

# Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States

## Stable Numbers, Changing Origins

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### Executive Summary

The number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States has largely stabilized over the past decade, rebounding slightly after a dip immediately following the recession of 2008–09. As of 2018, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that there were 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the country, down slightly from 12.3 million in 2007. This pattern of little growth or even decline in the unauthorized immigrant population has been noted by other analysts as well, and it follows a long period of high growth through the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet there have been notable changes in the characteristics of this population during the numerically stable, post-2008 period. The origin countries of unauthorized immigrants have shifted, for example, as the number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico has dropped, and populations from other world regions, particularly Asia and Central America, have continued to grow.

This fact sheet offers a profile of the unauthorized immigrant population, using a unique methodology developed by MPI researchers in partnership with leading demographers at The Pennsylvania State University and Temple University to analyze the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau and U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). It highlights key trends from a newly updated MPI data tool that can be used by policymakers, media professionals,

#### BOX 1 Explore U.S. and State Data

For a detailed sociodemographic profile of unauthorized immigrants in the United States, 41 states and the District of Columbia, and the 127 counties with the largest unauthorized populations, explore MPI's interactive data tool: [bit.ly/unauthdata](https://bit.ly/unauthdata)

scholars, advocates, and the general public to better understand the characteristics of the unauthorized immigrant population at the national, state, and local levels.

Among the key findings:

- ▶ In 2018, though their share was shrinking, Mexicans still accounted for about half of all unauthorized immigrants. Mexico and Central America more broadly remain far and away the greatest source region for unauthorized immigrants—with two-thirds of the total—while Asia came in second with 14 percent.
- ▶ Unauthorized immigrants' share of the total U.S. foreign-born population fell from 30 percent in 2007 to 23 percent in 2018, while the share comprised by legal immigrants—especially naturalized citizens—rose. This shift indicates that the foreign-born population overall is becoming better socially and politically integrated.

- ▶ About 1.6 million unauthorized immigrants were married to U.S. citizens and another 675,000 were married to lawful permanent residents (LPRs) in 2018. At the same time, 4.4 million U.S.-citizen children had at least one unauthorized immigrant parent, as did 100,000 LPR or nonimmigrant children. Citizens and LPRs living in mixed-status families with unauthorized immigrants face potential economic hardship due to the limited employment options of unauthorized immigrants and restrictions on their eligibility for assistance programs such as unemployment insurance and food stamps.
- ▶ In 2018, 15 percent of unauthorized immigrants (1.7 million people) had a temporary status or deferral of deportation with work authorization, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and asylum applicants granted employment authorization.
- ▶ Although they have become more dispersed across the country, unauthorized immigrants remain concentrated in certain states. In 2018, almost one-quarter lived in California, and nearly half lived in either California, Texas, or New York. At the local level, one-fifth resided in the counties where four major cities—Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and Chicago—are located.

The recent stabilization—and in some years, decline—of the unauthorized immigrant population can be attributed to fluctuations in the U.S. economy, a decline in the pool of potential migrants from Mexico as demographics there changed and economic opportunities expanded, and heightened U.S. border and interior immigration enforcement. The changing characteristics of this population are important as states and counties across the country assess the economic contributions of their unauthorized immigrant residents as well as their health,

economic, and social service needs. Looking ahead, future trends in this population's numbers and characteristics will be shaped by the ongoing effects of the Trump administration's ramped-up border enforcement, asylum restrictions, and deportations; the impacts of the pandemic and the associated economic contraction in both the United States and origin countries; and the course the incoming Biden administration sets for U.S. immigration policy.

## 1 Introduction

The size of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States has largely stabilized over the past decade. After a long period of high growth that stretched through the 1990s and early 2000s, this population contracted immediately following the recession of 2008–09, before rebounding slightly. Since that recession, the Mexican unauthorized immigrant population has declined substantially, while immigrants from Central America and Asia have grown as a share of the overall unauthorized population.

This fact sheet sketches a profile of the 11 million unauthorized immigrants the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates were living in the country as of 2018. Included in the profile are: their top countries and regions of origin; how they fit within the broader U.S. immigrant population; how many are part of mixed-status families; the U.S. states and counties where the largest numbers live; and key socioeconomic characteristics such as education, English proficiency, and family income levels.

The indicators described in this fact sheet and featured in the associated interactive data tool ([bit.ly/unauthdata](https://bit.ly/unauthdata)) are designed to address policy questions such as:

- ▶ How many unauthorized immigrants are eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, and how many

would be eligible for an expansion of DACA or a broader legalization program?

- ▶ How many are low income and may need assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated recession?
- ▶ How many are well educated, holding a bachelor's degree or higher, and how many are proficient in English?
- ▶ How can past trends in the size and composition of the unauthorized immigrant population help predict future trends?

These types of policy questions resonate not just at the national but also the state and local levels. The unauthorized immigrant population is distributed unevenly across the country, with high concentrations in major metropolitan areas—such as Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and Chicago—but also growing numbers in smaller cities and rural areas across the country. The data described in this

fact sheet and the online tool can be used by these communities to assess the economic contributions of unauthorized immigrants as well as their health, economic, and social service needs.

## 2 Recent Trends in the Unauthorized Immigrant Population

The 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s were decades of rapid growth in the United States' immigrant population—both legal and unauthorized. In 1980, there were 12.0 million foreign-born people in the country, of whom an estimated 2.1 million or 18 percent were unauthorized immigrants.<sup>1</sup> By 2000, the foreign-born population had risen to 31.1 million, with the 8.0 million unauthorized immigrants comprising about one-quarter of this total. According to MPI's estimates, the unauthorized immigrant population

### BOX 2

#### Building a Profile of the United States' Unauthorized Immigrant Population

To track trends in the unauthorized immigrant population and provide the best possible estimates of this group at the national, state, and local levels, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has partnered with leading demographers at The Pennsylvania State University and Temple University. Together, this research team has developed a unique methodology to estimate the number of unauthorized immigrants and to ascertain their characteristics by assigning legal status to noncitizens in the U.S. Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey (ACS).

Our method combines detailed data from several authoritative data sources, including the Census Bureau and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The first step involves comparing the total foreign-born population in the ACS with the number of legal immigrants counted in DHS administrative records; the difference between these two estimates represents the number of unauthorized immigrants in the country. In a second critical step, the total unauthorized immigrant population is weighted upward using the best available information about the undercount of immigrants in the ACS. In the third and final step, the characteristics of unauthorized immigrants are estimated by comparing the characteristics of noncitizens in the ACS with those of legal versus unauthorized immigrants as reported in the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP). The SIPP is a smaller, periodic, nationwide Census Bureau survey that asks noncitizens whether they have a green card or another form of legal immigration status.

For more information on this methodology, an in-depth explanation can be found on the MPI website: [bit.ly/MPILegalStatusMethods](https://bit.ly/MPILegalStatusMethods)

grew by more than 50 percent between 2000 and 2007, peaking at 12.3 million just before the Great Recession (see Figure 1).

