decades, along with the historically large, pandemic-related aid packages. Compared to existing public benefits, many of these new or expanded pandemic programs broadened eligibility among U.S. families, including immigrant families.

Declines in poverty are also correlated with changes in the characteristics of the immigrant population that would promote their families' economic well-being. In the past decade, the proportion of immigrant adults without a high school education fell, while the share with college degrees rose. Similarly, the share of immigrants who are English proficient increased. The amount of income immigrant families have at their disposal is also likely to have increased because the share of immigrant women in the workforce grew, while the average size of immigrant families declined. Changes in the legal status composition of the immigrant population also contributed to poverty declines. The share of immigrants who were either naturalized U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents rose from 58 percent in 2010 to 73 percent in 2019, while the unauthorized immigrant share fell from 28 percent to 23 percent. In short, the broad, somewhat surprising declines in poverty across the nation's immigrant population likely result not only from the stronger social welfare policies and spending in recent years but also from the immigrant population's changing characteristics and positive immigrant integration trends.

1   Introduction

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 upended social and economic life in the United States, as it did worldwide. The U.S. Congress enacted laws that year and the next that provided funds to federal, state, and local governments as they worked to respond to the pandemic's economic and health effects.[1] The federal government also stepped in to assist U.S. families directly. The aid included three rounds of stimulus payments as well as increased payments, and in some cases expanded eligibility, for such programs as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps), unemployment insurance compensation, emergency rental and utility assistance, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), and the Child Tax Credit (CTC).[2]

In late 2021, as the pandemic and the massive government response to it approached their second anniversary, several studies were released that documented a steep, surprising decline in poverty overall and in child poverty in the United States. A study by the Urban Institute projected that government aid seeking to mitigate the economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic would, as reported by *The New York Times*, "cut poverty nearly in half from pre-pandemic levels and push the share of Americans in poverty to the lowest level on record."[3] The Census Bureau estimated that child poverty in the United States had fallen from 10 percent in 2020 to 5 percent in 2021.[4]

It is notable that both studies base their findings on the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) and not on the Official Poverty Measure (OPM). The SPM, which is available for 2009 and later, differs from the OPM in considering not only cash income but also noncash benefits (such as nutritional assistance and subsidized housing) and by considering differences in housing costs across states and communities (see Table A–1 in the Appendix for a more detailed description of the two measures' key differences).

In this issue brief, the authors employ the SPM to examine trends in poverty among immigrants and their children from 2009 to 2021, utilizing data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS-ASEC). The brief disaggregates the results by nativity and citizenship status, and by race and ethnicity. The brief also examines factors that contributed to declines in poverty among immigrants, including the changing composition of the U.S. immigrant population as well as expanded social expenditures.

BOX 1
Key Terminology

This analysis examines adults and children in *poor families*, defined as those with incomes below 100 percent of the federal government's Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) threshold, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey (CPS). In the CPS-ASEC, respondents are asked questions about their incomes and certain expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.

Immigrants refers to people residing in the United States at the time of the population survey who were not U.S. citizens at birth. They include naturalized U.S. citizens and noncitizens. *Noncitizens* include legal permanent residents (or green-card holders), refugees and asylees, certain legal nonimmigrants (including those on student, work, or some other temporary visas), and persons residing in the country without authorization. The term *U.S. born* refers to people residing in the United States who were U.S. citizens in one of three categories: people born in one of the 50 states or the District of Columbia; people born in U.S. Insular Areas such as Puerto Rico or Guam; or people who were born abroad to at least one U.S.-citizen parent.

2   Poverty Trends by Citizenship

The United States has seen broad, steep declines in the number of people in poverty and their shares of the population over time. Because the underlying factors determining poverty differ before and during the pandemic, it is helpful to consider trends for two periods: 2009–19 and 2019–21.

A.   *The Pre-Pandemic Period, 2009–19*

In 2009, 46.1 million U.S. residents lived in families considered poor according to the SPM. By 2019, that number had fallen by nearly 8 million, or 17 percent, to 38.4 million (The percent change is noted as well

as the absolute number because shifts in the number of immigrants and other populations in poverty are significantly influenced by changes in the size of the underlying populations.)

Between 2009 and 2019, the number of noncitizens in poverty fell from 6.9 million to 4.9 million (or by 29 percent), while the total number of noncitizens in the country barely increased (by 1 percent; see the top panel of Table 1). Over the decade, the number of U.S.-born citizens increased by 6 percent, but those in poverty fell by 17 percent. The number of naturalized citizens rose significantly in this period, from 16.5 million to 22.9 million, driven by immigration and naturalization trends. While the naturalized population increased by 39 percent, the number in poverty rose by 13 percent (from 2.8 million to 3.1 million).

TABLE 1

Population Change among the Total and Poor Populations (using the Supplemental Poverty Measure), by Nativity and U.S. Citizenship, 2009, 2019, and 2021*

|	2009	2019	2021	Percent Change		
				2009–19	2019–21	2009–21
Total population	**304,283,000**	**327,601,000**	**328,723,000**	**8%**	**0%**	**8%**
All immigrants	38,547,000	45,219,000	46,856,000	17%	4%	22%
Noncitizens	22,085,000	22,360,000	23,979,000	1%	7%	9%
Naturalized	16,462,000	22,860,000	22,877,000	39%	0%	39%
U.S.-born citizens	265,737,000	282,382,000	281,867,000	6%	0%	6%
Population in poverty	**46,145,000**	**38,384,000**	**25,540,000**	**−17%**	**−33%**	**−45%**
All immigrants	9,642,000	7,975,000	6,144,000	−17%	−23%	−36%
Noncitizens	6,881,000	4,861,000	3,791,000	−29%	−22%	−45%
Naturalized	2,761,000	3,114,000	2,353,000	13%	−24%	−15%
U.S.-born citizens	36,503,000	30,409,000	19,396,000	−17%	−36%	−47%

* In the U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) of the Current Population Survey (CPS), respondents are asked questions about their incomes and expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the CPS-ASEC 2010, 2020, and 2022.

