Immigration and Integration in the Ever More Diverse Houston Area

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Contents

Executive Summary

The Houston metropolitan area's immigrant community, which represents about one-quarter of its overall population, continues to grow and is becoming even more diversified. Over the last decade, the foreign-born population in the nine-county Houston metro area grew by 32 percent, reaching 1,657,000 in 2017–21. Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) and other sources, this report draws a sociodemographic profile of Houston's overall foreign-born population, immigrants who are eligible to naturalize, those with temporary or "liminal" statuses (such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA] and Temporary Protected Status [TPS]), recent humanitarian arrivals, and highly skilled immigrants who are underemployed. This diverse immigrant population has contributed significantly to the region's strong post-pandemic economic performance and bolstered its resilience in the face of natural disasters and during the COVID-19 crisis.

> **BOX 1**
> **The Houston Area and Its Immigrants**
>
> In this analysis, Migration Policy Institute (MPI) researchers explore the characteristics of immigrant and U.S.-born residents of the Houston metropolitan area using the official U.S. Census Bureau definition of the Houston–The Woodlands–Sugar Land metropolitan area, which includes nine counties: Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Montgomery, and Waller Counties. In this report, "Houston" and "Houston area" refer to this metropolitan area. This definition differs slightly from the 12-county Houston metropolitan area analyzed in prior MPI work.
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> Throughout the report, "immigrant" and "foreign born" are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who were born in another country, did not have U.S. citizenship at birth, and who later immigrated to the United States. This population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents (also known as green-card holders), refugees and asylees, nonimmigrant visa holders (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), and unauthorized immigrants (including DACA recipients).

Key findings of this analysis include:

Immigrants in Houston are incredibly diverse in terms of their national origins, racial and ethnic identities, and legal status, and they are well-represented across the counties that make up the metropolitan area.

► Mexico was the country of birth for 37 percent of immigrants in the Houston area as of 2017–21, followed by El Salvador, Vietnam, India, Honduras, and Nigeria (each making up between 7 percent and 4 percent of all immigrants). And while Mexicans remain the largest immigrant group, those from other countries comprise a growing share of the foreign-born population, rising from 54 percent in 2006–10 to 63 percent in 2017–21. Some smaller and mid-sized immigrant populations saw particularly notable growth over the study period, including Venezuelans (464 percent), Cubans (259 percent), and Nigerians (251 percent).

► Harris County had by far the largest number of immigrants (1,230,000) in 2017–21, followed by Fort Bend, Montgomery, Brazoria, and Galveston Counties. However, immigrants made up the largest share

of all residents in Fort Bend (29 percent), followed closely by Harris County (26 percent), and, in smaller proportions, Montgomery and Brazoria (14 percent each).

► Most immigrants in the Houston area hold some form of legal status. In 2019, 34 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens, 30 percent were legal permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders), and 4 percent held nonimmigrant visas such as H1-B visas for high-skilled workers and student visas. Unauthorized immigrants made up 31 percent of all immigrants. The unauthorized share of all immigrants varied by county; for example, it was 17 percent in Fort Bend County and 34 percent in Harris County.

► While most immigrants in the Houston area identify as Latino, the breakdown varies by immigration status group. In 2019, the Latino share of immigrants was highest among unauthorized immigrants and green-card holders, and to a lesser extent among naturalized citizens. Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants also represented a significant share of naturalized citizens, and they were the largest group of nonimmigrant visa holders.

Nearly half of Houston children live in a household with at least one immigrant parent.

► There were 1,822,000 children under age 18 living with a parent in Houston in 2019, 48 percent of whom lived with at least one immigrant parent.

► While many of these children's parents held a legal status of one form or another, 310,000 children (or 17 percent of all Houston children) were living with one or more unauthorized immigrant parent.

Immigrants' highest level of education varies significantly by immigration status, and slightly more than half of immigrants in Houston reported having limited English proficiency.

► Although the share of immigrants without a high school diploma (36 percent) was more than four times higher than the share among the U.S. born (8 percent) in 2019, some immigrant groups had very high educational attainment. For example, naturalized citizens and nonimmigrant visa holders were more likely than the U.S. born to have a bachelor's degree or higher.

► In 2019, an estimated 1,040,000 immigrants, representing 57 percent of Houston's foreign-born population, reported speaking English less than "very well" (that is, "well," "not well," or "not at all").

► The languages most commonly spoken by Houston's immigrants included Spanish, English, Vietnamese, a Chinese language, Urdu, Tagalog, and Arabic.

Immigrant workers are overrepresented in key sectors of the Houston economy and select high-demand occupations. However, about one-fifth of college-educated immigrants are underemployed.

► Immigrants made up close to one-third of all workers in Houston in 2017–21. In the construction sector (the industry in which the largest number were employed), immigrants represented nearly half of all workers. Immigrants also comprised relatively high shares of workers in select in-demand, high-skilled occupations such as doctors (42 percent) and engineers (36 percent). Unauthorized immigrants made up important shares of workers the construction and hospitality industries.

► In 2017–21, approximately 67,000 immigrants with a four-year college degree were underemployed (that is, either working in jobs that required no more than a high school education and minimal on-the-job training or unemployed)—a phenomenon referred to as "brain waste." Half of these underemployed immigrants were naturalized U.S. citizens, and 63 percent had obtained their degrees abroad. This underemployed population included more than 3,000 immigrants with health or medical degrees and 4,000 with degrees in education—two sectors with ongoing labor shortages.

Overall, immigrants in Houston have lower incomes than the U.S. born. And while their rate of home ownership is also lower than that of the U.S. born, it varies significantly by immigration status.

► An estimated 43 percent of foreign-born and 31 percent of U.S.-born Houston residents had family incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in 2019 ($25,750 for a family of four). However, income levels varied depending on immigration status: 60 percent of unauthorized immigrants had low incomes compared with 26 percent of naturalized citizens.

► Home ownership rates mirror these contrasts. While 73 percent of naturalized citizens owned their homes (a rate higher than that of U.S.-born citizens, at 58 percent), 19 percent of unauthorized immigrants owned their homes.

While hundreds of thousands of noncitizens in the Houston area meet the status and U.S. residence criteria to naturalize, many face barriers to naturalizing related to limited English proficiency, education, and lower incomes despite relatively high employment rates.

► Based on Migration Policy Institute estimates, 360,000 foreign-born adults in Houston were eligible to naturalize in 2019, meaning that they were green-card holders with at least five years of U.S. residence or three years if married to a U.S. citizen. At least 276,000 of these eligible-to-naturalize individuals lived in Harris County.

► Two-fifths of eligible-to-naturalize Houstonians had lived in the United States for more than 20 years. Immigrants who had become eligible more recently (i.e., those in the country between five and nine years) represented another one-fifth of those eligible to naturalize.

► Close to half (44 percent) of eligible-to-naturalize immigrants were born in Mexico, followed in much smaller numbers from El Salvador, Vietnam, and India.

► English proficiency—an important element of the naturalization test—was likely a key barrier for many noncitizens who were eligible to naturalize but had not done so. As of 2019, 62 percent of eligible immigrants reported having limited English proficiency. In addition, 41 percent had less than a high school education, which could represent a barrier to passing the citizenship and language tests.

► The cost of applying to become a U.S. citizen can also be a barrier. In 2019, 42 percent of eligible-to-naturalize immigrants had a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

The Houston metropolitan area—long a top destination for resettled refugees—has welcomed large numbers of humanitarian protection seekers and recipients in recent years.

► In FY 2022, 684 refugees were resettled in the Houston area, most coming from Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myanmar (also known as Burma), and Syria.

► The metro area received 569 Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders (for interpreters or translators who had worked with the U.S. military) in FY 2022, mostly Afghans. In addition, 5,593 Afghan parolees arrived in Houston as part of Operation Allies Welcome. These newcomers in Houston represented fully half of all Afghan evacuees paroled in the state of Texas.

► The Biden administration also recently created parole programs for Ukrainians (2022) and for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (2023), with different requirements, duration, and access to public benefits. Local resettlement agencies in Houston have reported significant increases in the number of Cubans seeking assistance. Other parolees are either arriving in Houston in very small numbers (Haitians and Ukrainians) or not interacting with these resettlement organizations because they are ineligible for benefits (Nicaraguans and Venezuelans).

► As of August 2023, asylum seekers had 40,000 pending cases in federal immigration courts located in Houston. In FY 2022, more than 85 percent of defensive asylum petitioners in Houston were from Latin America.

► A record 9,234 unaccompanied children were released to family members or other sponsors in six of the nine counties in the Houston area in FY 2022. In the first 11 months of FY 2023, an additional 6,223 unaccompanied children were released to sponsors in Houston. Harris County has been the top recipient of unaccompanied children nationwide since FY 2014.

Tens of thousands of immigrants in the Houston area have temporary or "liminal" statuses that do not offer a path to permanency, leaving their future uncertain.

► An estimated 27,000 individuals in the Houston metropolitan were TPS holders as of 2019, with most having come from El Salvador or Honduras.

► Houston was also home to 31,340 DACA recipients in 2022. But with the DACA program locked in ongoing litigation, it is unclear how long these young people brought to the United States as children will continue to hold this status and work authorization.

Despite the economic and social impacts of the pandemic and ongoing litigation around federal immigration policies, the foreign-born population of Houston continues to grow. With well-designed policies and adequate resources to foster immigrant integration, established and more recent immigrants alike will continue to contribute to the metropolitan area's dynamism.

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1   Introduction

Houston is known for its dynamic economy and diversity. In 2023, it was ranked the 10th best city in America, in part thanks to its well-educated population and vibrant labor market.[1] The metro area's immigrant population, which has grown considerably over the last decade, has contributed significantly to this diversity and dynamism. Close to one-quarter of the Houston metropolitan area's population is foreign born, with some of immigrant communities—including Venezuelans, Nigerians, Hondurans, and Indians—growing particularly quickly.

These changes in Houston's immigrant population take place in a context of high-profile and highly contested immigration policies at the federal, state, and local levels. For instance, in 2017, Sheriff Ed Gonzalez of Harris County (in which Houston is located) ended the county's participation in the 287(g) agreement, which had facilitated local cooperation with federal immigration enforcement authorities.[2] And Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo gained national attention for several pro-immigrant initiatives and statements, including supporting the creation of an immigrant legal services fund in 2020, which eventually became the largest immigrant legal fund funded by a county.[3] Some of the most striking policy changes, and their local impacts, occurred as the Biden administration entered office and proceeded to reverse many of the most controversial and prominent Trump-era policies.[4]

Immigration to Houston—like the nation overall—was affected by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only slowed new arrivals but also hit immigrant communities especially hard. In addition, the public health crisis highlighted long-overlooked issues such as the underemployment of highly skilled immigrant health-care workers, even as the country faces chronic shortages. And as prior research by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has documented, local responses to the pandemic led Houston's private and public sectors to forge new partnerships and develop new outreach and targeting strategies to meet the needs of the metro area's increasingly diverse and dispersed immigrant populations.[5]

Although Houston is not a border city, it has also felt the spillover effects of the record high number of asylum seekers and other migrants who have arrived at the U.S. southwest border since 2021. Many of these immigrants are not from traditional sending countries, and they are entering the United States with widely divergent claims to legal status and, as a result, with differing prospects for remaining in the country long term and future integration trajectories.

This report uses multiple data sources and estimation methods to provide insight into the composition of and issues relevant to Houston's immigrant population. It begins by describing the overall foreign-born

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1   Megan Fan Munce, "Houston, 'America's Stealthy Powerhouse on the Rise,' Cracks Top 10 in New Ranking of Best Cities," *Houston Chronicle,* June 4, 2023.

2   Bethany Blankley, "Texas Sheriff Who Made Houston a 'Sanctuary City' for Noncitizens Tapped to Head ICE," The Center Square, May 11, 2021.

3   ABC News and Community Impact Newspapers, "Harris County Approves Immigrant Legal Defense Fund Proposed by Lina Hidalgo," ABC 13 Eyewitness News, February 27, 2020. By 2021, funding rose to 2 million dollars. See Andrea Guttin, "Revisiting Victory: The Path to an Immigrant Legal Services Fund," Houston Immigration Legal Services Collaborative, accessed August 10, 2023.

4   Muzaffar Chishti and Jessica Bolter, "Biden at the One-Year Mark: A Greater Change in Direction on Immigration Than Is Recognized," *Migration Information Source*, January 19, 2022.

5   Randy Capps and Michael Fix, *Changing the Playbook: Immigrants and the COVID-19 Response in Two U.S. Communities* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2022).

population in the nine-county Houston metropolitan area[6] and, when possible, at the county level, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), pooled for the 2017–21 period. It then focuses on the size and select characteristics of immigrants eligible to naturalize. The final section focuses on humanitarian populations and immigrants holding temporary statuses that do not offer a clear pathway to a long-term status. All data disaggregated by immigration status leverage a unique MPI methodology for assigning immigration status to noncitizens using data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and then weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigration population estimates.[7] This methodology allows researchers to better understand the characteristics of populations including lawful permanent residents (also known as green-card holders), nonimmigrant visa holders (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), unauthorized immigrants, refugees, asylees, and Cuban/Haitian entrants.