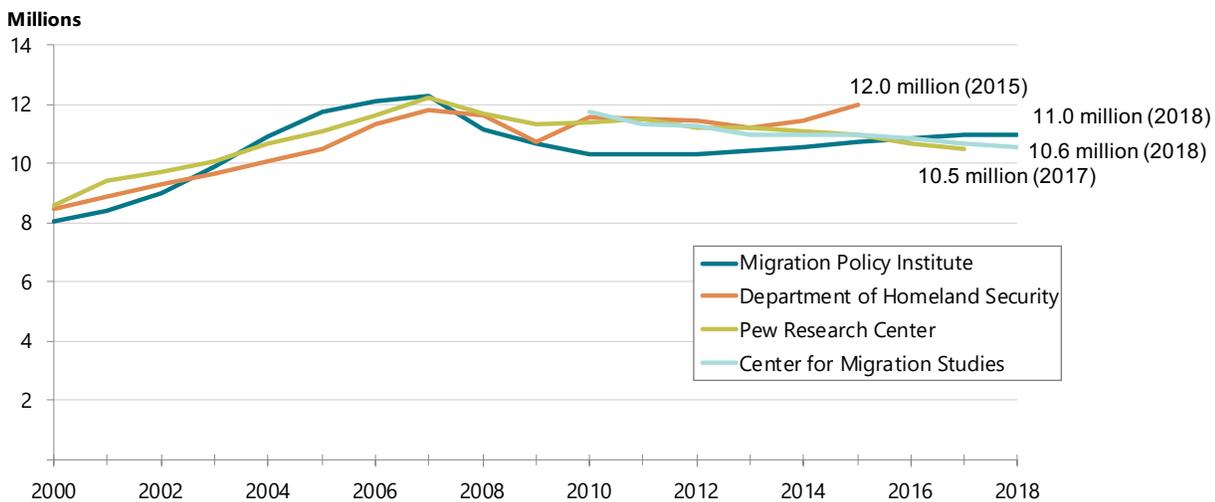
The 2008–09 recession led to a spike in unemployment among all U.S. workers, with particularly high rates among Latino immigrants, almost half of whom were unauthorized.<sup>2</sup> This drop in demand for labor in the United States was accompanied by a pronounced dip in the number of unauthorized immigrants, which fell from 12.3 million in 2007 to 10.3 million in 2010 through 2012. Contributing to this dip was an upswing in deportations from the U.S. interior, which peaked at more than 200,000 annually between fiscal year (FY) 2008 and FY 2011.<sup>3</sup> As the economy recovered and deportations subsided,<sup>4</sup> the population rebounded slowly, reaching 11.0 million in 2018, the latest year for which ACS data are available.

MPI’s finding that the unauthorized immigrant population peaked just before the recession is in line

with similar estimates from the Pew Research Center and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Office of Immigration Statistics. After that, estimates by different research organizations diverge somewhat. MPI and DHS find a sharper initial drop followed by a rebound, while Pew and the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) show a more constant rate of decline. But estimates from all four institutions for the 2015–18 period fall within a relatively narrow range of between 10.5 million and 12.0 million.

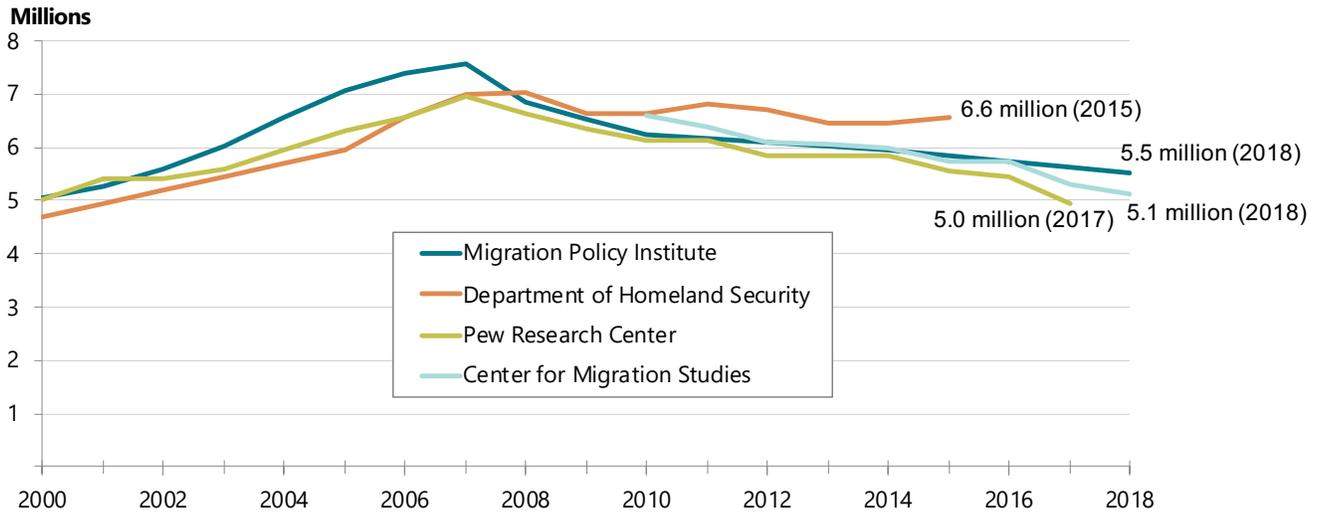
Mexicans have long comprised the largest group of unauthorized immigrants in the United States. The number of unauthorized immigrants born in Mexico also peaked in 2007, but it has fallen consistently and precipitously since then. MPI estimates that the Mexican-origin unauthorized immigrant population fell from 7.6 million in 2007 to 5.5 million in 2018 (see Figure 2). Estimates from Pew, DHS, and CMS show a similar trend, though with slightly different levels.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Estimates of the Size of the U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population, 2000–18**



Sources: Analysis of U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) administrative records and data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the 2000 decennial census and the American Community Survey [ACS] for various years) by Migration Policy Institute (MPI) researchers and Jennifer Van Hook at The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Center. Estimates from other organizations are from Jens Manuel Krogstad, Jeffrey S. Passel, and D’Vera Cohn, “5 Facts about Illegal Immigration in the U.S.,” Pew Research Center, June 12, 2019; Robert Warren, “Reverse Migration to Mexico Led to U.S. Undocumented Population Decline: 2010 to 2018,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 8, no. 1 (2020): 32–41; Bryan Baker, *Illegal Alien Population Residing in the United States: January 2015* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2018).

FIGURE 2

**Estimates of the Size of the U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Population from Mexico, 2000–18**

Sources: Analysis of DHS administrative records and data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the 2000 decennial census and the ACS for various years) by MPI researchers and Van Hook. Estimates from other organizations are from Krogstad, Passel, and Cohn, “5 Facts about Illegal Immigration in the U.S.”; Warren, “Reverse Migration to Mexico Led to U.S. Undocumented Population Decline”; Baker, *Illegal Alien Population Residing in the United States*.

In addition to declining job prospects in the United States in the wake of the recession and record-high deportations, Mexicans who might otherwise have considered coming to the United States illegally benefitted from improved conditions at home: a shrinking youth population that reduced competition for work, improved economic conditions that offered new job opportunities, and an expanding higher education system.<sup>5</sup> Stepped-up border enforcement efforts by the U.S. government—with increased deployment of personnel and technology alongside greater consequences for immigrants apprehended while illegally (re)entering the country, including potential federal prison time—also contributed to the decline in the Mexican unauthorized immigrant population.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the proportion of Mexicans among all unauthorized immigrants fell from 62 percent to 51 percent between 2007 and 2018.