For all three groups—noncitizens, naturalized citizens, and the U.S. born—the share of people in poverty was substantially lower in 2019 than in 2009. In percentage points, the share of noncitizen immigrants in poverty fell the most steeply: from 31 percent in 2009 to 22 percent in 2019. Over that period, the share of naturalized citizens in poverty fell from

17 percent to 14 percent, while the share of U.S.-born citizens in poverty decreased from 14 percent to 11 percent (see Figure 1). The poverty rate for the immigrant population overall fell from 25 percent to 18 percent (see Table 2) as the number of immigrants in poverty declined from from 9.6 million to slightly less than 8 million (see Table 1).

FIGURE 1

Share of Population in Poverty (using the Supplemental Poverty Measure), by U.S. Citizenship, 2009–21*
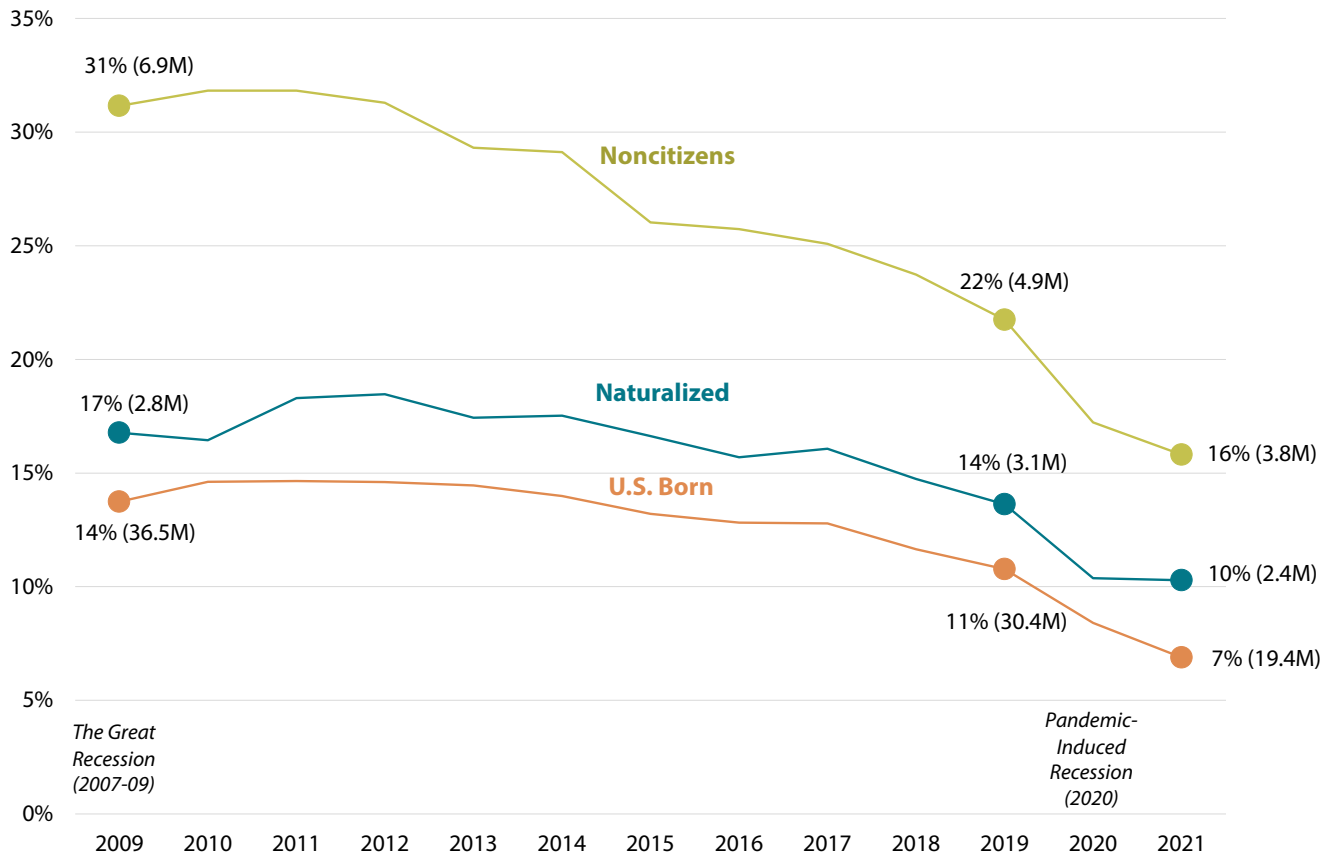
* In the CPS-ASEC, respondents are asked questions about their incomes and expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the CPS-ASEC 2010–22.

Several factors contributed to the declines in poverty among immigrant and U.S.-born populations between 2009 and 2019. First, the period was marked by an initially slow but eventually robust economic recovery from one of the worst global financial crises. In December 2009, the unemployment rate was 9.9 percent; by April 2019, it had fallen to 3.6 percent, the lowest rate since 1970.[5] Over the de-

cade, the U.S. economy gained more than 2 million jobs, making 2019 the tenth consecutive year of job growth since the 2007–09 economic recession.[6] Second, the safety net had widened over the past three decades, driven by, among other things, expanded eligibility for Medicaid, the creation of the Children's Health Insurance Program, increased federal spending for the EITC and the CTC, expanded

eligibility and higher payment levels for SNAP, and the enactment of the *Affordable Care Act* in 2010.[7] Notably, benefits grew steadily as a share of household income for both poor and middle-income households.[8]

Declines in poverty among immigrants, and especially noncitizens, can also be linked to the changing characteristics of the immigrant population. Between 2009 and 2019, the share of noncitizens without a high school education fell from 41 percent to 33 percent, while the share who were college graduates rose from 24 percent to 30 percent (see Table A–2 in the Appendix). In addition, the share of noncitizens who were English proficient increased from 38 percent to 43 percent. Research shows that these human capital characteristics are closely associated with economic outcomes such as labor force participation, higher-quality jobs, higher wages, and occupational and social mobility.[9] Higher education and English proficiency are also linked to a lower risk of poverty for individuals and their families.[10] Though noncitizen women are generally less likely to be employed than other women (both naturalized and U.S.-born citizens), their employment rates rose from 51 percent to 55 percent over the decade. Employment rates among noncitizen men also increased (from 77 percent to 83 percent). In addition, the average size of families headed by noncitizens fell from 4.05 persons to 3.89 persons, spreading family income across fewer family members. Naturalized citizens' education levels, language proficiency, and employment rates also rose over the period (see Table A–2 in the Appendix).

