

Recent Immigrant Children

A Profile of New Arrivals to U.S. Schools

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Executive Summary

A significant increase in the number of immigrant children in U.S. schools over the last decade has challenged K-12 educators to expand their capacity to serve students who may arrive with limited education, little to no English proficiency, and trauma. However, school systems tend to focus on immigrant-background students through the lens of their English proficiency level, and data on immigrant students as a distinct group have historically been limited in scope and accessibility. As a result, decisionmakers may fail to target resources to the unique needs of recent arrivals. The U.S. Department of Education has long collected state-level data on the number of foreign-born students who have been enrolled in U.S. schools for three years or less in order to distribute federal funds targeted to supporting such students. These data show that the size of this population steadily increased over the 2010s, reaching about 1.2 million students nationwide before the COVID-19 pandemic, then fell to 990,000 in school year 2020–21, the latest year for which data are available. New types of information were made available that year, including the fact that three-quarters of recent immigrant students are also English Learners.

Given the limits of administrative data, this fact sheet uses U.S. Census Bureau statistics to explore

the characteristics of recently arrived immigrant children in greater detail. This information can help schools understand what resources are needed to improve, for example, academic support for these students and language access for parents with limited English. In 2021, the American Community Survey counted 649,000 children ages 5 to 17 who had been in the United States for three years or less, and another 1.5 million immigrant children living here four or more years. The highest numbers of recent immigrant children were living in traditional immigrant destinations such as California, Florida, New York State, and Texas, but in other states such as Alaska, Delaware, and West Virginia, recent arrivals made up particularly large shares of all immigrant children.

This information can help schools understand what resources are needed to improve, for example, academic support for these students and language access for parents with limited English.

About half of recent immigrant children in 2021 were Latino and, likewise, about half spoke Spanish at home. The largest share, 13 percent, came from Mexico. Children from El Salvador, Guatemala, and

Honduras combined made up 21 percent of all recent immigrant children, but they comprised only 10 percent of immigrant children living in the United States for four or more years, reflecting the increase in arrivals from Central America. Recent immigrant children are more likely than their peers to live in low-income and linguistically isolated households. They, along with longer-residing immigrant children and U.S.-born children with immigrant parents, are also much less likely to live with a parent who has completed high school, compared to native-born children of native-born parents. This has important implications for the support needed to guide these youth through to the end of high school and into the postsecondary transition.

Finally, as of 2021, 9 percent of recent-immigrant youth ages 14 to 17 were not enrolled in and had not completed high school, compared to 3 percent of longer-residing immigrant and native-born youth. Among 18-to-21-year-old youth, the share out of school and without a high school diploma was 15 percent for recent immigrants, 8 percent for longer-residing immigrants, and 5 percent for the native born. These findings point to the need to provide appropriate supports to ensure the success of recent immigrant students in U.S. schools.

1 Introduction

A variety of migration trends over the last decade have raised the profile of recently arrived immigrant children as a distinct population in U.S. schools, one with unique characteristics and educational needs. For example, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of unaccompanied Central American minors from the mid-2010s through the early 2020s led K-12 educators to increasingly focus on the challenges these students often face. Many arrive in U.S. schools with limited or interrupted education and little to no English proficiency, are likely to have experienced trauma in their home country or en route to the United

States, may be expected to quickly join the workforce and earn money to support their household, and/or may be reuniting with family members they have not seen in years.¹ At the same time, immigrant students are a highly diverse group and also include, for example, children of high-skilled workers and resettled refugees. Regardless of their reason for migrating, immigrant students bring cognitive and socioemotional assets to the classroom that contribute to and even provide advantages in language, academic, and psychological growth.²

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Development of policy and pedagogy for children who are immigrants or the children of immigrants (collectively known as immigrant-background children) has historically been subsumed into the fields of teaching English to speakers of other languages and bilingual education. In that context, the predominant focus is on students' language development and less on meeting their socioemotional needs or remediating the academic gaps some may have in their prior education. Federal civil rights law has established a strong policy framework around nondiscrimination based on immigration status and access to equitable education for English Learners (ELs); however, the upshot of these policies has been an emphasis on funding for, research on, and accountability measures related to the linguistic and academic outcomes of ELs, and less of a focus on the other unique needs and assets of new immigrants.³

Data on immigrant children and youth are relatively difficult to access, yet essential for educators and

policymakers looking to improve instruction and other services for new arrivals. This fact sheet analyzes data from the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Census Bureau to illuminate the characteristics of recent immigrant children, compared to longer-residing immigrant children, native-born children of immigrants, and native-born children with native-born parents. It considers their geographic distribution, language use, and educational attainment, as well as characteristics of the households in which they live.

2 U.S. Department of Education Data on Immigrant Students

Under the federal *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) and civil rights law,⁴ schools identify students as ELs based on speaking a non-English language at home and their English proficiency level. Identified ELs must be provided with appropriate language and academic services, and their progress is monitored in school accountability systems. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education uses counts of such students along with U.S. Census Bureau data to apportion federal funds to states. This money, authorized by ESSA Title III, is used to support instruction and other services for ELs. ESSA also takes recent immigrant students into account in its funding formula. It defines these students as children ages 3 to 21 who were not born in any state, the District of Columbia, or Puerto Rico and who have not attended U.S. schools for more than three full academic years.⁵ These students are counted without regard to English proficiency or EL status.⁶ This categorization is used to allocate another share of funding through

Title III, this one intended to help schools serve newly arrived immigrants. Counts of recent immigrant students are not typically used in accountability or public data reporting at the state level. Additionally, neither the federal nor state education departments publish counts of all immigrant or foreign-born students, or of subcategories such as unaccompanied children or refugees.

There is considerable overlap between the EL and immigrant student populations, but decisionmakers and researchers interested specifically in the education of immigrants have generally had to make do using data on EL students as an imperfect proxy. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education has improved its collection of data on recent immigrant students, providing a fuller picture of this group to the public. For example, in addition to the number of recent immigrant students (using the Title III definition), the department now reports the number of recent immigrant students who are ELs, the top five languages spoken by such students, and how many are served by programs funded by the immigrant-focused portion of Title III. Beginning with school year 2020–21, this information is available for each state and local education agency (typically a school district).⁷

Table 1 shows the number of recent immigrant students and ELs from 2014–15 to 2020–21, according to school counts using the Title III definition. The U.S. Department of Education made a new data point available for 2020–21 student counts, with states reporting that 733,431 recent immigrant students were also ELs. Therefore, as Figure 1 shows, we now know that about three-quarters of recent immigrants are ELs, and about 15 percent of ELs are recent immigrants, with the remainder being longer-residing immigrants and the native born.