As the number of unauthorized Mexican immigrants declined after 2007, the number from some other countries and regions increased. The largest increase—from 866,000 in 2007 to 1.5 million in 2018

(and from 7 percent to 14 percent of the overall unauthorized population)—occurred among unauthorized immigrants born in Asia. The top Asian sending countries were India, China/Hong Kong, the Philippines, Korea, and Vietnam. The number of unauthorized immigrants born in Central America—primarily in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—also increased from 1.5 million in 2007 to 1.8 million in 2018 (and from 12 percent to 16 percent of all unauthorized immigrants). Unauthorized immigrants from Asia almost all overstayed valid visas, while those from Central America—like Mexicans—mostly entered the United States without authorization across the Southwest border.<sup>7</sup>

### 3 National Origins of Unauthorized Immigrants

Despite their decline in number and share, Mexicans still accounted for about half of all unauthorized immigrants in the United States in 2018. Among

the other nine most common origin countries were three in Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) as well as three in Asia (India, China/Hong Kong, and the Philippines), as can be seen in Table 1. All countries except Mexico comprised less than 10 percent of the total unauthorized population in 2018.

**TABLE 1**  
**Ten Most Common Origin Countries for Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States, 2018**

Origin Country	Estimated Number of Unauthorized Immigrants	Share of Total Unauthorized Immigrant Population
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,977,000</b>	<b>100%</b>
Mexico	5,572,000	51%
El Salvador	750,000	7%
Guatemala	588,000	5%
India	469,000	4%
Honduras	402,000	4%
China/Hong Kong	394,000	4%
The Philippines	233,000	2%
Dominican Republic	191,000	2%
Colombia	182,000	2%
Brazil	145,000	1%

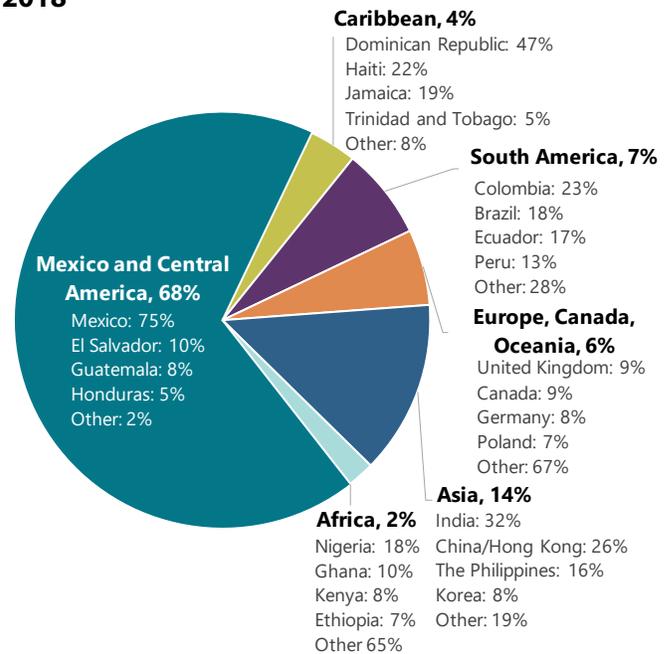
Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Jennifer Van Hook at The Pennsylvania State University.

**BOX 3**  
**Explore Country and Region of Origin Data**

To find out more about where unauthorized immigrants in different U.S. states and counties come from, explore MPI’s interactive data tool: [bit.ly/unauthmap](http://bit.ly/unauthmap)

Looking at world regions, Mexicans and Central Americans together were two-thirds of the overall unauthorized population in 2018. Asians accounted for 14 percent, and all other world regions made up less than 10 percent of the total (see Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3**  
**Regions of Origin and Top Countries within Them for Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States, 2018**



Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

## 4 Unauthorized and Other Immigrants in the United States

In 2018, unauthorized immigrants comprised an estimated 23 percent of the total U.S. immigrant population of 47.5 million (see Figure 4).<sup>8</sup> In the decade leading up to 2018, the share of immigrants who were unauthorized declined as their absolute number fell. In 2007, at their peak, unauthorized immigrants accounted for more than 30 percent of the total foreign-born population of 40.6 million.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the number of naturalized U.S. citizens rose and became an increasing share of all immigrants, and the number who were lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders) or nonimmigrants held steady. In 2018, the 21.0 million naturalized citizens made up the largest share of all immigrants—44 percent, up from 36 percent in 2007. The number of LPRs grew much more slowly over this period, from an estimated 12.8 million in 2007 to 13.5 million in 2018.<sup>10</sup> Although about 1 million people are admitted to the United States as LPRs each year, growth in this population is offset as some green-card holders naturalize and others emigrate.<sup>11</sup>

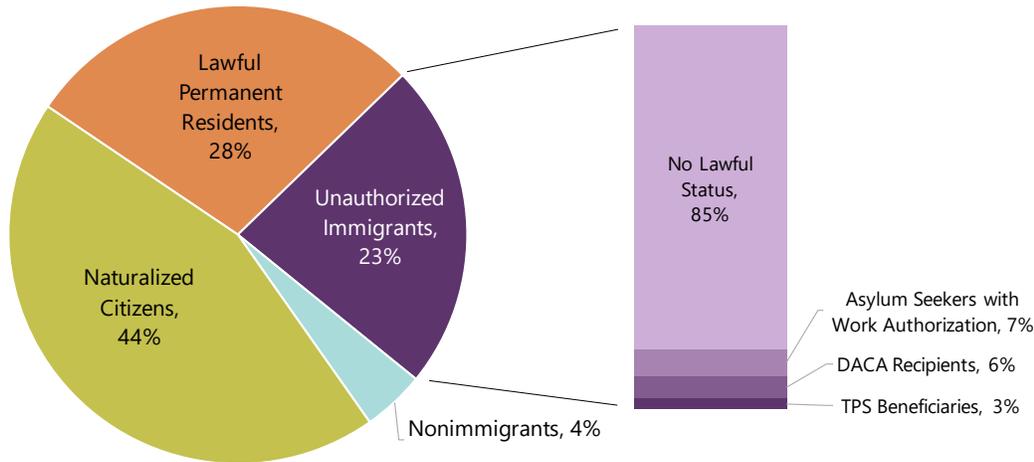
Another group of noncitizens (2.1 million as of 2018) were admitted on a temporary basis with nonimmigrant visas.<sup>12</sup> Nonimmigrants include students, diplomats, religious workers, and temporary workers in both high-skilled jobs (H-1B technical workers and L managers or skilled workers) and low-skilled jobs (H-2A agricultural seasonal workers and H-2B hospitality and other nonagricultural seasonal workers). The total number of nonimmigrants in the country is much smaller than the numbers of LPRs, naturalized citizens, and unauthorized immigrants because nonimmigrants generally stay in the United States for short periods, meaning this population does not accumulate in number the way other immigrant groups do.

MPI estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population—like those of other research organizations—include some individuals who, while lacking citizenship or a visa, have temporary protection from deportation and work authorization. These forms of protection are subject to the discretion of the U.S. executive branch, which can revoke them—as the Trump administration attempted to do, though its attempts were mostly blocked in court. Once protection is revoked, these immigrants are potentially subject to arrest and deportation.

