

# The Foreign-Born Population in the United States

## Population Characteristics

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This report describes the foreign-born population in the United States in 1999. It provides a profile of their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, such as region of birth, geographic distribution in the United States, age, educational attainment, and poverty status. These characteristics are compared with those of the native population, and because the foreign born are a heterogeneous group, variability within the foreign-born population is also discussed. The findings are based on data collected by the Census Bureau in the March 1999 Current Population Survey (CPS).<sup>1</sup>

The *Foreign Born* were not U.S. citizens at birth. *Natives* were born in the United States or a U.S. Island Area such as Puerto Rico, or born abroad of a U.S. citizen parent.

### POPULATION SIZE AND COMPOSITION

**One-third of the foreign-born population is from Mexico or another Central American country.**

In 1999, 26.4 million foreign-born people resided in the United States, representing 9.7 percent of the total U.S. population. Among

<sup>1</sup> The population universe for the March 1999 CPS is the civilian noninstitutional population of the United States and members of the armed forces in the United States living off post or with their families on post, but excludes all other members of the armed forces.

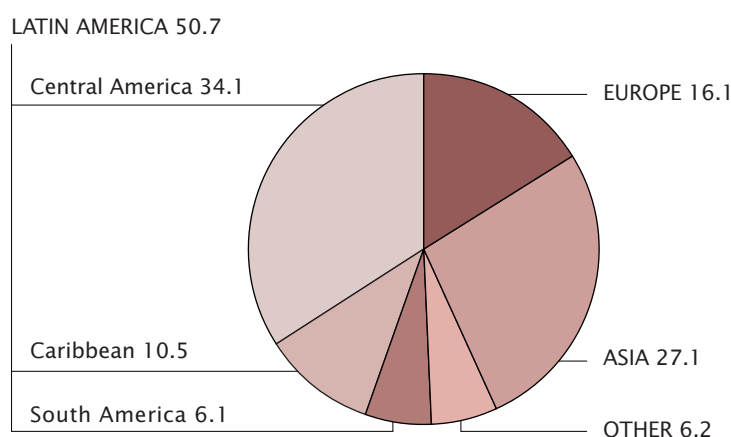
the foreign-born population, 50.7 percent were born in Latin America, 27.1 percent were born in Asia, 16.1 percent were born in Europe, and the remaining 6.2 percent were from other areas of the world.<sup>2</sup> The foreign-born population from Central America (including Mexico) accounted for two-thirds of the foreign-born population from Latin America and for one-third of the total foreign-born population (see Figure 1).

**The foreign born are more geographically concentrated than the native population.**

The foreign born were more likely to reside in the West and Northeast and less likely to live in

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the countries included in each of the six regions of the world used in this report, see Schmidley and Gibson, *Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 1997*. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, Series P23-195.

Figure 1.  
**Foreign Born by Region of Birth: 1999**  
(Percent of population from each region)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

## Current Population Reports

By Angela Brittingham

the Midwest and the South than the native population. In 1999, 39.3 percent of the foreign-born population lived in the West, 26.5 percent in the South, 23.9 percent in the Northeast, and 10.3 percent in the Midwest. Among natives, 35.8 percent lived in the South, 24.7 percent in the Midwest, 20.9 percent in the West, and 18.6 percent in the Northeast (see Figure 2).

The foreign born from Latin America were more likely to live in the West (41.1 percent) and South (31.4 percent). About 57.4 percent of those from Central America lived in the West and another 27.3 percent lived in the South. In contrast, those from the Caribbean and from South America were highly concentrated in the Northeast (48.6 percent and 49.8 percent, respectively) and the South (45.5 percent and 30.0 percent, respectively). Half of the foreign born from Asia lived in the West (47.1 percent).

**The foreign born are more likely to live in urban areas than the native population.**

Almost half of the foreign born lived in central cities within a metropolitan area (45.5 percent) compared with slightly more than one-quarter of the native population (28.1 percent). The percentage living outside central cities but within a metropolitan area was similar for the foreign-born and native populations (49.8 percent and 51.1 percent, respectively). The percentage of the foreign born living in nonmetropolitan areas (4.7 percent) was much smaller than the percentage of natives (20.8 percent).