2   Characteristics of Houston's Immigrant Population

In 2017–21, the Houston metropolitan area had 1,657,000 foreign-born residents, equivalent to 24 percent of its total population of 7,051,000 (see Table 1). About 1,230,000 of these immigrants lived in Harris County, the most populous county in the Houston metro area. After Harris, the counties with the most immigrants were Fort Bend—the county in which immigrants made up the highest share of residents, at 29 percent—followed by Montgomery, Brazoria, and Galveston. The other four counties in the metropolitan area had fewer than 10,000 foreign-born individuals each.

TABLE 1

Immigrant Population in the Houston Metropolitan Area and Its Counties, 2006–10 and 2017–21

	2006–10	2017–21	Percent Change	Foreign-Born Share of Total Population, 2017–21
Total Houston metro area	**1,253,000**	**1,657,000**	**32%**	**24%**
Harris County	988,000	1,230,000	24%	26%
Fort Bend County	133,000	236,000	77%	29%
Montgomery County	52,000	84,000	62%	14%
Brazoria County	36,000	50,000	39%	14%
Galveston County	28,000	34,000	21%	10%
Waller County	6,000	9,000	50%	13%
Liberty County	5,000	7,000	40%	10%
Austin County	3,000	4,000	33%	10%
Chambers County	2,000	3,000	50%	9%

Source: Table B05006 of the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2006–10 and pooled 2017–21 American Community Surveys (ACS).

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6   The geographic scope of this report's analysis varies slightly from the 12-county Houston metropolitan area analyzed in prior Migration Policy Institute (MPI) studies of the Houston area: Randy Capps and Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, *A Profile of Houston's Diverse Immigrant Population in a Rapidly Changing Policy Landscape* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018); Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Chiamaka Nwosu, *A Profile of Immigrants in Houston, the Most Diverse Metropolitan Area* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2015).

7   For more information on this methodology, see MPI, "MPI Methodology for Assigning Legal Status to Noncitizen Respondents in U.S. Bureau Survey Data," accessed June 6, 2023.

Between 2006–10 and 2017–21, the number of immigrants in the Houston metropolitan area increased by 32 percent, from 1,253,000 to 1,657,000. A number of counties saw their foreign-born populations grow by 50 percent or more: Fort Bend, Montgomery, Waller, and Chambers Counties.

A.   Top Countries of Origin

Mexican immigrants were by far the largest group, making up 37 percent of all immigrants living in the Houston metropolitan area in 2017–21 (see Table 2). Following Mexico, the next five top countries of origin were El Salvador (7 percent), Vietnam (6 percent), India (6 percent), Honduras (6 percent), and Nigeria (4 percent).

TABLE 2
Top 20 Origin Countries of Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2017–21

	Country	Number of Foreign Born	Share of All Foreign Born
1	Mexico	599,000	37%
2	El Salvador	119,000	7%
3	Vietnam	95,000	6%
4	India	94,000	6%
5	Honduras	92,000	6%
6	Nigeria	63,000	4%
7	Venezuela	54,000	3%
8	China*	53,000	3%
9	Colombia	40,000	2%
10	Guatemala	40,000	2%
11	The Philippines	36,000	2%
12	Pakistan	35,000	2%
13	Cuba	34,000	2%
14	Canada	16,000	1%
15	Iran	16,000	1%
16	Taiwan	15,000	1%
17	Nicaragua	12,000	1%
18	Iraq	11,000	1%
19	Korea	10,000	1%
20	Peru	10,000	1%

* In this data, China excludes Hong Kong and Taiwan.
Source: Table B05006 of the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2017–21 ACS.

Since 2006–10, the top five countries of origin of immigrants in the region have remained the same, though with significant differences in their growth rates (see Table 3). While the number of Mexicans in the Houston metropolitan area has been relatively stable, the number of Salvadorans grew by 22 percent, Vietnamese by 35 percent, Indians by 78 percent, and Hondurans by 117 percent. The immigrant population also become more diverse over the decade, with the non-Mexican share of immigrants increasing from 54 percent in 2006–10 to 63 percent in 2017–21.

The next largest immigrant groups, those from Nigeria and Venezuela, saw especially rapid growth since 2006–10. The number of Nigerian and Venezuelan immigrants grew by 251 percent and 464 percent, respectively, to reach 63,000 and 54,000 in 2017–21. Though they represented smaller numbers, Cuban and Iraqi immigrants also registered very high growth rates.

TABLE 3
Change in the Top 20 Origin Countries of Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2006–10 and 2017–21

Country	2006–10	2017–21	Change 2006–10 to 2017–21	Percent Change
Mexico	585,000	599,000	14,000	2%
El Salvador	97,000	119,000	22,000	22%
Vietnam	71,000	95,000	24,000	35%
India	53,000	94,000	41,000	78%
Honduras	42,000	92,000	50,000	117%
Nigeria	18,000	63,000	45,000	251%
Venezuela	10,000	54,000	44,000	464%
China*	30,000	53,000	23,000	75%
Colombia	20,000	40,000	20,000	97%
Guatemala	18,000	40,000	22,000	123%
The Philippines	28,000	36,000	8,000	26%
Pakistan	22,000	35,000	13,000	58%
Cuba	10,000	34,000	24,000	259%
Canada	13,000	16,000	3,000	23%
Iran	7,000	16,000	9,000	125%
Taiwan	13,000	15,000	2,000	19%
Nicaragua	6,000	12,000	6,000	104%
Iraq	1,000	11,000	10,000	938%
Korea	11,000	10,000	(1,000)	-8%
Peru	6,000	10,000	4,000	49%

* In this data, China excludes Hong Kong and Taiwan.
Sources: Table B05006 of the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2017–21 and pooled 2006–10 ACS.

B.   Citizenship and Legal Status

Nearly 7 out of 10 immigrants in the Houston metropolitan area were either naturalized citizens or noncitizens with a legal status in 2019 (see Figure 1). This included 34 percent who were naturalized U.S. citizens, 30 percent who were legal permanent residents (LPRs), and 4 percent who held a nonimmigrant status such as a H1-B visa for high-skilled workers or an international student visa. Another 31 percent of foreign-born Houston residents were unauthorized immigrants, a population that included those without any legal status as well as holders of certain "liminal" statuses such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) beneficiaries. Most unauthorized immigrants in Houston were born in Mexico (51 percent), El Salvador (13 percent), or Honduras (11 percent), with smaller shares from Guatemala (6 percent), India (4 percent), and other countries (see Appendix Table A–1).

While Harris County had the highest number of unauthorized immigrants in the Houston area (481,000 out of 577,000 in 2019), the unauthorized share of all immigrants was relatively high in not only Harris but also in counties such as Galveston and Montgomery (see Table 4).

FIGURE 1

Legal Status of Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019
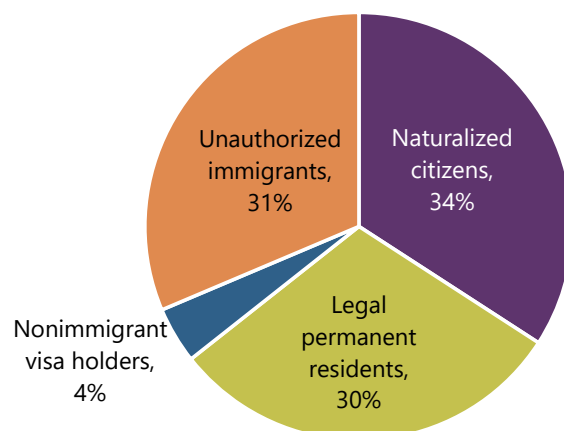
Notes: Legal permanent residents are also known as green-card holders. Nonimmigrant visa holders are temporary visa holders such as international students, H-1B high-skilled workers, and H-2A low-skilled agricultural workers; short-term visitors such as tourists are not included. Unauthorized immigrants include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, and some asylum applicants. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive 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.

TABLE 4

Legal Status of Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area and Its Counties, 2019

|	Naturalized Citizens	Legal Permanent Residents	Nonimmigrant Visa Holders	Unauthorized Immigrants
Total Houston metro area	**34%**	**30%**	**4%**	**31%**
Brazoria County	46%	29%	–	23%
Fort Bend County	50%	27%	6%	17%
Galveston County	37%	27%	4%	32%
Harris County	31%	31%	4%	34%
Montgomery County	30%	32%	6%	31%
Other counties	29%	32%	–	37%

Notes: Categories marked "–" have a sample size too small to generate statistically meaningful results. "Other counties" includes Austin, Chambers, Liberty, and Waller Countries, which are grouped together to make estimates possible despite their smaller population sizes. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

C.   Race and Ethnicity

In 2019, the largest racial group among the U.S.-born population in Houston was people who identified as non-Latino White (44 percent); by contrast, 64 percent of Houston's foreign-born residents identified as Latino (of any race) (see Figure 2). Racial and ethnic diversity varied considerably by immigration status. Among unauthorized immigrants and LPRs, Latinos were by far the largest racial or ethnic group, with 86 percent and 68 percent, respectively. The racial and ethnic makeup of naturalized citizens and nonimmigrant visa holders was more varied. For instance, 44 percent of naturalized citizens were Latino, 36 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, 11 percent were White, and 9 percent were Black. Asians and Pacific Islanders represented the largest share of nonimmigrant visa holders (40 percent), followed by White and Latino individuals.

FIGURE 2

Race and Ethnicity of Houston Metropolitan Area Residents, by Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019
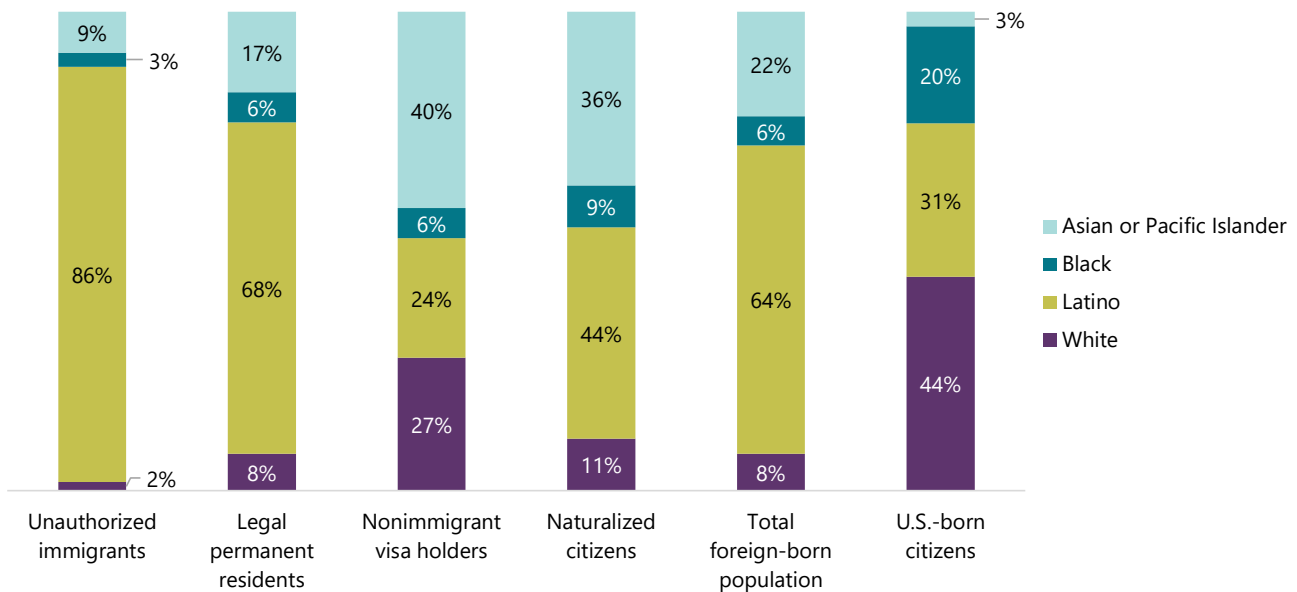
Note: In this figure, all racial and ethnic categories are exclusive, and all Latinos are included in that category regardless of their race. Multiracial and Native American individuals are excluded due to small sample size. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

D.   Immigrant Families

In 2019, 59 percent of immigrants age 15 and older in the Houston metropolitan area were married (see Table 5). The marriage rate among unauthorized immigrants was lower, at 49 percent. Most immigrants in Houston who were married had a spouse who was either a naturalized or U.S.-born citizen (337,000 and 168,000, respectively). An estimated 483,000 immigrants were married to a noncitizen. Married unauthorized immigrants, however, were considerably more likely to have a noncitizen spouse than a U.S.-citizen spouse.