Declines in immigrant poverty could also be partially explained by shifts in the legal status makeup of the U.S. immigrant population. In 2010, naturalized citizens and legal permanent residents made up 58 percent of the immigrant population—a share that rose to 73 percent by 2019. During the same period, the unauthorized share of immigrants declined from 28 percent to 23 percent.[11] Research by the Migra-

tion Policy Institute (MPI) and others shows that citizenship and legal status play a major role in shaping workers' employment outcomes, even when holding other characteristics constant.[12] The observed shift in the legal status makeup of the U.S. immigrant population increased the number of immigrants with access to the mainstream economy and to the safety net, and likely contributed to poverty declines among immigrants overall.

B. *Changes during the Pandemic, 2020–21*

With the onset of the pandemic and the economic recession it spurred, there was every reason to expect that declines in poverty would be reversed for the overall U.S. population and for immigrants. In fact, both the numbers and shares of people in poverty declined sharply. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of U.S.-born individuals in poverty fell from 30.4 million to 19.4 million, a decline of 36 percent, while the number of immigrants in poverty declined from approximately 8 million to 6.1 million, or by 23 percent (see Table 1). Among naturalized citizens, the number in poverty fell from 3.1 million to 2.4 million, or 24 percent, and the number of noncitizens in poverty fell from 4.9 million to 3.8 million, or by 22 percent. By 2021, one in six noncitizens and one in ten naturalized citizens were poor (see Table 2). Among immigrants overall, one in eight were in poverty that year, compared to one in fourteen U.S.-born persons.

While declines in poverty between 2009 and 2019 can be partially explained by shifts in the composition of the immigrant population, the same cannot be said for declines between 2019 and 2021. During that period, immigration to the United States dropped sharply,[13] and the education and family composition of the resident immigrant population remained largely unchanged (see Table A–2 in the Appendix). The principal drivers of the poverty de-

clines for the U.S. born and immigrants alike were the massive aid packages the U.S. Congress passed in 2020 and 2021. Perhaps the most visible were the three rounds of stimulus payments that eligible U.S. residents received between March 2020 and March 2021. For example, the three stimulus payments made in 2020 and 2021 together provided more than $11,000 in direct financial relief to a family of two parents and two children with a family income under $150,000.[14] In addition, the federal and state governments approved a wide range of support programs to help U.S. residents and their families cope with job losses, food insecurity, and health-care costs. Notably, both federal and state governments relaxed eligibility requirements for many programs, allowing broader access for immigrants in a range of legal statuses.[15] (See Box 2 for several examples of immigrants' eligibility for federal pandemic relief and how it evolved in 2020 and 2021).[16]

BOX 2
Immigrant Eligibility for New and Existing Income Support Programs

▶ **Stimulus checks:** A key requirement for receiving the first round of stimulus payments was that *all* family members (i.e., children and parents) listed on a tax return had to have a Social Security number (SSN). Migration Policy Institute (MPI) researchers estimated that the requirement excluded 5.1 million U.S. citizens and legal immigrants from direct payments because they were the children or spouses of unauthorized immigrants. The SSN requirement was modified for the second round of payments, making adults and children with SSNs eligible for aid as long as at least one adult in the tax unit had an SSN, opening up the opportunity to receive stimulus checks to nearly 3 million immigrants who were initially excluded. By the third round, payments were made available to any person in the tax-filing household with an SSN.

▶ **One-year expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC):** Considered to be one of the most far-reaching antipoverty measures for children during the pandemic, families could claim higher CTC payments in 2021 than before ($3,600 per child under age 6 and $3,000 per child ages 6 to 17, versus $2,000 in prior years). Furthermore, the American Rescue Plan of 2021 also allowed families with little to no earnings to apply for the CTC, expanding access to many families who were previously ineligible for this benefit (including many immigrant and minority families) because their family income was below the eligibility threshold. All children with SSNs were eligible, regardless of their parents' legal status. The *Build Back Better Act* (HR 5376) would have extended the CTC expansions through 2022 and made them permanent. However, the act did not pass, and the benefit expansions were sunset at the end of 2021.

▶ **Benefits in place of free or reduced-price school meals:** Low-income children have long been eligible for free or reduced-price lunches in school regardless of their own or their parents' legal status. To replace lost meals resulting from school closures during the pandemic, food benefits were made available to families as cash that could be redeemed for groceries through the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer program. No legal status requirements were placed on these benefits.

▶ **COVID-19-related paid leave and paid sick leave:** New, temporary paid leave under the *Family and Medical Leave Act* and paid sick leave for absences resulting from COVID-19 were extended to eligible workers, regardless of their immigration status.

Sources: Julia Gelatt, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, "Nearly 3 Million U.S. Citizens and Legal Immigrants Initially Excluded under the CARES Act Are Covered under the December 2020 COVID-19 Stimulus" (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, January 2021); National Low-Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC), "Frequently Asked Questions: Economic Impact Payments" (fact sheet, NLIHC, Washington, DC, 2021); Kathleen King, "What the American Rescue Plan Act Means for Children and Families," Children's Defense Fund, March 10, 2021; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Child Tax Credit," accessed January 31, 2023; Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), *Key Findings from National Child Tax Credit Survey: CTC Monthly Payments Are Helping Improve Family Well-Being* (Washington, DC: CLASP, 2021); Raymond G. Lahoud, "Do the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) and Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act Apply to Immigrant Employees?" *National Law Review*, April 23, 2020.