In 2018, 15 percent of the estimated unauthorized immigrant population (1.7 million people) had one of three major forms of protection:

- 1 **Asylum applicants with employment authorization documents: 738,000 (7 percent of the total 11 million unauthorized immigrants).** Until recently, asylum applicants became eligible to apply for work authorization once their applications had been pending for six months. A new regulation that entered into force in August 2020 extended this waiting period to one year.<sup>13</sup>
- 2 **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients: 646,000 (6 percent of the total).** Through an executive action in 2012, the Obama administration created the DACA program, which offered two-year, renewable reprieves from deportation for unauthorized immigrants who entered the United States as children (under age 16) before June 15, 2007; who were under age 31 as of June 15, 2012; who were ages 15 or older when they first applied for DACA; and who meet certain other conditions.<sup>14</sup> President Trump sought to end the DACA program on September 5, 2017, but to-date, the program has been kept alive through litigation.<sup>15</sup>
- 3 **Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders: 320,000 (3 percent of the total).** In the *Immigration Act of 1990*, Congress created TPS for migrants who cannot safely return to their origin countries due to armed conflict, natural disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions. The statute allows the administration to designate and redesignate certain countries for TPS on a periodic basis to reflect changing origin-country conditions. In 2020, the top origin countries for TPS

FIGURE 4

**Citizenship and Legal Status of the U.S. Foreign-Born Population, 2018**

TPS = Temporary Protected Status; DACA = Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

Sources: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook. Data on DACA recipients are from: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “Approximate Active DACA Recipients: As of June 30, 2020” (data table, USCIS, Washington, DC, November 16, 2020). Data on TPS beneficiaries are from: Jill Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2018); USCIS, “Extension of the Designation of Syria for Temporary Protected Status,” *Federal Register* 84, no. 184 (September 23, 2019): 49751–57; USCIS, “Extension of the Designation of Yemen for Temporary Protected Status,” *Federal Register* 85, no. 41 (March 2, 2020): 12313–19; USCIS, “Extension of the Designation of Somalia for Temporary Protected Status,” *Federal Register* 85, no. 48 (March 11, 2020): 14229–35; USCIS, “Extension of the Designation of South Sudan for Temporary Protected Status,” *Federal Register* 85, no. 212 (November 2, 2020): 69344–51. Data on asylum seekers are from: USCIS, “Form I-765 Application for Employment Authorization, All Receipts, Approvals, Denials Grouped by Eligibility Category and Filing Type” (data table for Fiscal Years 2018 and 2017, USCIS, Washington, DC, accessed November 1, 2020).

beneficiaries were El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, and Nicaragua.<sup>16</sup>

Other, smaller groups within the unauthorized immigrant population also have temporary protection from deportation and work authorization but could not be estimated. These include, for example, individuals granted deferred action (essentially, recognition that the government knows they are in the United States without authorization but does not plan to deport them) and those granted withholding of removal (a status granted to humanitarian migrants who do not meet the standards for asylum but demonstrate a clear probability of persecution if sent to their origin country).

Estimates of how many unauthorized immigrants have DACA, TPS, or other forms of temporary protec-

tion subject to executive discretion will be of policy importance to the incoming Biden administration. The president-elect has expressed his commitment to maintain the full scope of the DACA program as originally implemented,<sup>17</sup> and extensions or reinstatements of TPS designations are also likely to be on the new administration’s agenda.

## 5 Legal Status of Unauthorized Immigrants’ Family Members

Understanding the legal status(es) of unauthorized immigrants’ family members is more complex be-

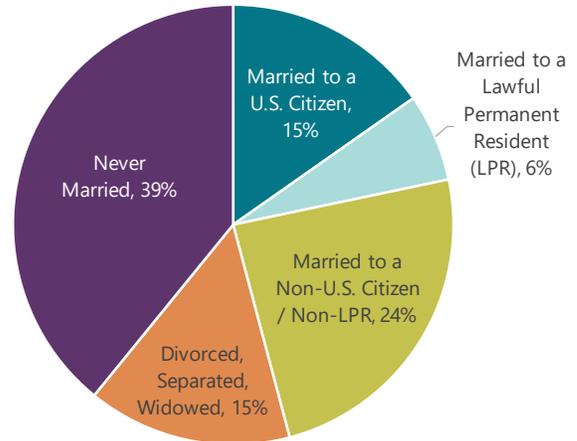
cause individual members of an immigrant family often have different statuses. For instance, in 2018, nearly half of unauthorized immigrant adults (ages 15 and older) were married and, of those who were, nearly half were married to a U.S. citizen or LPR (see Figure 5). MPI estimates that 1.6 million unauthorized immigrants were married to U.S. citizens and 675,000 were married to LPRs in 2018. In other words, more than one-fifth of unauthorized immigrant adults were married to a U.S. citizen or green-card holder.

MPI estimates that, as of 2018, there were 5.2 million children (ages 17 and under) with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent; they accounted for 27 percent of the 19.7 million children with at least one immigrant parent of any legal status, and 7 percent of the total U.S. child population of 73.8 million (see Figure 6).

Most of the children who lived with unauthorized immigrant parents were born in the United States, and all U.S.-born children are automatically U.S. citizens. As a result, 85 percent of all children with

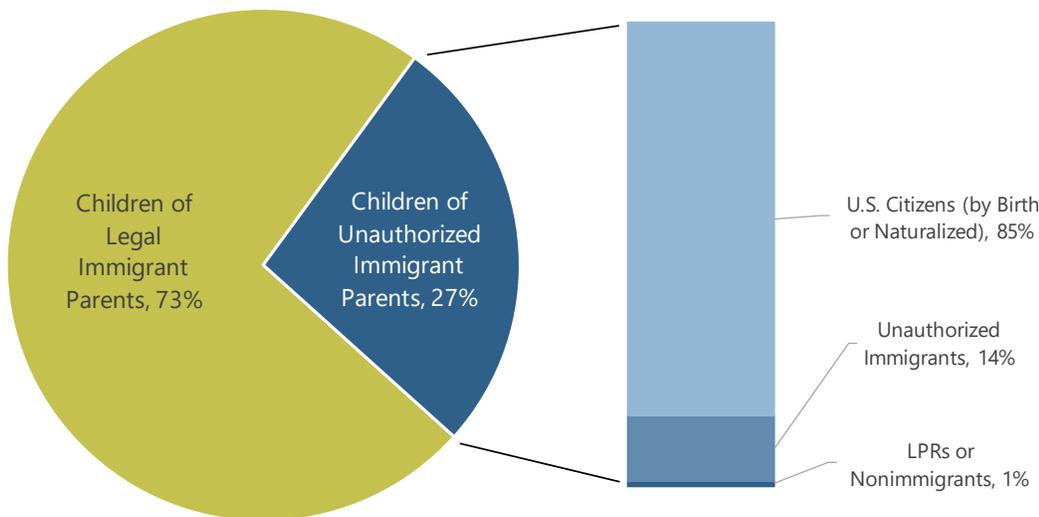
at least one unauthorized immigrant parent were U.S. citizens in 2018 (a total of 4.4 million children). Another 1 percent (fewer than 100,000) were LPRs or nonimmigrants, owing to the presence of at least one parent with that status in the household. The

**FIGURE 5**  
**Marital Status of Unauthorized Immigrant Adults (ages 15 and older) in the United States and Spouses' Immigration Status, 2018**



Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Citizenship and Immigration Status of Children of Immigrants\* in the United States, 2018**



\* Children of immigrants have at least one foreign-born parent. Children of unauthorized immigrant parents have at least one unauthorized immigrant parent, while children of legal immigrant parents do not have any unauthorized immigrant parents. Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

remaining 728,000 children with unauthorized immigrant parents were themselves unauthorized.

Having an unauthorized immigrant parent or spouse can affect the economic well-being and access to government assistance of other adults and children in immigrant families.<sup>18</sup> Unauthorized immigrants have limited job prospects due to restrictions on licensing for many occupations and unregulated, informal employment in others. Research has shown that unauthorized immigrants' often chaotic work schedules, poor working conditions, and low autonomy on the job can lead to psychological distress, with negative implications for child development.<sup>19</sup> Youth with unauthorized immigrant parents complete less schooling than those with legal immigrant parents from the same countries.<sup>20</sup> And lack of immigration status can disqualify parents from eligibility for many forms of government assistance such as unemployment benefits, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (also called food stamps) and the pandemic stimulus payments issued under the *Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act*, leading to lower family incomes and higher economic hardship among their U.S.-citizen children.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, having an unauthorized immigrant spouse makes U.S. citizens and LPRs eligible for lower food stamp benefits and excluded them from the pandemic stimulus payments.

