

GLOBAL GREATER BOSTON

*Immigrants in a
Changing Region*

BOSTON
INDICATORS

 Immigration
Research
Initiative

FEBRUARY 2024

ABOUT BOSTON INDICATORS

Boston Indicators is the research center at the Boston Foundation, which works to advance a thriving Greater Boston for all residents across all neighborhoods. We do this by analyzing key indicators of well-being and by researching promising ideas for making our city more prosperous, equitable and just. To ensure that our work informs active efforts to improve our city, we work in deep partnership with community groups, civic leaders and Boston's civic data community to produce special reports and host public convenings.

ABOUT IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Immigration Research Initiative (IRI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank on immigrant integration, looking at issues of economic, social, and cultural inclusion of immigrants in the United States. IRI is attentive to how immigrants fare in the United States and to how the receiving communities fare as they change, with particular attention to the implications for race, gender, and income equity. IRI is a fiscally sponsored project of NEO Philanthropy.

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GLOBAL GREATER BOSTON:

Immigrants in a Changing Region

AUTHORS

Kelly Harrington and Luc Schuster, **Boston Indicators**
Anthony Capote, **Immigration Research Initiative**

EDITORS

Sandy Kendall, **The Boston Foundation**
David Dyssegaard Kallick, **Immigration Research Initiative**

DESIGN

Mel Isidor, **Isidor Studio**

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OVERVIEW

For as long as it's been a city, immigrants have been central to Boston's identity. They've created businesses here. They've formed new neighborhoods. They've participated in civic life. They've contributed to the growth, dynamism, and vibrancy of our communities in innumerable ways.

In 1850, the earliest that U.S. Census Bureau data is available for place of birth, immigrants made up more than a third of Boston's population (we use just the city of Boston here because regional boundaries have shifted over the past 200 years). The number of immigrants moving to the United States dropped significantly beginning in 1920, and Boston's foreign-born share reached an all-time low of 13 percent in 1960. Since then, Boston has seen a new wave of immigration and our immigrant population has steadily rebounded, reaching 29 percent as of 2021. (Throughout this report, we use *immigrant* and *foreign-born* interchangeably to mean a person born in another country who lives in the U.S.)

In 2024, Greater Boston is home to immigrants from all over the world who came here to work, study, find safety, and build economic prosperity for their families. Most immigrants to our region are now from Latin America and Asia rather than from Europe, as was the case for most of our history. Then and now, immigrants contribute a great deal to our region's innovation and diversity of perspective.

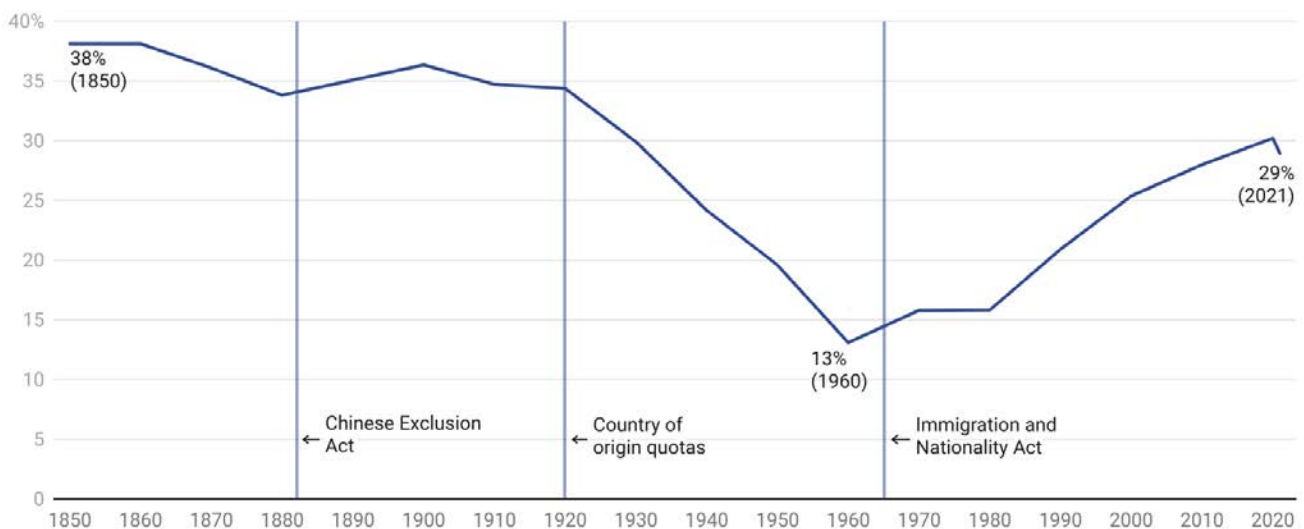
In recent years, immigration has become the target of heated rhetoric and intense debate. At the same time, political, economic, and climate instability around the globe has led to increased migration to our region. For these reasons, immigration is front of mind for many Bostonians.

In this report, Boston Indicators partnered with the Immigration Research Initiative to analyze who makes up immigrant communities in Greater Boston, quantify what they contribute to our regional economy, and detail the immigration pathways they take to get here. To do this, we organized the report into three sections:

- **PART 1:** Demographic Profile, which analyzes the composition of immigrant populations in our region and looks at how this has changed over time.
- **PART 2:** Economic Contributions, which examines the socioeconomic contributions and well-being of immigrants in our region. This section looks both at current conditions and the economic trajectory of immigrants over their careers and across the generations.
- **PART 3:** Immigration Pathways, which details the complex system that immigrants contend with in order to settle in Greater Boston.

We hope this analysis of Greater Boston's immigrant population will help policymakers and service providers better understand immigrant communities and effectively implement programs and policies that make our region an even more welcoming and thriving place.

Foreign-born share of Boston's population, 1850-2021.



Note: We use Boston rather than Greater Boston here due to more consistent administrative boundaries though census years.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1850-2000 U.S. Decennial Census, IPUMS USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. 2001-2021 1-year ACS; Campbell J. Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990" (Working Paper no. 29, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1999).

PART I:

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Countless factors determine who immigrates to a given region.

Factors that likely play a significant role in making Greater Boston a destination include our strong and diverse local economy and our relatively high-quality public school system. Over time, many longer standing ethnic groups in the region have developed neighborhood enclaves that provide social capital and attract new arrivals from specific home countries. But the broader enabling conditions for immigration are shaped by federal immigration policy, and these laws have changed dramatically across the generations.

In the 19th century millions of European immigrants came to the United States under federal policy that put up few barriers to entry for immigrants from Europe. This wave coincided with the development of steamships, making transatlantic travel more feasible, and increased work opportunities in the industrial economy and maritime commerce across Massachusetts.

During this period, large numbers of immigrants from European countries like Ireland and Italy—the ethnic groups that Boston became known for—arrived in Boston thanks to immigration policies that favored them over other groups. While European immigrants faced few barriers to entry during this

time, people from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East were largely denied the opportunity to immigrate. Targeted restrictions, like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banned specific groups from immigrating. These policies, along with others stipulating that citizenship was available to “free white persons,” show the explicit bias pervasive in policymaking during this time.

Greater Boston’s immigrant population, along with all immigration to the U.S., dropped dramatically beginning in 1920 when the federal government implemented restrictive immigration quotas based on country of origin. These quotas gave preference to immigrants from the countries of origin of past immigrants to the U.S., like England, Ireland, and Germany, but restricted visas for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Global shocks like the Great Depression and two world wars also contributed to the overall slowing of immigration during the mid-20th century. It’s important to note, however, that had the U.S. been more welcoming, these global shocks could have in other ways led to greater immigration, such as from Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi-occupied territory during the Holocaust.

While far fewer immigrants arrived in the U.S. during the mid-20th century, one of the most significant immigration measures in place then was the Bracero Program, which authorized entrance of five million temporary workers from Mexico between 1942 to 1965. Relatively few of those workers ended up in Boston, and the city's immigrant population was at its lowest level in 1960, when only 13 percent of residents were foreign-born.

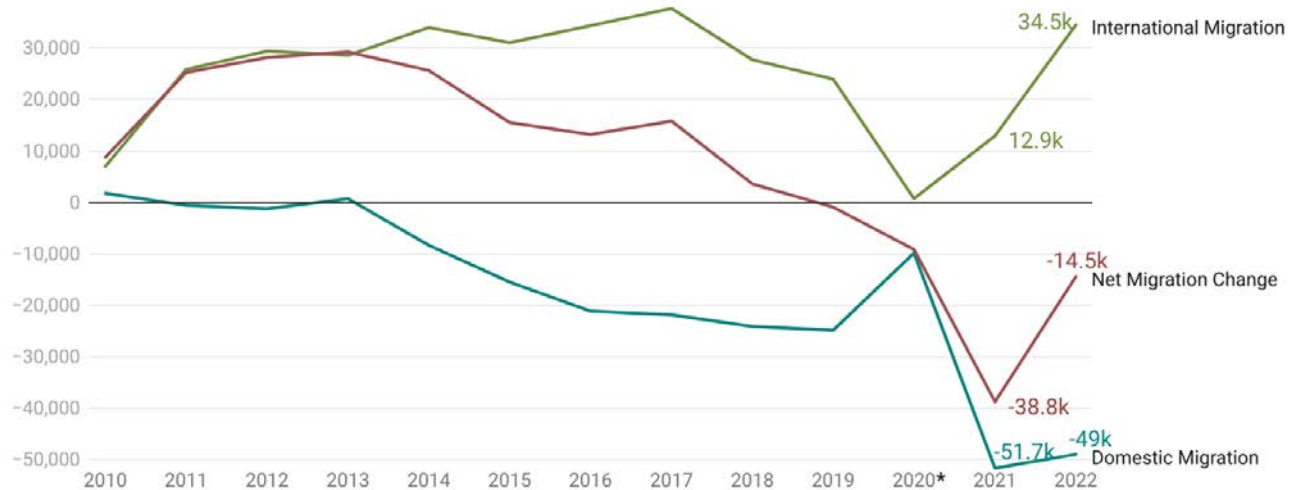
Immigration to Boston began to tick back up in 1970 in response to the federal government's loosening of policies that excluded immigrants from Asia in 1952 and the end of discriminatory quotas with the 1965 passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act. This nearly doubled the annual ceiling on immigration and made it possible for people from parts of the world beyond Europe to immigrate to the U.S. Immigration from Asia and Latin America increased substantially

shortly thereafter. Since the 1980s, Boston's immigrant population has steadily increased and reached 30 percent in 2020. In 2021, Boston's immigrant population declined for the first time since the 1960s, dropping one percentage point to 29 percent, likely in response to the travel bans enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the immigration restrictions implemented by the Trump administration.

Since the 1980s, Boston's immigrant population has steadily increased and reached 30 percent in 2020.

Immigration to Greater Boston has helped offset population losses from domestic moves to other parts of the US.

Net migration to and from Greater Boston.



Note: Population estimates restart each census year (in 2010 and 2020), and thus should not be viewed as a continuation of the previous 10 year estimates. Five-county definition of Greater Boston includes Essex, Middlesex, Suffolk, Norfolk, and Plymouth Counties.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Population Estimates Program

Immigration patterns have changed over time.

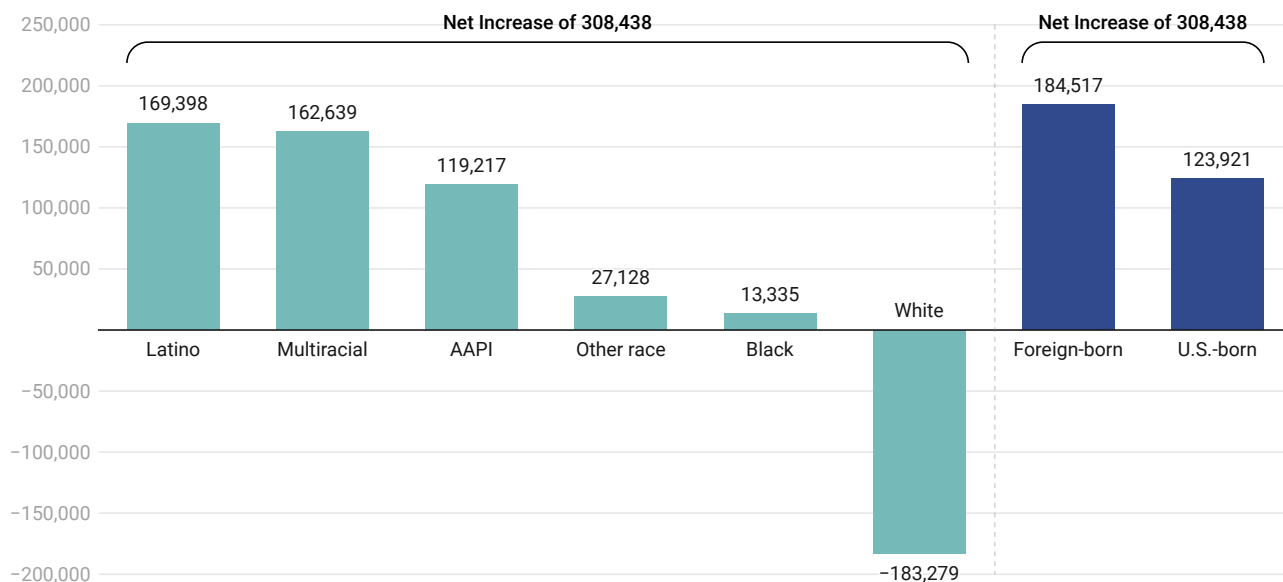
The prosperity and growth that we've enjoyed in Greater Boston is actually a relatively recent phenomenon. The region's economy slowed in the mid-20th century, and the population of Boston proper declined significantly, in part the result of "White flight" away from many city centers and into the suburbs. For the past several decades, however, our population and economic health have rebounded, driven by the [contributions of new immigrants](#). The graph on the previous page focuses on migration trends over the past 11 years, showing how important immigration has been to offsetting moves out of the region by longer-standing residents.

For earlier years, international migration was sufficient to offset domestic outmigration, allowing our region's population to continue growing at a modest pace. But for the past three years, this trend seems to have reversed, and net migration has turned negative. We may just now be seeing how important immigration has been for stabilizing our region's population.

Immigrants of color have been central to this story. Between 2010 and 2021, the foreign-born population made up 60 percent of Greater Boston's net population growth, with Latino, multiracial and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) populations seeing the greatest growth. We've also seen large increases in the number of people with multiple racial backgrounds. As we show in our 2021 report [Multiracial in Greater Boston](#), much of this increase is very real, with more families forming across racial lines. Some of this increase, however, is an artifact of back-end Census Bureau coding practices, which assign certain people (mostly Latinos) "Some Other Race" as a second race, even though these respondents themselves don't identify as multiracial. See [We're Reporting Census Data All Wrong](#) for more detail.

Greater Boston's population growth is driven by immigrants of color.

Net population change, Greater Boston, 2010-2021.