Looking at the 2009–21 period overall, the total number of U.S. residents in poverty fell by 45 percent, from 46.1 million to 25.5 million. Despite significant poverty declines across different nativity and citizenship groups, immigrants were still more likely to be poor than their U.S.-born counterparts: Immigrants represented 14 percent of the U.S. population in 2021, but they were 24 percent of those experiencing poverty that year.

C. *Poverty by Race and Ethnicity*

The broad impact of declines in poverty across the 2009–19 and 2019–21 periods can be seen in changes across racial and ethnic groups (see Table 2). Poverty declined for all groups shown in the table during the 2009–19 period and dropped further from 2019 to 2021, with Latinos experiencing the largest declines. By 2019, U.S.-born Latinos had slightly lower poverty rates than U.S.-born Blacks, with the difference widening by 2021. For all of the racial and ethnic groups examined, poverty rates fell the most among noncitizens.

One way to examine how antipoverty policies and economic trends have advanced equity is to look at the diminishing gaps between the poverty rates of differing racial and ethnic groups by nativity and

The gap in poverty rates between White U.S.-born citizens and all other groups was smaller in 2021 than in 2009.

citizenship and those of White U.S.-born citizens— the group with the lowest poverty rates in all three years. These gaps narrowed significantly from 2009 through 2019 and to 2021, with the differences between the poverty rates for Latino noncitizens, U.S.-born Latinos, and Black noncitizens and the rate for native-born Whites shrinking the most. For instance, the difference in poverty rates between Latino noncitizens and White U.S.-born citizens was 27 percentage points in 2009 (37 percent versus 10 percent, as shown in Table 2), but the difference narrowed to 19 percentage points by 2019 and then to 12 percentage points in 2021. With some variations in its extent across groups, the gap in poverty rates between White U.S.-born citizens and all other groups was smaller in 2021 than in 2009. Nonetheless, in 2021, poverty rates for Latino and Black individuals remained significantly higher than those for their Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and White counterparts across nativity and citizenship categories.

TABLE 2

Share of Population in Poverty (using the Supplemental Poverty Measure), by Nativity, U.S. Citizenship, and Race/Ethnicity, 2009, 2019, and 2021*

	2009	2019	2021	Difference (2009–19)	Difference (2019–21)	Difference (2009–21)
Total population	**15%**	**12%**	**8%**	**−3%**	**−4%**	**−7%**
All immigrants	25%	18%	13%	−7%	−5%	−12%
Noncitizens	31%	22%	16%	−9%	−6%	−15%
Naturalized	17%	14%	10%	−3%	−3%	−6%
U.S.-born citizens	14%	11%	7%	−3%	−4%	−7%
By race/ethnicity						
Latino	**27%**	**19%**	**11%**	**−8%**	**−8%**	**−16%**
All immigrants	32%	23%	16%	−9%	−8%	−16%
Noncitizens	37%	27%	18%	−10%	−9%	−19%
Naturalized	21%	18%	12%	−2%	−6%	−8%
U.S.-born citizens	24%	17%	9%	−8%	−8%	−16%
Black	**23%**	**18%**	**11%**	**−5%**	**−7%**	**−12%**
All immigrants	24%	16%	14%	−8%	−2%	−11%
Noncitizens	31%	18%	17%	−12%	−1%	−13%
Naturalized	17%	14%	11%	−3%	−3%	−6%
U.S.-born citizens	22%	18%	11%	−4%	−8%	−12%
Asian American and Pacific Islander	**18%**	**11%**	**9%**	**−7%**	**−2%**	**−9%**
All immigrants	19%	13%	11%	−6%	−2%	−8%
Noncitizens	24%	15%	13%	−9%	−2%	−11%
Naturalized	15%	11%	9%	−4%	−2%	−6%
U.S.-born citizens	16%	9%	7%	−7%	−2%	−9%
White	**10%**	**8%**	**6%**	**−2%**	**−2%**	**−5%**
All immigrants	16%	12%	10%	−5%	−2%	−7%
Noncitizens	19%	14%	11%	−4%	−3%	−8%
Naturalized	14%	10%	9%	−4%	−1%	−6%
U.S.-born citizens	10%	8%	6%	−2%	−2%	−5%

* In the CPS-ASEC, respondents are asked questions about their incomes and expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.
Notes: Latinos can be of any race. The other racial groups refer to non-Latinos and are mutually exclusive. Black refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "Black alone" or "Black in combination with other race." Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "AAPI alone" or "AAPI in combination with other race," except Black. White refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "White alone." The remainder (not shown here separately but included in the overall total) is a group called "other races" that is too small to display; it includes non-Latino people who reported their race as "American Indian alone," "American Indian and White," or unspecified multiracial group. The values shown in the table's rightmost three columns may not match exactly the difference between the poverty rates for the respective years due to rounding.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the CPS-ASEC 2010, 2020, and 2022.

3   Child Poverty Trends

Perhaps the most striking result of recent analyses of the poverty trends documented using the SPM is the precipitous declines they reveal in child poverty[17]—a key dimension of poverty that has been more severe in the United States than in most other advanced economies.[18] Extensive research shows the prolonged, adverse impact that growing up in poverty has on children. Crossnational studies find that children living in economically insecure families confront a wider variety of risks compared to their peers, including worse mental and physical health, lagged development in academic and social skills, and higher levels of exposure to violence.[19]

Recent declines in child poverty are therefore welcome news. At the end of the Great Recession, about 12.1 million children in the United States lived in families with incomes below the SPM's poverty threshold. Child poverty fell by 29 percent (to 8.6 million) in the decade between 2009 and 2019 (see the bottom section of Table 3). Then, driven by the expanded safety net during the pandemic, child poverty fell another 60 percent between 2019 and 2021 to less than 3.5 million, reaching its lowest point since the early 1990s.

Between 2009 and 2021, the number of U.S.-born children with only U.S.-born parents who lived in poor families declined by 73 pecent (from 7.5 million to about 2 million). During the same period, the number of children of immigrants in poor families fell by 68 percent (from 4.6 million to 1.5 million). Although the depth of the decline in poverty between 2009 and 2021 varied by children's own citizenship status and that of their parents, wide declines were experienced by all groups examined here.