**The foreign born are more likely than natives to be between 18 and 64 years of age.**

In 1999, 79.7 percent of the foreign born were 18 to 64 years of age, while 59.6 percent of natives were in

this age group. The proportion age 65 and over was similar for the foreign born (11.4 percent) and natives (12.0 percent). Relatively few foreign-born people were less than 18 years of age (9.0 percent) compared with 28.4 percent of the native population (see Figure 3). The small proportion of foreign born in the youngest age group occurs because

of the fact that most of the children of foreign-born parents are natives.

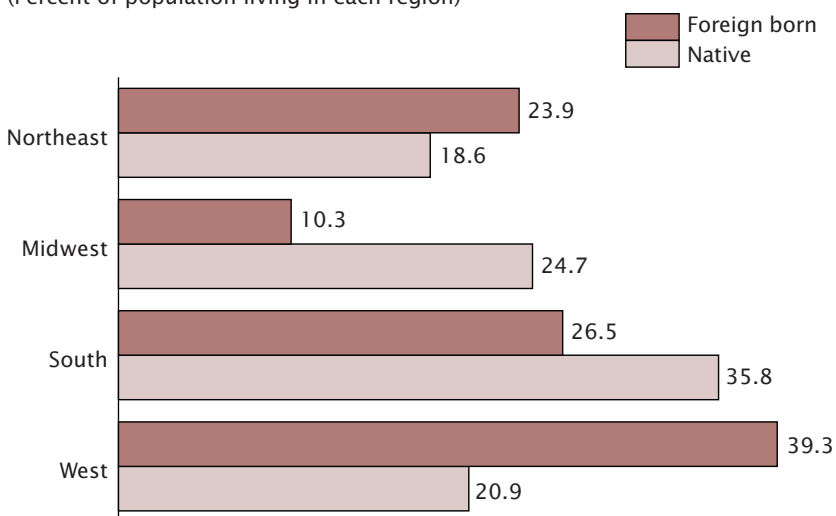
**More than one of every three foreign-born people are naturalized citizens.**

Among the foreign-born population in 1999, 35.1 percent entered the United States in the 1990s, another 30.0 percent came in the 1980s,

Figure 2.

**Population by Nativity and Region of Residence: 1999**

(Percent of population living in each region)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Figure 3.

**Population by Nativity and Age Group: 1999**

(Percent of population in each age group)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

and the remainder entered the country before 1980. Although 68.8 percent of those who entered before 1980 had obtained citizenship by 1999, only 33.7 percent of those who entered between 1980 and 1989 had become citizens (see Figure 4).

## FAMILY HOUSEHOLD SIZE AND MARITAL STATUS

### The foreign born live in family households that are larger than those of natives.

In 1999, 25.4 percent of family households in which a foreign-born

person was the householder consisted of five or more people.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, only 13.2 percent of native family households were this large. Among foreign-born family households, the proportion with five or more people varied from 40.1 percent when the householder was from Central America to 11.1 percent when the householder was from Europe (see Figure 5).<sup>4</sup>

The foreign born were more likely to be currently married<sup>5</sup> than natives (60.3 percent compared with 53.1 percent). Of the foreign born, naturalized citizens had a higher proportion married (66.0 percent) than noncitizens (56.7 percent).<sup>6</sup>

## EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

### One of three foreign born has not graduated from high school.

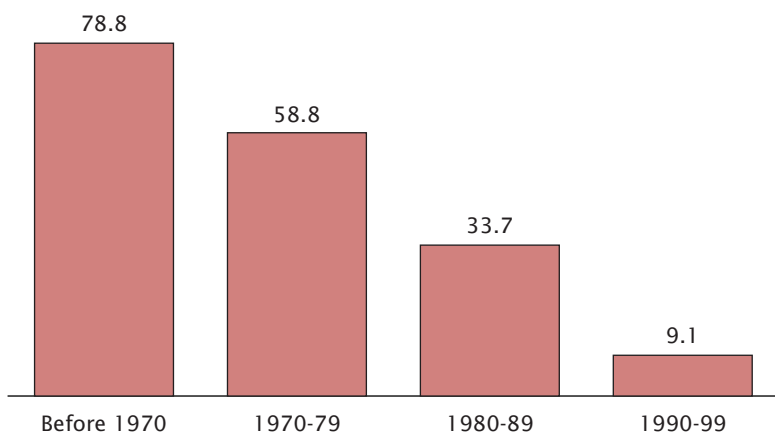
The foreign-born population age 25 and over was less likely to have graduated from high school than natives (65.7 percent and 85.9 percent, respectively). In addition, nearly one-fourth of the foreign born had less than a ninth grade education (23.0 percent) compared with one-twentieth of the native population (4.9 percent).