Note: "Other" includes "Some Other Race Alone" and American Indian/Alaska Native. Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), White and Black are non-Hispanic. Multiracial should be interpreted with caution due to changes in the Census Bureau's coding practices in 2020 that result in people who don't identify as multiracial being included in this category.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2010 Census, 2010 American Community Survey (ACS), 2021 1-year ACS

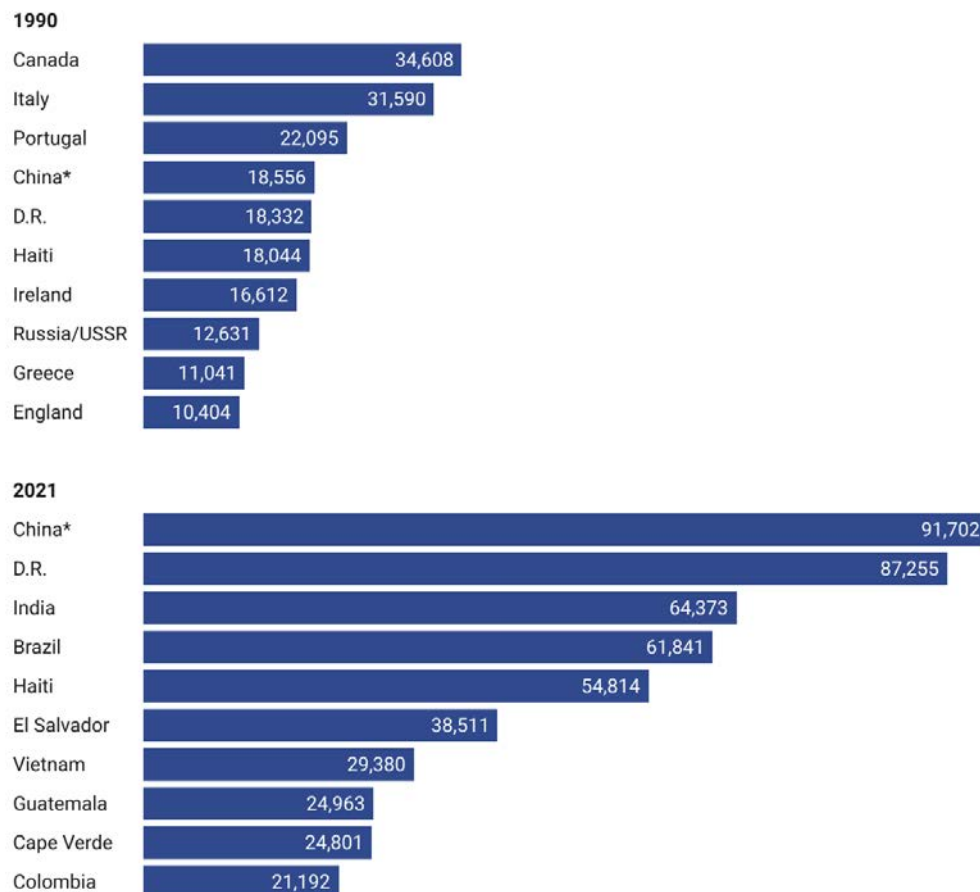
The composition of immigrants in Greater Boston has changed significantly.

Until 1965, U.S. immigration policy favored immigrants from Europe. Residual effects of this were evident in the composition of immigrant populations in Greater Boston until as late as 1990, when six European countries still made the top 10 countries of origin. In contrast, by 2021, no European country made the top 10. Instead, all top countries of origin are now Latin American or Asian, with the leaders being China, the Dominican Republic, India, Brazil, and Haiti.

Like European immigrants from the 19th century, Latin American and Asian immigrants arriving here today typically make the difficult decision to leave their home countries in search of greater safety or economic opportunity. Many are fleeing civil wars, economic and political crises, and natural disasters. Additionally, unlike with European immigration from the 19th century, aggressive U.S. foreign policy played a role in destabilizing many [Central American countries](#), in a way contributing to these push factors.

In 1990, six of the top 10 countries of origin were from Europe; in 2021, no European country made the top 10.

Top ten countries of origin of Greater Boston's foreign-born population.



*Excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 1990 and 2021 ACS 5-year estimates

Greater Boston's immigrant population differs widely from the U.S. overall.

Of the 25 largest metro areas in the country, Greater Boston is roughly in the middle of the pack for size of foreign-born population, coming in at number 11 (using official Metropolitan Statistical Area boundaries). Where we differ, however, is in where our region's immigrants come from.

In broad strokes, the immigrant population of Greater Boston reflects a more diverse global spread. Nationwide, Mexicans make up the largest immigrant share by far, with almost one in four foreign-born residents of the U.S. hailing from Mexico (24 percent). In Greater Boston, by contrast, the Mexican foreign-born share is only 1 percent. After Mexico, the next largest immigrant groups in the U.S. are from India and China, at 5 percent and 6 percent, respectively. India and China both also make the top five of Greater Boston's largest immigrant populations, albeit at larger shares.

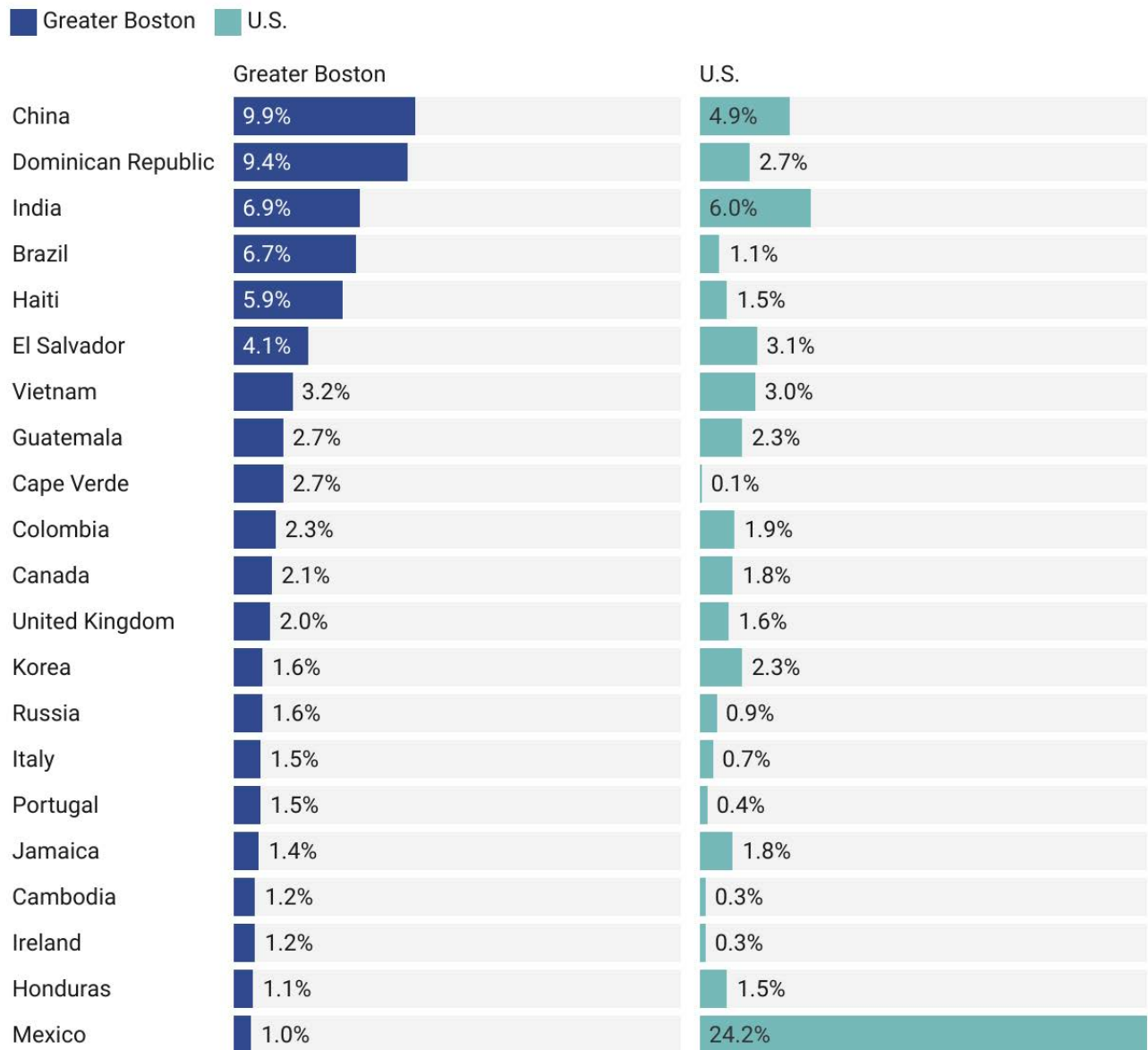
Meanwhile, some of the largest foreign-born groups in Greater Boston have very small representation elsewhere in the country. Greater Boston is home to the majority (58 percent) of all immigrants from Cape Verde in the U.S., 12 percent of Brazilian immigrants, and 9 percent of Irish immigrants. Greater Boston also has significant shares of the U.S. immigrant populations from Portugal, Haiti, Cambodia, and the Dominican Republic.

Another top diaspora group in Greater Boston is Puerto Ricans, but an essential difference is that Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, and therefore not immigrants. Some island-born Puerto Ricans living in Greater Boston share experiences similar to those of international immigrants—such as linguistic barriers and hardship inherent with moving away from one's home. But with citizenship comes the ability to work and move freely anywhere in the United States, and this is why they are not included in this analysis or mentioned anywhere else in this report.

Some of the largest foreign-born groups in Greater Boston have very small representation elsewhere in the country.

Greater Boston's largest immigrant groups are different from the largest immigrant groups to the U.S. overall.

Share of total foreign-born population for Greater Boston and U.S. of Greater Boston's top 21 countries of origin. 2021.



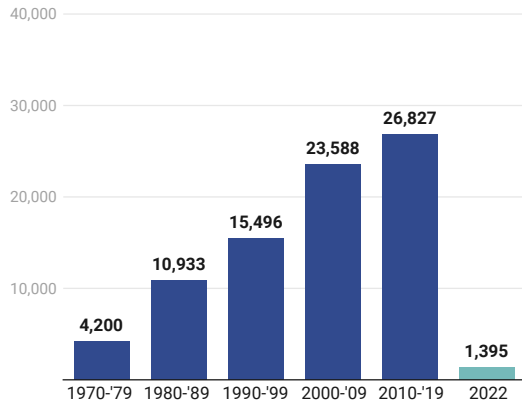
Note: China excludes Hong Kong and Taiwan and United Kingdom includes Crown Dependencies.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Table B05006 2021 American Community Survey 5-year estimates

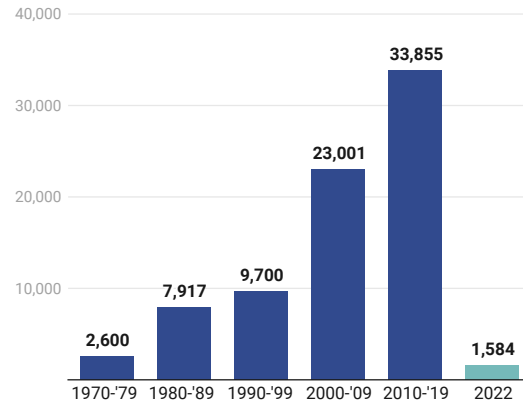
New arrivals to Greater Boston by country of origin.

Five top country of origin arrival estimates by decade preceding each U.S. census since 1980, plus 2022 arrivals alone.

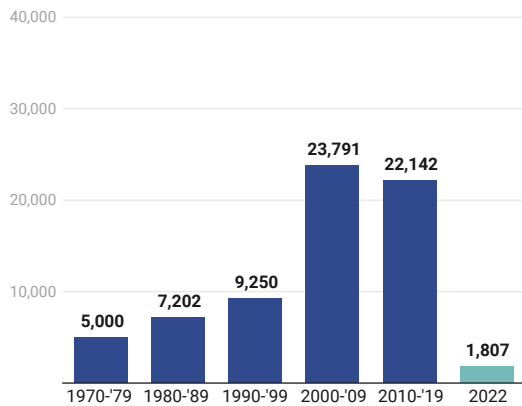
China



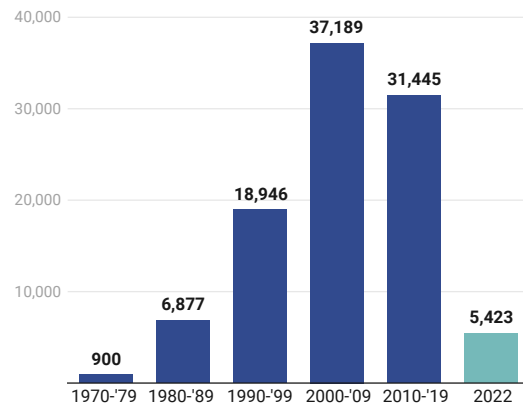
Dominican Republic



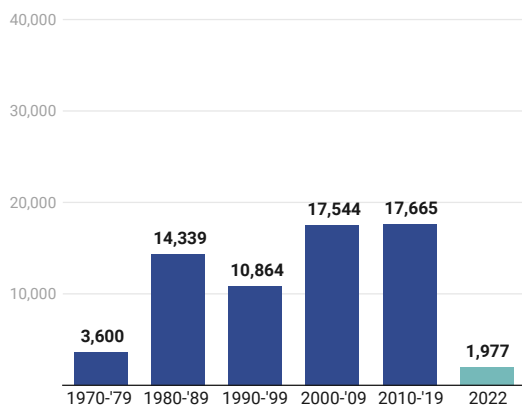
India



Brazil



Haiti



Source: ACS IPUMS 2021 5-year estimates.

Who makes up the largest groups of recent arrivals?

So far in this report, we've looked at people who were born abroad as our measure for immigrants living in Greater Boston. While useful, that measure combines very recent arrivals with others who have been living here for decades. So, here we shift and look just at new arrivals and see how that's changed over time. The graphs on the previous page look at the top five countries of origin for new arrivals in the single year of 2022, and then look back over time at how arrivals for those five groups have shifted for each 10-year period going back to 1970–1979.

Notably, new arrivals for each of these five immigrant groups have increased significantly since 1970. When we look at immigration by year instead of all foreign-born residents, we see that Brazil, not China, was the top country of origin in Greater Boston for 2022. Nearly three times as many immigrants from Brazil came to Greater Boston in 2022 as from the next highest country of origin. It should be noted that all of these are based on American Community Survey estimates, so these do come with significant margins of error, especially when looking just at one year's worth of arrivals.



CHINA: While still increasing at meaningful rates, Chinese immigrants now make up a somewhat smaller share of new arrivals than they did several years ago. China was the highest sending country during the 1980s and 1990s. The Boston metro area has the fourth largest [Chinese foreign-born population](#) in the country. And at 10 percent of our foreign-born population, China is the most common place of birth among immigrants here. In all, 92,000 Chinese immigrants lived in Greater Boston in 2021.

The Chinese population in Greater Boston was relatively small until the mid-1960s when decades-old restrictive immigration laws that banned immigration from China and imposed racist country of origin quotas were reversed. Arrival of immigrants from China to Greater Boston grew steadily from 1980 before peaking in 2016. China is a large, diverse country and the Chinese foreign-born population in Greater Boston reflects this intra-group diversity. Many come to study at our universities or to work on visas for highly specialized professions, but others come [without documentation](#) to seek a better economic future.

Like immigration from other countries, immigration to the U.S. from China declined drastically due to pandemic travel restrictions, but COVID-19 upended the steady growth trajectory of Chinese immigration to the U.S. due to racist Trump era restrictions targeting Chinese migration and the Chinese government's zero-COVID policies that brought travel from China to a complete standstill. In response, Chinese immigrants are [increasingly turning to passage through the U.S. southern border](#). This reflects intra-group disparities between individuals and families who have clear pathways toward legal status and citizenship and those without legal documentation.



DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: Immigration from the Dominican Republic has increased significantly in recent years. In 2022, roughly 1,600 Dominican immigrants arrived to Greater Boston. This comes on top of the decade from 2010 to 2019, when the Dominican Republic was the top country of origin for new arrivals at almost 34,000.