TABLE 1
U.S. Department of Education Count of English Learners and Recent Immigrant Students, School Year 2014–15 to 2020–21

School Year	English Learners	Recent Immigrant Students
2014–15	4,808,758	725,912
2015–16	4,855,837	806,540
2016–17	4,950,400	951,908
2017–18	5,011,462	994,137
2018–19	5,024,177	1,171,043
2019–20	5,155,887	1,176,093
2020–21	4,968,097	990,449

Note: In this table, “recent immigrants” are those who have been in U.S. schools for three years or less.

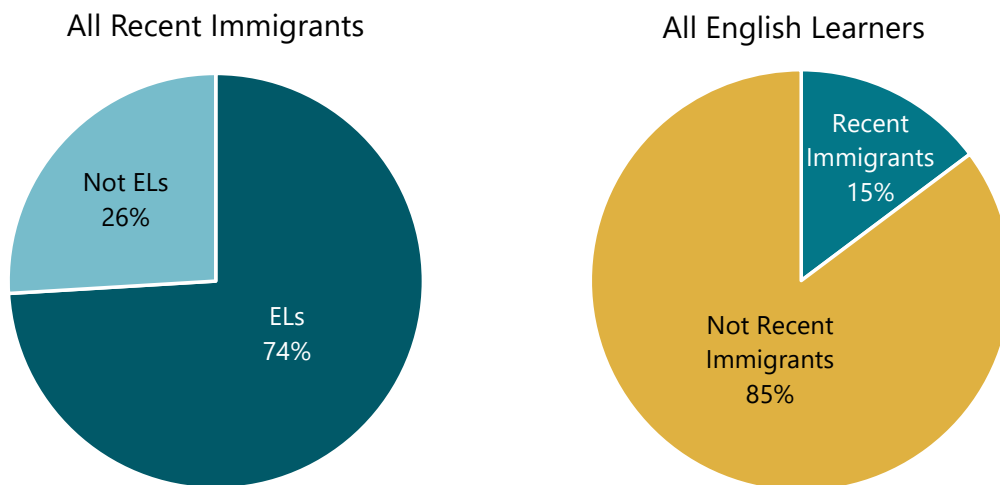
Sources: U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA), *The Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program, School Years 2014–2016* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2020); OELA, *The Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program, School Years 2016–2018* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2021); OELA, *The Biennial Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Title III State Formula Grant Program, School Years 2018–2020* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023); U.S. Department of Education, “ED Data Express,” accessed June 6, 2023.

3 Census Bureau Counts by Age, Recency of Arrival, and State

While administrative data collected by education agencies have the benefit of providing information tied to salient educational categories (such as EL status), they are sometimes inconsistently collected across schools and states. The data are also not crosstabulated with many other characteristics that interest education decisionmakers and researchers. For that, the remainder of this fact sheet uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2021 American Community Survey to explore the characteristics of recent immigrant children and youth that are unavailable in administrative data.

Census data have some advantages over school data, such as making it possible to look at out-of-school populations. However, there are disadvantages as well. In particular, the Census count of children who speak English less than “very well” tends to be about half the number identified by schools as

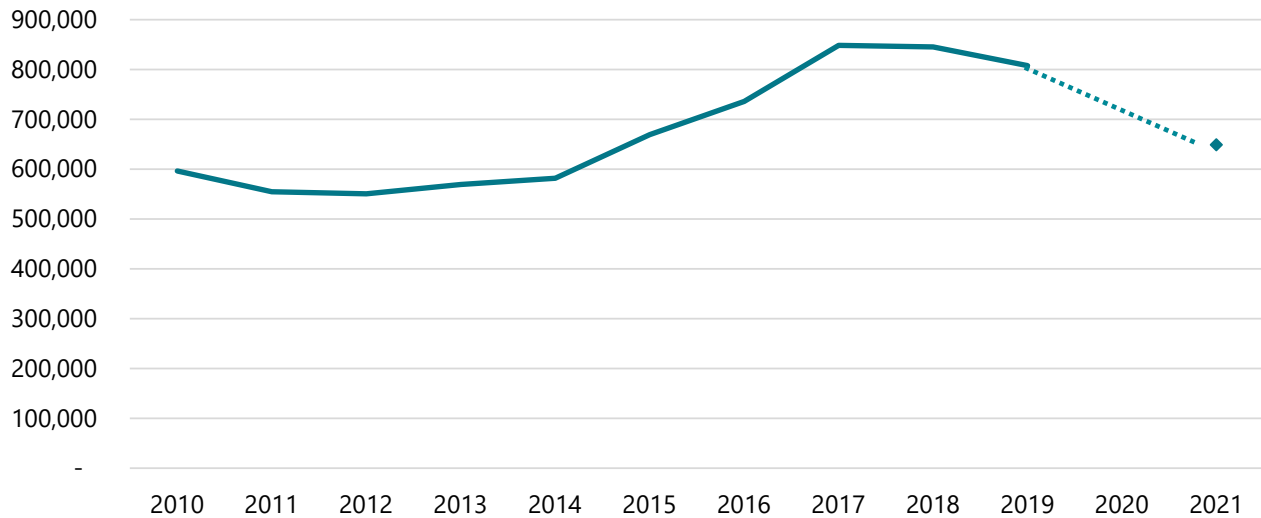
FIGURE 1
Federal Count of Recent Immigrants Who Are English Learners in U.S. Schools, School Year 2020–21



Notes: In this figure, “recent immigrants” are those who have been in U.S. schools for three years or less. In the second chart, “not recent immigrants” includes both immigrants who have been in U.S. schools for four or more years and some native-born students.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, “ED Data Express.”

FIGURE 2

Census Bureau Count of Recent Immigrant Children Ages 5–17 in the United States, 2010–21

Notes: Data from 2020 are not available due to data limitations from the American Community Survey (ACS) conducted during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis defines “recent immigrants” as individuals who arrived in the United States within three years of the survey year.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s annual ACS, 2010–19 and 2021.

ELs.⁸ Several factors likely contribute to this mismatch. These include the fact that Census data are based on respondents’ statements about their or their children’s English proficiency (not based on a test), response choices are not aligned to the federal definition of who is an EL, and the tendency for Census surveys to undercount immigrants and their children.⁹ Compared to the 5 million ELs shown in Table 1 for school year 2020–21, the 2021 American Community Survey counted only 2.5 million children ages 5 to 17 who spoke English less than “very well.”¹⁰ Because of this discrepancy, this fact sheet does not provide disaggregated data for the segment of immigrant children who would likely be identified as ELs in school; instead the fact sheet focuses on recent immigrant children, which it defines as children ages 5 to 17 who were foreign born and who immigrated within the three years prior to the Census survey.¹¹ This is similar to the Title III definition of recent immigrants used by schools.