TABLE 5

Marital Status of All Immigrants and Unauthorized Immigrants (age 15 and older) in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019

	All Immigrants		Unauthorized Immigrants	
	Number	Share	Number	Share
Total	1,665,000	100%	513,000	100%
Married	988,000	59%	251,000	49%
Married to a U.S.-born citizen	168,000	10%	31,000	6%
Married to a naturalized U.S. citizen	337,000	20%	29,000	6%
Married to a noncitizen	483,000	29%	191,000	37%
Divorced, separated, or widowed	231,000	14%	57,000	11%
Never married	445,000	27%	206,000	40%

Note: Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

In 2019, there were 873,000 children living with at least one immigrant parent, representing 48 percent of all children in the Houston metropolitan area (see Table 6). Although most lived with a parent who had a legal status, an estimated 310,000 children (or 17 percent of all Houston children) had one or more unauthorized immigrant parents.

TABLE 6

Children under Age 18 in the Houston Metropolitan Area, by Parental Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019

	Number	Share of All Children
Total children under 18 with parents in the home	**1,822,000**	**100%**
U.S.-born parents only	949,000	52%
At least one foreign-born parent	873,000	48%
One or more naturalized-citizen parents (no noncitizen parents)	224,000	12%
One or more legal noncitizen parents (no unauthorized immigrant parents)	339,000	19%
One or more unauthorized immigrant parents	310,000	17%

Notes: Children without parents in the home are excluded from this analysis. Legal noncitizens include LPRs and nonimmigrant visa holders such as international students and temporary workers; more than 85 percent of legal noncitizens are LPRs. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

E.   Educational Attainment

About 36 percent of foreign-born adults (age 25 and older) in the Houston metropolitan area had less than a high school education, compared to 8 percent of U.S.-born citizens in 2019 (see Figure 3). However,

education levels vary considerably by immigrants' legal status. Approximately 52 percent of unauthorized immigrants had less than a high school diploma or equivalent, as did 42 percent of LPRs. In contrast, 22 percent of naturalized citizens and 3 percent of nonimmigrant visa holders had less than a high school education.

Although Houston's U.S.-born citizens are more likely to have a university-level education than the overall foreign-born population, this too varies by immigration status. Nonimmigrant visa holders and naturalized citizens were more likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher (81 percent and 38 percent, respectively) than U.S.-born citizens (34 percent).

FIGURE 3

Educational Attainment of Houston Metropolitan Area Residents (age 25 and older), by Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019
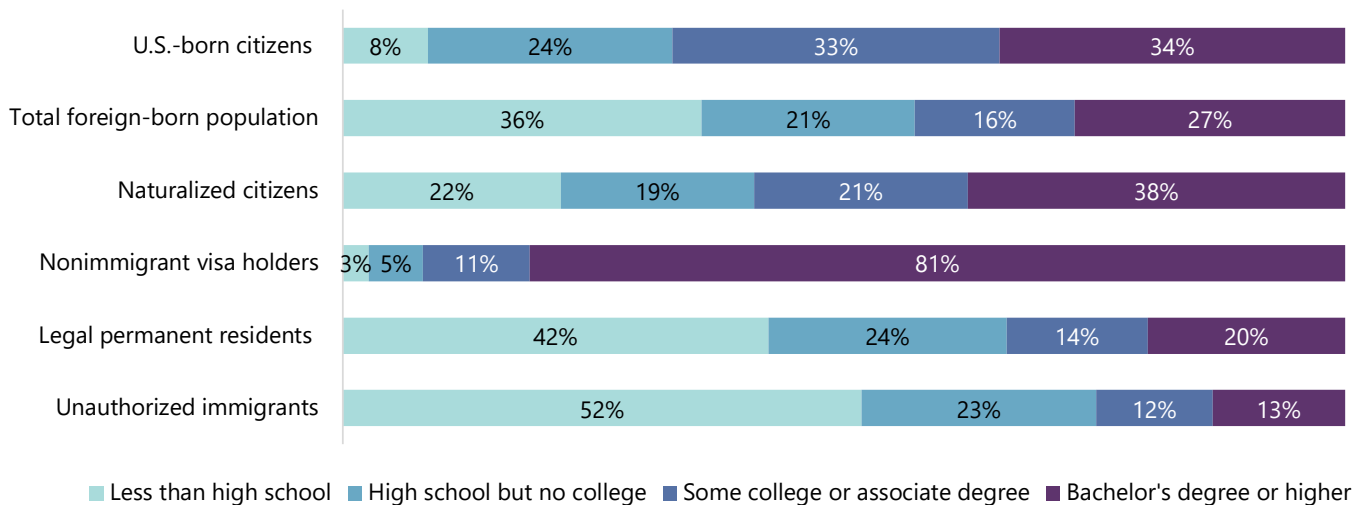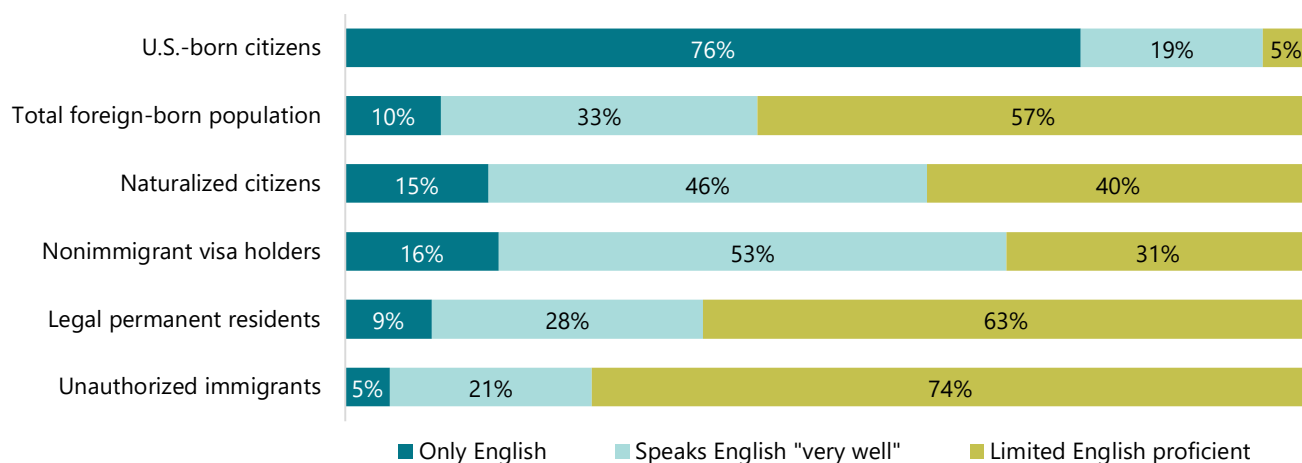

Note: Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

F.   *English Proficiency and Languages Spoken*

In 2019, nearly all U.S.-born citizens in Houston reported speaking English "very well" or "only English" in the ACS, as did 43 percent of its foreign-born residents (see Figure 4). However, an estimated 1,040,000 immigrants, or 57 percent of Houston's immigrants, were limited English proficient, meaning that they reported speaking English less than "very well" (i.e., either "well," "not well," or "not at all").

The immigrant groups with the lowest shares of limited English proficient individuals were nonimmigrant visa holders and naturalized citizens. Looking at the top five origin countries of immigrants in the Houston area, those from Honduras and El Salvador had higher rates of limited English proficiency than immigrants overall (see Appendix Figure A–1).

English Proficiency of Houston Metropolitan Area Residents (age 5 and older), by Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019

Notes: The U.S. Census Bureau asks ACS respondents if they speak a language other than English at home. For those who answer that they speak a foreign language, the survey then asks them to self-assess their spoken English proficiency. "Limited English proficient" refers to persons age 5 and older who report speaking English less than very well, either "not at all," "not well," or "well." Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

The top language spoken by Houston's immigrants in 2017–21 was Spanish (57 percent), followed by English (11 percent), Vietnamese (5 percent), a Chinese language (4 percent), and Swahili, Urdu, Tagalog, and Arabic (2 percent each).[8] Although spoken by a smaller number of immigrants, other primary languages included Hindi, Gujarati, French, Malayalam, Farsi, Telugu, Russian, Portuguese, and Amharic and other Ethiopian languages. Combined, speakers of the top 15 languages (excluding English) made up 82 percent of immigrants.

G.   *Employment and Industries of Work*

Houston, like the nation overall, is experiencing several important, longer-term demographic shifts that have implications for the labor market in terms of both the availability of workers and their skills. Although Houston has seen robust growth in its total population over the past decade, the number of adults age 65 and older grew three times faster than the total population (67 percent versus 23 percent).[9] The workforce is aging as well. As of 2017–21, approximately 15 percent of the Houston workforce was within ten years of retirement age (i.e., ages 55–64) and 5 percent of workers were older than 65.[10] Even before the pandemic, some sectors were experiencing worker shortages, and these will continue to shape the opportunities and dynamism of the Houston economy.

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8   MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2017–21 ACS. In the ACS data, "English" includes English, Jamaican Creole, Krio, Pidgin Krio, and other English-based Creole languages; "Chinese" includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages; "Tagalog" includes Tagalog and Filipino; "French" includes French, Patois, and Cajun; and "Portuguese" includes Portuguese and Cape Verdean Creole. After Arabic, all other languages listed here were spoken by 1 percent or less of the Houston metropolitan area immigrant population.

9   MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2006–10 and pooled 2017–21 ACS.

10   MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2017–21 ACS. All of the data in this section refer to employed workers age 16 and older.

Immigrants have long played an important role in the Houston area's economy. In 2017–21, nearly one-third of workers were immigrants (see Table 7). Some foreign-born workers have specialized skills in sectors such as health care, engineering, technology, oil and gas, and finance. For instance, 42 percent of doctors and 36 percent of engineers in Houston were immigrants. At the same time, many immigrants work in industries that were deemed essential during the pandemic, including construction, hospitality, food services, and retail. For example, 49 percent of construction workers and 34 percent of manufacturing workers were foreign born.

Overall, the top five industries of employment for foreign-born workers in the Houston metropolitan area were construction; professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste-management services; manufacturing; retail trade; and health care. Almost one in six immigrant workers worked in one of these five sectors.

TABLE 7

Total and Immigrant Workers (age 16 and older) in the Houston Metropolitan Area, by Industry of Employment, 2017–21

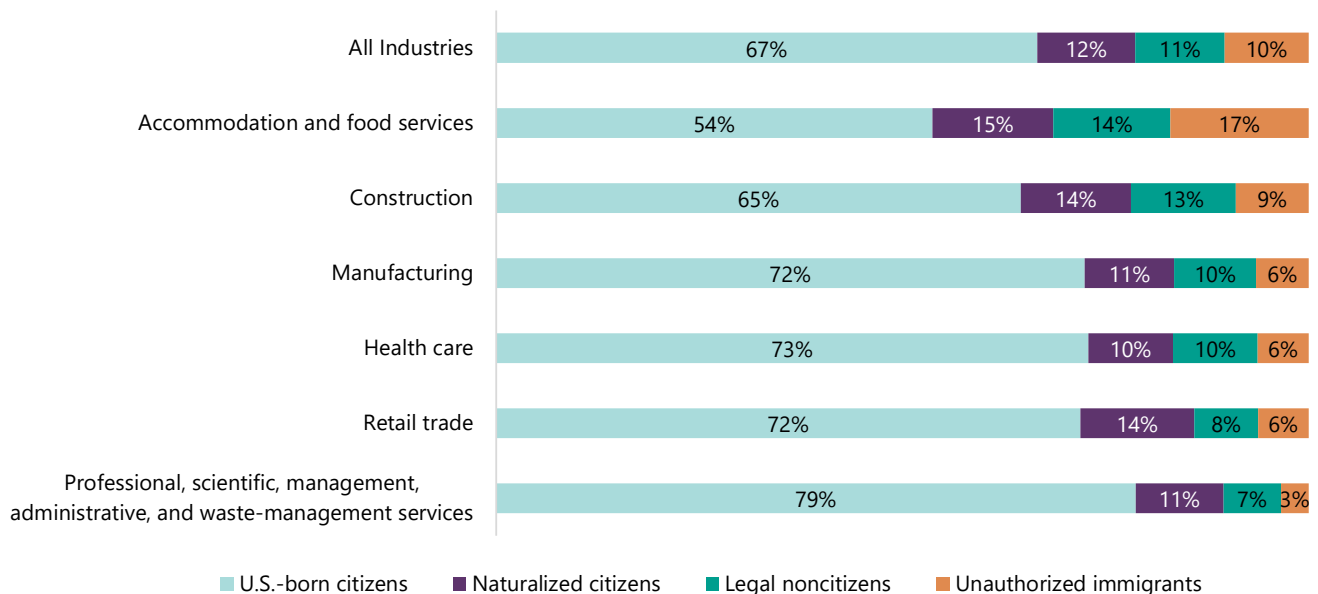| Industry of Employment	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	Foreign-Born Share of All Workers
Total	**3,311,000**	**1,006,000**	**30%**
Construction	323,000	160,000	49%
Professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste-management services	426,000	130,000	31%
Manufacturing	317,000	107,000	34%
Retail trade	350,000	92,000	26%
Health care	331,000	91,000	27%
Accommodation and food services	235,000	87,000	37%
Educational services	303,000	64,000	21%
Transportation and warehousing	184,000	50,000	27%
Finance and insurance, real estate, and rental and leasing	199,000	44,000	22%
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	94,000	28,000	30%
Wholesale trade	100,000	26,000	26%
Public administration	99,000	14,000	14%
Social assistance	49,000	12,000	25%
Utilities	34,000	8,000	25%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation	47,000	8,000	18%
Information	41,000	8,000	19%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	9,000	3,000	34%
Other services	171,000	73,000	43%

Note: Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2017–21 ACS.