## 6 Top U.S. States and Counties for Unauthorized Immigrants

Unauthorized immigrants have long been most concentrated in the U.S. Southwest, though they also live in communities across the country. In 2018, California had the most unauthorized immigrants of any state: 2.6 million, or almost one-quarter of the national total (see Table 2). Texas had the second most

with 1.7 million, or 16 percent of the total population. No other state accounted for more than 10 percent of the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population. All of the other states in the top ten—except for Arizona—were located outside of the Southwest. These ten states together accounted for 73 percent of the nationwide unauthorized immigrant population.

### BOX 4 Explore Data on DACA Recipients' States of Residence

To find out which U.S. states have the most beneficiaries of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, explore MPI's interactive data tools for the program: [bit.ly/dacatools](https://bit.ly/dacatools)

TABLE 2  
Ten U.S. States with the Largest Unauthorized Immigrant Populations, 2018

State	Estimated Number of Unauthorized Immigrants	Share of Total Unauthorized Immigrant Population
<b>United States</b>	<b>10,977,000</b>	<b>100%</b>
California	2,625,000	24%
Texas	1,730,000	16%
New York	866,000	8%
Florida	732,000	7%
Illinois	437,000	4%
New Jersey	425,000	4%
Georgia	330,000	3%
North Carolina	298,000	3%
Arizona	281,000	3%
Virginia	251,000	2%

Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

Unauthorized immigrants are also highly concentrated in a small number of cities and counties. The counties containing the four largest U.S. cities together accounted for about one-fifth of the nationwide unauthorized immigrant population in 2018

(see Table 3). Los Angeles County had 8 percent of the total, while New York City's five counties had 6 percent. Harris County, where Houston is located, had 4 percent of the total, and Cook County (which includes Chicago) had another 2 percent. Together, the top ten localities together were home to one-third of all unauthorized immigrants.

**TABLE 3**  
**Ten U.S. Localities with the Largest Unauthorized Immigrant Populations, 2018**

County	Estimated Number of Unauthorized Immigrants	Share of Total Unauthorized Immigrant Population
<b>United States</b>	<b>10,977,000</b>	<b>100%</b>
Los Angeles County, CA	880,000	8%
New York City Counties*	616,000	6%
Harris County, TX	466,000	4%
Dallas County, TX	278,000	3%
Cook County, IL	263,000	2%
Orange County, CA	223,000	2%
Maricopa County, AZ	202,000	2%
Boston-Cambridge-Quincy, MA Metropolitan NECTA**	177,000	2%
Miami Dade-Monroe Counties, FL	176,000	2%
San Diego County, CA	173,000	2%

\* New York City Counties include Bronx County, Kings County, New York County, Queens County, and Richmond County.

\*\* New England City and Town Areas (NECTAs) are geographic entities defined by the U.S. Census Bureau for use as alternatives to counties in the six-state New England region.

Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

## 7 Socioeconomic Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants

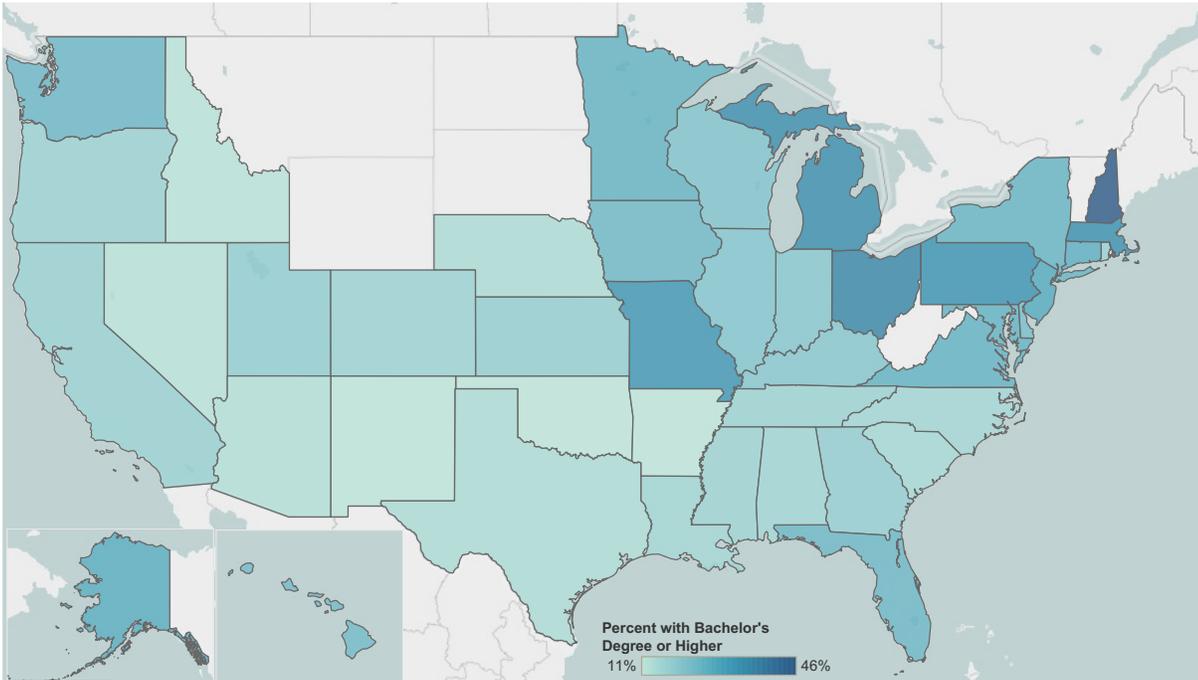
While most unauthorized immigrants' job prospects are limited by their lack of work authorization, many bring substantial human capital to the U.S. labor market. In 2018, almost one-fifth of unauthorized immigrants had a four-year college degree, compared to one-third of the overall U.S. population.<sup>22</sup> Some unauthorized immigrants, both those with more and less formal education, were employed in industries that have become essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as health care, agriculture, food processing, and transportation.<sup>23</sup>

The educational attainment of unauthorized immigrants varies by where in the United States they live and their national origins. In 2018, New Hampshire, Washington, DC, Ohio, Michigan, and Massachusetts had the best-educated unauthorized immigrant populations (see Figure 7). Among unauthorized immigrants from the top ten countries of origin, those from India, China, the Philippines, and Brazil were the most likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher (see Figure 8).

In general, unauthorized immigrants in the Northeastern and Midwestern states tended to have more formal education than those living elsewhere. They were also more likely to be from Asia, the Caribbean, and South America—regions that include some of the top origin countries for college-educated unauthorized immigrants (such as China, India, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, and Colombia). In the West and South, a higher proportion of unauthorized immigrants fall into the less well-educated group from Mexico and Central America.