Driven by the expanded safety net during the pandemic, child poverty fell another 60 percent between 2019 and 2021.

But even though poverty declined for all groups of children studied, disparities persisted. In 2021, poverty rates for both citizen and noncitizen children with only noncitizen parents (12 percent and 16 percent, respectively) were three to four times higher than those for children who had at least one U.S.-citizen parent (4–5 percent; see Figure 2). In other words, the risk of child poverty falls sharply when at least one parent is a U.S. citizen.

TABLE 3

Number of Children under Age 18 in Poverty (using the Supplemental Poverty Measure) and Percent Change, by Own and Parental Citizenship, 2009, 2019, and 2021*

	2009	2019	2021	Percent Change		
				2009–19	2019–21	2009–21
Children with at least one parent present	**72,023,000**	**71,764,000**	**70,998,000**	**0%**	**−1%**	**−1%**
Children of U.S.-born parents	54,779,000	52,517,000	52,003,000	−4%	−1%	−5%
Children of immigrants	17,244,000	19,247,000	18,995,000	12%	−1%	10%
By own and parental citizenship status						
All children with only noncitizen parents	7,580,000	6,905,000	7,604,000	−9%	10%	0%
Citizen children with noncitizen parents	5,716,000	5,288,000	5,848,000	−7%	11%	2%
Noncitizen children with noncitizen parents	1,864,000	1,617,000	1,756,000	−13%	9%	−6%
Citizen children with one noncitizen parent and one U.S.-citizen parent**	3,724,000	4,278,000	4,353,000	15%	2%	17%
Citizen children with only U.S.-citizen parents**	5,939,000	8,063,000	7,037,000	36%	−13%	18%
Children in poverty	**12,057,000**	**8,616,000**	**3,461,000**	**−29%**	**−60%**	**−71%**
Children of U.S.-born parents	7,490,000	5,209,000	1,999,000	−30%	−62%	−73%
Children of immigrants	4,568,000	3,407,000	1,462,000	−25%	−57%	−68%
By own and parental citizenship status						
All children with only noncitizen parents	3,001,000	1,961,000	966,000	−35%	−51%	−68%
Citizen children with noncitizen parents	2,332,000	1,548,000	684,000	−34%	−56%	−71%
Noncitizen children with noncitizen parents	669,000	413,000	282,000	−38%	−32%	−58%
Citizen children with one noncitizen parent and one U.S.-citizen parent**	638,000	566,000	211,000	−11%	−63%	−67%
Citizen children with only U.S.-citizen parents**	929,000	881,000	285,000	−5%	−68%	−69%

* In the CPS-ASEC, respondents are asked questions about their incomes and expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.
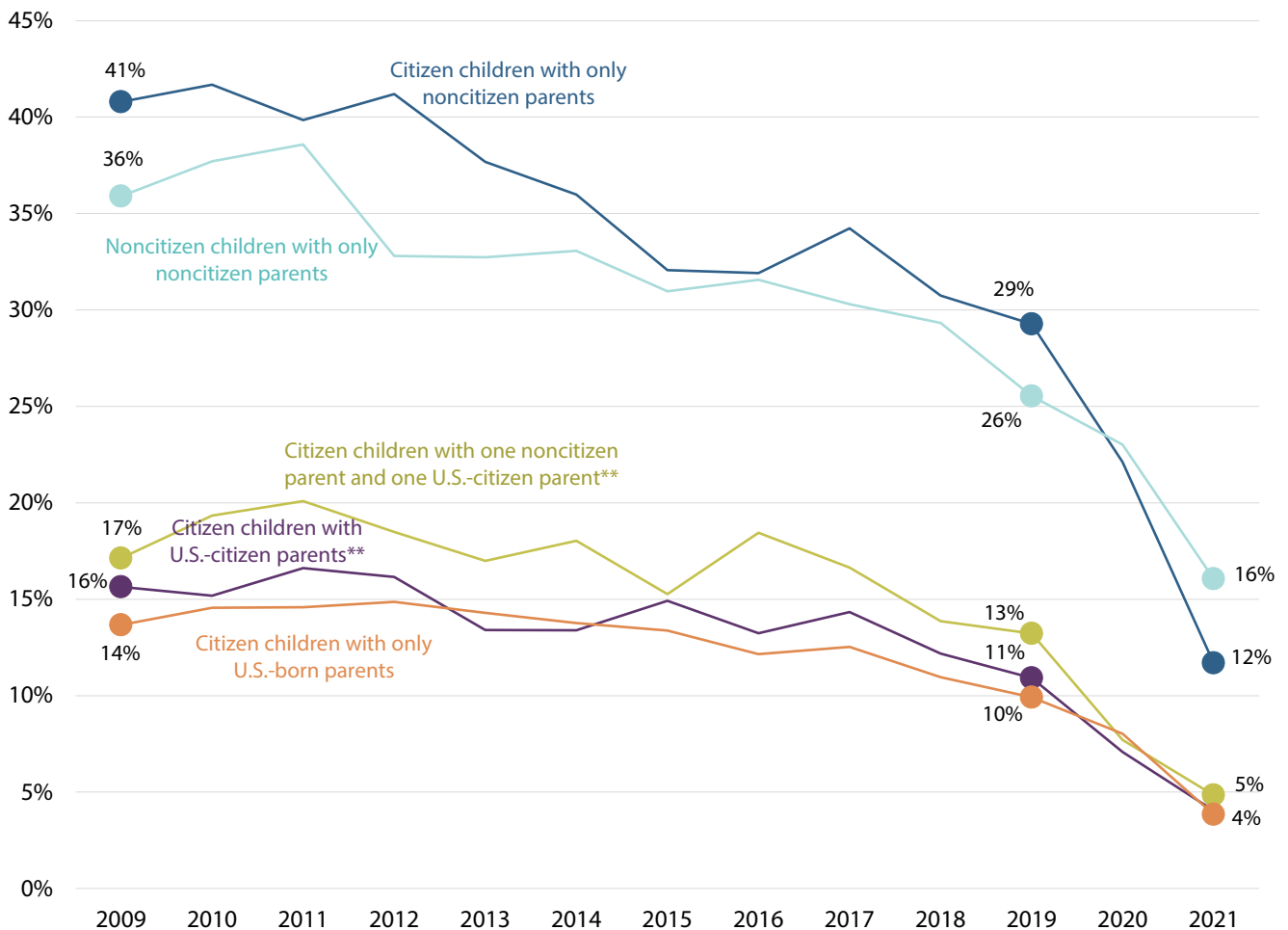** In these categories, the U.S.-citizen parents can be citizens by either birth or naturalization.
Note: The categories of children are mutually exclusive. All children except for "children of U.S.-born parents" are children of immigrants, meaning they have at least one immigrant parent.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the CPS-ASEC 2010, 2020, and 2022.