While there's been a recent increase, Greater Boston has had a significant Dominican population for a while. Dominicans now comprise 9 percent of Greater Boston's foreign-born population, making them the biggest [Latino foreign-born group](#) in the region (a total of roughly 87,000 residents). The Boston metro area has the second most [Dominican immigrants](#) in the U.S., following only New York City.

Dominican migration to the Northeast was spurred by the U.S.-backed assassination of the authoritarian ruler Rafael Trujillo in 1960, which led to political and economic instability. After the Trujillo assassination and the turmoil that followed, many Dominicans came to the United States on visas issued by the U.S. Embassy or on family-sponsored visas (although some came undocumented). The majority of Dominicans arrived in New York City, but as New York City fell on hard times during the 1970s, many Dominicans went on to seek a new life in smaller New England cities. In later decades, Dominicans have immigrated to the U.S., many of them women, to flee economic crisis.



INDIA: Immigration from India shot up in the 1990s and 2000s and has remained relatively high in recent years, although not at the same levels of China, Brazil or the Dominican Republic. Indians are now the second largest immigrant group nationwide and the third largest immigrant group in Greater Boston, making up 7 percent of the region's foreign-born population. In 2021, 64,000 Indian immigrants called Greater Boston home.

Immigration from India was limited until the U.S. government abolished country of origin quotas in 1965 and it has increased at a steady pace since then. Post–World War II, most Indian immigrants came to the U.S. for professional jobs or to study at colleges or universities. Compared to many other groups, Indian immigrants are far more likely to be international students or on visas for highly specialized professions (e.g., H-1B). According to the [Migration Policy Institute](#), in recent years there has also been a rise in Indian migrants arriving without documentation at the U.S. southern border. This may be related to conditions in India pushing people to emigrate, such as religious and political persecution and limited economic opportunities, along with long lines for legal immigration due to backlogs in the U.S. immigration system. India is the fourth largest country of origin for undocumented immigrants in Massachusetts.



BRAZIL: Brazil was the top sending country between 2000 and 2009 and was not far behind the Dominican Republic in 2010–2019. Brazilians make up 7 percent of Greater Boston’s foreign-born population at 62,000 residents in 2021. Massachusetts has the second largest share of [Brazilian immigrants](#) in the U.S. (17 percent), after Florida (22 percent). Arrival from Brazil peaked in 2016 but fluctuated over the past 40 years, increasing considerably in the first half of the 2000s and declining in the second half of the 2000s before shooting back up in 2015.

Even when Brazilian immigration declined in the late 2000s, Brazilians were still the second largest group of new arrivals. Brazil’s 2012 economic crises, compounded by high rates of unemployment, an increase in crime, and ensuing political instability, drove emigration from the country. In more recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic and appreciation of the U.S. dollar have exacerbated economic hardship and spurred immigration to the U.S. As Massachusetts’ largest undocumented group, Brazilian immigrants are now also entering through the U.S. border at significantly higher rates than as recently as 2016.



HAITI: Immigration from Haiti has fluctuated somewhat more than the other four leading countries of origin and peaked in 2010. The number of Haitian-born residents in Greater Boston reached 52,000 in 2021, with Haitians now making up 6 percent of our foreign-born population. We would also likely see a large increase if this data included Haitian arrivals in 2023, given the recent spike in immigration of Haitians to our region. Massachusetts has the third largest Haitian population of any U.S. state and Haiti is the most common country of origin among the region’s [Black immigrants](#).

During the mid-20th century, [Haitian migration](#) to the U.S. was triggered, in part, by political repression, economic crises, and natural disasters. Prompting a wave of emigration was a massive earthquake in 2010 that left 217,000 dead and 1.5 million homeless in Haiti. In 2021, the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, which was followed by increased civil unrest, along with a 7.2 magnitude earthquake and tropical storm, spurred an increase in emigration. Additionally, many recent Haitian-born immigrants to the U.S. and Greater Boston are from the [generation of Haitians](#) who left the island after the 2010 earthquake, migrating to Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Chile.

As conditions for Haitians have grown inhospitable in those countries, including intense anti-Black and anti-immigrant discrimination, Haitians have continued to migrate farther north. Over the past several years, the number of Haitians arriving to the U.S. without documentation has increased, and many have begun to cross through the U.S. southern border rather than coming directly from Haiti. Many of the new international arrivals to Massachusetts in the past two years have been from Haiti.

2023 brought a spike in new arrivals to Massachusetts.

As part of a recent nationwide trend, Massachusetts saw a substantial increase in the number of international immigrants arriving here in 2022 and 2023. Immigrants often go to where there are jobs and where they have family connections or networks of other immigrants from their homelands. Many recent arrivals came to the U.S. to pursue asylum based on persecution or violence in their home countries or to obtain some type of [temporary status](#) that shields them from deportation for at least one year and typically offers authorization to apply for a work permit. Owing to strong Haitian and Brazilian diaspora communities in Greater Boston, many of the immigrants coming to Massachusetts have been Haitian and Brazilian nationals, but immigrants are also arriving from other Central and South American countries.

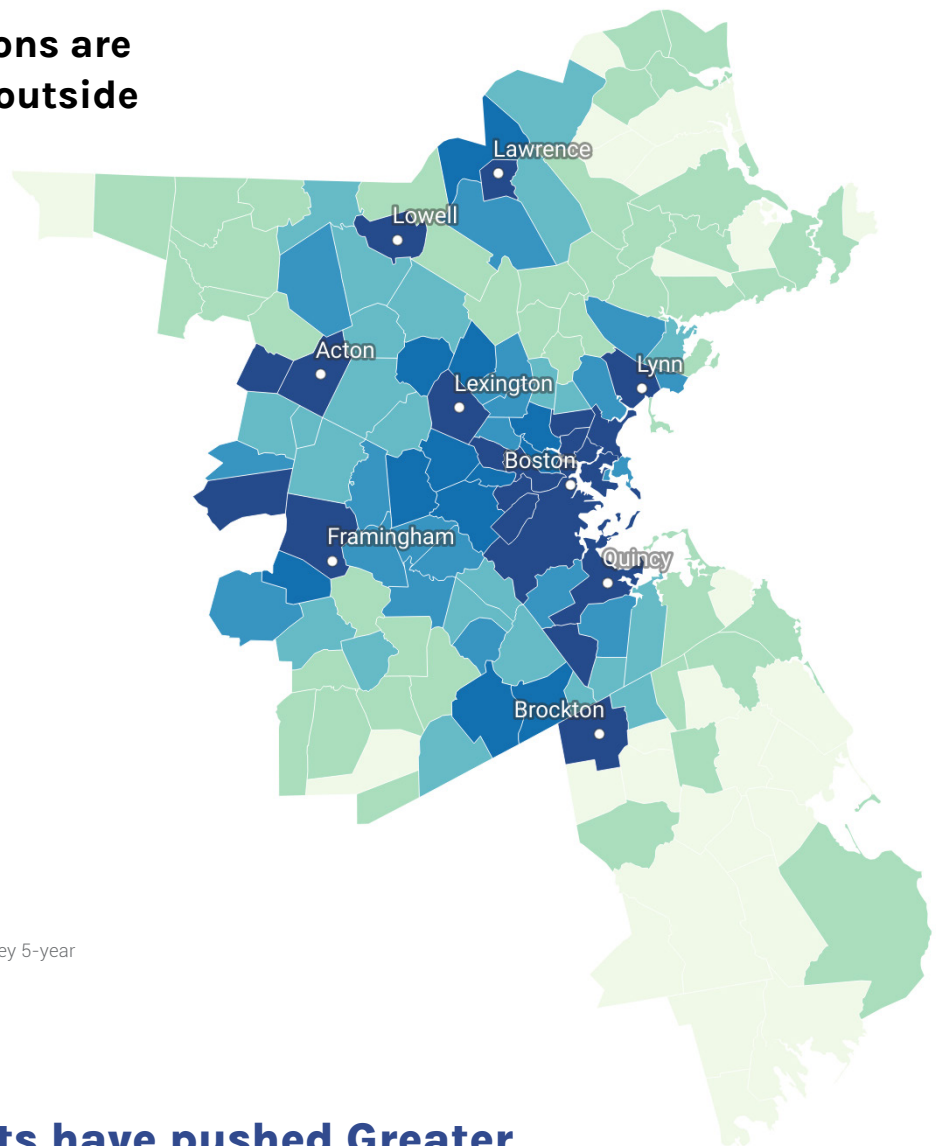
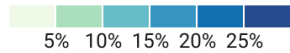
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Many recent arrivals came to the U.S. to pursue asylum based on persecution or violence in their home countries or to obtain some type of temporary status.

There isn't good publicly available data on exactly how many new arrivals have come to Massachusetts in 2023 or who they are. Many arrive with few resources of their own and nowhere to go and wind up homeless or in the state's emergency housing assistance system. We also know that as of fall 2023, about half the family shelter caseload was made up of new international arrivals. For this reason, the state's data on use of the state's emergency housing assistance system is the best proxy we have at this time for determining numbers of new arrivals to our area. As of January 2024, there were [7,545 families](#) in emergency assistance shelters and hotels/motels, meaning about 3,500 of them were likely immigrant families. We also know that between January and November 2023, a total of [43,282](#) immigrants who received a notice to appear in court resided in Massachusetts and have been allowed to stay in the U.S. to await their court dates.

Immigrant populations are growing in suburbs outside the urban core.

Share of residents born outside of the United States by city/town. 2017-2021.



Source: 2017-2011 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates Table B05002 • Map data: MassGIS

High housing costs have pushed Greater Boston's immigrants out of the urban core.

In recent years, the immigrant population has grown rapidly in some suburbs outside of the urban core. Greater Boston's foreign-born population is still largely concentrated in Boston and inner-ring suburbs like Cambridge, Somerville, and Chelsea. But this is changing quickly. Boston itself was once the hub for new immigrant arrivals to the region, but as housing costs have skyrocketed, many immigrant families are being pushed to move to farther-flung parts the region and many new arrivals are skipping the urban core altogether.

Several communities that saw rapid growth in foreign-born populations since 2011 were quite far from the urban core. These include Revere (+11 percentage point increase in foreign-born population), Boxborough (+9 percentage points), Marlborough (+8 percentage points), and Brockton (+8 percentage points). Meanwhile, Boston and inner-ring suburbs saw much smaller increases. Boston's foreign-born population increased by just one percentage point between 2011 and 2021 and Cambridge's increased by two percentage points. Meanwhile, Somerville's foreign-born population actually dropped by two percentage points.

On the other hand, South Shore communities like Duxbury, Cohasset, and Marshfield and stretches toward Cape Cod have consistently since 2011 had a smaller share of foreign-born residents than other parts of Greater Boston. This may be because these communities are much farther from jobs in the urban core without easily accessible public transportation options.

Boston itself was once the hub for new immigrant arrivals to the region, but as housing costs have skyrocketed, many immigrant families are being pushed to move to farther-flung parts the region and many new arrivals are skipping the urban core altogether.

While we know that there are communities with higher concentrations of foreign-born residents, we also know that every community across the region is home to immigrant populations. In the next map we show more detail about each community's top immigrant group. Specifically, the map shows the top country of origin for foreign-born residents in each community. To see municipality names with longer lists of the top five countries of origin for each one, refer to our [interactive online supplement](#).

Because there's a wide range of immigrant groups, at first glance the map is quite busy, but looking more closely, some interesting patterns emerge. For example, many of the cities and towns where China is the top country of origin are inner-ring suburbs, like Cambridge and Brookline, and in MetroWest just outside of the urban core, like Lexington and Needham, along with a few places on the North and South shores. Meanwhile, India is the top country of origin in communities southwest and northwest of the metro area, including parts of the Merrimack Valley. This map also tells us about groupings of immigrants by continent and it's notable the largest Asian immigrant groups (namely China and India) are the top immigrant groups in many higher-income suburbs west of Boston.

The North Shore sees Dominican Republic as the top country of origin in many communities such as Lynn and Lawrence, but the DR diaspora also includes Boston. For a similar analysis of top 10 countries of birth within the neighborhoods of Boston, see the Boston Planning and Development Agency's [Boston Neighborhoods map](#). Concentrated locations where Brazil is the top country of origin are spread throughout Greater Boston, and most communities where Haiti is the top country of origin are clustered south of Boston, such as in Milton and Randolph. We also see that Lowell is home to a large Cambodian population and Brockton is home to a significant Cape Verdean community. Interestingly, communities where the top countries of origin are Portuguese-speaking—namely Brazil, Portugal, and Cape Verde—dominate the region south of Boston.

PART II:

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Immigrants play a vital role in Greater Boston's economy at virtually every level and in every sector.

Immigrants contribute roughly \$103 billion annually, or 21 percent of the regional GDP, which is equivalent to their share of the population (21%). And immigrants living in Greater Boston paid \$17 billion in local, state, and federal taxes, according to estimates by [American Immigration Council](#). In this section, we examine the economic impacts of foreign-born workers in detail, comparing them to those of native-born workers and tracking how they change for individuals over time and across generations.

Immigrants contribute roughly \$103 billion annually, or 21 percent of the regional GDP, which is equivalent to their share of the population (21%).

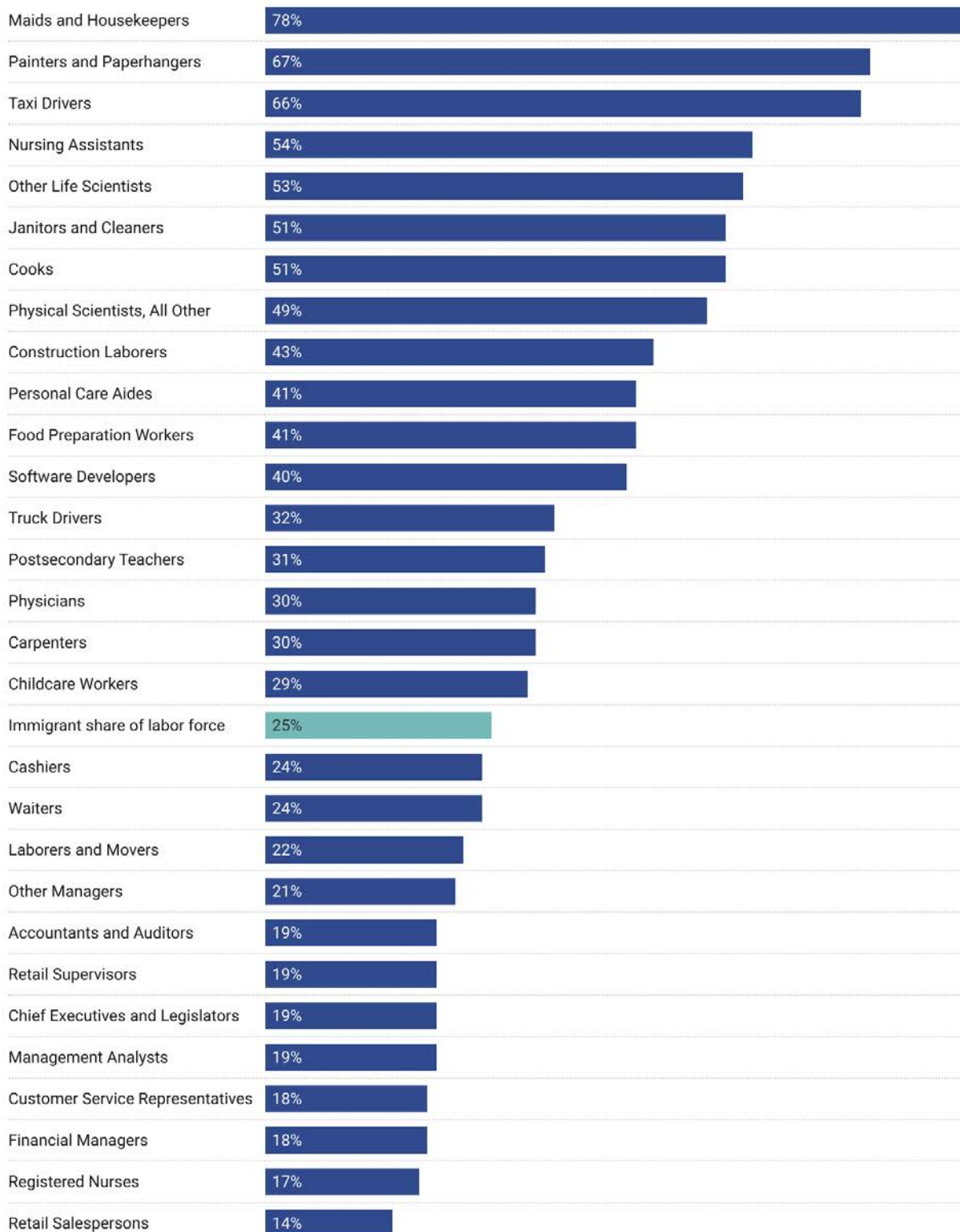
There's a persistent stereotype that immigrants to the United States work mostly in low-wage, low-productivity jobs. As a result, many Americans harbor a deeply inaccurate view that immigrant workers are somehow bad for the economy and our communities. There are several ways in which this stereotype misses important dynamics.