The proportions with a bachelor's degree or more education were not significantly different between the foreign-born population (25.4 percent) and the native population (25.2 percent, see Figure 6). The foreign born who were naturalized

Figure 4.

### Citizenship Status of the Foreign-Born Population by Year of Entry: 1999

(Percent of population who are citizens)

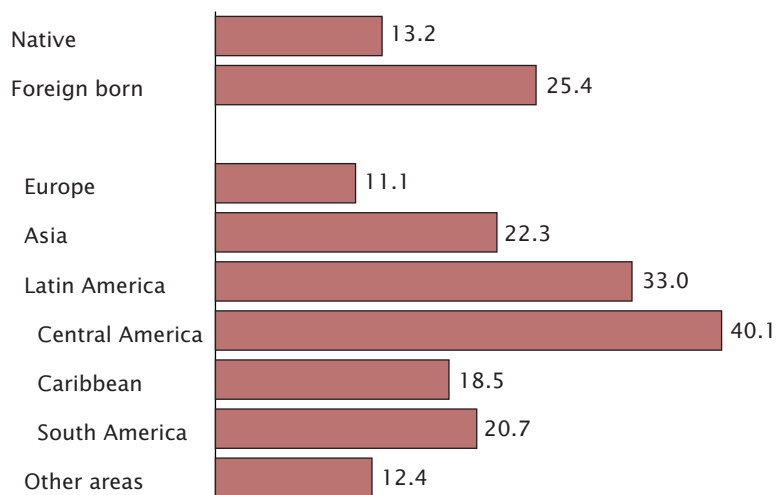


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Figure 5.

### Family Households With 5 or More People by Nativity and World Region of Birth: 1999

(Percent of all family households)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Family households consist of two or more people, at least one of whom is related to the householder (the person who owns or rents the housing unit). Foreign-born family households are households with a foreign-born householder.

<sup>4</sup> The percentage of family households that contained five or more people did not differ significantly between those maintained by a foreign-born person from Europe, the Caribbean, South America, or Other areas.

<sup>5</sup> Includes cases in which the spouse is absent, but excludes those who are separated.

<sup>6</sup> Marital status is calculated for those age 15 and over.

citizens were more likely to have graduated from high school than the foreign born who were not citizens (76.5 percent and 57.5 percent, respectively).

### Educational attainment among the foreign born varies by region of birth.

The foreign born from Asia had the highest proportion who had graduated from high school (83.4 percent) compared with those from Europe (79.4 percent) and Latin America (48.1 percent). Among the foreign born from Latin America, those from South America were the most likely to have graduated from high school (78.7 percent), and those from Central America were the least likely (36.1 percent, see Figure 7).<sup>7</sup> The proportion who had attained a bachelor's degree ranged from 45.3 percent for those from Asia to 10.8 percent for those from Latin America.

## ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

### The foreign born are more likely to be unemployed than natives.

In March 1999, 5.4 percent of the foreign born in the civilian labor force were unemployed compared with only 4.5 percent of natives.<sup>8</sup> Unemployment rates were similar between foreign-born men (4.9 percent) and native men (4.6 percent), but differed between foreign-born

women (6.2 percent) and native women (4.3 percent).<sup>9</sup>

Foreign-born workers were more likely than native workers to be in service occupations (19.4 percent and 12.9 percent, respectively).<sup>10</sup> Conversely, only 24.4 percent of the foreign born were in managerial or professional specialty occupations, compared with 30.9 percent of natives. Among the foreign born, the percentage of workers in managerial or professional specialty occupations ranged from 6.2 percent of those from Central America to 38.9 percent of those from Asia.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The unemployment rates were not statistically different between native women and native or foreign-born men, and between foreign-born women and foreign-born men.

<sup>10</sup> The occupational classification system used here and by the Bureau of Labor Statistics is the one used in the 1990 Census of Population and is based largely on the 1980 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC).

<sup>11</sup> The percentage of foreign-born workers from Asia who were in executive, administrative, or managerial occupations did not differ from the percentage from Europe or Other areas.