Like the administrative data shown in Table 1, Census data show an increase in the count of recent

immigrant children starting in 2014, followed by a leveling out during the Trump administration and a significant dip during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 2). However, 2022 Census data, once available, will likely show this dip to be short-lived. Legal immigration rebounded to pre-pandemic levels in 2022, and the number of encounters between U.S. border authorities and migrants at the southwest border reached record levels in 2022, including increasing numbers of Venezuelans, Cubans, and Nicaraguans.¹²

Table 2 and Figure 3 show the number and share of immigrant and native-born children in the United States, with Table 2 disaggregating that information by age bands equivalent to typical elementary, middle, and high school populations. In 2021, there were 649,000 recent immigrant children ages 5 to 17, representing 30 percent of all foreign-born children. About one-quarter of all school-age children come from an immigrant background; among these 14 million immigrant-origin children in 2021, 85 percent were U.S.-born children with immigrant par-

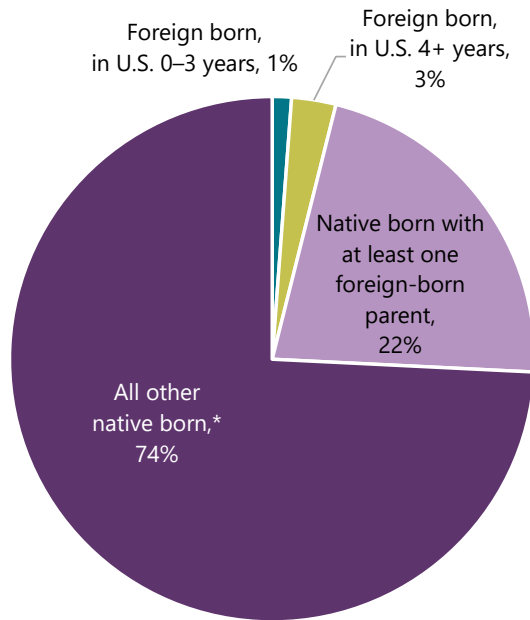
TABLE 2

Number of Foreign- and Native-Born Children in the United States, by Recency of Arrival and Age, 2021

	Ages 5–10	Ages 11–13	Ages 14–17	Total
Foreign born, in U.S. 0–3 years	323,000	145,000	180,000	649,000
Foreign born, in U.S. 4+ years	461,000	392,000	641,000	1,494,000
Native born with at least one foreign-born parent	5,345,000	2,929,000	3,713,000	11,988,000
All other native born*	18,072,000	9,661,000	12,950,000	40,683,000

* Includes native-born children with only native-born parents and native-born children not living with any parent.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

FIGURE 3
Foreign- and Native-Born Share of Children
Ages 5–17 in the United States, 2021



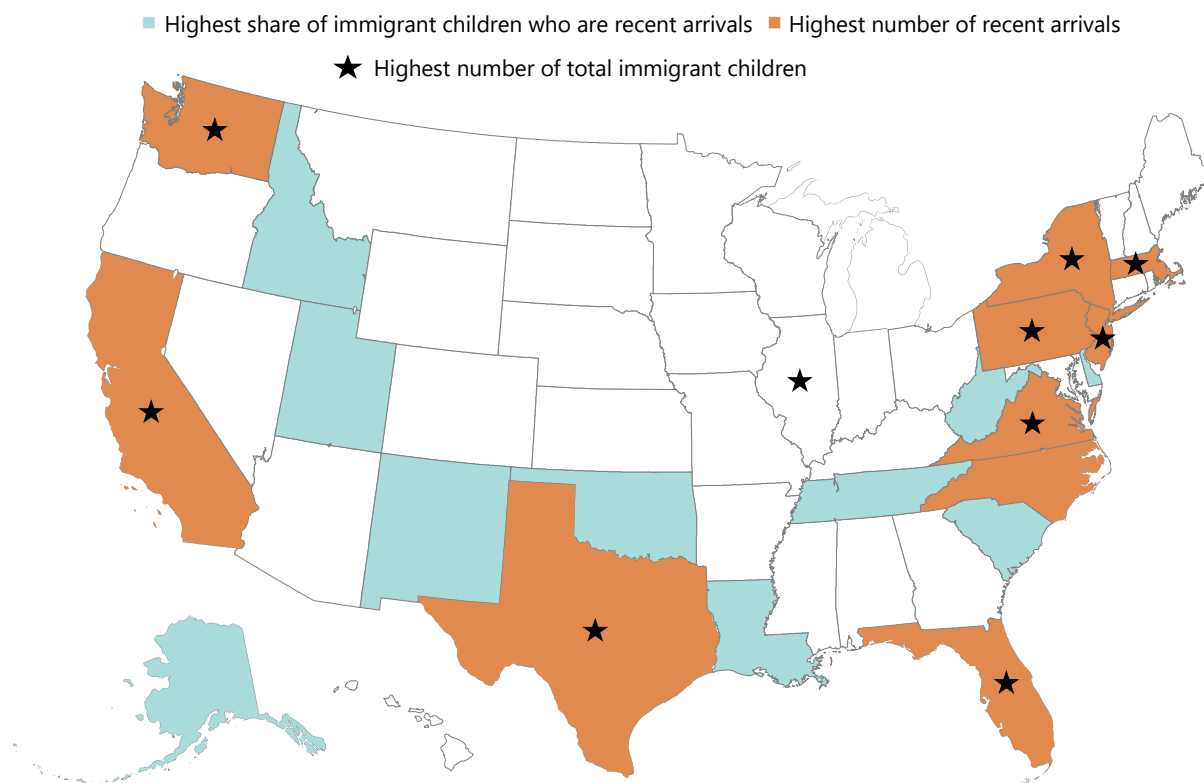
* Includes native-born children with only native-born parents and native-born children not living with any parent.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

ents and thus have been U.S. citizens since birth. The share of children in each category shown in Figure 3 was similar across each of the three age bands analyzed individually.

Immigrant families live in every state and in urban, suburban, and rural settings. But, of course, they are not evenly distributed, and their settlement patterns reflect historical and economic factors. The appendix to this fact sheet shows the number and share of all immigrant children and recent immigrant children by state. Figure 4 shows that the states with the greatest number of immigrant children—including the traditional destinations of California, Florida, New York State, and Texas—are also the states with the greatest numbers of recent immigrant children. In contrast, recent arrivals made up larger shares of all immigrant children in some other states, such as Delaware, where 60 percent of immigrant children in 2021 had recently arrived in the United States, as had 55 percent of immigrant children in Alaska and 48 percent in West Virginia.