FIGURE 7

**College-Educated Share of Unauthorized Immigrants, by State, 2018**

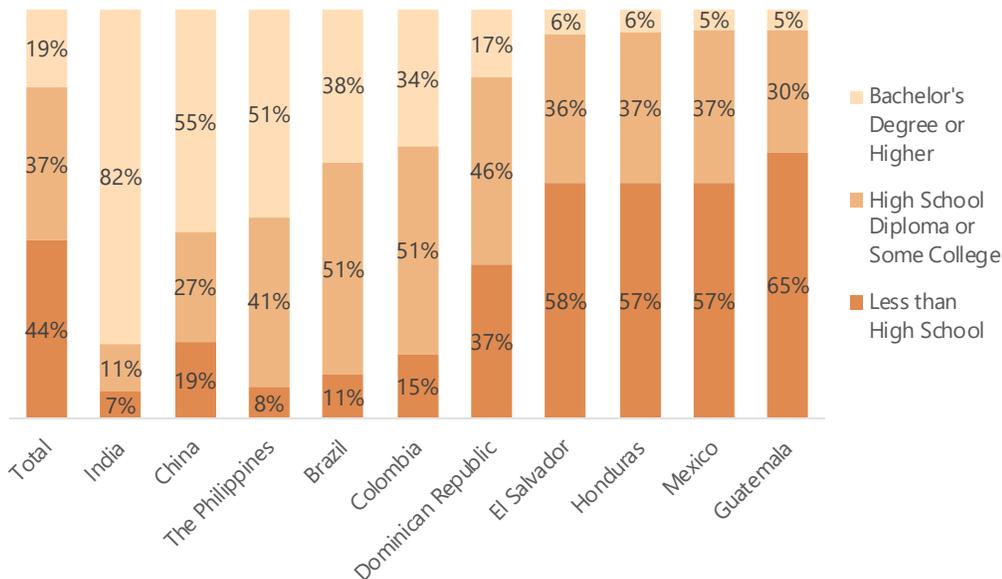


Notes: The college-educated immigrants included in this figure are those with a bachelor's degree or higher. States not shaded are those for which the characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small sample sizes.

Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

FIGURE 8

**Educational Attainment of Unauthorized Immigrant Adults (ages 25 and older) in the United States, Overall and for the Top Ten Countries of Birth, 2018**



Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

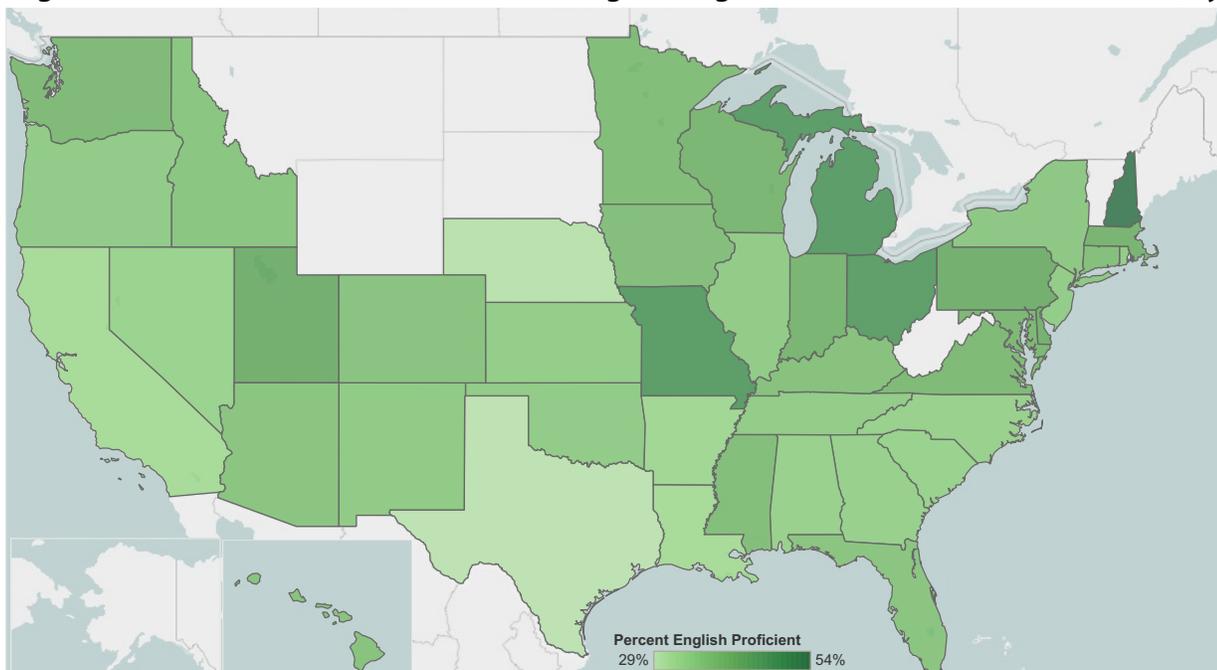
More than one-third of unauthorized immigrants in 2018 reported that they spoke English very well or spoke only English, meeting the Census Bureau’s definition of “English proficiency.” New Hampshire, Missouri, Michigan, Ohio, and Washington, DC had the highest English-proficient shares of resident unauthorized immigrants (see Figure 9); with the exception of Missouri, these were also among the top five with the most well-educated unauthorized immigrant populations (see Figure 7). Like educational attainment, the state pattern for unauthorized immigrants’ English proficiency was related to the state pattern for their national origins. Among those from the top ten sending countries, unauthorized immigrants from India had the highest rates of English proficiency, followed by those from the Philippines and Brazil—the same countries showing the highest

rates of educational attainment, with the exception of China (see Figure 10).

The most common non-English languages among unauthorized immigrants in 2018 were Spanish (72 percent), Chinese (8 percent, including speakers of Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages), Filipino or Tagalog (2 percent), Portuguese (2 percent), and Hindi (1 percent). Spanish was the most common language among unauthorized immigrants in all states except Hawaii, where the category “Pacific Islander languages” sat at the top of the list, and Alaska, where the top language was Tagalog. English was the second most commonly spoken language among unauthorized immigrants in all states except Hawaii (Tagalog) and Massachusetts (Portuguese). Beyond that, there was more state-to-state variation; the third most common language was Chinese in 20

FIGURE 9

**English-Proficient Share of Unauthorized Immigrants Ages 5 and Older in the United States, by State, 2018**

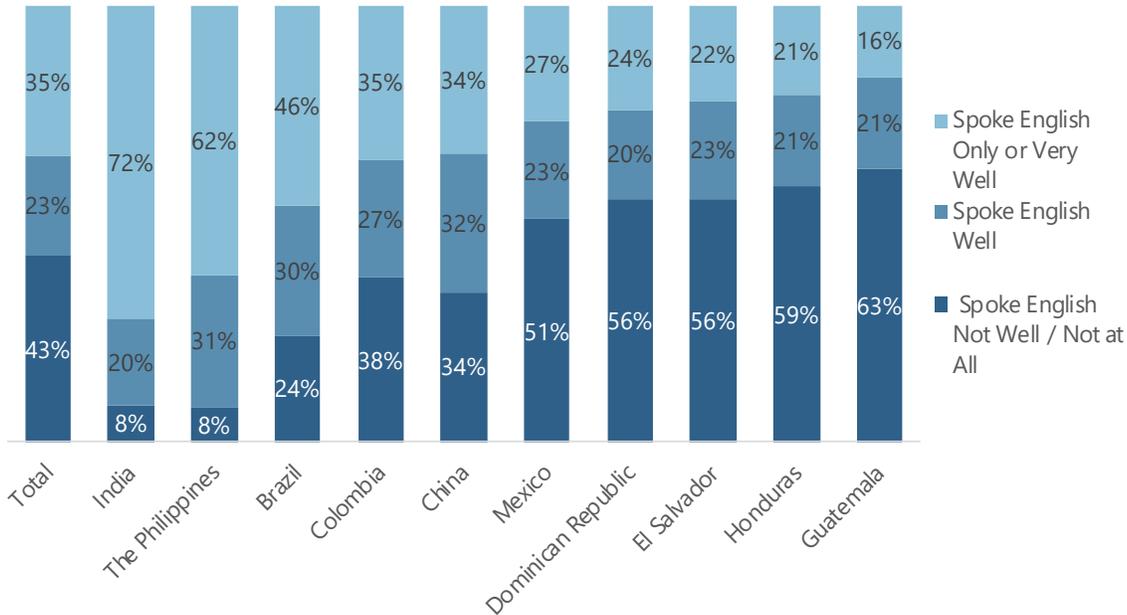


Note: States not shaded are those for which the characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small sample sizes.

Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

FIGURE 10

**English Proficiency of Unauthorized Immigrants Ages 5 and Older in the United States, Overall and for the Top Ten Countries of Birth, 2018**



Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

states, Haitian Creole in Florida, Polish in Illinois, and Portuguese in Connecticut and New Jersey.

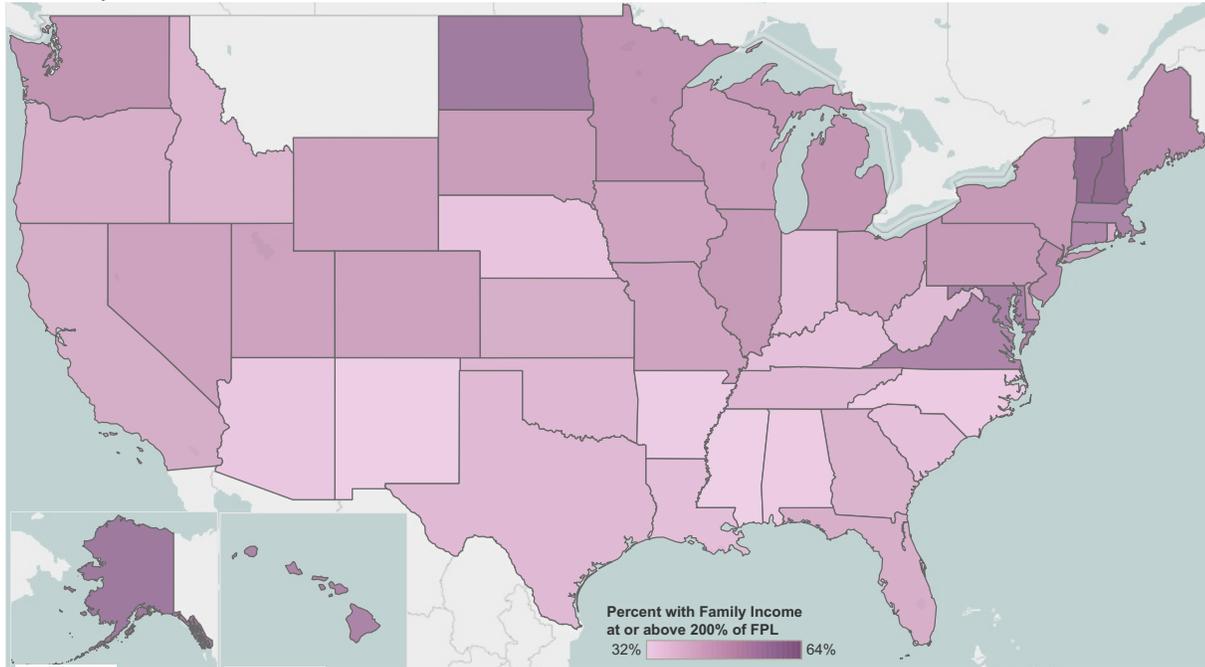
In 2018, 26 percent of unauthorized immigrants had family incomes below the federal poverty level, while 43 percent had incomes of at least twice this level.<sup>24</sup> The places where unauthorized immigrants had the highest family incomes were New Hampshire, Vermont, Washington, DC, Alaska, and North Dakota (see Figure 11). Some of these are among the

places with the best educated and most English-proficient unauthorized populations (see Figures 7 and 8).

Among unauthorized immigrants from the top origin countries, those from India, the Philippines, Brazil, and Colombia had the highest family incomes, correlating with the groups showing both the highest educational attainment and strongest English skills (see Figure 12).

FIGURE 11

**Share of Unauthorized Immigrants with Family Incomes at or above 200 Percent of the Federal Poverty Level, by State, 2018**

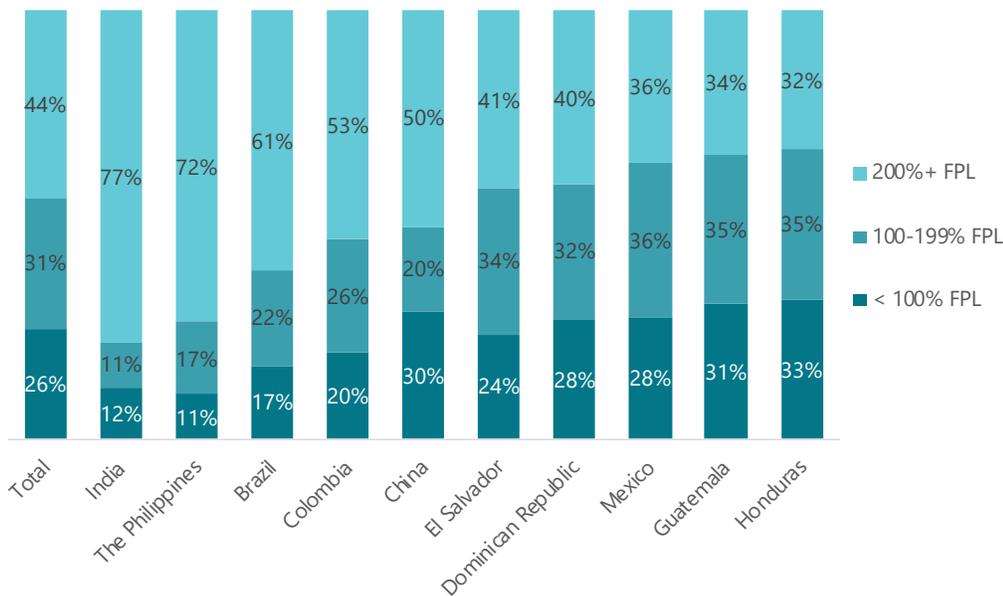


Note: States not shaded are those for which the characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small sample sizes.

Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

FIGURE 12

**Family Incomes of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States Relative to the Federal Poverty Level, Overall and for the Top Ten Countries of Birth, 2018**



Source: These 2018 data result from MPI analysis of data from the 2014–18 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2018 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

## 8 Conclusion

The size of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States has remained relatively steady since the 2008–09 recession. At the same time, its composition has shifted. Unauthorized immigrants from Mexico, while still the largest origin group, now make up a smaller share of the overall unauthorized population, while those from other countries, particularly in Asia and Central America, account for larger shares. Whether these trends continue will depend on the ongoing impact of substantial U.S. immigration policy changes implemented under the Trump administration and those put forward by the incoming Biden administration, as well as by the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. economy, and conditions in major origin countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

The 2008–09 recession broke a decades-long pattern of growth in the United States' unauthorized immigrant population. Though the U.S. economy rebounded after the recession, changing demographics and an improved economy in Mexico reduced the pool of would-be unauthorized immigrants from that country. Migration from the Central American countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras—where economic and social conditions remain weak and unstable—only partially filled the gap. Meanwhile, the number of unauthorized immigrants from Asia increased as more migrants from countries in that region overstayed their visas. The result was a substantial shift in the composition of the unauthorized immigrant population away from Mexican origins and toward Central Americans and Asians.