### The foreign born earn less than natives.

In 1998, 39.1 percent of foreign-born full-time, year-round workers and 22.1 percent of native workers earned less than \$20,000.<sup>12</sup> Among foreign-born workers, the proportions earning less than \$20,000 ranged from 59.9 percent of those from Central America to 25.0 percent of those from Europe and Asia.<sup>13</sup> About 17.4 percent of the foreign-born workers earned more than \$50,000 compared with 22.7 percent of natives.

### The foreign born are more likely to live in poverty than natives.

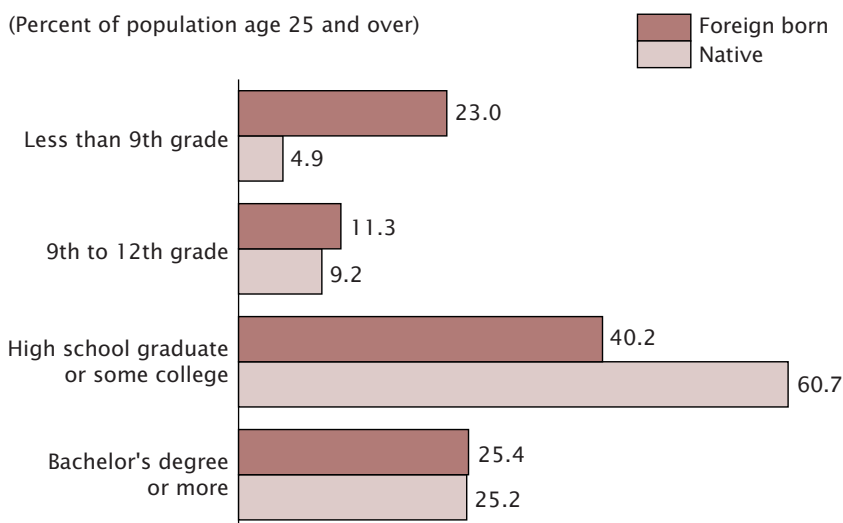
In 1998, 18.0 percent of foreign-born residents were living below the poverty level, compared with

<sup>12</sup> Data on earnings and poverty in this report refer to the calendar year before the survey. In this case, earnings information collected in March 1999 refers to calendar year 1998.

<sup>13</sup> The percentage of foreign born from Europe who earned less than \$20,000 was not significantly different from the percentage from Asia.

Figure 6.  
**Population by Nativity and Educational Attainment: 1999**

(Percent of population age 25 and over)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

<sup>7</sup> The percentage of foreign born from Europe with a high school degree or more was not significantly different from the percentage from South America.

<sup>8</sup> Civilian labor force data shown in this report reflect characteristics of the civilian noninstitutionalized population age 16 and over for March 1999 and are not adjusted for seasonal changes. Data released by the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, may not agree entirely with data shown in this report because of differences in methodological procedures and their seasonal adjustment of the data.

12.1 percent of natives.<sup>14</sup> The foreign born without U.S. citizenship

<sup>14</sup> Poverty status is determined through a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition (see Dalaker, Joseph, 1999. *Poverty in the United States: 1998*. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P20-207; or [www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html)).

were twice as likely to live in poverty (22.2 percent) as foreign-born naturalized citizens (11.0 percent).<sup>15</sup> Among the foreign born,

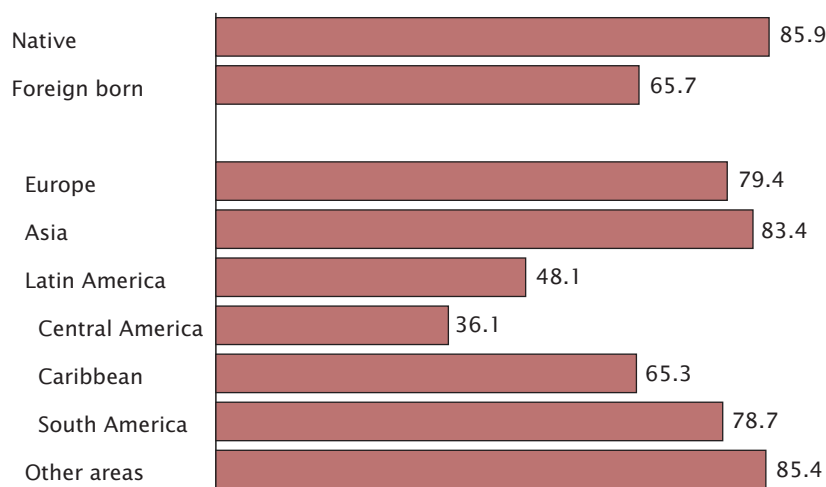
<sup>15</sup> The poverty rate for naturalized citizens was not significantly different from the rate for natives.