First, immigrants to Greater Boston compose a significant proportion of the area's economic output and labor force. As we will show, immigrant labor is essential to the Boston metropolitan region right now and to its potential for future growth.

Second, while immigrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage jobs, the majority of immigrants—61 percent—work in middle- or upper-wage jobs. Truly, there are immigrants working in every sector of Boston's economy. This includes thousands of highly skilled workers in upper-wage jobs in technology, business, and the medical fields. Many immigrants who hold low-wage jobs are responsible for essential functions that help keep the local economy running, especially notable during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Immigrants work in all sectors of Greater Boston's economy.

Share of all workers in each occupation who are immigrants.



Note: Includes top 30 Census-defined occupational categories among immigrants in Greater Boston with at least 5,000 immigrants.

Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

To illustrate where immigrants work in the economy, we sorted the most common jobs immigrants hold into low-, middle-, and upper-wage categories based on the median wage for all workers in each job. Jobs where the median wage was less than two-thirds of the overall median for full-time workers in Greater Boston were listed as “low-wage” jobs and those with a median wage of more than double the overall median were called “upper-wage.” Every job between these ranges was classified as “middle-wage.”

We look at full-time workers because American Community Survey data give an annual rather than an hourly wage; looking only at full-time workers allows an apples-to-apples comparison of wage levels.

Finally, our research finds that immigrants demonstrate remarkable levels of economic mobility as they spend more time in the United States. The improvements in economic outcomes persist into the next generation, with second-generation immigrants (those with at least one immigrant parent) often earning more than native-born workers.

Immigrants work at all levels of the economy.

Certainly, many immigrants work in low-wage jobs where workers have the fewest guarantees and bargaining rights, even when the jobs themselves are labeled essential. In some cases, these workers have arrived in our region with low levels of education and have few immediate opportunities for high-quality work. In other cases, workers are highly skilled, but regulations prohibit them from working jobs for which they are trained but lack U.S.-specific credentials.

To better understand the quality of jobs immigrants hold, we assigned each occupation an earnings range (low, middle, or upper) based on the median wage for all workers in that profession compared against the median wage for all full-time, year-round workers in the region, which was \$73,000. Thus: Low-wage jobs have a median wage that is less than \$49,000 per year (two-thirds of the overall median), middle-wage jobs have a median annual wage between \$49,000 to \$146,000 (double the overall median), and upper-wage jobs have a median annual wage higher than \$146,000. Data analysis is based on the 2021 American Community Survey 5-year sample.¹⁴

Defining low-, middle-, and upper-wage jobs.

Earning Range	Income
Low Wage	Less than \$49,000
Middle Wage	\$49,000 - \$146,000
Upper Wage	More than \$146,000

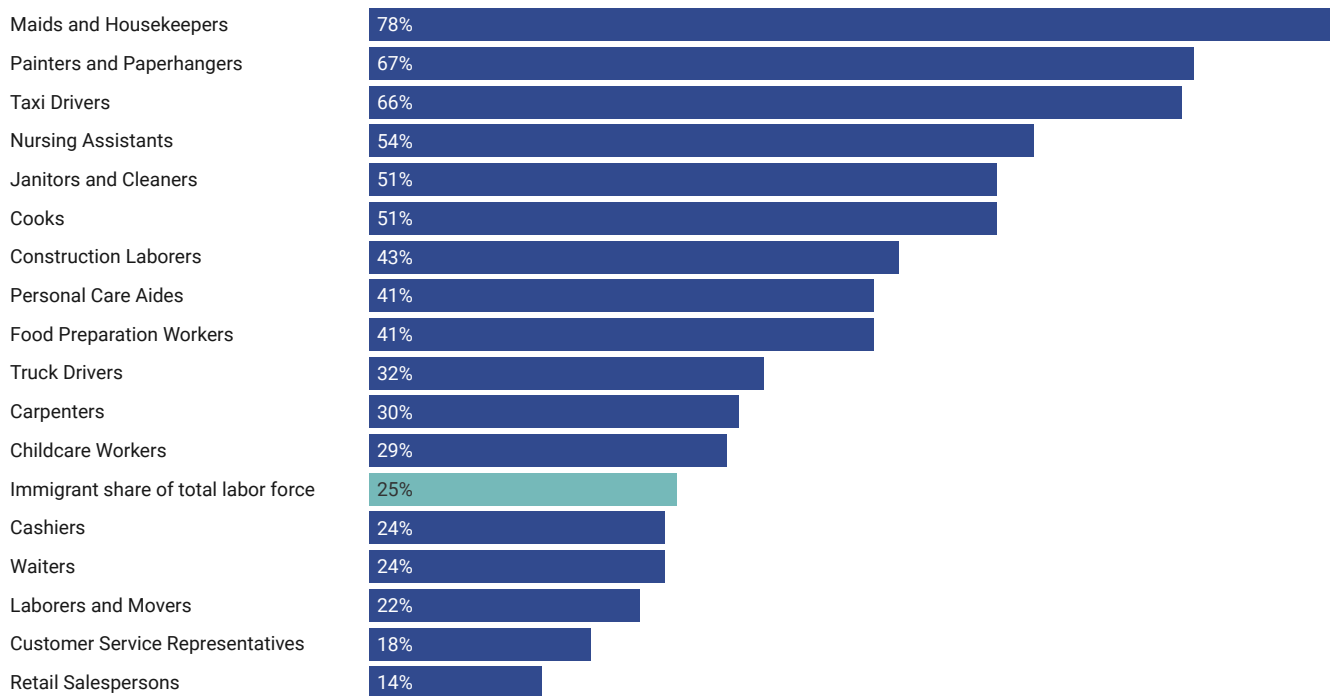
This analysis sorted each occupation based on the median wage for all workers in each occupational category.

Table: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-year Sample

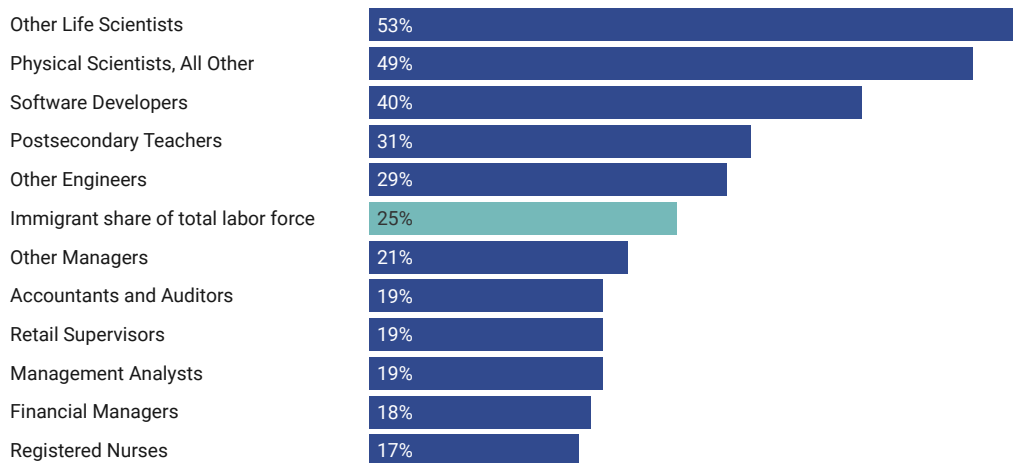
Immigrants make up a vital share of jobs at all economic levels.

Share of all workers in each profession who are immigrants, sorted by wage level.

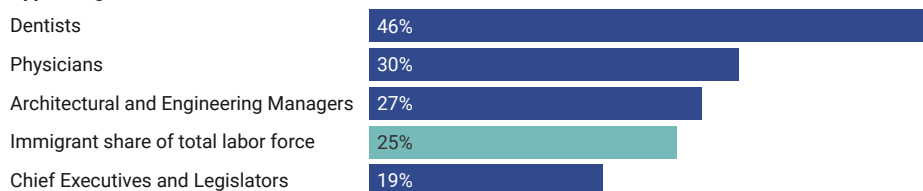
Low Wage



Middle Wage



Upper Wage



Earning range calculated using the median wage for workers in each occupation. Graph shows top 30 jobs for immigrants in Greater Boston.

Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

Sixty-one percent of Greater Boston's immigrant workers—documented and undocumented—who have full-time jobs earn at least \$49,000 per year, which is a middle-wage earning level for full-time work. At the same time, *immigrants are disproportionately likely* to be in low-wage jobs. In all, 38 percent of immigrants are in jobs paying less than \$49,000, compared to 24 percent of U.S.-born workers.

Most workers in Greater Boston are in middle- or upper-wage jobs, and so are most immigrant workers. Yet, as shown in the graph above, while immigrants are present in virtually every type of workplace in Greater Boston, they are much more likely than U.S.-born workers to be in low-wage jobs, where the median wage is below \$49,000. Many of these are service occupations, where immigrants account for the vast majority of all workers in the field. For example, immigrants account for 78 percent of maids and housekeepers, 51 percent of cooks, and 51 percent of janitors and building cleaners, disproportionately more than their 25 percent share of the labor force.

In Greater Boston immigrants are much more likely than U.S.-born workers to be in low-wage jobs, where the median wage is below \$49,000.

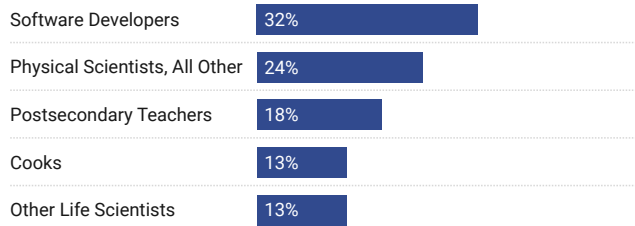
Workers in these occupations often have the fewest protections in the entire economy because of historic and deliberate exclusion. For example, farm workers and maids and housekeepers are excluded from collective bargaining rights and worker protections. That immigrants make up most of these workers is no coincidence. Historically, domestic jobs have been held most often by women of color, especially Black women. At the time the federal labor protections were written, in the 1930s, farm laborers also were overwhelmingly African American. The exemption of domestic and farm occupations from national and local worker protection laws is a result of workplace segregation and systemic racism. In present day, the people who work as maids and housekeepers continue to be mostly women, but now tend to be immigrants from Latin America; farm laborers are now overwhelmingly from Latin America as well.

Sectors of work vary widely by country of origin, reflecting different immigration pathways. Immigrants from some countries are more commonly selected for certain immigration pathways, like H-1B visas for highly specialized professions. By contrast, immigrants from other countries are **less likely** to receive work visas for professional pathways because the American immigration system prioritizes those with college degrees who work in highly specialized professions, like software development or engineering.

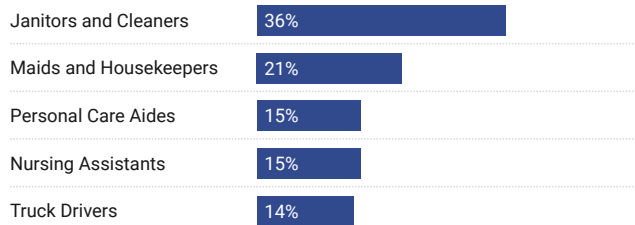
Occupations vary by country of origin.

The five most common jobs for immigrants from Greater Boston's top 10 countries of origin.

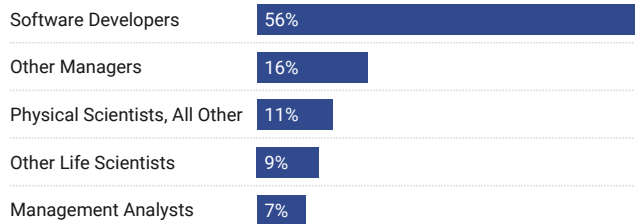
China



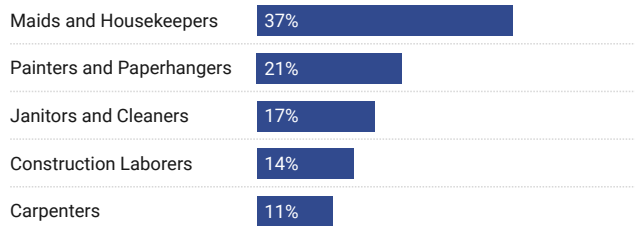
Dominican Republic



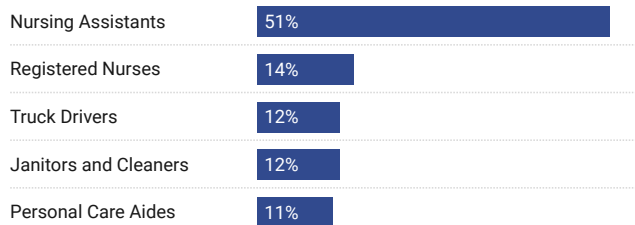
India



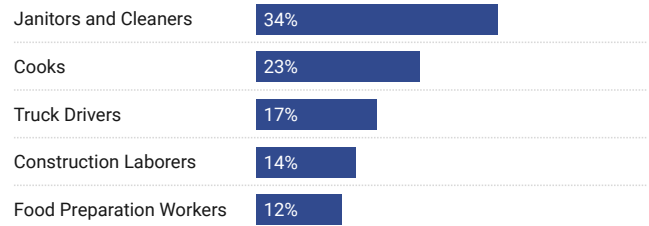
Brazil



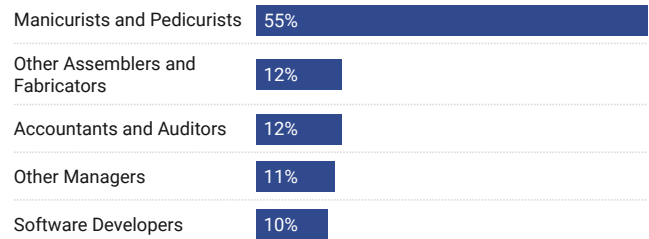
Haiti



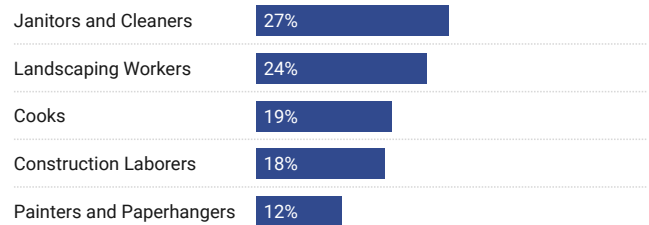
El Salvador



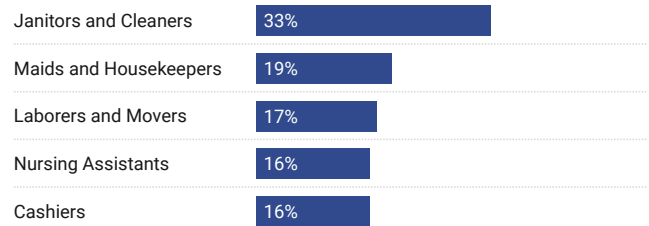
Vietnam



Guatemala



Cape Verde



Colombia

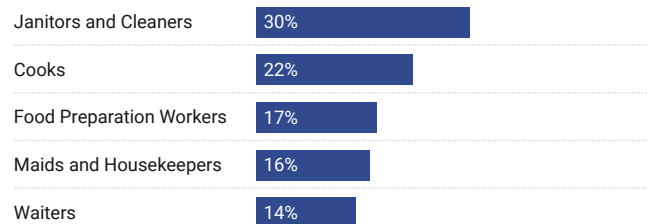


Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2011 5-Year Sample

Immigrants are more likely to start their own businesses.