FIGURE 2

Share of Children under Age 18 in Poverty (using the Supplemental Poverty Measure), by Own and Parental Citizenship, 2009–21*

* In the CPS-ASEC, respondents are asked questions about their incomes and expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.
** In these categories, the U.S.-citizen parents can be citizens by either birth or naturalization.
Note: The categories of children are mutually exclusive. All children except for "citizen children with only U.S.-born parents" are children of immigrants, meaning they have at least one immigrant parent.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the CPS-ASEC 2010–22.

This analysis found declines in the share of children in poverty across all major racial and ethnic groups (see Table 4). Declines between 2009 to 2021 were particularly steep for Latino children with only noncitizen parents (a drop from 44 percent to 15 percent) and Black children with only noncitizen parents (from 41 percent to 14 percent). At the same time, Black and Latino children overall were more likely to be poor (7 percent and 8 percent, respec-

tively, in 2021) than AAPI children (4 percent) and White children (2 percent). Across the four racial and ethnic groups analyzed, children with only noncitizen parents faced a higher risk of poverty than their peers. There was little difference in 2021 in the poverty rates between children in families where all parents were U.S. citizens and those where one parent was a citizen and another a noncitizen.

TABLE 4

Share of Children under Age 18 in Poverty (using the Supplemental Poverty Measure), by Race/Ethnicity and Parental Citizenship, 2009, 2019, and 2021*

	2009	2019	2021	Difference (2009–19)	Difference (2019–21)	Difference (2009–21)
Children with at least one parent present	**17%**	**12%**	**5%**	**−5%**	**−7%**	**−12%**
With only noncitizen parents	40%	28%	13%	−11%	−16%	−27%
With one U.S.-citizen parent and one noncitizen parent	17%	13%	5%	−4%	−8%	−12%
With only U.S.-citizen parents	14%	10%	4%	−4%	−6%	−10%
By race/ethnicity						
Latino	**29%**	**20%**	**8%**	**−9%**	**−12%**	**−21%**
With only noncitizen parents	44%	35%	15%	−9%	−21%	−30%
With one U.S.-citizen parent and one noncitizen parent	19%	15%	5%	−5%	−10%	−14%
With only U.S.-citizen parents	22%	15%	6%	−7%	−9%	−16%
Black	**24%**	**19%**	**7%**	**−6%**	**−11%**	**−17%**
With only noncitizen parents	41%	21%	14%	−19%	−7%	−26%
With one U.S.-citizen parent and one noncitizen parent	15%	13%	8%	−2%	−4%	−6%
With only U.S.-citizen parents	23%	19%	7%	−5%	−12%	−17%
Asian American and Pacific Islander	**17%**	**8%**	**4%**	**−8%**	**−4%**	**−12%**
With only noncitizen parents	23%	12%	7%	−11%	−5%	−16%
With one U.S.-citizen parent and one noncitizen parent	19%	7%	4%	−12%	−3%	−15%
With only U.S.-citizen parents	14%	7%	3%	−7%	−4%	−11%
White	**10%**	**6%**	**2%**	**−3%**	**−4%**	**−7%**
With only noncitizen parents	26%	19%	8%	−6%	−11%	−18%
With one U.S.-citizen parent and one noncitizen parent	11%	13%	2%	2%	−11%	−9%
With only U.S.-citizen parents	9%	6%	2%	−3%	−4%	−7%

* In the CPS-ASEC, respondents are asked questions about their incomes and expenses during the previous calendar year, and their responses are used to generate poverty estimates for that earlier year.

Notes: The categories of children are mutually exclusive. "U.S.-citizen parents" include citizens by birth and by naturalization. See the notes under Table 2 for a description of the racial and ethnic categories used. The values shown in this table's rightmost three columns may not match exactly the difference between the poverty rates for the respective years due to rounding.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the CPS-ASEC 2010, 2020, and 2022.

4   Conclusion

The United States has higher general and child poverty rates than most other advanced countries, despite its global economic prowess and ability to withstand economic downturns. Longstanding debates continue about who is primarily responsible for poverty—the individual, the family, the community, or government—and how to address it, but reducing poverty is generally viewed as a worthy social goal.[20] And for good reasons: experiencing periods of poverty in childhood or adulthood has lasting, negative impacts on people's well-being, contributing to worse mental and physical health, developmental delays for children, slower academic progress, and greater difficulties finding one's footing in the labor market. Concerns about immigration's contribution to U.S. poverty and some new arrivals' dependency on public benefits drove the immigrant-related provisions of the 1996 *Welfare Reform Act* that denied many immigrants access to public benefits[21] and, most recently, the multiple though unsuccessful attempts by the Trump administration to change the longstanding public-charge rule.[22]

> *The United States has seen notable declines in overall poverty— extending even into the period of pandemic-driven economic turmoil.*

Since 2009, however, the United States has seen notable declines in overall poverty—extending even into the period of pandemic-driven economic turmoil. By analyzing Current Population Survey data and using the Supplemental Poverty Measure, this study found that the number of U.S. residents experiencing poverty fell by 45 percent, from 46.1 million in 2009 to 25.5 million in 2021. The decline occurred among immigrants and the U.S. born alike and across all of the major racial and ethnic groups

examined. The number of noncitizens in poverty fell from 6.9 million in 2009 to 4.9 million in 2019, dropping further to 3.8 million by 2021. Noncitizens' poverty rates followed a similar trajectory: from 31 percent in 2009 to 22 percent in 2019 to 16 percent in 2021. The shares of individuals experiencing poverty also dropped among naturalized citizens (from 17 percent in 2009 to 14 percent in 2019 to 10 percent in 2021) and the U.S. born (from 14 percent in 2009 to 11 percent in 2019 to 7 percent in 2021).