Latin Americans had the highest poverty rate (24.4 percent), compared with Asians and Europeans (about 11.0 percent each). Among Latin Americans, the poverty rate was highest for Central Americans (27.5 percent, see Figure 8).

Figure 7.

### Population With at Least a High School Education by Nativity and World Region of Birth: 1999

(Percent of those age 25 and over who were high school graduates)

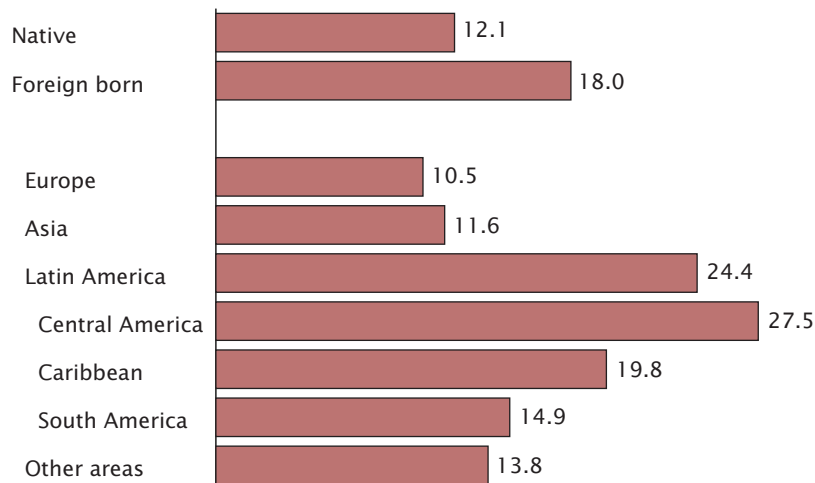


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

Figure 8.

### People Living Below the Poverty Level by Nativity and World Region of Birth: 1998

(Percent of individuals)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 1999.

### Source of the Data

Estimates in this report come from data obtained in March 1999 by the CPS. The Census Bureau conducts the CPS every month, although this report uses only data from the March survey.

### Accuracy of the Estimates

Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken sampling error into account and meet the Census Bureau's standards for statistical significance. Nonsampling errors in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing respondents are to provide correct answers, and how accurately the answers are coded and classified. The Census Bureau employs quality control procedures throughout the production process—including the overall design of surveys, the wording of questions, review of the work of interviewers and coders, and statistical review of reports.

The Current Population Survey employs ratio estimation, whereby sample estimates are adjusted to independent estimates of the national population by age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for bias due to undercoverage, but how it affects different variables in the survey is not precisely known. Moreover, biases may also be present when people who are missed in the survey differ from those interviewed in

ways other than the categories used in weighting (age, race, sex, and Hispanic origin). All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources.

For further information on statistical standards and the computation and use of standard errors, contact the Census Bureau Demographic Statistical Methods Division on the Internet at: [dsmd\\_s&a@ccmail.census.gov](mailto:dsmd_s&a@ccmail.census.gov).

### More Information

Sixty-four detailed tables from the March 1999 CPS are available on the Internet, at the Census Bureau's Web site ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). Once on the site, click on "F," then select "Foreign-Born Population Data." Under "CPS March 1999" choose "Data Tables."

Data from previous years (1995-1998) are also available on this Web site.

To receive a paper version of these tables, send your request for "PPL-123, Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: March 1999," along with a check or money order in the amount of \$30.80, payable to "Commerce-Census-88-00-9010," to U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau, P.O. Box 277943, Atlanta, GA 30384-7943, or call the Statistical Information Office at 301-457-2422. A copy of these tables will be made available to any existing Current Population Report P20 subscriber without charge, provided that the request is made within 3 months of the issue date of this report.

### Contact

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### User Comments

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