About one in ten immigrant workers was without legal status as of 2019. Unauthorized immigrant workers represented 9 percent of all workers in construction and 17 percent of all workers in hospitality (accommodation and food services)—sectors that are largely characterized by unstable employment and limited job prospects (see Figure 6). These sectors were also among those hit hardest and fastest by the pandemic.

Research from MPI and other organizations has demonstrated that during the pandemic, the country's overall immigrant worker population was disproportionately affected by job losses and interruptions compared to U.S.-born workers.[11] Combined with more limited access to health insurance, particularly among unauthorized immigrants, the pandemic's impact on immigrant workers and their families was severe.

FIGURE 6

Houston Metropolitan Area Workers (age 16 and older) Employed in Select Major Industries, by Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019

	U.S.-born citizens	Naturalized citizens	Legal noncitizens	Unauthorized immigrants
All Industries	67%	12%	11%	10%
Accommodation and food services	54%	15%	14%	17%
Construction	65%	14%	13%	9%
Manufacturing	72%	11%	10%	6%
Health care	73%	10%	10%	6%
Retail trade	72%	14%	8%	6%
Professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste-management services	79%	11%	7%	3%

Note: Legal noncitizens include both LPRs and nonimmigrant visa holders such as temporary workers; more than 85 percent of "legal noncitizens" are LPRs. Active-duty members of the military are excluded. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

H. *Employment and Underemployment of College-Educated Immigrant Workers*

Unlike some states and metropolitan areas in the Midwest and Northeast that are experiencing slower population growth or even labor force losses, Houston's labor market continues to grow and remains

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11   Rakesh Kochhar, "Hispanic Women, Immigrants, Young Adults, Those with Less Education Hit Hardest by COVID-19 Job Losses," Pew Research Center, June 9, 2020; Julia Gelatt and Muzaffar Chishti, *COVID-19's Effects on U.S. Immigration and Immigrant Communities, Two Years On* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022).

dynamic. One population that has contributed to the growth and strength of the local economy is college graduates (defined in this analysis as persons with a bachelor's degree or higher).

While the total population of the Houston metropolitan area grew by 23 percent between 2006–10 and 2017–21, the number of college graduates increased by 53 percent from just under 1 million to more than 1.5 million.[12] This population's growth owed in part to college-educated immigrants, who accounted for 37 percent of the expansion of the college-educated population during this period. In 2017–21, 30 percent of immigrant adults had at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 36 percent of U.S.-born adults. Notably, the college-educated share among recently arrived immigrants (i.e., those who had resided in the United States for five year or fewer) was much higher: 44 percent.[13]

Although immigrants are overrepresented within some highly skilled occupations in Houston, such as physicians, IT specialists, and engineers, 67,000 immigrants with four-year college degrees were either working in low-skill jobs or unemployed—a phenomenon referred to as underemployment or "brain waste."[14] Low-skill jobs are those that typically require at most moderate on-the-job training and no more than a high school diploma. Underemployment, which is often the product of U.S. employers or industry bodies not recognizing credentials or experience earned in other countries, comes at a substantial cost: to immigrants in the form of lost wages, to communities in forgone taxes, and to employers who face shortages of skilled workers. Immigrant college graduates are more likely to experience underemployment than their U.S.-born counterparts in Houston (21 percent versus 16 percent), as in the nation overall.

Underemployment … comes at a substantial cost: to immigrants in the form of lost wages, to communities in forgone taxes, and to employers who face shortages of skilled workers.

In the Houston area, 63 percent of underemployed immigrants obtained their degrees outside the United States, and 46 percent were women (see Table 8). Latinos made up the largest share of underemployed immigrants (36 percent), followed by 32 percent who were AAPI and 17 percent who were Black. Half of underemployed immigrants in Houston were naturalized citizens, highlighting the fact that legal status does not remove all obstacles in the labor market. Like their U.S.-born counterparts, almost one-third of underemployed immigrants had a business degree, followed by workers with degrees in architecture and engineering.

Looking specifically at the health sector, which has attracted considerable attention since the pandemic hit, more than 3,000 immigrants in Houston and 6,000 of their U.S.-born counterparts held undergraduate degrees in medical and health sciences and services but were either working in jobs requiring no more than a high school degree or were out of work in 2017–21. Nursing was the most common degree held by underemployed immigrant and U.S.-born health professionals. Additionally, there were 2,000 foreign- and

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12   MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2006–10 and pooled 2017–21 ACS.

13   For comparison, nationally 34 percent of U.S.-born adults age 25 and older, 33 percent for all foreign-born adults, and 45 percent of recently arrived immigrants were college graduates, according to MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2017–21 ACS.

14   Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Leaving Money on the Table: The Persistence of Brain Waste among College-Educated Immigrants* (Washington DC: MPI, 2021).

8,000 U.S.-born college graduates with degrees in fields that relate to mental health (such as psychology and social work). In the similarly in-demand field of education, more than 4,000 immigrants and about 7,000 U.S.-born workers with college degrees in education were underemployed. Given that the health, mental health, and education professions are highly regulated, rigid licensing and professional regulations may act as a major barrier to employment for internationally educated immigrants in these fields.

TABLE 8

Profile of Underemployed Immigrant and U.S.-Born College Graduates in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2017–21

	Foreign Born	U.S. Born
College-educated adults in the civilian labor force (ages 25 and older)	**327,000**	**842,000**
Underemployed	67,000	130,000
Percent underemployed	21%	16%
Profile of underemployed college-educated adults		
Race and ethnicity		
Latino	36%	15%
Non-Latino Black	17%	26%
Non-Latino Asian American/Pacific Islander	32%	4%
Non-Latino White	13%	54%
Female	46%	49%
English proficient	62%	–
Internationally educated	63%	–
Noncitizen	50%	N/A
Top 5 degrees		
Degree 1	Business	Business
Percent	31%	30%
Degree 2	Architecture & engineering	Architecture & engineering
Percent	18%	9%
Degree 3	Computers, statistics & math	Humanities & liberal arts
Percent	7%	9%
Degree 4	Education	Communications & journalism
Percent	7%	6%
Degree 5	Social sciences	Psychology & social work
Percent	6%	6%

Notes: "Underemployment" refers to persons with at least a four-year college degree who are unemployed or working in low-skill jobs (that is, jobs that typically require a high school degree or less and minimal on-the-job training). Categories marked "–" have a sample size too small to generate statistically meaningful results.
Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2017–21 ACS.

Helping underemployed immigrant workers find employment in jobs that match their credentials can help address current and projected worker shortages and reduce racial inequities in health-care access and education. These immigrant professionals, many of whom are bilingual, could also help hospitals, community clinics, and schools provide services that are more linguistically and culturally responsive to the communities they serve.[15] Nearly two-thirds of underemployed immigrants in the Houston area were English proficient (see Table 8), meaning they spoke English very well or only spoke English. Underemployed immigrants overall and those in the health-care sector also reported speaking a variety of other languages, including Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Arabic, Tagalog, Urdu, and Hindi—the same top languages spoken by the nearly 1.1 million residents of Houston who have limited English proficiency (see Table 9).

TABLE 9

Top Non-English Languages Spoken by the Houston Metropolitan Area's Limited English Proficient Residents and Underemployed Immigrant College Graduates, 2017–21

Limited English Proficient Population		Total Underemployed Foreign-Born Professionals		Underemployed Foreign-Born Health-Care Professionals	
Estimate	**1,061,000**	**Estimate**	**67,000**	**Estimate**	**3,000**
Spanish	79%	Spanish	34%	Spanish	47%
Vietnamese	6%	Chinese	5%	Arabic	8%
Chinese	4%	Vietnamese	5%	Tagalog	6%
Arabic	1%	Arabic	4%	Chinese	6%
Urdu	1%	Tagalog	4%	Vietnamese	4%
Tagalog	1%	Urdu	3%	Hindi	3%
Hindi	1%	Hindi	3%	Malayalam	2%

Notes: "Chinese" includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages; "Tagalog" includes Tagalog and Filipino.
Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2017–21 ACS.
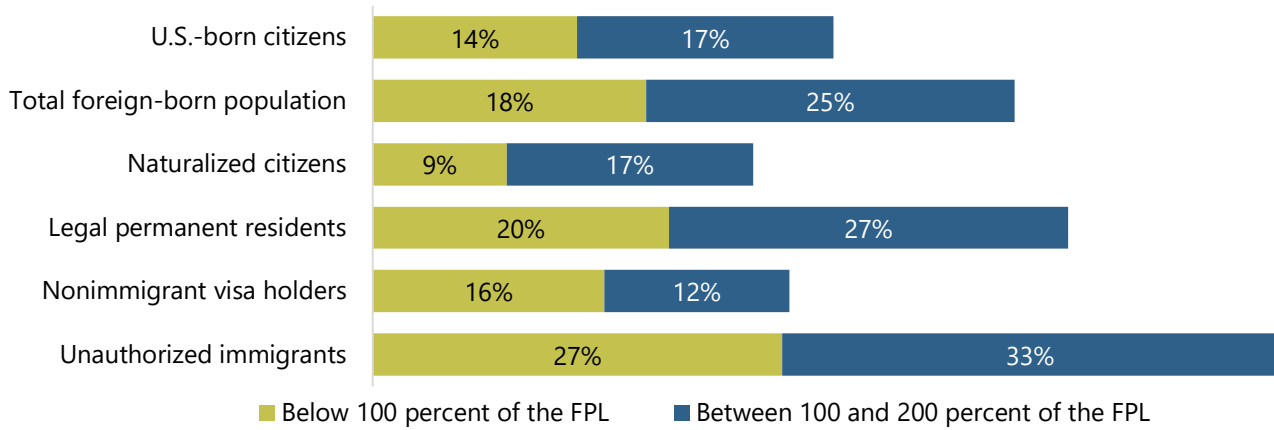
I.   *Poverty Levels*

In 2019, about 43 percent of foreign-born Houston residents had low incomes—that is, their family incomes were below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), which was $25,750 for a family of four that year (see Figure 7). The low-income share of immigrants was 12 percentage points higher than the low-income share of U.S.-born citizens (31 percent). About 60 percent of unauthorized immigrants had family incomes below 200 percent of FPL, the highest share of any immigrant group.

Looking specifically at people living in poverty—those with family incomes below 100 percent of the FPL—18 percent of immigrants and 14 percent of U.S.-born citizens in the Houston area had incomes in that range. Again, there was significant variation by immigration status: 9 percent of naturalized citizens were living in poverty, compared to 20 percent of LPRs and 27 percent of unauthorized immigrants.

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15   Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and José Ramón Fernández-Peña, *The Integration of Immigrant Health Professionals: Looking beyond the COVID-19 Crisis* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

FIGURE 7
Low-Income Share of Houston Metropolitan Area Residents, by Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019

	Below 100 percent of the FPL	Between 100 and 200 percent of the FPL
U.S.-born citizens	14%	17%
Total foreign-born population	18%	25%
Naturalized citizens	9%	17%
Legal permanent residents	20%	27%
Nonimmigrant visa holders	16%	12%
Unauthorized immigrants	27%	33%

Note: Poverty levels are calculated for individuals based on their family's size and annual income. Individuals are considered to be low income if their family income was below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), which was $25,750 for a family of four in 2019, higher for larger families, and lower for smaller ones.

Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

J.   Home Ownership

A higher share of U.S.-born citizens owned their homes than did foreign-born residents of Houston in 2019 (see Figure 8). However, naturalized citizens owned homes at a higher rate than the U.S. born (73 percent versus 58 percent). Smaller but notable shares of LPRs and nonimmigrant visa holders also owed their homes (39 percent and 44 percent, respectively). Almost 20 percent of unauthorized immigrants owned their own homes as well.