FIGURE 4

States with the Highest Number and Share of Recent Arrivals and All Immigrant Children Ages 5–17, 2021



Note: This analysis defines “recent arrivals” as individuals who arrived in the United States within three years of the survey year.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

4 Demographic Characteristics of Immigrant Children

As has historically been the case for U.S. immigrants, the largest number and share of recent immigrant children are Latino, of Mexican origin, and speak Spanish (see Tables 3, 4, and 5). In 2021, Latinos made up higher shares of recent immigrant children and native-born children of immigrants than of immigrant children who had been in the United States for four years or more, as shown in Table 3. The reverse is true for Black children and Asian American and Pacific Islander children, who made up larger shares among longer-residing immigrant children than recent arrivals or native-born children of immigrants. Further, only 7 percent of Latino children,

4 percent of Black children, and 1 percent of White children were foreign born in 2021, whereas that share was 20 percent for Asian American and Pacific Islander children.

Looking at recent immigrant children’s countries of origin, shown in Table 4, seven of the top ten were countries in Latin America. As of 2021, about 13 percent of recent immigrant children were from Mexico, and Mexican children made up a similar share of immigrant children in the United States for four or more years (15 percent). In contrast, immigration from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has increased in recent years. The share of children from those three countries was greater among recent immigrants (21 percent) than among immigrants in the United States for four or more years (10 percent).

TABLE 3

Race or Ethnicity of Children Ages 5–17 in the United States, by Nativity and Recency of Arrival, 2021

	Foreign born, in U.S. 0–3 years	Foreign born, in U.S. 4+ years	Native born with at least one foreign- born parent	All other native born*
All Children	649,000	1,494,000	11,988,000	40,683,000
Latino	50%	39%	53%	16%
Asian American and Pacific Islander	20%	28%	15%	1%
White	13%	15%	15%	60%
Black	10%	13%	9%	14%
Multiracial	4%	3%	6%	7%
American Indian and Alaska Native	0%	0%	0%	1%
Other	1%	1%	1%	1%

* Includes native-born children with only native-born parents and native-born children not living with any parent.

Note: Latinos can be of any race. All other categories refer to people who are not Latino.

Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

TABLE 4

Top Ten Countries of Birth of Recent Immigrant Children Ages 5–17 in the United States, 2021

Country	Percent
Mexico	13%
Honduras	9%
Guatemala	8%
India	6%
El Salvador	5%
Dominican Republic	4%
Brazil	4%
Venezuela	3%
China/Hong Kong	3%
The Philippines	2%

Note: This analysis defines “recent immigrants” as individuals who arrived in the United States within three years of the survey year.

Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

As far as home language is concerned, about 89 percent of recent immigrant children in 2021 spoke a language other than English at home, compared to 81 percent of longer-residing immigrants and 60 percent of native-born children with at least one immigrant parent. About half of recent immigrant children spoke Spanish at home (see Table 5). Looking only at those who spoke a language other than English at home, 54 percent were Spanish speakers.

As one would expect, a larger number of recent immigrant children than longer-residing immigrant children are noncitizens (93 percent versus 67 percent in 2021, respectively). Utilizing the Migration Policy Institute’s unique methodology for assigning immigration status to noncitizens in Census Bureau data, an estimated 32 percent of recent immigrant children and 27 percent of longer-residing immigrant children were unauthorized in 2019.¹³

TABLE 5
Top Ten Home Languages of Recent Immigrant Children Ages 5–17 in the United States, 2021

Language	Percent
Spanish	48%
English	11%
Portuguese	4%
Arabic	3%
Chinese	3%
French	2%
Russian	2%
Tagalog	2%
Vietnamese	1%
Farsi/Persian	1%

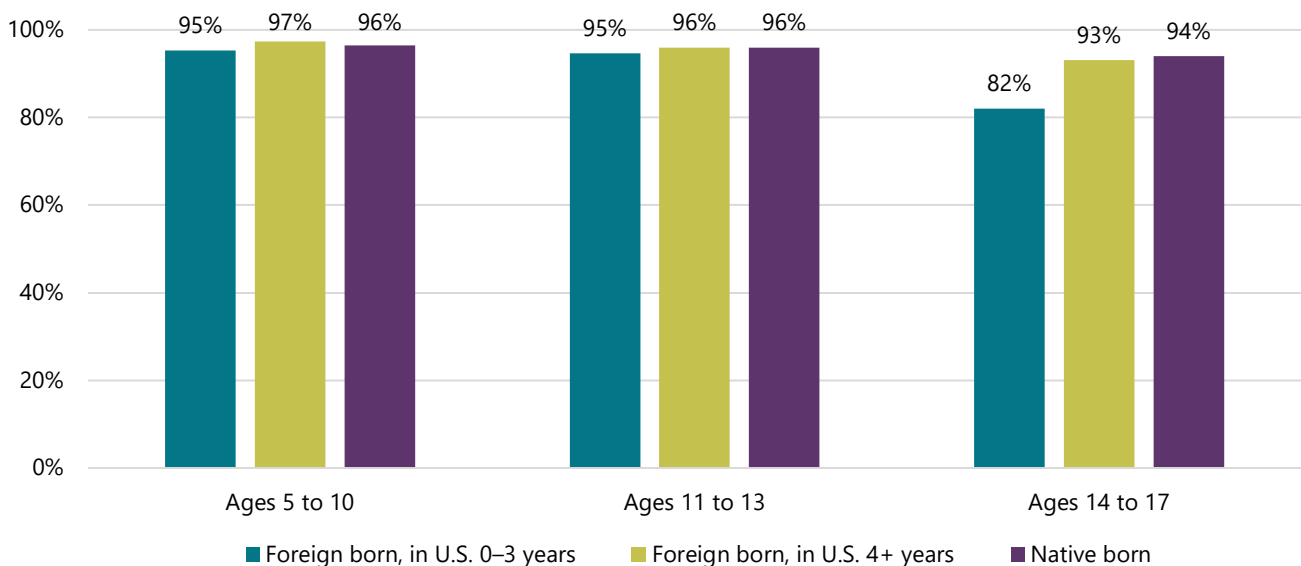
Notes: This analysis defines “recent immigrants” as individuals who arrived in the United States within three years of the survey year. In this table, “Chinese” includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages; “English” includes English, Jamaican Creole, Krio, Pidgin Krio, and other English-based Creole languages; “French” includes French, Patois, and Cajun; “Portuguese” includes Portuguese and Cape Verdean Creole; “Tagalog” includes Tagalog and Filipino.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

5 Household Characteristics of Immigrant Children

About 96 percent of the U.S. child population was living in a household with at least one parent as of 2021. That share is similar across the elementary, middle, and high school age bands and for immigrant and native-born children, as shown in Figure 5. However, there is one exception: only 82 percent of recent immigrants ages 14 to 17 lived in a household with at least one parent, compared to more than 90 percent for all other groups.