In Greater Boston, immigrants make up 28 percent of all business owners, considerably higher than their 21 percent share of the population and a bit higher than their 25 percent share of the labor force.

Immigrants run an even higher proportion of Main Street businesses. These are the institutions that help shape the character of neighborhoods, such as restaurants, beauty salons, and convenience stores. Immigrants own 40 percent of Main Street¹ businesses in the Greater Boston area, including more than half (55 percent) of all restaurants, 45 percent of beauty salons, and 61 percent of nail salons.

In Greater Boston, immigrants make up **28 percent of all business owners**, considerably higher than their 21 percent share of the population.

Immigrants in Greater Boston's economy.

Immigrant share of population, labor force, business owners, and Main Street business owners in Greater Boston.

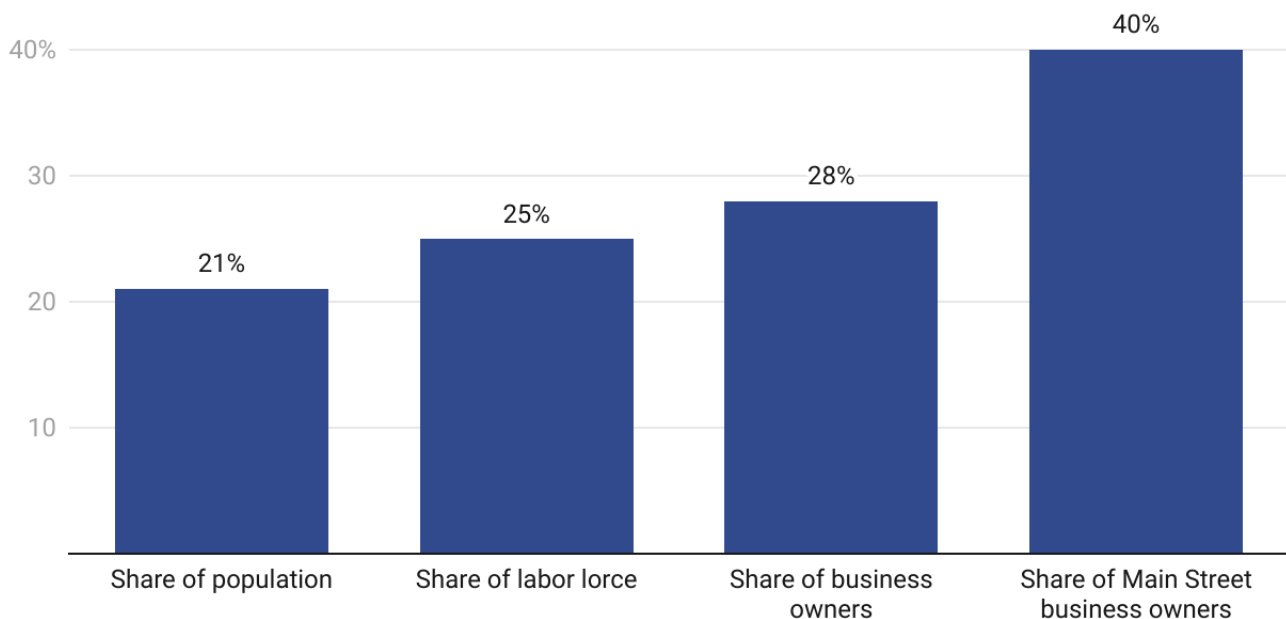
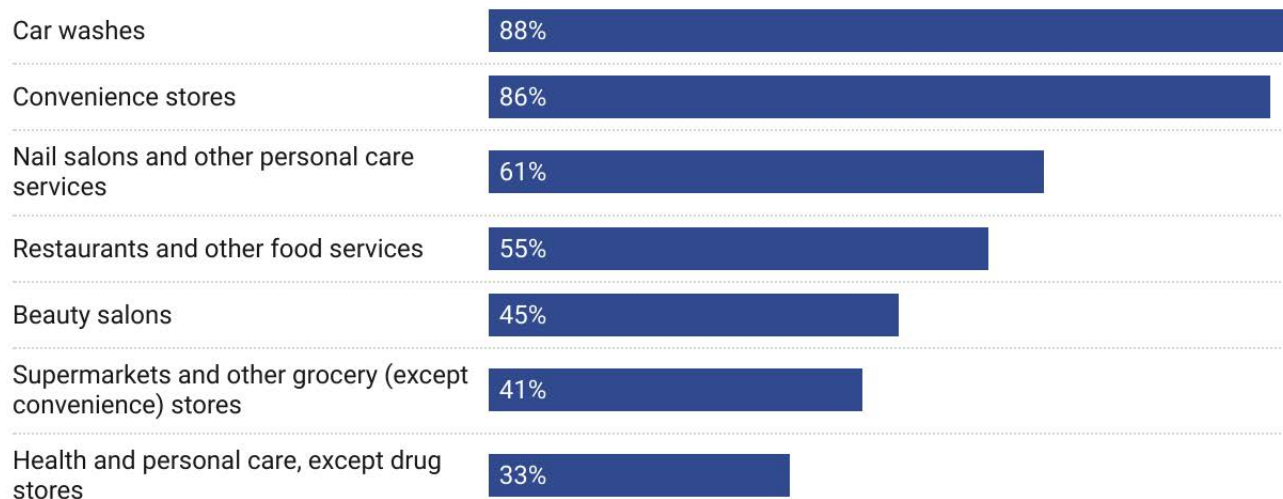


Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

Immigrants on Main Street.

Percentage of Main Street businesses in each industry that are owned by immigrants.



Showing only the most commonly owned Main Street businesses in Greater Boston.

Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

Immigrants in Greater Boston have a broad range of educational attainment.

Related to the fact that immigrants in Greater Boston work in a wide variety of sectors and roles, they also have diverse educational experiences. The distribution is remarkably even across the different levels of attainment, with the share of immigrants having a college degree (19 percent), for instance, roughly the same as those with no high school diploma (18 percent). This diversity in educational experience is especially notable when you contrast Boston to a metro area like Los Angeles, where 33 percent of foreign-born residents don't have a high school degree.

This puts the Boston area's foreign-born population among the most highly educated in the nation, with 43 percent having a college degree or more. At 24 percent, a graduate degree is the most common level of education among our area's immigrant population—on par with the overall rate of graduate degree holding in Greater Boston (also 24 percent) and exceeding the rate for all Americans nationwide (14 percent).

Greater Boston is known internationally as an academic hub, with universities that draw people from all over the world. Immigrants from China and India are among those with the highest levels of educational attainment and are also some of largest immigrant groups in Greater Boston. Ninety-one percent of immigrants from India and 64 percent of immigrants from China have a college or graduate degree. At the same time, a significant proportion of immigrants in Greater Boston also have lower levels of formal education.

For example, among immigrants from the Dominican Republic, 60 percent had an educational level of a high school diploma or less, as did 59 percent of immigrants from Brazil. Accordingly, the top occupation for immigrants from both China and India in Greater Boston is software engineer, a field requiring a high level of education, and the top occupations for immigrants from the Dominican Republic and Brazil were professions requiring less education, such as maids and housekeepers.

Greater Boston's immigrant population is highly educated.

Education level of foreign-born population 25 years or older in 12 metropolitan statistical areas with largest overall population, sorted by graduate degree. 2022.

■ Graduate or professional degree
 ■ Bachelor's degree
 ■ Some college or associates degree
 ■ High school graduate (includes equivalency)
 ■ Less than high school graduate

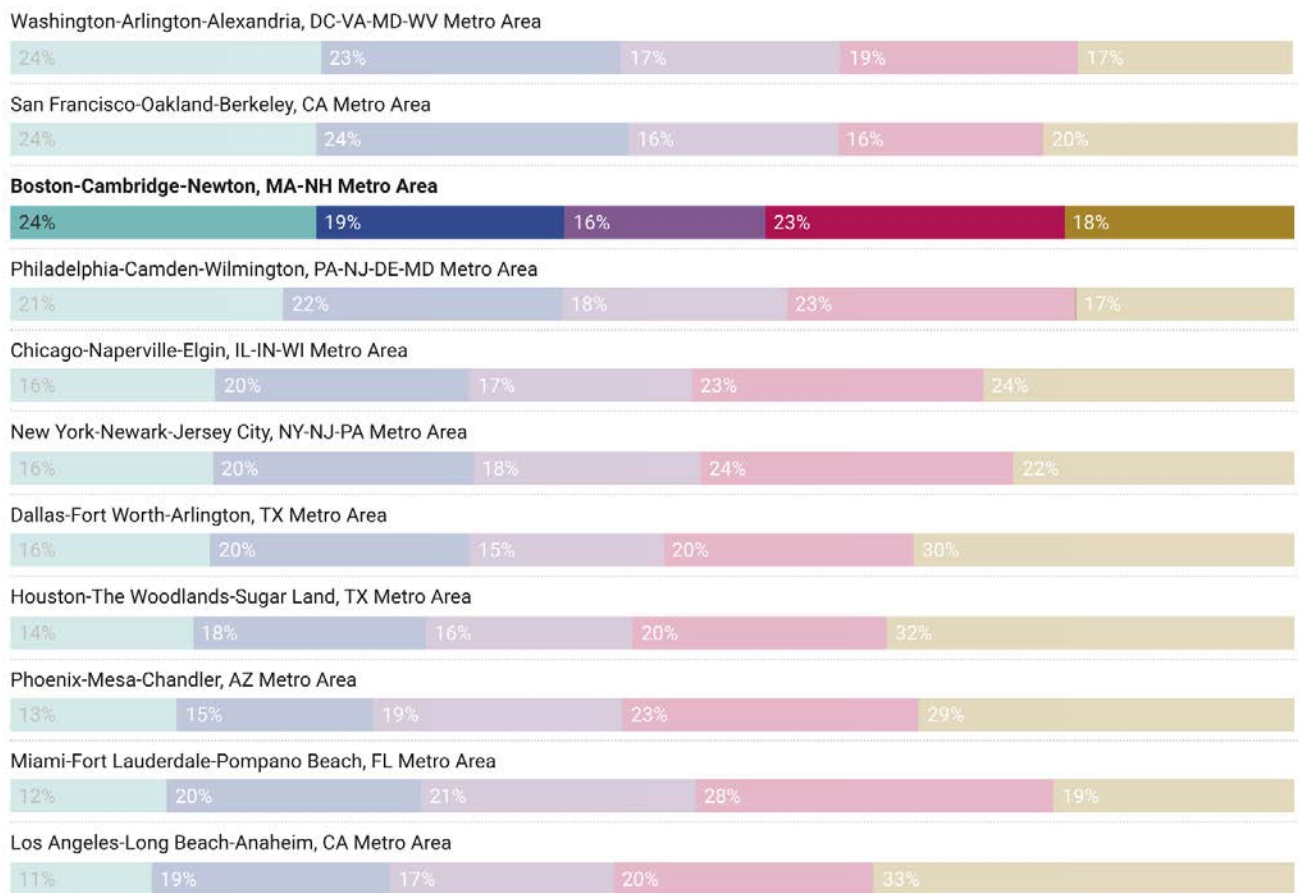
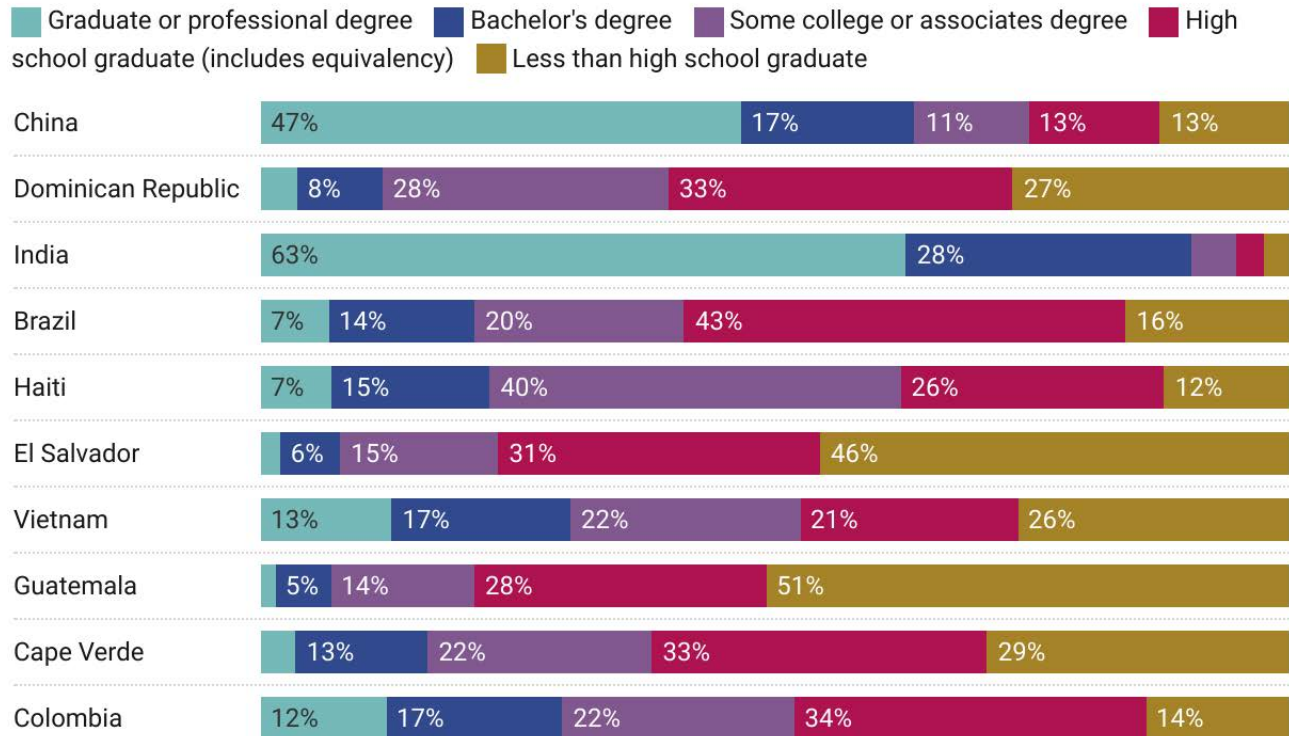


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Table S0501 ACS 2022 1-year estimates

Educational attainment of Greater Boston’s immigrant population varies by country of origin.

