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

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

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

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

I. Countries and Regions of Origin

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

In most states, the second most common origin was a country from the Northern Triangle of Central America: El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras (see Figure 1). Several states in the Midwest and Northeast had China or India as the second-most common origin.
In 24 of the 135 counties for which the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) was able to generate sociodemographic profiles, more than 90 percent of unauthorized immigrants were from Mexico or Central America. This group includes counties in the Western and Southern states of California, Texas, Washington, Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, Georgia, and Arkansas. The highest shares of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico were found in Yakima County, Washington (97 percent); Hidalgo County, Texas (96 percent); and Yuma County, Arizona (96 percent).

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

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

III. Deep Roots in the United States

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

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

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

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

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2012-16 pooled ACS and the 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.
Many unauthorized immigrants have strong family ties in the United States. Forty percent of unauthorized immigrants age 15 and older were married and living with a partner during the period analyzed. Of those, 29 percent were married to a U.S. citizen, 17 percent to a legal permanent resident (also known as a green-card holder), and 53 percent to a temporary visa holder or unauthorized immigrant.

In the 2012-16 period, 5.1 million U.S. children under age 18 resided with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent. Approximately 80 percent (4.1 million) of these children were born in the United States and had U.S. citizenship at birth; 1 percent (33,000) were naturalized citizens; 3 percent (167,000) were legal immigrants; and 16 percent (809,000) were unauthorized themselves. Many times, U.S.-citizen children and older noncitizen children live in the same families. Of the 4.1 million U.S.-born children with unauthorized immigrant parents, 1.3 million resided with two unauthorized parents and 909,000 with a single unauthorized parent. The remaining 1.8 million lived with one parent who was unauthorized and another who was a citizen or legal immigrant. Proposals to restrict birthright citizenship for children born in the future to unauthorized immigrant parents have recently resurfaced. Under most of these proposals, children born to at least one citizen or legal immigrant parent would still be granted citizenship. See Table 2 for the ten states with the largest numbers of U.S.-born children of unauthorized immigrants, and the share with only unauthorized parents in each state. For estimates for all states, see here; and for top counties, here.
IV. Educational Attainment and English Proficiency

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

Figure 3. Educational Attainment of Unauthorized Immigrants (age 25 and older), by Geography, 2012-16

Note: Some states omitted, due to small sample sizes of unauthorized immigrants.  
Source: MPI analysis of Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.
English Proficiency

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

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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Language 1</th>
<th>Language 2</th>
<th>Language 3</th>
<th>Language 4</th>
<th>Language 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Bengali</td>
<td>Korean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Haitian Creole</td>
<td>Portuguese</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Sub-Saharan African</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Sub-Saharan African</td>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Sub-Saharan African</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Tagalog</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: “Chinese” includes Mandarin, Cantonese, and other Chinese languages; “English” includes English, Jamaican Creole, Krio, Pidgin Krio, and other English-based Creole languages; “Tagalog” includes Tagalog and Filipino; and “Sub-Saharan African” includes Swahili or other Bantu languages, Mande, Fulani, Kru, and other African languages.

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

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

Industries of Employment

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

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

Figure 4. Most Common Industry of Employment for Unauthorized Immigrants (age 16 and older), by State, 2012-16

Notes: States shaded white are those for which characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could not be estimated due to small samples. Admin services refers to professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services. Hospitality refers to accommodation and food services, arts, entertainment, and recreation.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS and 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.
the period analyzed. In 13 mostly Southern states, construction was the top industry. In ten mostly Midwestern states, it was manufacturing. And in two states—Arizona and Delaware—it was professional, scientific, management, administrative, and waste management services.

VI. Income and Homeownership

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

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

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

Figure 5. Share of Unauthorized Immigrants with Household Incomes at Least Twice the Poverty Level, by State, (%), 2012-16

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

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

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

Figure 6. Share of Unauthorized Immigrants Residing in Owned Home, by State, 2012-16

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

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

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

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

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


About the Authors

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Dr. Gelatt previously worked as a Research Associate at the Urban Institute, where her mixed-methods research focused on state policies toward immigrants; barriers to and facilitators of immigrant families’ access to public benefits and public prekindergarten programs; and identifying youth victims of human trafficking. She was a Research Assistant at MPI before graduate school.

Dr. Gelatt earned her PhD in sociology, with a specialization in demography, from Princeton University, where her work focused on the relationship between immigration status and children’s health and well-being. She earned a bachelor of the arts in sociology/anthropology from Carleton College.

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Previously, Ms. Zong interned with the Center for Migration Studies of New York, where she provided research support on U.S. refugee and asylum issues, as well as the U.S. immigration detention system.

She holds a master’s degree of public administration from New York University’s Wagner Graduate School of Public Service with a specialization in policy analysis, and a Bachelor of Arts degree in international finance from the Central University of Finance and Economics in China.
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The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. The Institute provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic responses to the challenges and opportunities that migration presents in an ever more integrated world.