FIGURE 8
Share of Houston Metropolitan Area Residents Living in Owned Homes, by Citizenship and Immigration Status, 2019
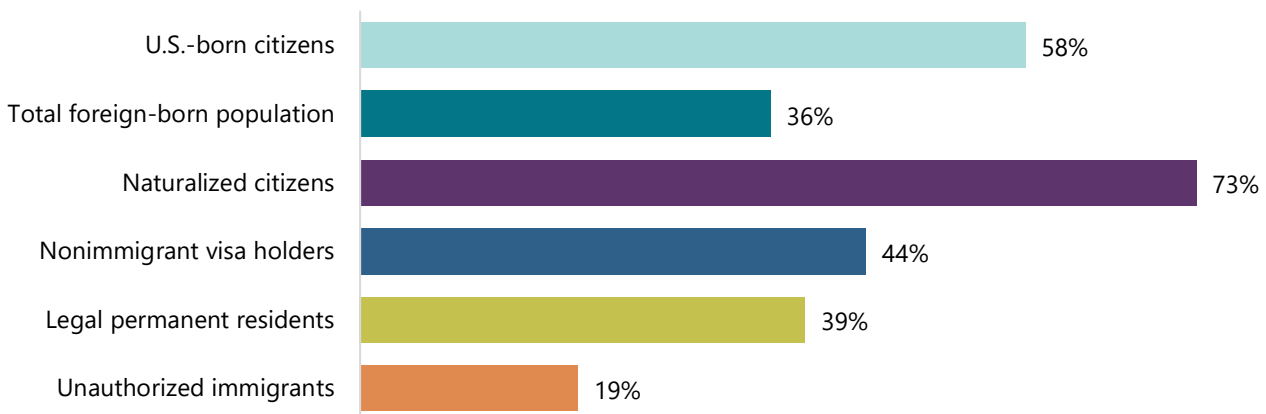
U.S.-born citizens	58%
Total foreign-born population	36%
Naturalized citizens	73%
Nonimmigrant visa holders	44%
Legal permanent residents	39%
Unauthorized immigrants	19%

Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

3   Immigrants Eligible to Naturalize

Becoming a U.S. citizen confers several benefits, including protection from deportation, eligibility to sponsor relatives to immigrate to the United States, access to federal government jobs and public benefits, and the right to vote.[16] While several immigration statuses can lead to eligibility for a green card, the path from a green card to U.S. citizenship entails a number of additional steps. To be eligible, green-card holders must have held that status for at least five years (or three, if married to a U.S. citizen), and then apply for adjustment of status with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), pay the associated fees, and pass English proficiency and civics tests during an interview with a USCIS officer.[17]

With foreign-born residents making up close to one-quarter of Houston's population, the civic and political participation of immigrants can play a critical role in determining state and national electoral outcomes. Nearly 86 percent of Houston's naturalized citizens were registered to vote in 2020—a rate similar to U.S.-born citizens (85 percent).[18] Voter turnout among naturalized citizens in the Houston area increased significantly over the last two presidential elections, from 61 percent in 2016 to 74 percent in 2020, outpacing the growth in U.S.-born citizens' participation.[19]

> **BOX 2**
> **Examining the Eligible-to-Naturalize Population**
>
> In this analysis, the population of immigrants eligible to naturalize is defined as LPRs age 18 and older who have been in the United States for five or more years, or three or more years for those married to a U.S. citizen. Due to data limitations, MPI researchers used time in the country as a proxy for the number of years in LPR status.
>
> To determine which noncitizens are LPRs and meet these criteria, MPI researchers analyzed 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. The total estimated number of LPRs was weighted to Department of Homeland Security topline numbers of LPRs in the United States, by country and region of origin.
>
> For more information on MPI's methodology for imputing legal status in this and other sections of this study, see: bit.ly/MPILegalStatusMethods

Still, more Houstonians could participate in future elections if immigrants who are eligible to naturalize completed the necessary steps to become U.S. citizens. MPI estimates that in 2019, approximately 360,000 immigrants were eligible to naturalize in the Houston area but had not done so. The majority lived in Harris County (276,000), followed by Fort Bend and Montgomery Counties (see Figure 9).

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16   The New Americans Campaign, "Top 6 Benefits of Citizenship," accessed June 5, 2023.
17   U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "Citizenship and Naturalization," updated July 5, 2020.
18   MPI analysis of data from the Current Population Survey 2020 November Voting and Registration supplemental surveys.
19   The voter turnout of U.S.-born citizens was 67 percent in 2016 and 75 percent in 2020. MPI analysis of data from the Current Population Survey 2016 and 2020 November Voting and Registration supplemental surveys.

FIGURE 9

Number of Eligible-to-Naturalize Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area and Its Counties, 2019

Total for Houston metropolitan area: 360,000
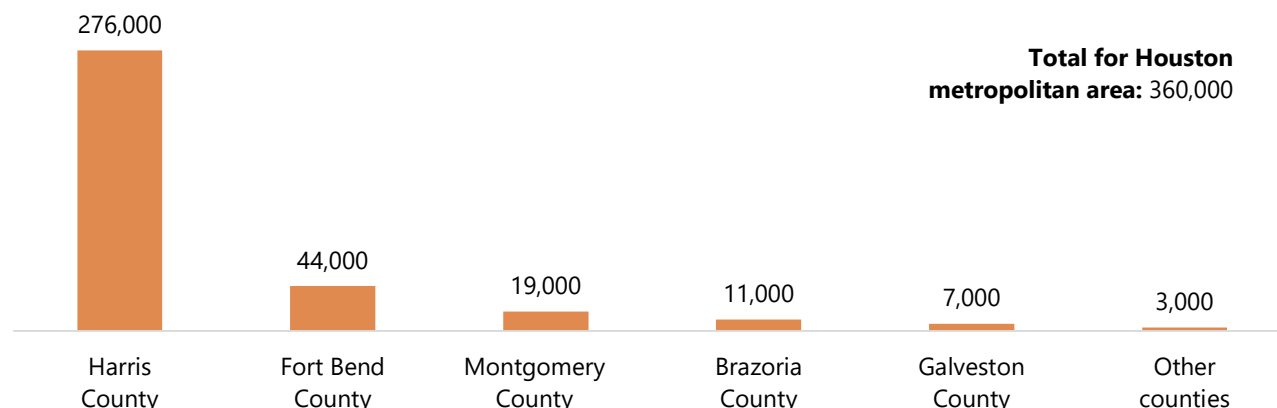
Notes: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize. "Other counties" includes Austin, Chambers, Liberty, and Waller Countries, which are grouped together to make estimates possible despite their smaller population sizes. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

A.   Top Countries of Origin

In 2019, an estimated 44 percent of all Houston residents who were eligible to naturalize were born in Mexico (see Table 10). Many other eligible-to-naturalize immigrants came from El Salvador (7 percent), Vietnam (5 percent), India (5 percent), Honduras (4 percent), and China (4 percent). This list closely reflects the top origin countries for Houston's overall immigrant population.

TABLE 10

Top Ten Origin Countries for Eligible-to-Naturalize Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019

Country	Share of All Immigrants Eligible to Naturalize
Total	**100%**
Mexico	44%
El Salvador	7%
Vietnam	5%
India	5%
Honduras	4%
China*	4%
Cuba	2%
Pakistan	2%
Philippines	2%
Guatemala	2%
Other countries	22%

* In this data, China excludes Taiwan.
Notes: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize. Numbers may not add up to the total due to rounding.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

B.   English Proficiency and Languages Spoken

An estimated 62 percent of Houston immigrants who were eligible to naturalize had limited English proficiency as of 2019 (see Figure 10). This percentage was slightly higher than for the overall foreign-born population (57 percent). Within the population of eligible-to-naturalize immigrants with limited English proficiency, an estimated 63,000 reported they did not speak English at all.

The ability to speak English is an important factor in successfully passing the naturalization test. For example, a nationwide study by Pew Research Center of Mexican immigrants (who represent nearly half of Houston's eligible-to-naturalize residents) found that many tend to delay their naturalization and that English proficiency is an important barrier to applying.[20] USCIS is in the process of redesigning the naturalization test, and the revised test will reportedly emphasize English speaking skills—a change that will likely make it more difficult for immigrants with limited English proficiency to complete the steps to become U.S. citizens.[21]

As is the case for Houston's immigrant population overall, Spanish is the language most commonly spoken by its eligible-to-naturalize residents. In 2019, 63 percent indicated it was their main language. Other top languages included English (9 percent), Vietnamese (5 percent), a Chinese language (4 percent), and Urdu (2 percent).

FIGURE 10

English Proficiency of Eligible-to-Naturalize Immigrants (age 5 and older) in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019
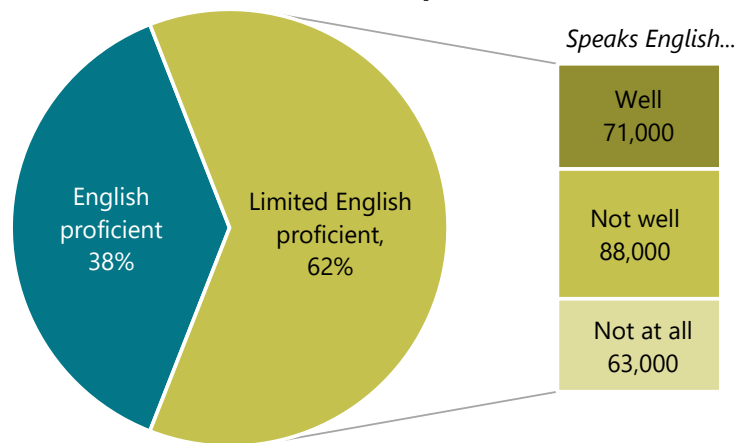
Notes: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize. The U.S. Census Bureau asks ACS respondents if they speak a language other than English at home. For those who answer that they speak a foreign language, the survey then asks them to self-assess their spoken English proficiency. "Limited English proficient" refers to persons age 5 and older who report speaking English less than "very well," either "not at all," "not well," or "well." Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

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20   Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, "Mexican Lawful Immigrants among the Least Likely to Become U.S. Citizens," Pew Research Center, June 29, 2017.

21   Since announcing the test redesign in December 2022, USCIS has conducted a nationwide campaign of public engagement. See USCIS, "Trial Testing of Redesigned Naturalization Test for Naturalization Applications," *Federal Register* 87, no. 240 (December 15, 2022): 76634–37. Some advocates have expressed concerns about the negative impact the test could have on low-income immigrants. See Trisha Ahmed, "US Citizenship Test Changes Are Coming, Raising Concerns for Those with Low English Skills," Associated Press, July 6, 2023.

C. Length of U.S. Residence

In 2019, eight out of ten Houston immigrants who were eligible to naturalize had been living in the United States for at least ten years (see Figure 11). This includes the 41 percent of the eligible-to-naturalize population who had been in the country for 20 years or more. Immigrants who more recently became eligible to naturalize—those with five to nine years of U.S. residence—represented one-fifth of all eligible-to-naturalize Houston residents.

D. Educational Attainment

In 2019, 41 percent of eligible-to-naturalize Houston residents had less than a high school diploma—a share slightly higher than the overall immigrant population (36 percent; see Figure 12). Immigrants eligible to naturalize were also less likely to have a university degree: 22 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 27 percent of all immigrants in Houston.

FIGURE 11

Length of U.S. Residence of Eligible-to-Naturalize Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019
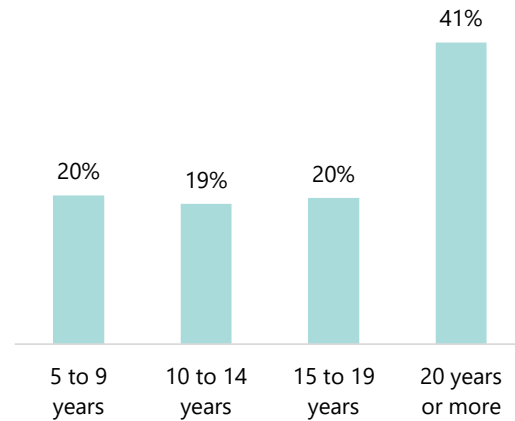
Notes: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize. The category of immigrants with three to five years of U.S. residence (which would qualify them to naturalize only if they had a U.S.-citizen spouse) was excluded due to small sample size.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.
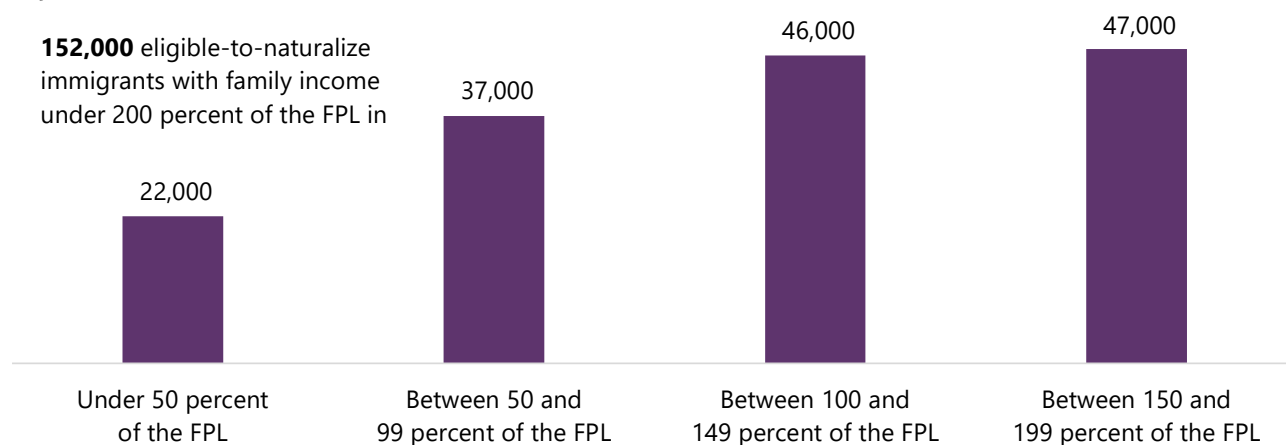
FIGURE 12