Education level of foreign-born workers by place of birth. Ten largest immigrant groups in Greater Boston. 2017-2021.



Groups are sorted by total population size.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: ACS 2017-2021

Greater Boston is known internationally as an academic hub, with universities that draw people from all over the world.

Most immigrants succeed, despite facing obstacles.

Most immigrants in Greater Boston do fairly well in this analysis. More than 60 percent of immigrants in the region make at least a middle wage and 14 percent earn more than double the median wage, falling into the upper-wage category.

In Greater Boston, 24 percent of U.S.-born workers and 38 percent of immigrant workers make less than two thirds of the median wage. The immigrants who make up a disproportionate share of this group face numerous barriers in the labor market, from language to educational attainment, recognition of credentials, immigration status or discrimination in the workplace.

Cost of living is also high in Boston. [According to data from the Economic Policy Institute](#), the average cost of living for just one adult in the Boston Metropolitan Area is \$58,000. That means anyone in the low wage category in this analysis will likely struggle to provide basic housing, food, and transportation for themselves alone, never mind if they have children or other relatives to support, and even people in middle-wage jobs may also have a hard time making ends meet.

Distribution of immigrant wages versus U.S.-born wages.

Percentage of full-time, year-round workers in Greater Boston in each earnings category. 2021.



In this analysis, "Low Wage" describes anyone whose reported earnings were less than \$49,000 per year. "Upper Wage" consists of individuals making more than \$146,000 annually. Those in the "Middle Wage" group made between \$49,000 and \$146,000

Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

Race and gender are major factors impacting economic outcomes.

People in all race and gender groups, whether U.S.-born or immigrant, work in jobs across the economic spectrum; however, workers are not spread evenly. The graph below shows that race and gender² are significant factors in determining economic outcomes. Among both immigrants and U.S.-born residents, White and Asian/Pacific Islander men are the most likely to earn middle and upper wages, while Black and Latino women are more likely to earn low wages.

In aggregate, Hispanic/Latino³ immigrants face the greatest hardship. The proportion of Latino immigrants making low wages highlights the economic struggles of a group of Americans who are often the target of hateful anti-immigrant rhetoric, actions of the U.S. deportation regime, and workplace abuses; and signals the barriers they may face due to level of formal

education or English language ability. Just 45 percent of Latino men and a strikingly low 37 percent of Latino women born outside the United States make more than the low-wage threshold of \$49,000. At this wage level, Latinas have the worst economic outcomes of any racial, gender, or nativity group in Greater Boston, putting them well below the cost of living in the Greater Boston area (\$58,000).

Countless factors lie behind these race and gender disparities. Some of it has to do with different immigrant pathways more readily available to people from different countries of origin based on profession and educational attainment, as we discuss above, and some clearly has to do with persistent racism and discrimination faced by Black and Latino workers in the labor market.

White and AAPI men are the most likely to earn middle and upper wages.

Percentage of full-time, year-round immigrant workers in Greater Boston earning a middle or upper wage (more than \$49,000 per year) by race and gender. 2021.

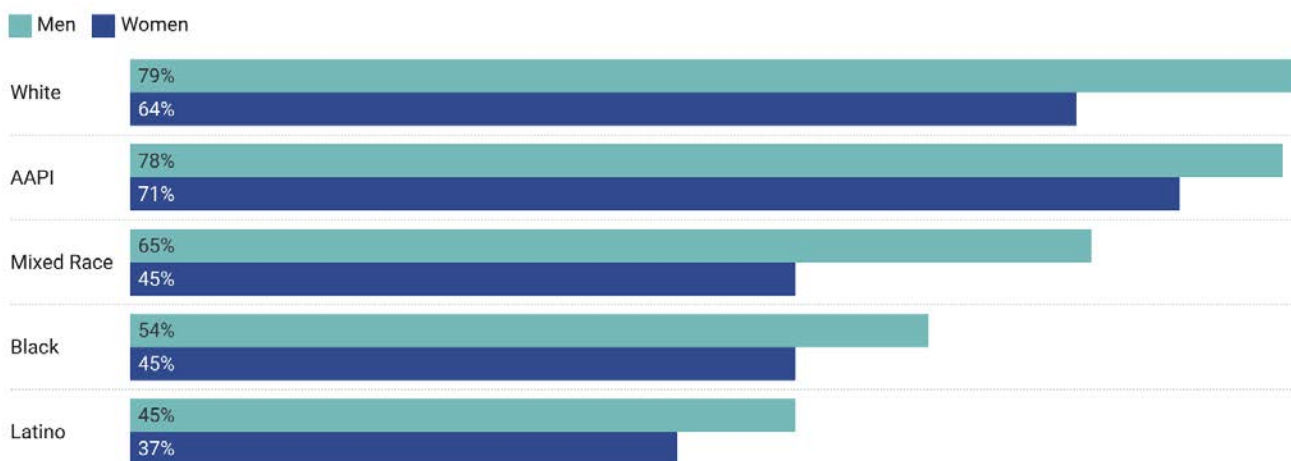


Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

Latino and Black women are most likely to earn low wages.

Percentage of full-time, year-round immigrant workers in Greater Boston earning a low wage (less than \$49,000 per year) by race and gender: 2021.

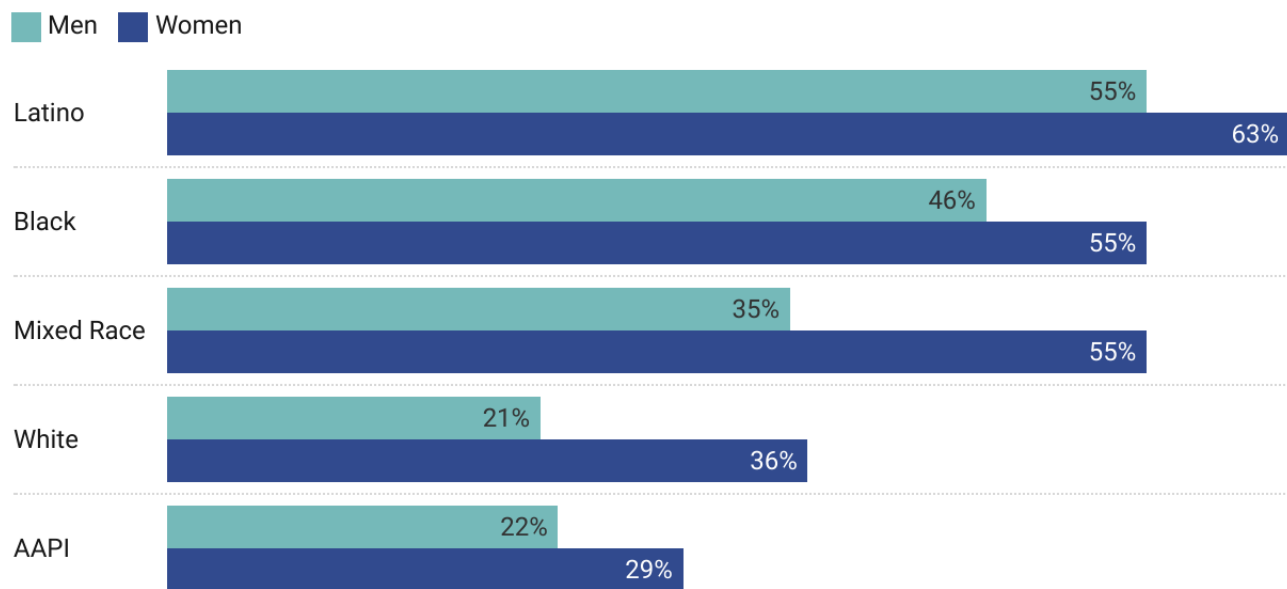


Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

It's also important to note that the above racial categorizations reflect crude social constructs that themselves mask large intra-group disparities. This limitation is perhaps most true for Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) immigrants. This limitation is perhaps most true for Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI) immigrants. From [prior research](#), we know that there are huge income differences within the AAPI population by nationality. In 2018, for example, median incomes by Asian ancestry ranged from \$58,705 for Nepali residents to \$128,552 for Indian residents in Greater Boston. The median income for AAPI in Greater Boston in aggregate, however, was \$102,785. This aggregate median skews high because of the relative size of different ethnic groups thus masking some smaller groups' substantially lower incomes.

There are huge income differences within the AAPI population by nationality. In 2018, for example, median incomes by Asian ancestry ranged from \$58,705 for Nepali residents to \$128,552 for Indian residents in Greater Boston.

Immigrants have high rates of economic mobility.

While many immigrants face economic barriers both nationally and in Greater Boston, most have a clear path toward upward mobility the longer they live in the United States. Below is a graph showing how median wages for full-time workers improve over time in Greater Boston. Immigrants who have been in the U.S. for less than five years and work full-time jobs make a median wage of \$50,000. For those who have lived in the U.S. for more than a decade, the median wage climbs to \$58,000. At \$67,000, the median wage is even higher for immigrants who have been in the U.S. for more than 20 years. While this trend demonstrates upward mobility, it's notable that even after 20 years, immigrants still make almost \$10,000 less than their U.S.-born counterparts, whose median wage is \$76,000.

The rate at which individual earnings grow is a good indicator of how well immigrants fare in Greater Boston's economy. It is clear from these data that not only do immigrants who settle in Greater Boston do well overall, but their socioeconomic outcomes improve over time. This finding is important especially when we consider the often-dangerous stereotypes that today's immigrants are all low-wage workers or that they only serve to fill jobs that U.S.-born workers do not want.

Wages of immigrants increase the longer they live in the U.S.

Median wage for immigrants in Greater Boston by years spent in the United States. 2021.

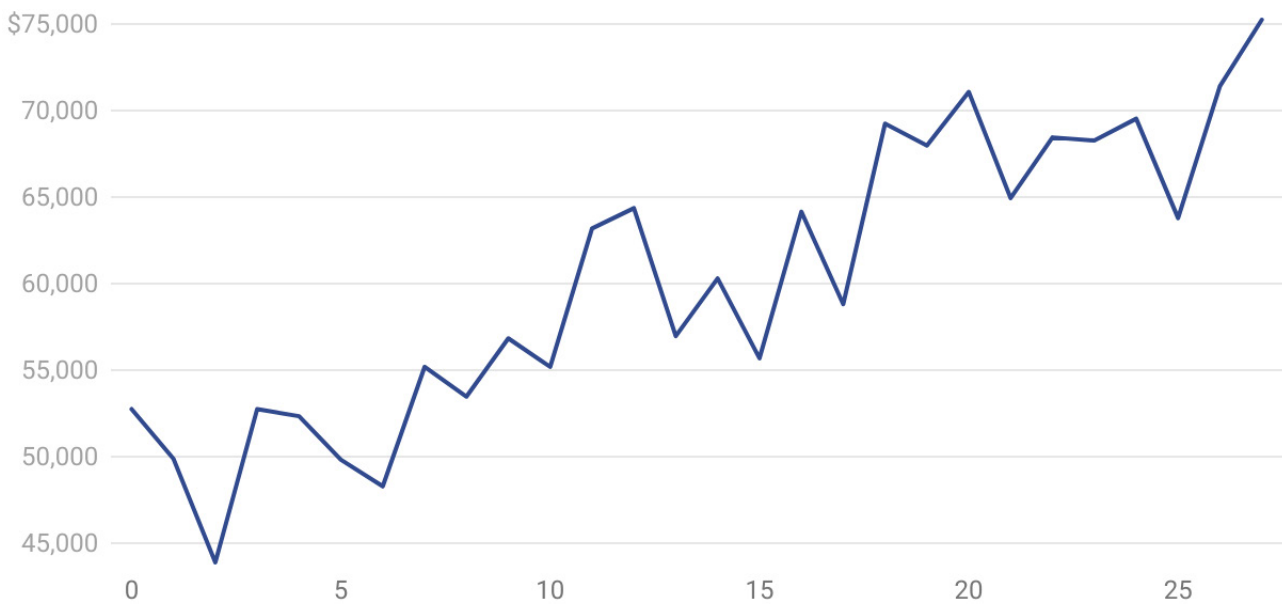


Chart: Immigration Research Initiative • Source: ACS 2021 5-Year Sample

Immigrants have high economic mobility into the second generation in Massachusetts.

Median personal income for residents born outside of the United States (first generation) and in the US to at least one foreign-born parent. Massachusetts. 2022.

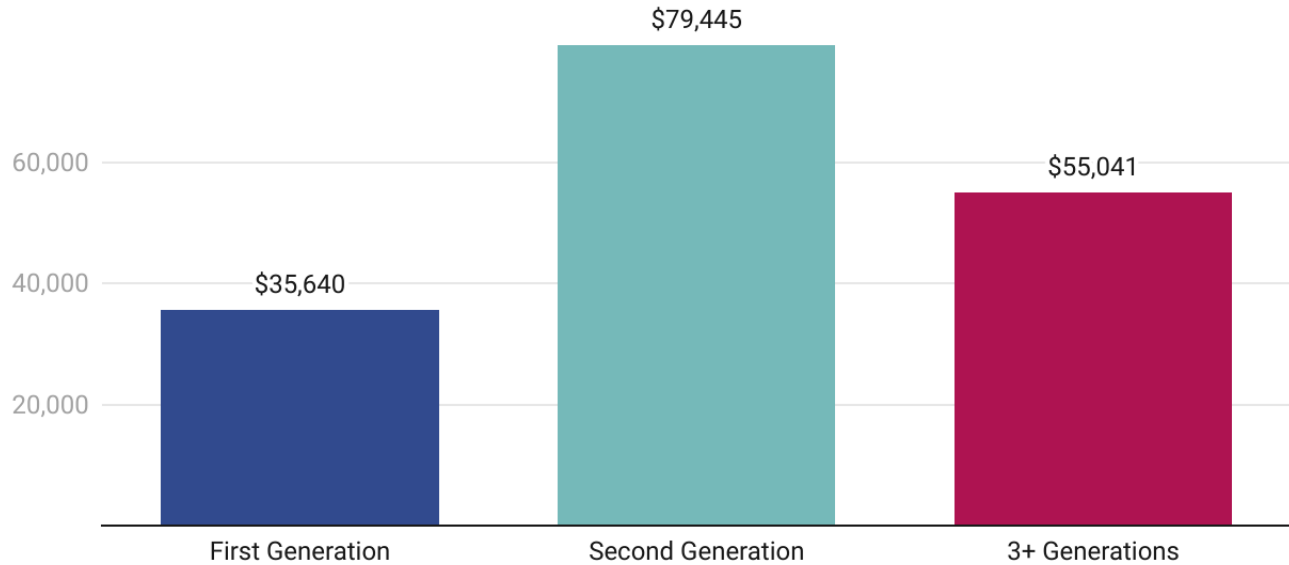


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Current Population Survey ASEC accessed via IPUMS

The trends of upward mobility for immigrants [extend into the next generation](#). Those born in the U.S. to immigrant parents often experience the most drastic improvements in economic outcomes of any demographic group in the U.S. Seventeen percent of individuals in Greater Boston are second-generation immigrants, meaning they were born in the U.S. with at least one parent who is an immigrant. The median individual income for second-generation Bostonians from immigrant families is \$79,000 compared to just \$36,000 for their first-generation parents.

This finding is indicative of larger trends for second-generation immigrants nationally. Second-generation immigrants typically have a greater understanding of the nuances of American life than their parents. In addition to living and being educated in the United States, the children of immigrants often grow up especially imbued with values stressing the importance of striving to build a better life for their families, and encouraged to take advantage of the greater educational and economic opportunities available to them in the U.S.