The declines in poverty before and during the pandemic can be attributed to several factors. Between 2009 and 2019, a strong labor market created employment opportunities, key public benefit programs were expanded, and the *Affordable Care Act* of 2010 was enacted. During the same period, the U.S. immigrant population (and noncitizens in particular) became more educated, had higher levels of English proficiency, were more likely to be employed, and were less likely to be unauthorized immigrants—all factors associated with better economic outcomes and a lower risk of poverty. The pandemic initially upended the country's steady economic progress. However, the unprecedented cash and noncash safety net response in the forms of stimulus checks and increased nutritional benefits, unemployment insurance, and housing assistance, among other kinds of aid, helped lift millions of U.S. citizens and noncitizens out of poverty in 2020 and 2021.

The recent declines in both the number and share of U.S. residents in poverty are remarkable, but the declines in *child poverty* both before and during the pandemic are arguably even more impressive. Overall, the number of poor children under age 18 dropped by 71 percent, from 12.1 million in 2009 to 3.5 million in 2021. Poverty fell sharply for children of immigrant and U.S.-born parents alike (by 68 percent and 73 percent, respectively). But this analysis also highlights the importance of parental citizenship for children's exposure to poverty. Children with at least one U.S.-citizen parent were three to

four times less likely to experience poverty in 2021 than those with two noncitizen parents. In other words, having even one U.S.-citizen parent (whether U.S. born or naturalized) acts as a protective factor against the risk of poverty.

Despite these improvements, disparities by both citizenship and race/ethnicity remain.

Poverty trends by race and ethnicity among immigrants and the U.S. born showed both promising signs as well as reason for concern. On the one hand, while all major racial and ethnic groups saw lower poverty rates in 2021 compared to a decade or so ago, and this held true for noncitizens, naturalized citizens, and the U.S. born alike, the largest declines were among racial and ethnic minorities. For instance, the shares of Latino and Black noncitizens in poverty—historically disadvantaged both because of their minority and noncitizen status—fell by half between 2009 and 2021. Moreover, the gaps between U.S.-born White individuals (the population with the lowest poverty exposure) and other race/ethnicity and citizenship groups narrowed over this period, highlighting progress in reducing racial inequities regarding poverty. On the other hand, despite these improvements, disparities by both citizenship and race/ethnicity remain. As before, Latino and Black noncitizens were more likely to be in poverty in 2021 (18 percent and 17 percent, respectively) than noncitizens who were AAPI (13 percent) or White (11 percent). U.S.-born individuals who identified as Black or Latino were also more likely to be poor (11 percent and 9 percent, respectively) than those who were AAPI (7 percent) or White (6 percent). The patterns of disadvantage along racial and ethnic lines were similar among children as well.

Looking to the future, two developments may reduce these gains and require investigation. One is the expected rise in poverty associated with the termination of pandemic-era assistance. The cessation of this aid has coincided with rising inflation that has driven up the cost of food, gas, and other basic expenses.[23] One countervailing factor to these lost benefits has been a strong U.S. economy, with almost 10.8 million job openings in January 2023—about twice the number of unemployed workers.[24] However, access to the labor market does not always translate into family-supporting wages, particularly for immigrant workers.[25] There is already some evidence that poverty may be rising.[26] Between spring and fall of 2021, more U.S. families—particularly those with children and racial/ethnic minorities—reported experiencing difficulties getting enough food, paying their rent or mortgage, and covering other household expenses such as auto payments, medical expenses, or student loans.[27]

Another development that may affect these gains and that merits further attention is changes in the composition of the immigrant population. Shifts in the profile of U.S. immigrants from 2009 to 2019—with a higher share having a college education and a declining share made up of unauthorized immigrants—contributed to the poverty declines documented here. After a sharp slowdown early in the pandemic, the number of immigrants granted green cards and the number of temporary worker and international student visas issued have been restored to pre-pandemic levels.[28] It is likely that these immigrants have similar human capital levels to those who entered the country through these channels in recent years. Yet newcomers, like the resident immigrant population, are a diverse group, and some may find it more difficult to gain a solid foothold in the U.S. economy than others. For example, among recent arrivals fleeing violence and political and economic crises in countries such as Afghanistan, Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Ukraine, some have relatively high levels of education and professional skills,[29] but others have fewer years of schooling and, according to recent reports, are vulnerable to economic exploitation.[30] And while some of these

noncitizens have been granted access to work and selected benefits in the United States, others have not.[31] The characteristics of all newcomers—from college-educated tech workers to family green-card recipients to asylum seekers—and their varied levels of socioeconomic mobility will influence overall immigrant poverty levels.

While it is uncertain how the composition of the U.S. immigrant population will change in the years to come, and what policies and economic forces will shape immigrants' economic integration, it is certain that they will be an important element of the nation's reviving debate over poverty and how best to address it.