Educational Attainment of Eligible-to-Naturalize Immigrants and All Immigrants (age 25 and older) in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019
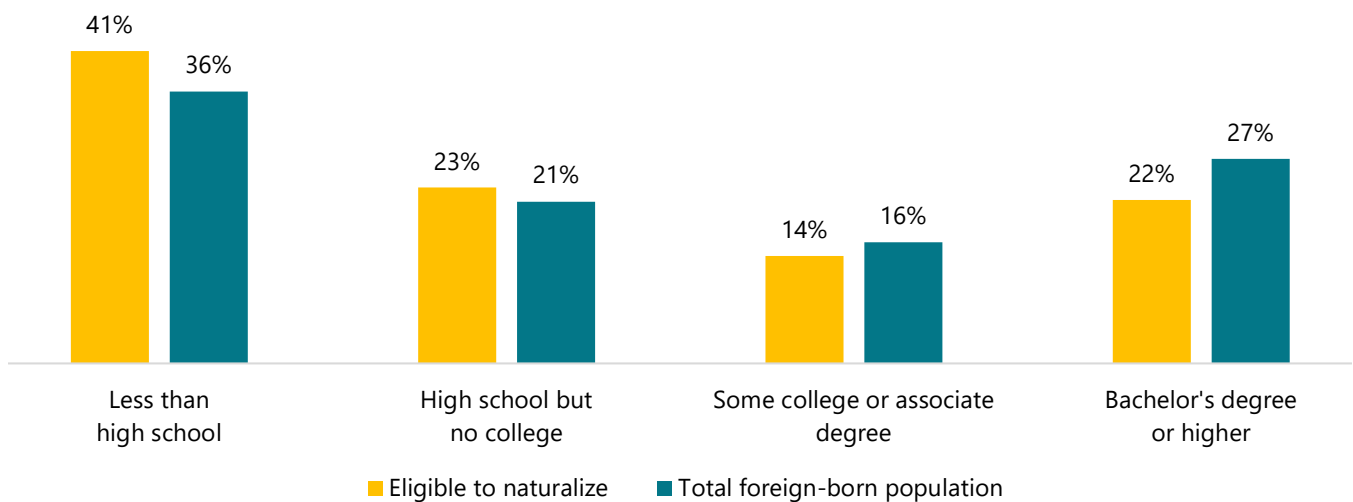
Note: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

E. *Income and Poverty*

A total of 152,000 immigrants eligible to naturalize in Houston had a low income, defined as a family income below 200 percent of FPL (see Figure 13). This group represented 42 percent of all Houston residents who were eligible to naturalize (a share similar to the low-income share of Houston's overall immigrant population, 43 percent).

In addition to non-financial barriers to naturalization, such as having limited English proficiency, the cost of applying to become a U.S. citizen (approximately $725 in 2023) has been shown to be prohibitive for some low-income immigrants.[22] Applicants with incomes under 150 percent of the FPL are eligible for a fee waiver, which could help 107,000 eligible-to-naturalize Houston residents, based on 2019 estimates.[23] An additional 48,000 Houston immigrants eligible to naturalize could qualify for a reduced fee because their incomes fell between 150 and 199 percent of the FPL.[24]

FIGURE 13

Income Distribution of Eligible-to-Naturalize Low-Income Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019

152,000 eligible-to-naturalize immigrants with family income under 200 percent of the FPL in

Under 50 percent of the FPL	Between 50 and 99 percent of the FPL	Between 100 and 149 percent of the FPL	Between 150 and 199 percent of the FPL
22,000	37,000	46,000	47,000

Notes: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize. Poverty levels are calculated for individuals based on their family's size and annual income. Individuals are considered to be low income if their family income was below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), which was $25,750 for a family of four in 2019, higher for larger families, and lower for smaller ones.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

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22   Jens Hainmueller et al., "A Randomized Controlled Design Reveals Barriers to Citizenship for Low-Income Immigrants," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)* 115, no. 5 (2018): 939–44. For 2023 naturalization application fees, see USCIS, "N-400, Application for Naturalization," updated December 23, 2022. A proposed rule to increase USCIS fees, including for naturalization applicants, has been introduced and is pending final publication: USCIS, "Proposed Fee Rule Frequently Asked Questions," updated February 23, 2023.
23   USCIS, "I-912, Request for Fee Waiver," updated December 21, 2022.
24   USCIS, "I-942, Request for Reduced Fee," updated December 21, 2022.

F.   Labor Force Participation

In 2019, immigrants eligible to naturalize in Houston were slightly more likely to be employed than the general immigrant population (see Figure 14). About 84 percent of men and 51 percent of women who were eligible to naturalize were employed in 2019 (compared to 81 percent and 50 percent, respectively, of all immigrants).

Research shows that U.S. citizenship not only opens some employment opportunities, such as federal government jobs and jobs that require extensive international travel; it can also help immigrants obtain more stable and better paid jobs.[25] In addition, U.S. citizenship can reduce employer concerns about immigrants' legal right to work.[26]

FIGURE 14

Employed Share of Eligible-to-Naturalize Immigrant Men and Women (age 16 and older) in the Houston Metropolitan Area, 2019
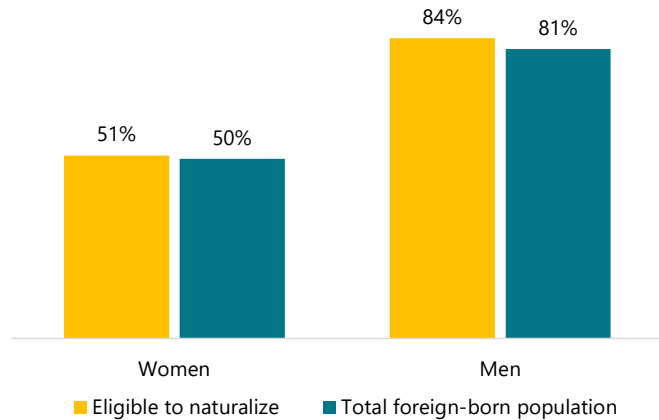
Notes: See Box 2 for this report's definition of the population eligible to naturalize. This figure shows the share of people employed out of total civilian population.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

4   Recent Border Arrivals, Humanitarian Protection Seekers and Recipients, and Liminal Status Holders

While not a border city, Houston has been affected by trends in asylum seeker and other migrant arrivals at the U.S.-Mexico border. Following a sharp drop in the number of migrants U.S. authorities encountered at the border in 2020 (the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic), migrant encounters in Texas between ports of entry jumped from a low of 217,671 in fiscal year (FY) 2020 to 1,026,824 in FY 2021 and 1,252,897 in FY 2022, before dipping slightly to 1,046,673 in FY 2023.[27] The Houston metropolitan area has also experienced an influx of recently arrived migrants, many of whom subsequently move to other parts of the country. These new arrivals include a mix of humanitarian protection seekers and economic migrants, and some are fleeing violence, persecution, or natural disasters and are in need of assistance.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides certain benefits and services to certain humanitarian populations, including some who arrive at the border and others admitted through other pathways. These groups include eligible refugees, asylees, Cuban and Haitian Entrants, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, Amerasians, unaccompanied children,

25   Madeleine Sumption and Sarah Flamm, *The Economic Value of Citizenship for Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2012).
26   Manuel Pastor and Justin Scoggins, *Citizen Gain: The Economic Benefits of Naturalization for Immigrants and the Economy* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, 2012).
27   MPI analysis of data from U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), "Nationwide Encounters," updated October 21, 2023.

victims of trafficking, humanitarian parolees, and survivors of torture.[28] ORR partners with ten national resettlement services agencies that fund and manage local offices, which assist resettled refugees.[29] Other migrants who are in need of assistance but ineligible for ORR benefits may find it in Houston community and faith-based organizations.

The Houston area also has some immigrant residents who hold liminal statuses. These include Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients, and beneficiaries of humanitarian parole programs. These statuses do not offer a path to permanent residence, but they temporarily shield recipients from deportation and in many cases offer permission to work legally. In the case of DACA holders and some TPS recipients, these immigrants have been in the country for years or even decades, while most humanitarian parolees are more recent arrivals.

A.   *Refugees*

The president, in consultation with Congress, sets the refugee admissions ceiling at the beginning of each fiscal year. In both FY 2022 and FY 2023, this was set at 125,000.[30] Before refugees come to the United States, they have fled their countries of origin or residence and registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in a host country. Then, if referred by UNHCR to the United States for resettlement, they are interviewed and vetted by various federal agencies. Those selected for resettlement are granted refugee status by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), travel to the United States, and receive resettlement benefits and services through ORR upon arrival.

In FY 2022, which ran from October 1, 2021, to September 30, 2022, Texas received 2,118 refugees. The top countries of origin for refugees resettled in the state that year were the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Syria, Myanmar (also known as Burma), Afghanistan, Guatemala, and Sudan (see Table 11). While resettlement data are not usually published broken down by city or metropolitan area, state resettlement officials report than 684 refugees were resettled in the Houston area in FY 2022, the majority coming from Afghanistan, DRC, Myanmar, and Syria.[31]

TABLE 11

Top Ten Origin Countries of Refugees Resettled in Texas, FY 2022

Country	Number of Refugees
Total refugees resettled	**2,118**
Democratic Republic of the Congo	719
Syria	358
Myanmar (also known as Burma)	212
Afghanistan	209
Guatemala	121
Sudan	107
Honduras	54
Iraq	51
El Salvador	43
Iran	42
Other countries	202

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration's Refugee Processing Center, "Refugee Arrivals by State and Nationality" (dataset, October 4, 2022).

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28   U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), "What We Do," updated March 1, 2022.

29   U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Reception and Placement," accessed March 23, 2023.

30   Memorandum from the President for the Secretary of State, *Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2023*, Presidential Determination No. 2022-25 (September 27, 2022); MPI, "U.S. Annual Refugee Resettlement Ceilings and Number of Refugees Admitted, 1980-Present," accessed September 20, 2023.

31   Data gathered from MPI exchanges with State Refugee Coordinator for the Texas Office for Refugees, February 2023.

B.   Asylum Seekers and Asylees

To receive asylum in the United States, applicants must meet the same legal definition of a "refugee."[32] However, unlike refugees resettled from abroad, asylum seekers apply for protection either from within the country or after arriving at a port of entry. Individuals may apply for asylum affirmatively at USCIS or, if they are in removal proceedings, defensively at a U.S. immigration court within one year of entering the country.[33] As of September 2023, the number of total pending asylum applications nationwide stood at a record high of about 2 million.[34]

State-specific data on pending affirmative asylum applications are not currently available, but Texas ranks fourth in pending defensive asylum cases, behind Florida, California, and New York.[35] The state had more than 97,000 pending asylum cases in the immigration court backlog as of August 2023, 40,000 of which were in federal immigration courts located in Houston. In FY 2022, more than 85 percent of defensive asylum petitioners in Houston were from Latin America, with Hondurans and Salvadorans making up two-thirds of these asylum seekers (see Table 12).

TABLE 12

Top Ten Origin Countries of Asylum Petitioners in Houston Immigration Courts, FY 2022

Origin Country	Number of Petitioners	Share of All Petitioners
Total asylum petitioners	**40,158**	**100%**
Honduras	10,554	26%
El Salvador	8,561	21%
Venezuela	6,527	16%
Guatemala	3,442	9%
Cuba	3,375	8%
Mexico	3,035	8%
Nicaragua	1,105	3%
Nigeria	702	2%
Colombia	513	1%
China	268	1%
Other countries	203	13%

Source: MPI tabulation of data from Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) Immigration, "Immigration Court Asylum Backlog," updated August 2023.

In FY 2020, the latest year for which detailed data could be obtained, there was a total of 1,793 asylum grants (affirmatively and defensively) in the state of Texas. Most of these asylees were from Venezuela, Turkey, Cuba, Cameroon, Nigeria, Honduras, Eritrea, and El Salvador.[36] In the same year, 745 individuals were granted asylum in the Houston area, where they primarily settled in Harris and Fort Bend Counties.[37]

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32   That is, that they are unable or unwilling to return to their origin country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group.