Looking at the characteristics of the households in which immigrant children live helps educators understand the challenges that some may face, including those associated with, for example, living in poverty or with parents who have limited formal education. In cases where parents do not speak English, it

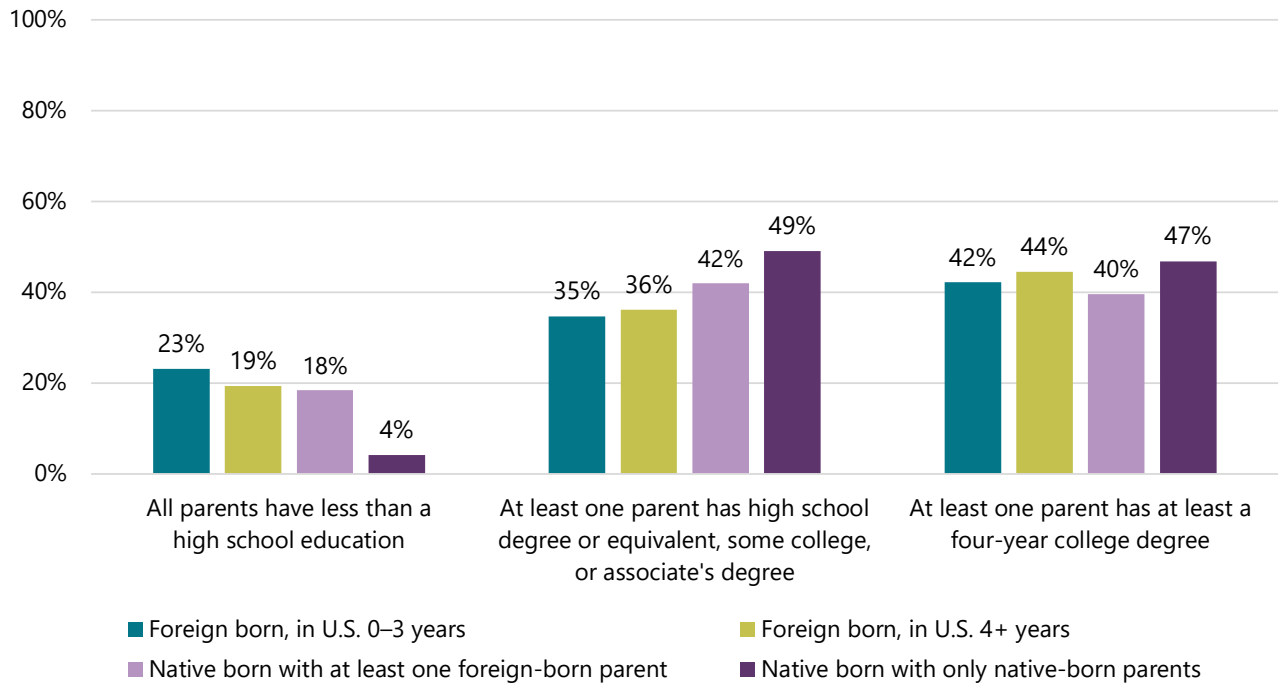
FIGURE 5
Share of U.S. Children Ages 5–17 Living with a Parent in their Household, by Age, Nativity, and Recency of Arrival, 2021



Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

FIGURE 6

Parental Educational Attainment of U.S. Children Ages 5–17, by Nativity and Recency of Arrival, 2021



Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

also indicates to schools the need to communicate with parents in a language they understand.

Recently arrived immigrant children have fairly similar parental education profiles to other immigrant-background children, as Figure 6 shows. Foreign-born children (both newcomers and those with longer U.S. residence) are more likely to have parents with a four-year college degree or higher than to have parents with a high school degree, some college, or an associate degree, while the inverse is true for native-born children. But the most notable information in Figure 6 is that both foreign-born children and the children of immigrants are substantially more likely to live in a household where all parents have less than a high school education than native-born children with native-born parents. This has important implications for ensuring that high schools provide clear and comprehensive information to students with immigrant parents about high

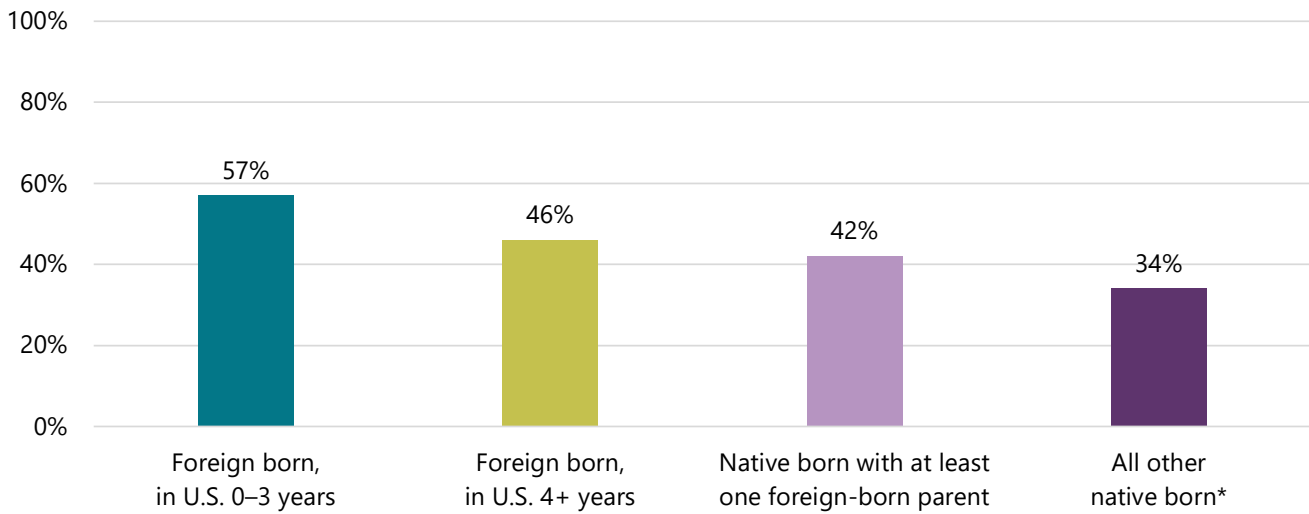
school graduation requirements and pathways to postsecondary education.