Appendix

TABLE A−1

Key Differences between the Supplemental Poverty Measure and the Official Poverty Measure

	Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)	Official Poverty Measure (OPM)
Available for years	2009–present (with methodological and other improvements in 2014, 2018, and 2020)	1959–present
Unit of analysis (poverty universe)	Expanded family definition (also known as "resource unit"): The SPM definition of family includes the official "primary family" (see the OPM column) plus cohabiting partners and their relatives, and unrelated children under age 15 and foster children under age 22 who are cared for by the primary (householder) family. Unrelated (to the householder) individuals who are related to each other are defined as a "subfamily" (i.e., they represent their own resource unit) regardless of their or their children's age.	Primary family: The official family definition refers to individuals residing at the same address who are related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption. Individuals unrelated to the householder may be grouped into subfamilies or treated as a separate unit (these unrelated individuals may be cohabiting partners or children in foster care). Children under age 15 who are unrelated to the householder and with no parent present are *excluded* from the family and the poverty universe under the OPM.
Family resources	As a post-tax-based measure of the family's disposable income, the SPM is based on cash incomes from all sources. It also incorporates the value of in-kind benefits (for example, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, subsidized housing, and home energy assistance) minus necessary expenses. For instance, payroll taxes, child-care expenses, and health insurance premiums reduce a family's income, while stimulus payments, child tax credits, rental assistance, Social Security income, and unemployment insurance expand the family's economic resources.	The OPM measures pre-tax cash income from all sources, including cash incomes from federal and state governments such as unemployment insurance, workers' compensation benefits, public assistance benefits, and Social Security income. Stimulus checks are also included.

TABLE A–1 (cont.)

Key Differences between the Supplemental Poverty Measure and the Official Poverty Measure

	Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM)	Official Poverty Measure (OPM)
Poverty levels (thresholds)	These are based on consumer expenditures on food, clothing, shelter, and utilities. The SPM adjusts for rising standards of living and costs over time. Higher housing costs, higher taxes, or medical expenses may drive the SPM rates up, while more generous in-kind benefits may lower the SPM rates.	The OPM's poverty thresholds are based on three times the cost of a minimum food diet in 1963.
	The base SPM threshold is calculated for a two-adult, two-child family and distinguishes among three housing tenure groups (renters, homeowners with mortgages, and homeowners without mortgages) to account for differences in housing costs. The threshold is then adjusted to reflect the number of adults and children in the family.	The OPM thresholds vary by the size and age composition of family members. These are considered along with pre-tax cash income to determine a family's poverty status.
Geographic adjustments	SPM thresholds are adjusted to reflect geographic differences by state and selected metropolitan areas in the cost of living.	OPM thresholds are developed at the national level and are not adjusted for geographic differences.
	In 2019, the nationwide poverty threshold was $28,881 for a family consisting of two adults and two children that rents.	In 2019, the Census Bureau's poverty threshold for a family consisting of two adults and two children was $25,926.

Note: To illustrate how "family" is conceptualized under the OPM versus SPM, consider this example: "The householder lives with a roommate and the roommate's three children. The children are ages 16, 18, and 20. Using the official measure, the householder is identified as a householder with no relatives present. The roommate and his 16-year-old child are a subfamily. The 18-year-old and 20-year-old children are unrelated individuals. Using the alternative definition of family for the SPM universe, this household consists of two resource units: the householder; and a subfamily (the roommate and his three children)." See Ashley J. Provencher, "Unit of Analysis for Poverty Measurement: A Comparison of the Supplemental Poverty Measure and the Official Poverty Measure" (Social, Economic, and Housing Statistics Division Working Paper 2011-22, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, August 2011), 9.
Sources: John Creamer, Emily A. Shrider, Kalee Burns, and Frances Chen, *Poverty in the United States: 2021* (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022); Joseph Dalaker, *Poverty in the United States in 2021* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022); U.S. Census Bureau, "Improvements to the Census Bureau's Supplemental Poverty Measure for 2021," updated October 8, 2021; U.S. Census Bureau, "Supplemental Poverty Measure Workshop" (PowerPoint presentation for Brookings Expert Meeting, May 28, 2020); Dana Thomson et al., *Lessons from a Historic Decline in Child Poverty* (Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2022); U.S. Census Bureau, "Poverty Thresholds by Size of Family and Number of Children: 2019," accessed December 1, 2022; Alex Traub, "Rebecca Blank, Who Changed How Poverty Is Measured, Dies at 67," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2023.

TABLE A–2

Select Sociodemographic and Family Characteristics of Immigrants and the U.S. Born in the United States, by Nativity and Citizenship Status, 2009, 2019, and 2021

	2009	2019	2021
Immigrants			
Share without a high school education*	31%	24%	22%
Share with a bachelor's degree or more*	29%	35%	36%
Share who are English proficient**	48%	54%	54%
Average family size	3.86	3.72	3.60
Share of working-age women in employment***	58%	61%	59%
Share of working-age men in employment***	78%	83%	80%
Noncitizens			
Share without a high school education*	41%	33%	32%
Share with a bachelor's degree or more*	24%	30%	30%
Share who are English proficient**	38%	43%	44%
Average family size	4.05	3.89	3.76
Share of working-age women in employment***	51%	55%	51%
Share of working-age men in employment***	77%	83%	81%
Naturalized			
Share without a high school education*	19%	16%	14%
Share with a bachelor's degree or more*	34%	39%	42%
Share who are English proficient**	61%	64%	63%
Average family size	3.69	3.61	3.50
Share of working-age women in employment***	67%	68%	66%
Share of working-age men in employment***	80%	84%	80%
U.S. born			
Share without a high school education*	10%	7%	6%
Share with a bachelor's degree or more*	30%	36%	38%
Share who are English proficient**	98%	98%	98%
Average family size	3.11	3.12	3.05
Share of working-age women in employment***	65%	68%	65%
Share of working-age men in employment***	70%	74%	70%

* Civilian, noninstitutionalized adults ages 25 and older
** This describes the population ages 5 and older and refers to people who reported speaking English only or very well.
*** Civilian, noninstitutionalized population ages 16 to 64
Source: All estimates in this table are MPI tabulations of data from the CPS-ASEC 2009, 2019, and 2021, except for those of English proficiency and family size, which are from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Surveys in 2009, 2019, and 2021.

Endnotes

1   These laws included the *Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act* (CRRSA Act), passed in March 2020; the *Families First Coronavirus Response Act* (FFCRA), March 2020; *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act* (CARES Act), March 2020; the *Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021*, December 2020; and the *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021*, March 2021.

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