Heightened U.S. immigration enforcement and shifting trends in migrant arrivals at the U.S.-Mexico border also contributed to the stalling number of unauthorized immigrants and changes in their characteristics. Between the 2008–09 recession and 2018, the Border Patrol augmented surveillance and

staffing along the border, erected more barriers, and increasingly imposed penalties such as federal prison sentences on apprehended migrants. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) deported record numbers of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States during the 2009–11 period and, following a dip during the later Obama years, ramped deportations back up after Trump took office in 2017. And starting in 2014, the composition of migrants apprehended at the Southwest border shifted from primarily Mexican adults to primarily Central American families and children, resulting in a short-term spike in Central Americans entering the United States as asylum seekers, peaking in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

Looking beyond 2018 and the data analyzed in this fact sheet, recent policy decisions and world events continue to shape the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population. During the 2018–19 period of heightened asylum claims by Central Americans, the Trump administration implemented measures that make it more difficult to seek and obtain asylum and increased pressure on the Mexican government to contain unauthorized migration from countries to the south.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps as a result, apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexico border fell in the second half of 2019 and early 2020. Once the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the administration issued an order in March 2020 mandating the rapid expulsion of most migrants arriving at U.S. borders without authorization to enter—without formal removal orders or opportunities to apply for asylum.<sup>27</sup> This order, combined with mobility restrictions throughout the region, have led to further reductions in Central American arrivals. However, in the fall of 2020, the number of apprehensions of Mexican unauthorized migrants by U.S. authorities rebounded to levels not seen since before the 2008–09 recession.<sup>28</sup> The new policy of expelling migrants rapidly to Mexico, without a period in U.S. custody, has facilitated multiple entry attempts, thereby increasing overall apprehensions.<sup>29</sup>

Other pandemic-related policy changes may affect the size of the unauthorized immigrant population by reducing the number of visitors admitted temporarily to the United States who later overstay their visas. In March 2020, U.S. consulates and embassies abroad temporarily closed for in-person services, limiting legal immigration to the United States, and in June 2020, the Trump administration banned the admission of several types of temporary workers. These policy changes, combined with reduced global mobility and high U.S. unemployment, resulted in a 54-percent reduction in temporary visa issuances abroad in fiscal year 2020 compared to the prior year.<sup>30</sup>

Many of these trends could change once a Biden administration takes charge, if it chooses a different approach to border enforcement, asylum policies and procedures, and other elements of the U.S. immigration system. A changed approach to managing the spread of the coronavirus and the potential introduction of successful vaccines could also change the course of the pandemic and help speed economic recovery. All these factors will shape the future number and characteristics of unauthorized immigrants in the United States, from those who arrive without authorization or overstay a visa, to those who choose to return or are deported to their origin countries, to which immigrants qualify for temporary protections or a path to legal status.

## Endnotes

- 1 Robert Warren and Jeffrey S. Passel, "A Count of the Uncountable: Estimates of Undocumented Aliens Counted in the 1980 United States Census," *Demography* 24, no. 3 (1987): 375–93.
- 2 Estimates by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) indicate that 46 percent of all immigrants from Latin America were unauthorized immigrants in 2007, just before the recession hit. That share fell to 42 percent by 2009. For a discussion of the impact of the recession on Latin American immigrants see Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Madeleine Sumption, and Aaron Terrazas, *Migration and Immigrants Two Years after the Financial Collapse: Where Do We Stand?* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2010), 30.
- 3 Randy Capps et al., *Revving Up the Deportation Machinery: Enforcement under Trump and the Pushback* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018), 38.
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- 8 The 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) recorded a total immigrant population of 44.9 million, but the ACS undercounts both legal and unauthorized immigrants. MPI estimates assume an undercount of about 6 percent among the total foreign-born population, with most of this undercount occurring among unauthorized immigrants.
- 9 The 2007 ACS recorded a total immigrant population of 37.9 million, but MPI estimates that the true population was 40.6 million due to the ACS undercount of immigrants.
- 10 The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) has estimated the number of lawful permanent residents (LPRs) at 13.4 million in FY 2018; this includes 1.2 million who arrived before 1980 and 12.2 million who arrived after 1980. For FY 2019, the agency's estimated total was 13.6 million. Calendar year 2018—the time period of this fact sheet's analysis—overlaps those two fiscal years. See Bryan Baker, *Estimates of the Lawful Permanent Resident Population in the United States and the Subpopulation Eligible to Naturalize: 2015-2019* (Washington, DC: DHS, OIS, 2019), 2; Nancy Rytina, *Estimates of the Legal Permanent Resident Population in 2007* (Washington, DC: DHS, OIS, 2009).
- 11 DHS, OIS, "Table 1. Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status: Fiscal Years 1820 to 2019," *2019 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, updated October 27, 2020.
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- 13 DHS, "Asylum Application, Interview, and Employment Authorization for Applicants," *Federal Register* 85, no. 124 (June 26, 2020): 38532–628.
- 14 The number of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients is as of June 30, 2020. See U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "Approximate Active DACA Recipients: As of June 30, 2020" (data table, November 16, 2020).
- 15 The Trump administration terminated DACA on September 5, 2017, but the federal courts enjoined the termination. The Supreme Court ruled in June 2020 that the Trump administration did not adequately justify its decision to terminate the program. The administration responded by issuing a new memo re-establishing the program and allowing only immigrants who had previously received DACA to renew it in one-year intervals; it did not allow new applications. However, a federal court judge ruled that Chad Wolf, who signed that memo, was illegally appointed as Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, and that therefore his DACA memo should be set aside. On December 4, 2020, that judge ordered the U.S. government to restore DACA to its original form, allowing new applications, two-year DACA grants, and advance parole. See Memorandum from Chad Wolf, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, to Mark Morgan, Senior Official Performing the Duties of Commissioner, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP); Matthew Albence, Senior Official Performing the Duties of Director, ICE; and Joseph Edlow, Deputy Director of Policy, USCIS, "Reconsideration of the June 15, 2012 Memorandum Entitled 'Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion with Respect to Individuals Who Came to the United States as Children,'" July 28, 2020; *Martin Jonathan Batalla Vidal, et al. v. Chad Wolf, et al.*, 16-cv-04756-NGG-VMS and *State of New York, et al. v. Donald Trump et al.*, 17-CV-5228-NGG-VMS (U.S. District Court Eastern District of New York, Memorandum and Order, December 2020).

- 16 In 2017 and 2018, the Trump administration attempted to end TPS designations for nationals of El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Sudan, who together make up the great majority of all beneficiaries. While court injunctions have kept the designations in place, a 9th Circuit Court decision in September 2020 allows the administration to wind down TPS for all of these countries except Haiti, once the court issues a directive to the federal district court. Until that directive is issued, the injunction preserving TPS for El Salvador, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, and Sudan remains in place. A separate injunction is keeping TPS in place for Haitian nationals. Due to these ongoing injunctions, the Trump administration has announced an automatic extension of TPS protections and work authorization through October 4, 2021, for TPS beneficiaries from all six of these countries. See Jill H. Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status: Overview and Current Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020); Congressional Research Service, “Ninth Circuit Decision Allows Termination of Temporary Protected Status for Sudan, Nicaragua, and El Salvador to Go Forward,” Legal Sidebar, October 16, 2020; USCIS, “Continuation of Documentation for Beneficiaries of Temporary Protected Status Designations for El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Sudan, Honduras, and Nepal,” *Federal Register* 85, no. 237 (December 9, 2020): 79208–15.
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- 27 Pierce and Bolter, *Dismantling and Reconstructing the U.S. Immigration System*, 13.
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