Recent immigrant children are more likely to live in low-income households and with limited English proficient parents, factors associated with academic struggles.¹⁴ Figure 7 shows that more than half of recent immigrant children lived in low-income households in 2021. The rate was successively lower for other foreign-born children, native-born children with one or more immigrant parent, and other native-born children. For children living in households without a parent—a relatively small percentage of the children represented in Figure 7—the low-income share was 52 percent for recent immigrant children, 53 percent for longer-residing immigrant children, and 47 percent for the native born.

Recent immigrant children are also more likely to live in a linguistically isolated household (in which

FIGURE 7

Children Ages 5–17 Living in Low-Income Households in the United States, by Nativity, 2021



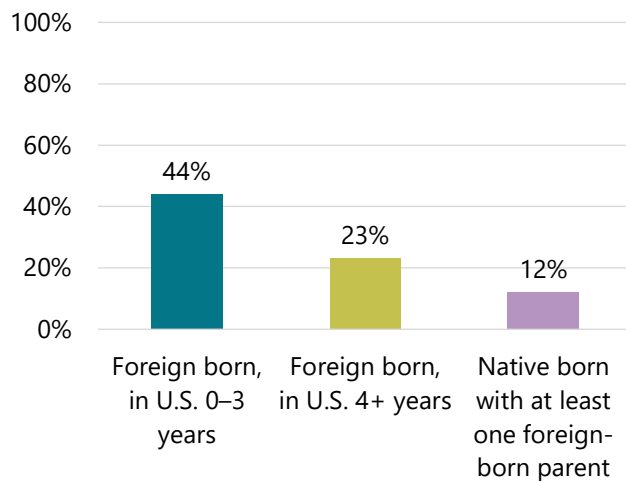
* Includes native-born children with only native-born parents and native-born children not living with any parent.
 Notes: In this analysis, “low income” is defined as families with annual incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. This analysis includes children both with and without at least one parent in the household.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

no one age 14 or older speaks English very well) than other foreign-born children or native-born children of immigrants (see Figure 8). Again, the rates for the small number of children living without a parent in the household were somewhat different: 30 percent of recent immigrant children and 17 percent of longer-residing immigrant children without parents at home lived in linguistically isolated households in 2021.

The trend for children who have parents with limited proficiency in English is, understandably, similar. Looking only at children with at least one parent in the household, three-quarters of recent immigrant children, two-thirds of other immigrant children, and half of native-born children of immigrants had at least one parent with limited English proficiency in 2021 (see Figure 9).

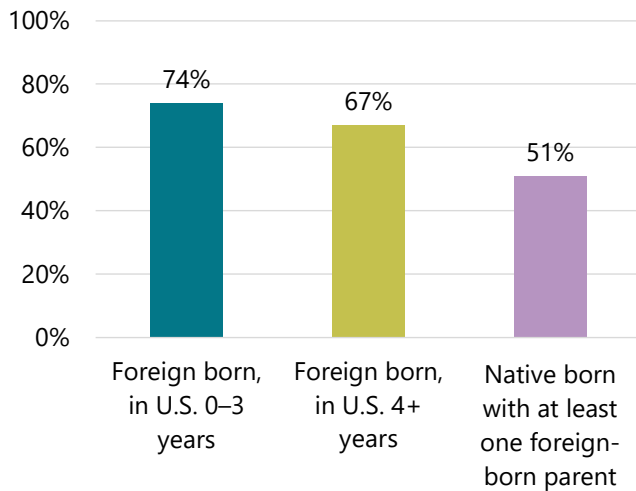
FIGURE 8

Children Ages 5–17 Living in Linguistically Isolated U.S. Households, by Nativity, 2021



Notes: Linguistically isolated households are those in which all members ages 14 and older speak a language other than English and none reports speaking English “very well” in the ACS. This analysis includes children both with and without at least one parent in the household.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

FIGURE 9
Share of U.S. Children Ages 5–17 with at Least One Limited English Proficient Parent, by Nativity, 2021



Note: Persons who speak a language other than English at home and report speaking English less than “very well” (that is, “well,” “not well,” or “not at all”) are considered limited English proficient.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

BOX 1 Explore Data on Immigrant Parents

For a deeper dive into the sociodemographic characteristics of immigrant and native-born parents of U.S. children, check out the Migration Policy Institute’s fact sheets and data files for the United States, all 50 states, and the 50 counties with the largest populations at: <https://bit.ly/immigrant-parents-2021>

The data files include breakdowns for parents of children in different age bands (ages 0–4, 5–10, 11–13, and 14–17) and information on parents’ English proficiency, level of education, employment, and access to digital devices and the internet.

6 School Enrollment and High School Completion

While the U.S. Department of Education publishes annual graduation rates for ELs and other student groups, no nationwide data of this kind are available on immigrant students. Few states track graduation rates for their immigrant students or similar groups, such as students with limited or interrupted formal education. In one notable exception, data from the Texas Education Agency show that the four-year graduation rate was 78 percent for Texas students in the Class of 2021 who were identified as recent immigrants using the ESSA Title III definition, compared to 80 percent for students who were ELs anytime in high school and 90 percent for all students.¹⁵ More concerning, a 2018 study of two states showed that only 29 to 58 percent of ELs who arrived in the United States during grades 10 to 12 graduated from high school within four or five years.¹⁶

U.S. Census Bureau data do provide information on high school completers and dropouts, but this is made less useful by the fact that it does not differentiate between those who attended high school in the United States and those who attended school in other countries. It also does not differentiate between youth who dropped out of U.S. high schools and those who never enrolled after arriving in the country. With those qualifications duly noted, as of 2021, 89 percent of foreign-born youth ages 18 to 24 and 95 percent of native-born youth had completed a high school education.¹⁷

Table 6 shows the school enrollment and attainment of children who are of typical high-school age (14 to 17). Among those children living with at least one parent, almost all were enrolled in K-12 schools in

TABLE 6

School Enrollment and Attainment among Children Ages 14–17 in the United States, by Nativity and Presence of Parent in the Household, 2021