33   The affirmative asylum process through USCIS involves individuals who are not in removal proceedings, while defensive asylum applicants are in removal proceedings and must file the application with an immigration judge at the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR). See USCIS, "Obtaining Asylum in the United States," updated September 13, 2023.

34   As of September 2023, nearly half of the cases were awaiting hearings in the immigration courts, while the other half were waiting for hearings with USCIS. Comments made during USCIS Asylum Quarterly Engagement, FY 2023 Quarter 4, Washington, DC, September 19, 2023; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) Immigration, "Immigration Court Asylum Backlog," accessed October 4, 2023.

35   TRAC Immigration, "Immigration Court Asylum Backlog."

36   Listed countries had at least 50 asylees. Data obtained from MPI exchanges with a representative of ORR, February 2023.

37   Data obtained from MPI exchanges with a representative of ORR, February 2023.

C.   *Unaccompanied Children*

The number of immigrant children traveling to the United States without a parent or legal guardian has increased significantly over recent years, with FY 2022 marking an historic peak in the number of unaccompanied children intercepted at the southwest border. After a relatively short stay in ORR custody, most unaccompanied children are released to family members or other approved sponsors in the United States while they await their immigration proceedings and, often, pursue asylum or another form of relief.[38] ORR provides these children and their sponsors with limited post-release services, and the transition to life in U.S. communities can prove challenging.[39] Post-release services can include case management, assistance as children and sponsors locate community benefits and services for which they are eligible, and support with the children's immigration proceedings.[40]

FIGURE 15

Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors in the Houston Metropolitan Area, FY 2014–23 YTD*
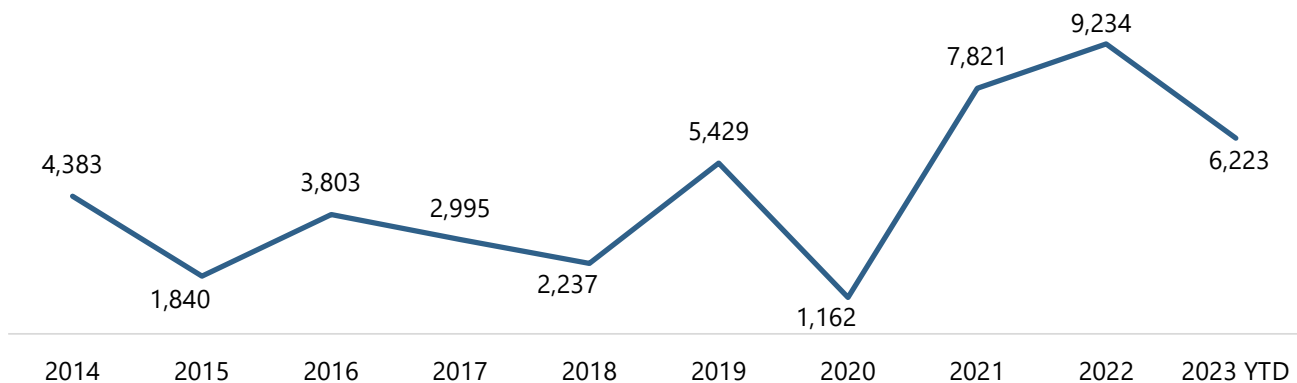
* FY 2023 year-to-date data cover the period between October 1, 2022, and August 31, 2023.
Note: These data, which come from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of the Administration for Children and Families, cover the following six counties in the Houston metropolitan area: Brazoria, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, and Montgomery Counties. Data for the other three counties that are part of the Houston metro area are unavailable.
Source: MPI Data Hub "Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State and County, FY 2014-Present," accessed October 12, 2023, based on data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Office of the Administration for Children and Families.

In the first 11 months of FY 2023 (October 2022 to August 2023), 6,223 unaccompanied children were released to sponsors in the Houston area.[41] In all of FY 2022, 9,234 unaccompanied children were released to sponsors in Houston, a record high that surpassed the previous peak of 7,821 in FY 2021 (see Figure 15). Most of these unaccompanied children have been released to sponsors in Harris County, which has been the top county nationwide since FY 2014.[42]

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38   MPI analysis of data from HHS, "Latest UC Data - FY 2020—Total Monthly Discharges to Individual Sponsors Only (by Category)," updated February 1, 2021.

39   Jonathan Beier, Lauren Farwell, Rhonda Fleischer, and Essey Workie, *Four Strategies to Improve Community Services for Unaccompanied Children in the United States* (Washington, DC, and New York: MPI and the United Nations Children's Fund, 2022); Jonathan Beier and Karla Fredricks, *A Path to Meeting the Medical and Mental Health Needs of Unaccompanied Children in U.S. Communities* (Washington, DC: MPI and American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023).

40   ORR, "ORR Unaccompanied Children Program Policy Guide: Section 6," updated January 31, 2023.

41   MPI Data Hub, "Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors by State and County, FY 2014-Present," accessed October 12, 2023, based on data from HHS and ACF. The data cover six counties in the Houston metropolitan area: Brazoria, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, and Montgomery Counties. Data for the other three counties in the metro area are unavailable.

42   MPI Data Hub, "Unaccompanied Children Released to Sponsors."

D.   SIV Holders

Congress has established multiple versions of the Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program for Afghans and Iraqis (and for other nationalities in smaller numbers). The Afghan SIV program has run continuously since 2006 and has been extended through December 31, 2024. Generally, Afghans who have been employed by or on behalf of the U.S. government for at least one year between 2001 and 2023 may be eligible for SIV status. In response to the changing circumstances of the conflict in Afghanistan, the criteria and access to visas are broader for Afghan nationals. The Iraqi SIV program ended in 2014, but a small number of Iraqi nationals (maximum of 50 per year) can still access SIV status thanks to a 2006 program that grants permanent residency to eligible Iraqi and Afghan nationals who worked as interpreters or translators with the U.S. military.[43]

In FY 2022, the state of Texas received 1,658 SIV holders, 95 percent of whom were Afghan, and 569 settled in Houston.[44] SIV holders have access to ORR refugee services on the same level as refugees.

E.   Humanitarian Parolees

Humanitarian parole is an immigration category that grants temporary status in urgent humanitarian crises, such as following the United States' withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975 and, more recently, the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. The Biden administration has created new parole programs by executive power, each with its own eligibility criteria, duration, and access to public benefits. Other than the exceptions noted below, parolees must generally have that status for at least one year before they become what is known in public benefits terminology as "qualified immigrants,"[45] and they must then hold that classification for an additional five years before they become eligible for major programs such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).[46]

Afghan Parolees

The Biden administration created Operation Allies Welcome on August 29, 2021, following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Taliban's rise to power.[47] Afghan evacuees were granted humanitarian parole for up to two years, with work authorization. Afghans granted parole between July 31, 2021, and September 30, 2022, were made eligible for refugee resettlement services.

Texas and Houston have received the most Afghan humanitarian parolees of any state and city nationwide. In FY 2022, Houston received 5,593 Afghans through Operation Allies Welcome, representing more than half

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43   U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) for Iraqi and Afghan Translators/Interpreters," accessed October 3, 2023.

44   Out of 1,658 SIV holders statewide, 1,578 were from Afghanistan. See U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Amerasian & SIV Arrivals by Nationality and State" (dataset, October 4, 2022). Data on SIV holders in Houston were gathered from MPI exchanges with State Refugee Coordinator for the Texas Office for Refugees, February 2023.

45   For more on noncitizens' eligibility, see *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, Public Law 104–193, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 110 (August 22, 1996): 2105, Sec. 401–403.

46   Karina Fortuny and Ajay Chaudry, "Overview of Immigrants' Eligibility for SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and CHIP" (issue brief, HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Washington, DC, March 2012), 9–10.

47   U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Operation Allies Welcome," updated September 22, 2023.

of all Afghan parolees resettled in the state; this figure includes 1,578 Afghans who were eligible for or had applied for SIV status.[48] Although Operation Allies Welcome was not renewed, a process announced in June 2023 will provide two-year renewals to qualifying Afghan parolees.[49]

Texas and Houston have received the most Afghan humanitarian parolees of any state and city nationwide.

Ukrainian Parolees

The Uniting for Ukraine program was announced on April 21, 2022, to grant humanitarian parole to Ukrainian nationals and others fleeing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[50] The program grants parolees with a U.S.-based financial sponsor permission to remain in the United States for a period of up to two years and work authorization. Ukrainian parolees are immediately eligible for refugee services.

When the program was initially announced, it was expected that 12,000 Ukrainian parolees would be resettled throughout Texas in FY 2022 and FY 2023.[51] Available data suggest that, nationwide, Houston is not among the top metro areas for Ukrainian parolees.[52] Local resettlement agencies in Houston only served 176 Ukrainian parolees in FY 2022, and during the first quarter of FY 2023, they served 166 Ukrainian parolees.[53]

Cuban, Haitian, Nicaraguan, and Venezuelan Parolees

In the context of historically high numbers of migrant arrivals at the southwest border, difficulties returning migrants to certain countries, and severe political or other crises in some countries of origin, the Biden administration created a parole program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans in January 2023.[54] Designed to encourage nationals of these countries to seek legal pathways to the United States, rather than arriving unauthorized at the southwest border, the program allows for the admission of up to 30,000 parolees per month from the four countries combined. Parolees must have a sponsor in the United States, can stay in the country for two years, and receive work authorization. Between January and September of 2023, 50,185 Cubans, 85,258 Haitians, 38,070 Nicaraguans, and 66,893 Venezuelans were paroled into the United States through this program.[55] Data on newcomers admitted via this program are not available broken down by where in the United States they settle.

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48   Data gathered from MPI exchanges with State Refugee Coordinator for the Texas Office for Refugees, February 2023. A total of 11,612 Afghan parolees were resettled statewide. See Elizabeth Trovall, "Houston Led the Nation in Resettling Afghans, Allowing Agencies Gutted under Trump to Bounce Back," *Houston Chronicle,* October 9, 2022; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, "Refugee Arrivals by State and Nationality Fiscal Year 2022" (dataset, October 4, 2022).

49   U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "DHS Announces Re-Parole Process for Afghan Nationals in the United States" (press release, June 8, 2023).

50   U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "President Biden to Announce Uniting for Ukraine, a New Streamlined Process to Welcome Ukrainians Fleeing Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" (press release, April 21, 2022).

51   Adriana De Alba, "Texas Organizations Gearing up to Welcome Thousands of Ukrainian Refugees," WFAA, March 24, 2022.

52   Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "A Year into War, U.S. Sponsors Apply to Welcome 216,000 Ukrainian Refugees under Biden Policy," CBS News, February 24, 2023.

53   Data gathered from MPI exchanges with State Refugee Coordinator for the Texas Office for Refugees, February 2023.

54   U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "Implementation of Changes to the Parole Process for Venezuelans," *Federal Register* 88, no. 5 (January 9, 2023): 1279–82.

55   MPI analysis of CBP monthly operational updates for January through September 2023. See CBP, "CBP Releases September 2023 Monthly Update" (news release, October 21, 2023).

Parolees' eligibility for services varies by their country of origin. For example, Cuban and Haitian parolees are treated as entrants for benefits purposes, and they are thus immediately eligible for resettlement benefits and services.[56] Even before the parole program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans was announced, the number of Cubans seeking assistance in Houston had dramatically increased. In FY 2022, local resettlement agencies in Houston served an estimated 12,600 Cubans, almost four times more than the previous year.[57] In the first four months of FY 2023, these organizations served 6,100 Cubans. In comparison, the number of Haitians has been significantly smaller.

It is difficult to estimate the number of Nicaraguans and Venezuelans who have been admitted through the parole program and are living in Houston. Unlike Cuban and Haitian parolees, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans are not eligible for resettlement benefits and services and thus often do not interact with local resettlement agencies, the main source of local data on other humanitarian populations discussed in this report.

F.   TPS Holders

The *Immigration Act of 1990* established Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to provide temporary refuge and work authorization to eligible nationals of certain countries who are present in the United States and unable to return to their home countries due to war, natural disaster, or other extraordinary conditions.[58] The law does not provide a path to lawful permanent residency or any other immigration status; if a country's TPS designation is terminated, TPS holders are expected to either apply for a different immigration status or return to their home country. TPS designations range from 6 to 18 months, and the secretary of homeland security must either extend or terminate a designation before the end of that period.

MPI estimates that close to 27,000 TPS holders were living in Houston in 2019. This includes about 19,000 from El Salvador and 6,700 from Honduras.[59] As of March 2023, there were more than 500,000 TPS holders nationwide from 16 countries: Afghanistan, Cameroon, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela, and Yemen.[60]

G.   DACA Active Recipients and Potentially Eligible

Soon after its creation by the Obama administration in 2012, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) became subject of legal challenges by states and by the Trump administration, which rescinded

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56   "Cuban/Haitian Entrant" is a benefit eligibility category, rather than an immigration status, and has existed since the 1980s. See ORR, "Eligibility for ORR Services for Cuban and Haitian Entrants without Work Authorization" (policy letter, August 19, 2019).