Prior research shows that, despite common belief to the contrary, economic mobility of immigrants today very closely resembles economic mobility of European immigrants during the 19th and 20th centuries. The book *Streets of Gold* by economists Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan helpfully examines common myths about immigrant economic success throughout American history by using data from Ancestry.com to follow immigrants over time. The European immigrants of the 19th and 20th centuries are commonly revered for their “rags to riches” economic advancement. Meanwhile, immigrants of today, who are largely people of color from Latin American and Asia, are often misrepresented as drains on our economy—never catching up to their American counterparts and straining public resources—reflecting persistent racist and xenophobic sentiments toward this more recent wave of immigrants. Abramitzky and Boustan prove this rhetoric wrong in *Streets of Gold*, showing that immigrants throughout American history from

nearly every sending country have climbed the economic ladder at the same pace. Typically, it takes only one generation for immigrant families to rise from poverty. First-generation immigrants typically improve their own economic positions substantially and their children often rise to the middle class. This is true for immigrants of color today just as it was for European immigrants of past centuries.

This seems to be especially true in Massachusetts. When we compare first and second-generation incomes in Massachusetts with those in the nine other U.S. states with the largest immigrant communities, we find that income figures for both generations are higher in Massachusetts than in any other state, and the jump between generations is second only to New York's. This shows that Massachusetts has high rates of intergenerational immigrant mobility even when compared to peer states.

Incomes rise by the second generation in every state, and they're highest in Massachusetts.

Median personal income among first and second generation immigrants in the states with the highest concentration of first and second generation immigrants. Sorted by income for second generation immigrants. 2022.

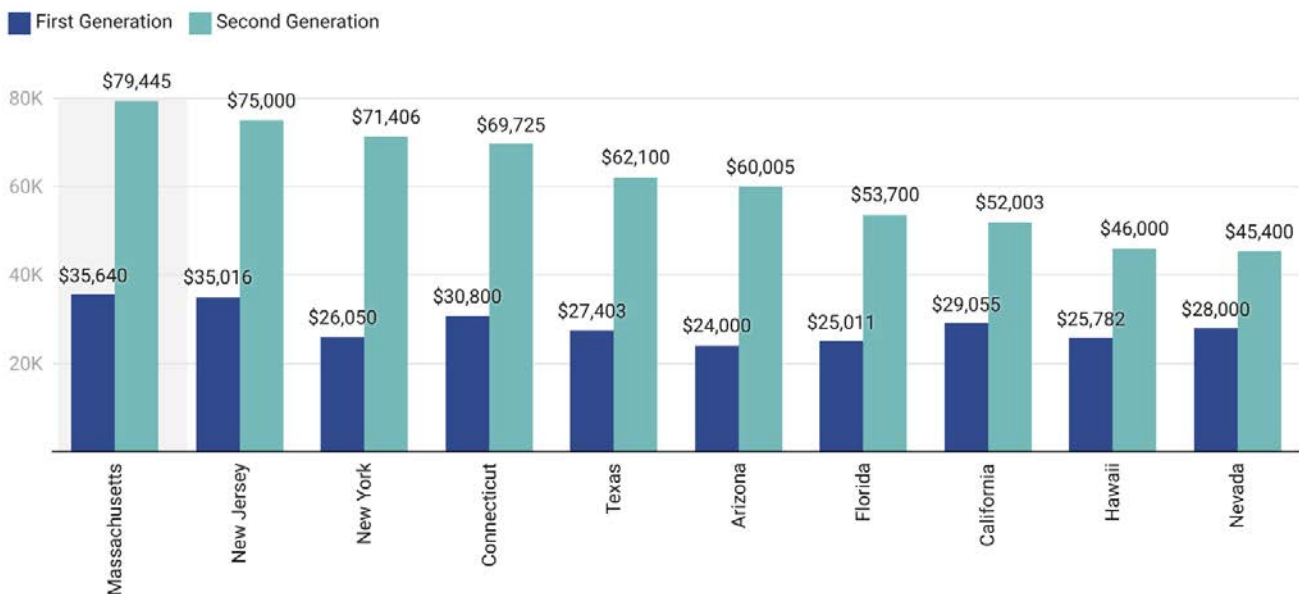


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: CPS ASEC 2022

PART III:

IMMIGRATION PATHWAYS

TYPE	Temporary visa holders	Green card holders	Naturalized citizens
EXPLANATION	<p>Tourists, workers, students, and exchange visitors may enter the U.S. on visas, of which there are more than 80 types. Some visas are temporary (nonimmigrant) and do not lead to permanent status in the U.S. The Visa Waiver Program allows tourists and business travelers from certain countries to travel to the U.S. without a visa for up to 90 days.</p>	<p>Green card holders are also known as lawful permanent residents (LPRs). Green card holders can apply for renewal of their Green card, typically every 10 years, though their status does not expire when their card expires. They may be eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship after a few years. Immigrants commonly obtain green cards through sponsorship by family, employment, refugee or asylum status; as a survivor of trafficking, domestic violence or a serious crime; or the diversity visa lottery.</p>	<p>A naturalized citizen is a former green card holder who applies for and is granted citizenship after meeting specific criteria, including length of residency, and passing an English and civics test.</p>
EXAMPLES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A tourist applies for and receives a B-2 visa to vacation in the U.S. ➤ A student applies for and receives an F visa to study at a U.S. university. ➤ A temporary agricultural worker applies for and is granted an H-2A visa to come to the U.S. for seasonal employment. ➤ An engineer is sponsored by a U.S. company with an H-1B visa to come to the U.S. for specific skilled work. ➤ A tourist from a country that's part of the Visa Waiver Program submits and receives approval under the Electronic System for Travel Authorization to travel to the U.S. for vacation without a visa. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A person marries a U.S. citizen and applies for a green card through marriage. ➤ A worker with an H-1B visa applies for and is granted an adjustment of status to a green card after being sponsored by an employer. ➤ After one year with refugee status, a person applies for and receives a green card. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A person who has resided in the U.S. with a green card for at least five years applies for and is granted citizenship. ➤ A person who obtains a green card through a U.S. citizen spouse applies for and is granted citizenship after three years.

U.S.-born Americans don't typically interface much with the immigration system and may not have a clear sense of how it works. As we've noted in earlier sections, the specific immigration pathways people follow can drive different socioeconomic outcomes, which often vary largely by country of origin. This section explains some common ways that immigrants get here. Each immigrant's experience is unique, but the table below describes a broad framework.

Asylees and Refugees	Undocumented	Temporary Statuses	TYPE
<p>Asylees and refugees obtain legal status in the U.S. based on a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, national origin, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. People who are already in the U.S. may apply for asylum, and refugee status is granted to people who apply and are approved from abroad. Both statuses are eligible for a green card after one year.</p>	<p><u>Undocumented immigrants</u> are foreign-born individuals whose presence in the U.S. is not currently authorized by the federal government. They may have entered the U.S. without inspection, overstayed their visa, or obtained a status that expired.</p>	<p>Some immigrants may be granted or enter the U.S. with a temporary status that protects them from deportation and, in many cases, allows them to obtain work authorization. Examples include temporary protected status (TPS), humanitarian parole, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, classification as a Special Immigrant Juvenile, U Visas, and T Visas.</p>	EXPLANATION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A person fleeing persecution in their home country who enters the U.S. without documentation applies for and eventually receives asylum. ➤ A person trying to escape persecution in their home country applies for and receives refugee status and then enters the U.S. for resettlement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A tourist to the U.S. with a temporary visa stays beyond the date authorized by the U.S. government upon arrival. ➤ A person fleeing their home country crosses a U.S. border without lawful documentation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A person fleeing Haiti arrives in the U.S. without federal authorization, and the U.S. government later decides to grant Temporary Protected Status to people who came from Haiti before a certain date. ➤ A child who came to the U.S. with their family without documentation who meets certain conditions was later granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. ➤ A child who experienced abuse enters the U.S. without documentation and is granted Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. ➤ A person who entered the U.S. without documentation becomes a survivor of a crime and is granted U nonimmigrant status. ➤ A person who entered the U.S. without documentation is a survivor of human trafficking and is granted T nonimmigrant status. 	EXAMPLES

We'll look first at documented immigrants, or those who are present with legal status. Here we focus on Massachusetts, rather than Greater Boston, since that's the geographic level at which these data are available. It's also worth noting that these data reflect immigration statuses granted by the U.S. government both to new arrivals and to current residents of the state. This is because temporary visa holders are new arrivals, whereas citizenship is granted only to current residents, and green card holders can be either new arrivals or current residents.

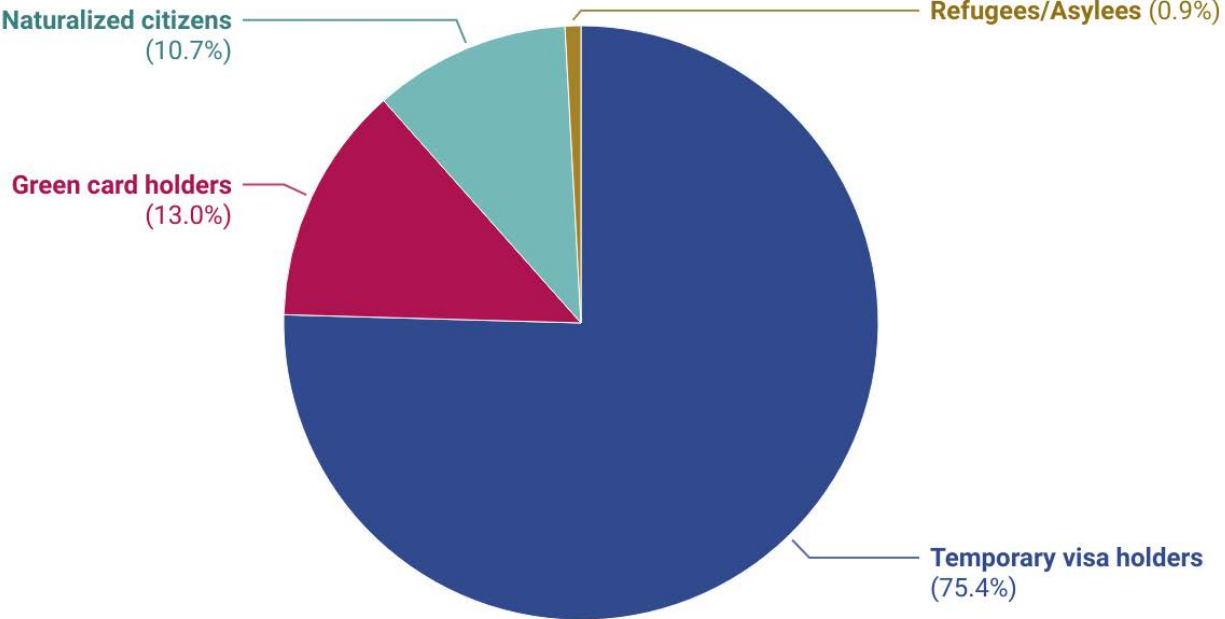
During the past 10 years, Massachusetts has seen major fluctuations in immigration rates that coincided with changes in federal immigration and travel regulations.

In 2022, the U.S. government issued more temporary visas than any other type of immigration status. Of those who entered Massachusetts with temporary visas, 78 percent were tourists or business travelers who likely only stayed in our region for short spans of time. So, for this discussion we set those travel and business visas aside and instead focus on visa holders who are likely to be here for longer spans of time, like students, seasonal and specialized workers, and diplomats. Even after subtracting travel and business visa holders, temporary visas still made up three quarters of immigration statuses issued by the U.S. government for Massachusetts in 2022. Meanwhile, 11 percent of statuses went to naturalized citizens, 13 percent to green card holders (LPRs), and 0.9 percent to refugees or asylees.

During the past 10 years, Massachusetts has seen major fluctuations in immigration rates that coincided with changes in federal immigration and travel regulations. Immigration of all types to Massachusetts ticked upward from 2012 to 2016 but declined drastically between 2016 to 2020 when the federal government more harshly enforced immigration policy and application processing times slowed. [Refugee admissions](#) and approval of asylum petitions saw the biggest decline during that timeframe, though green card holders and naturalizations fell too. Temporary visas were the only category to increase during that timeframe. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 brought broad travel restrictions and steep declines in all immigration types, with temporary visas, which includes tourist visas, declining most rapidly. In 2021, green card holders and naturalizations started inching upward, but temporary visas and granting of refugee/asylee status continued to fall.

Temporary visas are the most common type of status issued by the U.S. federal government.

Share of immigrants to Massachusetts by immigration pathway. 2022.



Note: We removed tourist and business visas from the temporary visa holders category because they make up such a large share of visas.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics

Temporary visas include foreign-born residents in a wide range of circumstances.

A significant share of foreign-born residents in Massachusetts are on temporary visas, which is a broad category encompassing lots of different types of visas—and therefore lots of different circumstances. A visa is a legal authorization provided by the federal government to a foreign traveler that allows them to enter the country and stay for a certain amount of time based on specific conditions. For example, tourists, people traveling from abroad for business, international students, highly specialized workers, and seasonal workers are just a few examples of who enters the U.S. on visas. As mentioned above, at 78 percent, tourist and business travelers make up the majority of temporary visas in Massachusetts. People coming to Massachusetts to study at universities make up the second largest category of temporary visas at 15 percent, followed by temporary workers at 7 percent.

The temporary worker category includes people coming to the U.S. for many different types of work, both highly specialized jobs like engineers and seasonal jobs like farmworkers. To get a sense for what type of workers make up the share of temporary worker visas in Massachusetts, we looked at a visa for specialized occupations, the H-1B visa, and a group of visas for seasonal workers, the H-2A, H-2B, and H-2R visas. Massachusetts has a high rate of foreign-born residents with visas for specialized occupations but a low rate of seasonal worker visas. Of all states, Massachusetts has the fourth most H-1B specialty occupation visa holders per 100,000 people. Meanwhile, Massachusetts has the fourth lowest H-2A, H-2B, and H-2R seasonal worker visa holders per 100,000 people.

The majority of temporary visas are tourist and business travelers.

Share of temporary visa admissions by visa type, Massachusetts. 2022.

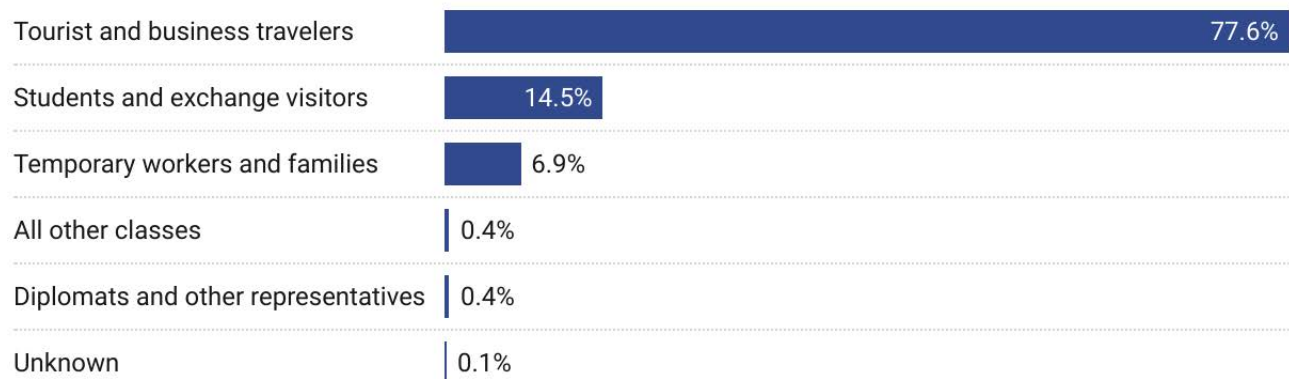


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: DHS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2022, Nonimmigrant Admissions 2022 Data Tables

Seventeen percent of foreign-born residents in Massachusetts have some kind of permanent status.