	Living with at Least One Parent				No Parent in Household		
	Foreign born, in U.S. 0–3 years	Foreign born, in U.S. 4+ years	Native born with at least one foreign-born parent	Native born with only native-born parents	Foreign born, in U.S. 0–3 years	Foreign born, in U.S. 4+ years	Native born
Children Ages 14–17	147,000	597,000	3,713,000	12,031,000	33,000	44,000	919,000
Enrolled in K-12	90%	96%	97%	96%	70%	87%	89%
Enrolled in college	1%	1%	1%	0%	10%	3%	4%
Not enrolled in school, has at least high school diploma or equivalent	1%	1%	1%	1%	4%	3%	2%
Not enrolled in school, no high school diploma or equivalent	8%	3%	2%	3%	16%	7%	5%

Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

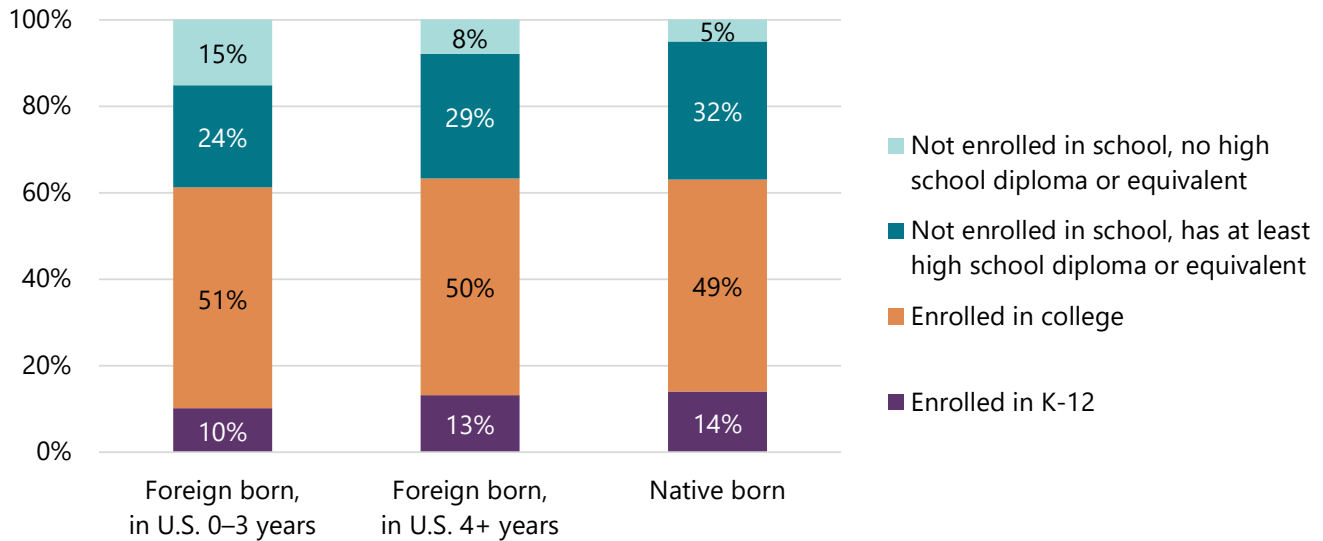
2021. However, 8 percent of recent arrivals were not enrolled in and had not completed high school. A slightly different picture emerges for children with no parents in the household; this group includes about 58,000 young people ages 14 to 17 who were already enrolled in college or who were not enrolled in school but had completed high school. About 16 percent of recent immigrants not living with parents (about 5,300 youth) were not enrolled in and had not completed high school. It is important to note that in half of states, young people are required to be enrolled in school up to their 18th birthday if they do not have a high school diploma (the other states require enrollment only up to age 16 or 17).¹⁸ Adding together those 14-to-17-year-old youth with and without parents in the household, 9 percent of recent immigrants and 3 percent of both longer-residing immigrants and the native born were not enrolled in and had not completed high school.

It is impossible to explain these differences between youth living with and without parents based on Cen-

sus Bureau data alone. Nevertheless, the relatively high number of recently arrived foreign-born youth not living with a parent, 10 percent of whom were enrolled in college in 2021, likely includes some young international students at U.S. colleges and universities. Looking at students who were not in school and had not completed high school, the difference between students with and without a parent at home is stark. It seems that the presence of a parent in the household may help keep youth enrolled in school, while the absence of a parent may signal other circumstances that contribute to the decision to enter the workforce early, such as greater responsibility for household costs or a need to repay migration-related expenses.

Among youth ages 18 to 21, roughly equal proportions of the foreign born and native born were enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education in 2021, as shown in Figure 10. However, the share of youth not enrolled in school and without a high school diploma or equivalent was substantially high-

FIGURE 10
School Enrollment and Attainment of Youth Ages 18–21 in the United States, by Nativity, 2021



Note: This analysis includes 320,000 foreign-born youth who have been in the United States for zero to three years; 986,000 foreign-born youth in the United States for four or more years; and 16,277,000 native-born youth.
 Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

er for recent immigrants (15 percent) than longer-residing immigrants (8 percent) and the native born (5 percent).

Altogether, in 2021 there were 162,000 foreign-born and 1.2 million native-born youth ages 14 to 21 who had not finished high school and were not enrolled in school, representing 8 percent and 4 percent of their cohorts, respectively.

7 Conclusion

Recent immigrant students in U.S. schools are at once a highly diverse population and one dispro-

portionately likely to face challenges due to living in low-income households, having parents with limited formal education and English proficiency, and experiencing stress related to migration and immigration status. It is critical for school staff to understand students’ backgrounds, especially as migration trends shift, to provide appropriate resources and support for their linguistic, academic, and socioemotional growth. At a minimum, school systems should track the educational progress of students new to the United States—and ideally, subgroups such as those with limited or interrupted education in their countries of origin—in order to plan and evaluate educational programs that meet their unique needs.

It is critical for school staff to understand students’ backgrounds, especially as migration trends shift, to provide appropriate resources and support for their linguistic, academic, and socioemotional growth.