57   About 3,100 Cubans were served by local resettlement agencies in Houston in FY 2021. Data gathered from MPI exchanges with State Refugee Coordinator for the Texas Office for Refugees, February 2023.

58   *Immigration Act of 1990*, Public Law 101-649, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 104 (1990): 358.

59   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 combined with national topline Temporary Protected Status (TPS) estimates by country from Jill H. Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2021).

60   USCIS, "Temporary Protected Status," updated March 13, 2023.

the program in 2017.[61] DACA allows unauthorized immigrants who came to the United States as children and who meet educational and age criteria to apply for deferred action (avoiding deportation) and work authorization. The ability to work and more fully integrate into U.S. society has potential benefits for DACA recipients and the communities in which they live. A 2021 study found that DACA-eligible Houston residents paid 255.4 million dollars in federal, state, and local taxes, and their total spending power was approximately 846.2 million dollars in 2019.[62]

However, the future of the program is uncertain. While the Supreme Court in June 2020 overturned the Trump administration's termination of DACA, litigation has continued and the program has largely not been processing new applications. In August 2022, the Biden administration issued final rule in an attempt to strengthen the program's legal authority. Yet in another legal challenge, this time by nine states including Texas,[63] a judge declared the program illegal in September 2023 but ruled that current DACA recipients can keep and renew their status while the case moves through the judicial system.[64] Without new applicants joining the program, the number of DACA recipients has gradually declined over time, and more young people brought to the country as children are entering adulthood without the program's protection.

Without new applicants joining the program, the number of DACA recipients has gradually declined over time, and more young people brought to the country as children are entering adulthood without the program's protection.

There were 31,340 active DACA recipients in the Houston metropolitan area in 2022, according to USCIS data.[65] MPI estimates that a broader population of about 72,000 unauthorized immigrants were potentially eligible for DACA as of December 2022, with the overwhelming majority (60,000) residing in Harris County (see Appendix Table A–2). The overall potentially eligible population in Houston includes 52,000 individuals who met all program criteria and were immediately eligible,[66] and another 20,000 who met all but the educational requirement. However, because USCIS is not currently processing new applications, those who are not already DACA recipients have been shut out from participating. Meanwhile, a small number of Houston residents under age 15 (less than 2,000 people) could eventually meet the program's criteria in the future, though their ability to apply will depend on the outcome of ongoing litigation.

61   Memorandum from Elaine C. Duke, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security, to the Acting Director of USCIS, the Acting Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Acting Commissioner of CBP, the Acting General Counsel, the Assistant Secretary of International Engagement, and the Citizenship and Immigration Services Ombudsman, *Recession of the June 15, 2012 Memorandum Entitled "Exercising Prosecutorial Discretion with Respect to Individuals Who Came to the United States as Children"*, September 5, 2017.

62   New American Economy, "New Data Highlights the Economic Contributions of DREAMers in Major Texas Metros," updated March 30, 2021.

63   PBS News Hour, "New DACA Program to Be Heard before Texas Judge Who Previously Ruled It Illegal," PBS News Hour, June 1, 2023.

64   Ariel G. Ruiz Soto and Julia Gelatt, "A Shrinking Number of DACA Participants Face Yet Another Adverse Court Ruling" (commentary, MPI, September 2023).

65   USCIS, "Count of Active DACA Recipients" (dataset, March 31, 2022).

66   This estimate includes active DACA recipients, eligible individuals whose applications have not been processed due to litigation, and eligible individuals who have not applied for the program.

5   Conclusion

The Houston metropolitan area's immigrant population, which represents about one-quarter of Houston residents, is both growing and becoming even more diverse. The data presented in this report highlight just some of the many ways immigrants have contributed to the Houston area's dynamism, as well as the challenges some foreign-born residents face.

Immigrants have long been an important part of the Houston workforce, bringing diverse skills and experiences to the local economy. They make up a higher-than-average share of construction workers, a key sector in the region, and they hold positions in a range of high-skilled occupations, including in the health sector that has been so critical to the Houston economy. Yet, the analysis also shows that brain waste affects tens of thousands of foreign-born (and U.S.-born) college graduates who find themselves underemployed, even as worker shortages persist for many middle- and high-skill jobs in health care, education, and other sectors.[67]

Some immigrants also face challenges related to their immigration status, low household income, and/or limited English proficiency. This population includes the 43 percent of foreign-born Houstonians who had a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level in 2019, and the 57 percent who had limited English proficiency. Moreover, while 69 percent of immigrants in the Houston area held some form of legal status in 2019, 31 percent were unauthorized. Notably, almost half of Houston children under age 18 who were living with their parents in 2019 had at least one immigrant parent. While many of these children's parents had a legal status of one form or another, 310,000 children (or 17 percent of all Houston children) lived with one or more unauthorized immigrant parent.

Immigrants are also an important part of the civic life of the Houston area. For example, the voting share of naturalized citizens increased significantly between the 2016 to 2020 presidential elections. However, this analysis finds that an estimated 360,000 Houston residents who were eligible to naturalize in 2019 had not done so. Eight out of ten eligible-to-naturalize immigrants in Houston had been in the country for more than a decade, and 41 percent had lived in the country for more than 20 years. These findings underscore the barriers that some Houston residents face to completing the necessary steps towards U.S. citizenship. Certain characteristics highlighted in this analysis—such as the fact that 44 percent of eligible-to-naturalize immigrants were born in Mexico, 62 percent had limited English proficiency, and 42 percent had low family incomes—should help local organizations tailor the immigrant integration services and naturalization support they offer.

A notable development in recent years has been the increasingly mixed nature of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border, some of whom may move to or through Houston. The revival of the U.S. refugee resettlement program after a sharp drop in admissions during the Trump administration and early pandemic years, as well as the creation of new humanitarian parole programs by the Biden administration, have also brought new humanitarian arrivals to Houston and other cities across the country. These newcomers have a wide range of statuses and, relatedly, differing levels of eligibility for public services and benefits. This

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67   Libby Seline, "Why Classroom Data Tells Only Part of the Story behind Houston's Teacher Shortage," *Houston Chronicle, March 13, 2023.*

diversity of statuses adds to the complexity of providing services to a growing and changing immigrant community. In interviews, local stakeholders have indicated that service delivery and outreach to humanitarian populations are uneven across nationalities due to a range of factors, including the limited resources of local resettlement agencies and newcomers' differing access to information resulting from language barriers and limited social networks.[68] Prior MPI research in the Houston area has also described how human service agencies can find it difficult to reach smaller language and nationality groups, particularly if they do not have an established diaspora network in the region and are spatially dispersed.[69]

These trends point to both the strengths and challenges facing the Houston area's growing and diversifying immigrant community, and to their important implications for service providers and organizations that assist and advocate for the rights of immigrant Houstonians. These include opportunities to maximize immigrants' economic contributions. For example, reducing the employment and licensing barriers that have affected many of the 67,000 underemployed highly skilled immigrants could help address key skill shortages in the Houston labor market in sectors ranging from health care to education.[70] A significant number of immigrants in the area also work in jobs with limited occupational prospects. Helping them to improve their occupational English proficiency or gain additional credentials would expand their labor market options, boost family incomes, and help reduce poverty among immigrant families. Demand for assistance with applying for naturalization also remains strong, particularly for services able to help those among the 360,000 eligible-to-naturalize Houston residents who face barriers such as limited English proficiency. There is also a need to boost pro bono and subsidized legal assistance for the growing number of immigrants with temporary or liminal statuses as they apply for work permits and seek pathways to stay legally in the United States. Investments such as these can help ensure that immigrant Houstonians are able to continue to contribute to the economic and civic vibrancy of the region.

Investments such as these can help ensure that immigrant Houstonians are able to continue to contribute to the economic and civic vibrancy of the region.

68   Author interview with State Refugee Coordinator for the Texas Office of Refugees, February 2023.

69   Capps and Fix, *Changing the Playbook*, 3–4.

70   Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Leveraging the Skills of Immigrant Health-Care Professionals in Illinois and Chicago* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022).

Appendix. Additional Data Tables and Figures

TABLE A−1

Unauthorized Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area, by Origin Country, 2019

Origin Country	Number of Unauthorized Immigrants	Share of the Total Unauthorized Immigrant Population
Total unauthorized immigrant population	**577,000**	**100%**
Mexico	300,000	52%
El Salvador	77,000	13%
Honduras	63,000	11%
Guatemala	35,000	6%
India	21,000	4%
Venezuela	14,000	2%
Vietnam	10,000	2%
China*	8,000	1%
Nigeria	8,000	1%
Colombia	7,000	1%
Philippines	7,000	1%
Nicaragua	4,000	1%
Pakistan	1,000	0%
Other countries	22,000	4%

* In this data, China excludes Taiwan.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

FIGURE A−1

Limited English Proficient Share of Immigrants (age 5 and older) in the Houston Metropolitan Area, by Top Origin Countries, 2019
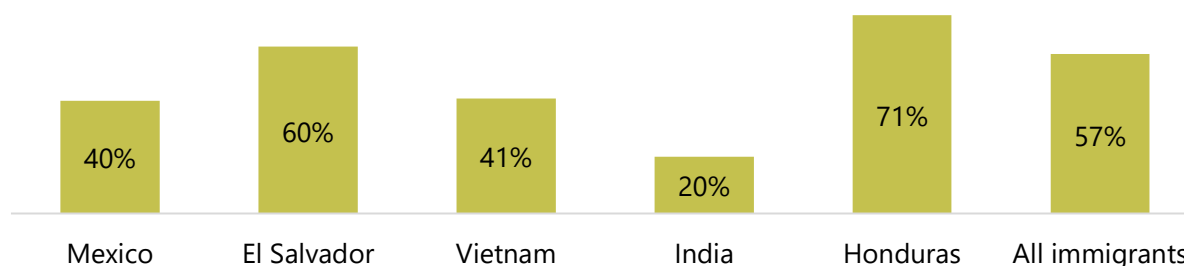
Note: The U.S. Census Bureau asks ACS respondents if they speak a language other than English at home. For those who answer that they speak a foreign language, the survey then asks them to self-assess their spoken English proficiency. "Limited English proficient" refers to persons age 5 and older who report speaking English less than very well, either "not at all," "not well," or "well."
Source: These 2019 data result from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook. The top five origin countries shown in this figure were selected based on data from Table B05002 of the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2017–21 ACS.

TABLE A–2

Immigrants in the Houston Metropolitan Area Estimated to Be Eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, by County, as of December 2022

County of Residence	Total Potentially Eligible	Immediately Eligible	Eligible but for Education	Eligible in the Future
Total Houston Metro Area	**72,000**	**52,000**	**20,000**	**<2,000**
Harris County	60,000	43,000	17,000	<2,000
Montgomery County	5,000	4,000	<2,000	<2,000
Fort Bend County	3,000	3,000	<2,000	<2,000
Brazoria County	<2,000	<2,000	<2,000	–
Galveston County	<2,000	<2,000	<2,000	–
Other counties	<2,000	<2,000	<2,000	–

Notes: MPI estimates of the DACA-eligible population as of 2022 include unauthorized immigrant youth who had been in the United States since 2007, were under the age of 16 at the time of arrival, and were under the age of 31 as of 2012. Three populations are estimated: (1) Immediately eligible youth and adults who met both age and educational criteria (i.e., they were ages 15 to 40 as of December 2022 and were either enrolled in school or had at least a high school diploma or equivalent); (2) youth and adults who were eligible but for education (i.e., those ages 15 to 40 as of December 2022 who met the other requirements but did not have a high school diploma or equivalent and were not enrolled in school); and (3) children eligible in the future who met the age-at-arrival requirements but were age 14 or younger in December 2022, and who would become eligible when they reach age 15 provided they stay in school. For the immediately eligible population, the MPI estimates capture those meeting the criteria to apply for DACA, whether or not they ever did. As a result, past and current DACA recipients would be included within the MPI estimates. To capture the population eligible to apply in 2022 using 2019 data, MPI included in its estimates youth who would have turned age 15 through December 2022. Using the share of the DACA-eligible population ages 19 to 24 without a GED or high school diploma and not enrolled in school in 2019, MPI excluded a portion of the immediately eligible 17- and 18-year-olds in 2022 to account for potential school dropouts as this population ages. Eligibility due to adult education program enrollment and ineligibility due to criminal history or lack of continuous U.S. presence were not modeled due to data limitations. More precise figures are not shown for populations of less than 2,000 due to high margins of error in estimating small populations. "Other counties" includes Austin, Chambers, Liberty, and Waller Countries, which are grouped together to make estimates possible despite their smaller population sizes.
Source: These 2019 data derive from MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

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Valerie Lacarte is a Senior Policy Analyst with the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) U.S. Immigration Policy Program, where she contributes to research design and conducts data analysis on a range of issues, including native-immigrant gaps in socioeconomic outcomes and access to public benefits for vulnerable immigrant and humanitarian populations.

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