Green card holders are considered permanent residents, but they are still subject to some restrictions, can't vote, and their legal status can be reversed. Naturalized citizens—or immigrants who gain U.S. citizenship through an application process after having held a green card for a required number of years—have the same rights as U.S.-born citizens.⁴

Obtaining green card status, which is also known as legal permanent residence (LPR), is a long road for most immigrants and there are several routes it can take. Some immigrants arrive from their countries of origin with green card status and others are already living here when they obtain that status through a process called “adjustment of status.” Green card holders in Massachusetts access legal permanent residence through a variety of means, helping explain the notable diversity of our immigrant population and some stratification of groups by education and income. In 2022, 42 percent of green card holders accessed green card status through sponsorship by immediate

relatives, making it the most common way to get a green card, especially for immigrants from Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Cape Verde. One reason it's so common for people to achieve green card status through family is because there are no caps on the number of green cards issued for family members that immigration laws consider “immediate relatives” of U.S. citizens (i.e., spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens 21 and older), but there are caps on other pathways like for employment and all other family categories (i.e., adult children, spouses of green card holders, siblings); limits that lead to long waiting periods, especially for some countries of origin. That being said, immigrants from India, China, and Brazil—three of the largest immigrant groups in Greater Boston—most often access green card status through employment. A much smaller share of immigrants accesses green cards through refugee or asylee status, while entrance through the green card diversity lottery is very rare and limited to nationals of specific countries each year.

Massachusetts' top immigrant groups come to the U.S. through a wide range of channels.

Pathways to legal permanent residence among Greater Boston’s top immigrant groups. 2022.

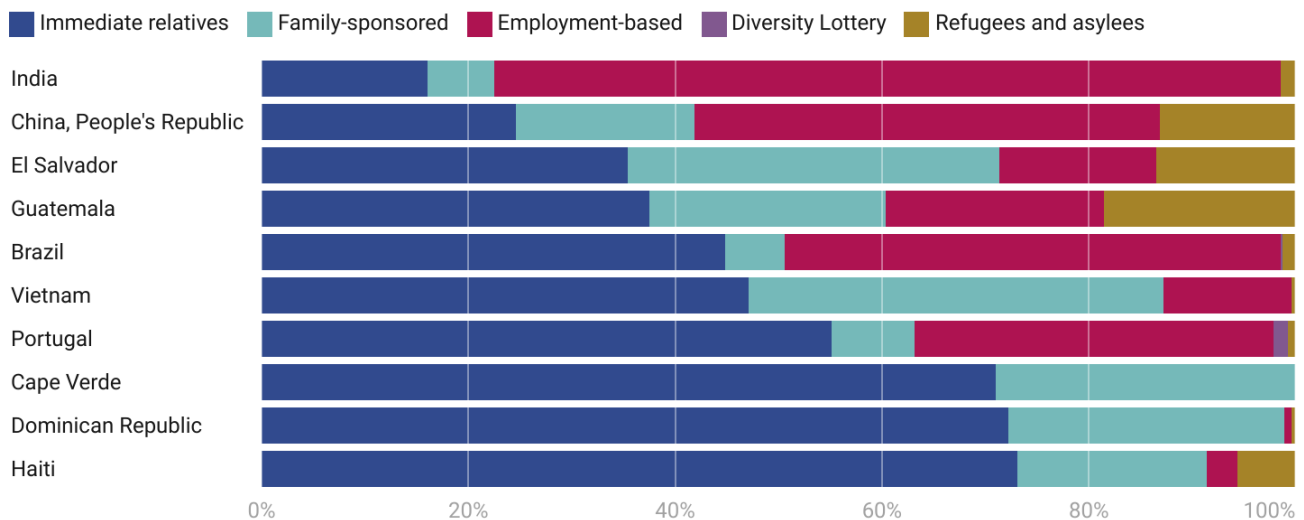


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: DHS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Lawful Permanent Residents 2022 Data Tables.

Massachusetts is home to a significant number of immigrants who lack lawful immigration status.

The Migration Policy Institute⁵ estimates that in 2019 there were 209,000 undocumented immigrants living in Massachusetts, ranking it 13th among states for largest undocumented immigrant population. We should note that these figures from 2019 do not account for the lull in immigration that took place during COVID-19 travel restrictions or the more recent increase in new arrivals to Massachusetts. Because 2020 data did not meet quality standards due to irregularities caused by the pandemic, 2019 is the most recent year that state-level data are available for the undocumented immigrant population, with more recent state-level data not yet available from Migration Policy Institute.

Of Massachusetts' undocumented population, 55 percent were estimated to be from Central or South America, with 20 percent estimated to be from Brazil alone (42,000). An estimated 24,000 came from El Salvador and 19,000 from Guatemala. At the same time, since 2019 undocumented immigration to the U.S. has included a [growing mix](#) of nationalities, including some of Greater Boston's other top immigrant groups like India (18,000) and China/Hong Kong (17,000), as well as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Haiti.

The majority of Massachusetts' undocumented immigrants are from South and Central America.

Share of temporary visa admissions by visa type, Massachusetts. 2022.

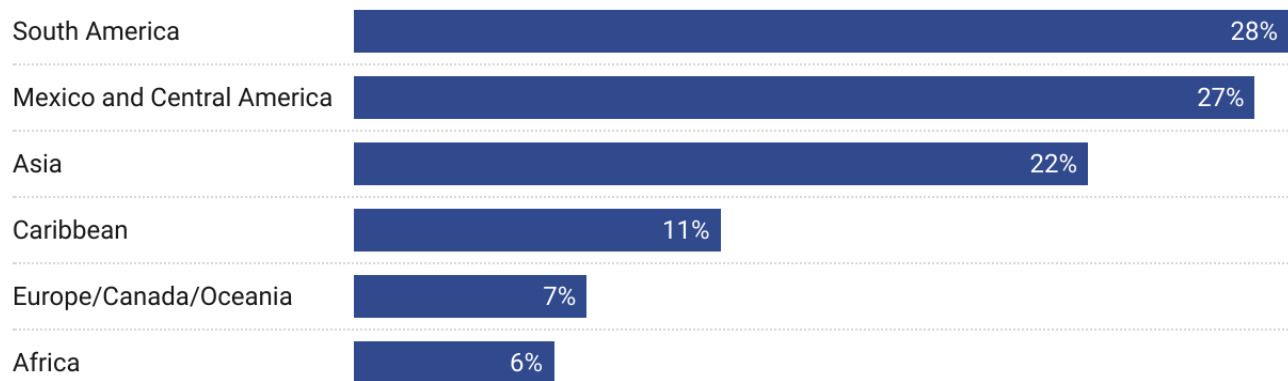


Chart: Boston Indicators. • Source: Migration Policy Institute, Massachusetts Profile of the Unauthorized population.

Many immigrants arriving without documentation are coming to seek asylum from conditions in their home countries. Some also travel to the U.S. for the prospect of an improved economic future, but living in the U.S. without legal documentation comes with its own risks and economic struggles. An estimated 22 percent of Massachusetts undocumented families have incomes below the federal poverty level. However, many undocumented immigrants in Massachusetts seem to be managing financially. An estimated 66 percent of the undocumented population in Massachusetts have family incomes at 150 percent of the federal poverty level or above and 21 percent are estimated to be homeowners.

Living without documentation in the U.S. is stressful for individuals and families and limits opportunities, from education and employment to whether you can legally drive a car. Greater Boston has tried to promote itself as a welcoming place for new immigrants, including those without documentation. In 1984 and 1987, respectively, Cambridge and Somerville declared themselves [sanctuary cities](#), meaning they are cities where police do not cooperate with federal immigration enforcement and cannot detain someone based on their immigration status. Boston became a sanctuary city in 2016 and in 2017 [the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court](#) ruled that Massachusetts law does not authorize law enforcement to detain someone solely based on an immigration detainer. While this ruling does not go as far as to make Massachusetts a sanctuary state, it does offer similar protections. In more recent years, Massachusetts has passed additional legislation attempting to make the state a better place for people to live, whatever their immigration status. For example, in 2022 the state passed a law allowing provision of driver's licenses to all residents who pass driving tests regardless of immigration status, and a law making undocumented high school graduates eligible for in-state tuition and financial aid at public higher education institutions.

Many recent arrivals to Greater Boston have a temporary status that protects them from deportation.

In 2023, the mass arrival of new immigrants to Massachusetts and Greater Boston dominated headlines. Many of these individuals and families left their home countries due to persecution or violence and entered the U.S. with a status that allows them to be here legally, such as refugee status or humanitarian parole, while others approached the border without documentation hoping to seek asylum or some type of [temporary or “twilight” status](#) that protects them from deportation and typically provides work authorization, though does not technically provide them with the legal documentation to be in the country. [Temporary protected status](#) (TPS) is the most common of these provisions, and currently applies to people from Haiti, Ukraine, and Afghanistan as well as a dozen or so other countries and is restricted by country-specific cut-off dates, making protection available only to people already in the U.S. and not those looking to enter. While these types of temporary measures allow the U.S. government to act quickly and permit entry of new arrivals who may have nowhere else safe to go, they also leave the individuals with these statuses in limbo without a permanent way to stay in the country and often facing deportation proceedings.

Temporary protected status (TPS) is the most common temporary measure, and currently applies to people from Haiti, Ukraine, and Afghanistan as well as a dozen or so other countries.

Faced with increased migration through the U.S. southern border and international humanitarian crises, the Biden administration has embraced the application of temporary statuses for new arrivals, expanding many of these programs since taking office in 2021. For example, the administration provided humanitarian parole to nationals of Afghanistan and Ukraine to expedite their departure from their war-torn home countries.

For Haitian nationals specifically, the U.S. government established or resumed a few different temporary status programs in response to the crisis in Haiti and increased migration. In 2022 the U.S. government resumed the [Family Reunification Parole Program](#), which allows Haitians (and nationals from other designated countries) with family members who are U.S. citizens or green card holders to live in the U.S. while they wait for their own green card case to work its way through the years-long processing backlogs. Then in December 2022 Haiti was redesignated for TPS, providing temporary relief from deportation and work authorization for Haitians who arrived in the U.S. on or before November 6, 2022. Finally, in January 2023, the Biden administration created a new humanitarian parole program—which included Haitians, as well as Cubans, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans—that allows immigrants with a U.S. sponsor to apply for parole prior to coming to the U.S. and to live and work in the U.S. for two years. Many of the recent immigrant arrivals to Massachusetts have been from Haiti and hold these types of temporary statuses.

Another, perhaps more well-known, type of temporary status is Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which the Obama administration launched in 2012 to provide temporary protection from deportation specifically to undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children during a certain timeframe. The Trump administration subsequently attempted to terminate the program in 2017 and the program remains in legal limbo as federal courts review the legality of the program. Currently, DACA holders can renew their two-year status, but the federal government is unable to process applications for those who have never applied before or those whose DACA expired more than a year ago. The Migration Policy Institute estimates that of the 16,000 people who were eligible for DACA in Massachusetts in 2022, only 30 percent actually received DACA.

While immigrants with many of these types of temporary statuses are eligible for work permits, they still have to apply for the permit, which is often a barrier to work for many individuals since the wait time for the U.S. federal government to process the permits can stretch on for months. This makes it nearly impossible for people to support themselves financially and find adequate housing, leading many to resort to living in the state's emergency shelter system. These temporary statuses also don't lead to any type of permanent status, so their holders still have to maneuver the immigration system to figure out how to stay in the country after their temporary status expires. There aren't many avenues for holders of temporary statuses to receive more permanent status. Asylum can be a path toward permanent status, albeit one that is difficult to obtain and often takes years.

Temporary statuses don't lead to any type of permanent status, so their holders still have to maneuver the immigration system to figure out how to stay in the country after their temporary status expires.

According to data made available by the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH), refugee and asylee arrivals⁶ to Massachusetts have been trending upward in the past few years, back to pre-pandemic levels. They went from the all-time low of 339 refugee and asylee arrivals in 2020 to 2,178 in 2022. It's worth noting that technically this count may be artificially high: In its refugee and asylee data DPH includes "Cuban/Haitian Entrants," which is not the same as refugee/asylee immigration status but instead indicates that Cubans and Haitians admitted on humanitarian parole or seeking asylum are eligible for the same public benefits as refugees even before they receive asylum status. Massachusetts saw a rise in new arrivals from Haiti in 2022 and data from 2023 will likely show an even greater increase. In 2022 the top countries of origin of refugees, and newcomers with asylum or humanitarian parole to Massachusetts were Afghanistan (934), Ukraine (479), Haiti (190), Democratic Republic of Congo (179), Syria (85), and Guatemala (56). These countries of origin have been consistent for the past few years.

CLOSING

Immigration brings new perspectives from around the world and has for generations increased our country's innovation, vibrancy, and growth. While there's some disagreement on the margins—much of it packed with undue vitriol—about all the varied impacts of immigration on the United States, economists overwhelmingly agree that immigrants' contributions are a net positive.

Greater Boston is as good an example of these dynamics as any region in the country. Our research shows that the region welcomes a diverse range of immigrants from all over the world. They contribute to all occupational sectors and make up a meaningful part of the area's economic output and labor force. They own an outsized proportion of businesses, especially Main Street businesses that provide needed services and boost our local economies. Perhaps most powerfully, our research finds that the longer immigrants are in the U.S., the more their economic standing improves and the greater their contributions become.

Some immigrants come to our region fleeing hardship, as is the case for many recent arrivals in 2022 and 2023. These individuals face challenges finding housing and work when they arrive, and in the short term there may be some real public costs to helping them establish their footing. But as we grapple with these short-term challenges, we can't lose sight of the impressive long-term benefits that our immigrant neighbors, co-workers, classmates, and friends contribute to our region. Throughout history, immigrants have been America's superpower, and there's every reason to think that they will continue to be for years to come.

Endnotes

1. Main Street business defined in “Bringing Vitality to Main Street” by David Kallick et al: <https://fiscalpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Bringing-Vitality-to-Main-Street.pdf>
2. While the authors recognize that gender is not binary and that not all Americans are either men or women, the American Community Survey and U.S. Census Bureau only account for two genders.
3. In this analysis, White refers to non-Hispanic White, Black to non-Hispanic Black, Asian to non-Hispanic Asian American and Pacific Islanders—sometimes shortened to AAPI or to “Asian,” and Hispanic or Latino refers to people of any race who respond to the Census Bureau that they of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.
4. United States. Department of Homeland Security. 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2023.
5. Analysis of undocumented population is done by Migration Policy Institute based on ACS 2015-2019 and 2008 SIPP weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University. 2019 is the most recent year of data available for state estimates because 2020 data did not meet the U.S. Census Bureau’s quality standards due to irregularities caused by the pandemic.
6. According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, data include “new arrivals to Massachusetts (refugees, asylees, derivative asylees, Amerasians, Cuban/Haitian entrants, arrivals with Special Immigrant Visas, and victims of trafficking), including persons initially resettled in other states and moving to Massachusetts within 90 days of U.S. entry. Excludes individuals who (a) moved out of Massachusetts within 30 days of arrival and did not complete a health assessment in Massachusetts or (b) moved to Massachusetts from another state more than 90 days after arrival in the U.S.”

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