Appendix

TABLE A-1
Immigrant Children Ages 5–17, by State, 2021

	Total U.S. Children	All Immigrant Children		Recent Immigrant Children	
		Number	% of all children	Number	% of all immigrant children
Alabama	831,000	10,000	1%	2,000	16%
Alaska	138,000	7,000	5%	4,000	55%
Arizona	1,211,000	29,000	2%	8,000	26%
Arkansas	525,000	9,000	2%	2,000	24%
California	6,553,000	340,000	5%	100,000	30%
Colorado	938,000	27,000	3%	10,000	35%
Connecticut	550,000	29,000	5%	9,000	29%
Delaware	157,000	3,000	2%	2,000	60%
District of Columbia	85,000	3,000	3%	–	6%
Florida	3,195,000	236,000	7%	69,000	29%
Georgia	1,898,000	55,000	3%	17,000	30%
Hawaii	223,000	11,000	5%	3,000	26%
Idaho	355,000	8,000	2%	3,000	42%
Illinois	2,096,000	70,000	3%	17,000	24%
Indiana	1,182,000	26,000	2%	7,000	25%
Iowa	547,000	12,000	2%	1,000	12%
Kansas	524,000	11,000	2%	4,000	37%
Kentucky	753,000	19,000	3%	6,000	33%
Louisiana	797,000	14,000	2%	6,000	42%
Maine	188,000	3,000	2%	–	28%
Maryland	1,012,000	56,000	6%	16,000	29%
Massachusetts	1,014,000	65,000	6%	21,000	32%
Michigan	1,599,000	36,000	2%	10,000	27%
Minnesota	978,000	40,000	4%	6,000	15%
Mississippi	518,000	4,000	1%	1,000	34%
Missouri	1,032,000	14,000	1%	3,000	22%
Montana	178,000	–	0%	–	17%
Nebraska	360,000	12,000	3%	3,000	26%
Nevada	521,000	15,000	3%	4,000	30%
New Hampshire	195,000	3,000	2%	–	15%

TABLE A-1 (cont.)

Immigrant Children Ages 5-17, by State, 2021

	Total U.S. Children	All Immigrant Children		Recent Immigrant Children	
		Number	% of all children	Number	% of all immigrant children
New Jersey	1,507,000	116,000	8%	35,000	30%
New Mexico	357,000	8,000	2%	3,000	40%
New York	3,010,000	172,000	6%	44,000	26%
North Carolina	1,720,000	52,000	3%	20,000	39%
North Dakota	130,000	3,000	2%	–	5%
Ohio	1,932,000	39,000	2%	13,000	33%
Oklahoma	719,000	8,000	1%	3,000	41%
Oregon	651,000	13,000	2%	3,000	23%
Pennsylvania	1,991,000	59,000	3%	21,000	35%
Rhode Island	155,000	9,000	6%	2,000	23%
South Carolina	840,000	17,000	2%	8,000	46%
South Dakota	163,000	1,000	1%	–	0%
Tennessee	1,140,000	33,000	3%	13,000	39%
Texas	5,570,000	294,000	5%	97,000	33%
Utah	711,000	14,000	2%	6,000	39%
Vermont	90,000	1,000	1%	–	9%
Virginia	1,402,000	57,000	4%	20,000	35%
Washington	1,243,000	61,000	5%	21,000	34%
West Virginia	271,000	1,000	1%	–	48%
Wisconsin	957,000	15,000	2%	5,000	30%
Wyoming	100,000	–	1%	–	35%
United States	54,814,000	2,142,000	4%	646,000	30%

Notes: This analysis defines “recent immigrants” as individuals who arrived in the United States within three years of the survey year. “–” indicates estimates not displayed due to small sample size.

Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS data.

Endnotes

- 1 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State and County, FY 2014-Present,” accessed October 13, 2023; Jonathan Beier, Lauren Farwell, Rhonda Fleischer, and Essey Workie, *Four Strategies to Improve Community Services for Unaccompanied Children in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022).
- 2 Xinjie Chen and Amado M. Padilla, “Role of Bilingualism and Biculturalism as Assets in Positive Psychology: Conceptual Dynamic GEAR Model,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, no. 2122 (2019).
- 3 See Julie Sugarman, *A Guide to Finding and Understanding English Learner Data* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018); Julie Sugarman, *Legal Protections for K-12 English Learner and Immigrant-Background Students* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2019).
- 4 This includes Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* and the *Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974*.
- 5 The federal government applies this definition to the term “immigrant student.” However, in fact sheet uses the term “recent immigrant” to refer both to the population defined by Title III of the *Every Student Succeeds Act* and the recent immigrant population identified with Census Bureau data. *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*, as amended through the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, Public Law 114–95, 114th Cong., 2d sess. (December 10, 2015): 212.
- 6 The term “newcomer” is typically used in research and in school systems to refer to immigrants who have arrived in the United States relatively recently and with little or no English proficiency. This fact sheet, in contrast, focuses on data on recent immigrant children without consideration for their English proficiency.
- 7 This information is available from the U.S. Department of Education’s ED Data Express. From <https://eddataexpress.ed.gov>, select “Data Download” then “Build Dataset.” In the Data Download Tool, under program, select “Title III,” and under population, select “immigrant students.”
- 8 Researchers using Census Bureau data typically count individuals as limited English proficient if they report speaking English well, not well, or not at all, compared to those that respond they speak English very well or speak only English. See Julie Sugarman and Courtney Geary, *English Learners in Select States: Demographics, Outcomes, and State Accountability Policies* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018).
- 9 Cary Lou and Steven Martin, “Better Census Data on Children of Immigrants Would Help Them and the Nation,” Urban Institute, June 29, 2022.
- 10 MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) data.
- 11 In this analysis, “foreign-born children” excludes those born abroad to U.S.-citizen parents or reported to have only U.S.-born parents. Additionally, the ACS asks respondents who have lived in the United States more than once to list the latest year they came to live in the United States. Therefore, some children categorized in this fact sheet as recent immigrants may have more than three total years of residency in the United States due to leaving and returning.
- 12 Muzaffar Chishti and Julia Gelatt, “After a Slump, Legal Immigration to the United States Is Returning to Pre-Pandemic Levels,” *Migration Information Source*, November 30, 2022; Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, “Record-Breaking Migrant Encounters at the U.S.-Mexico Border Overlook the Bigger Story” (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, October 2022).
- 13 These 2019 data result from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University.
- 14 See, for example, Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez, Joanna A. Christodoulou, and Michelle M. Shabaker, “Preschoolers’ English Vocabulary Development: The Influence of Language Proficiency and At-Risk Factors,” *Learning and Individual Differences* 35 (2014): 79–86.
- 15 Texas Education Agency, *Secondary School Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools, 2020-21* (Austin, TX: Texas Education Agency, 2022), 88.
- 16 Ilana M. Umansky et al., *Understanding and Supporting the Educational Needs of Recently Arrived Immigrant English Learner Students: Lessons for State and Local Education Agencies* (Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2018), 22.
- 17 High school completion includes students who passed a high school equivalence test. See National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 219.67. High School Completion Rate of 18- to 24-Year-Olds Not Enrolled in High School (Status Completion Rate), Number of 18- to 24-Year-Olds Not in High School, and Number Who Are High School Completers (Status Completers), by Selected Characteristics: Selected Years, 2010 through 2021,” updated September 2022.
- 18 Cassidy Francies and Zeke Perez, Jr., “50-State Comparison: Free and Compulsory School Age Requirements,” Education Commission of the States, updated August 19, 2020.

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