



Immigration, Nationalities & Inequality

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"My fellow Americans, we are and always will be a nation of immigrants. We were strangers once, too. "

*-Barack Obama**

Introduction

May 11, 2023, marked the expiration of the so-called “Title 42” policy at the southern border. First issued by the Trump administration and later continued by the Biden administration, this policy allowed immediate expulsions of undocumented migrants at the US-Mexico border under the guise of limiting the spread of COVID-19. Even with the deterrent of Title 42, the number of migrants at the US-Mexico border seeking asylum in the US have reached record levels in the past three years (Isacson 2023). Economic and humanitarian crises across Latin America have fueled waves of immigration into the United States despite the legal and physical obstacles faced by desperate asylum-seekers. Getting to the border is just the first of many obstacles; once they get here, immigrants are forced to contend with unfamiliar cultures and languages in a country that is often hostile towards immigration despite having the largest immigrant population in the world, with almost 45 million foreign immigrants in a nation of more than 300 million people.

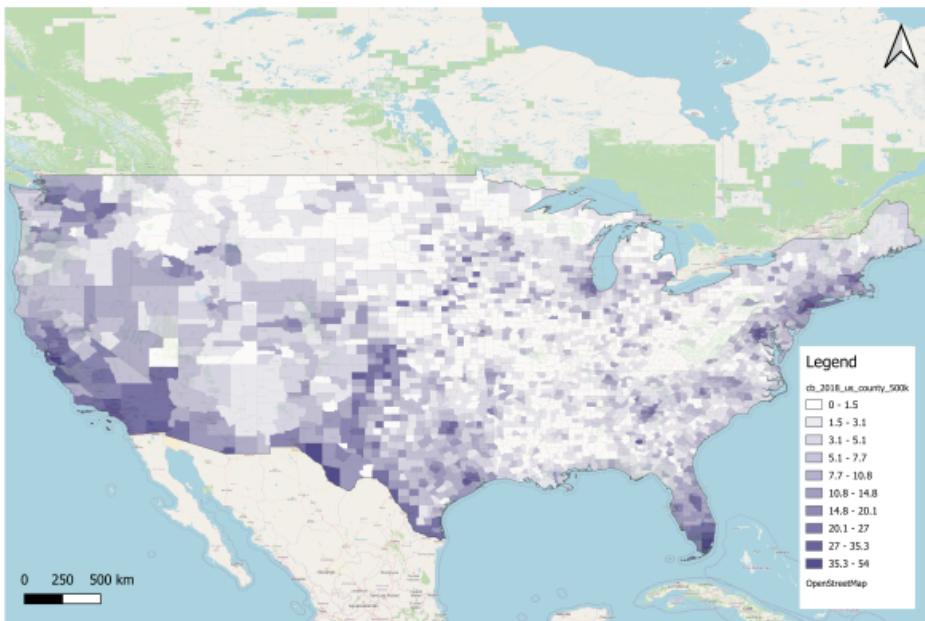
While crossings at the southern border tend to capture the most attention of news outlets, immigrant populations in the United States are incredibly diverse. Latin Americans are not the only immigrants - Asian, European and African immigrants can be found across the country. This diversity is also reflected in the different socioeconomic statuses of various nationalities, including factors such as income levels and educational attainment.

In this StoryMap, we first take a look at the broader trend of immigrant populations across the continental United States, before zooming in to Los Angeles to further analyze immigrant populations, their nationalities, and their socioeconomic statuses in that county.

By examining the patterns of immigration and immigrant nationalities, this project aims to analyze and better understand the obstacles faced by immigrants.

Overview: the United States

Percentage of Foreign Born Population in Counties across the United States



Data from 2021 ACS 5-year estimates

This map of the continental United States shows the distribution of immigrant populations across the country. As illustrated on the map, large portions of the population near the US-Mexico border are foreign-born (especially in Texas), in addition to the West Coast, Florida, New Jersey and New York. This is borne out by the numerical data, which shows that about two-thirds of immigrants live in the South (34%, 15.2 million) and the West (33%, 14.9 million), followed by 21% (9.6 million) in the Northeast and 11% (5.0 million) in the Midwest region.

According to 2021 data from the American Community Survey (ACS), three states accounted for nearly half (45%) of the nation's immigrants: California (24%), Texas (11%) and Florida (10%). California had the largest immigrant population of any state, at 10.5 million. Texas, Florida and New York each had more than 4 million immigrants.

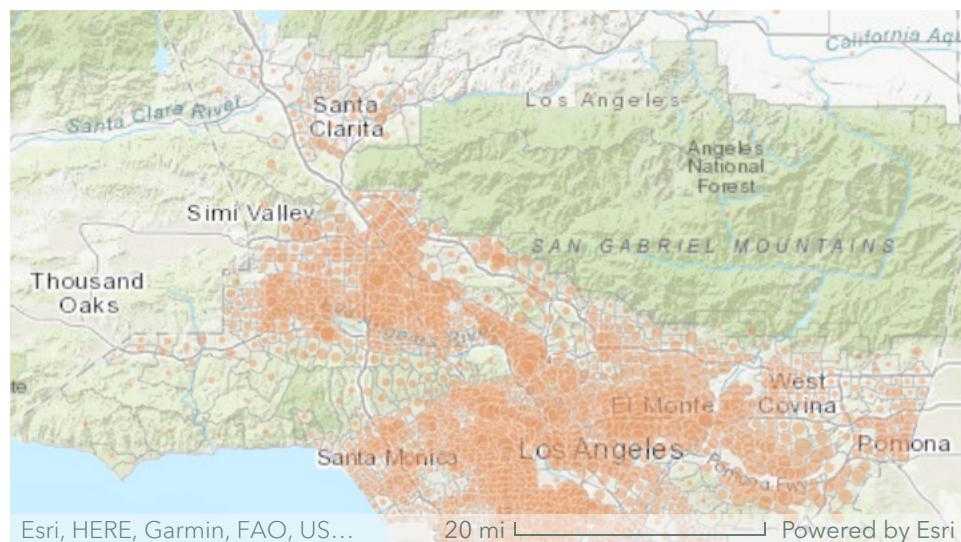
As a result, we now turn our attention to California, specifically, Los Angeles County, for a closer look at immigration and its

outcomes.



A Closer Look: Los Angeles County

According to 2021 data from the ACS, there are over 3.35 million foreign-born individuals in Los Angeles County. Of those 3.35 million, more than 1.5 million or almost 15% of Angelenos are not US citizens. Moreover, data from a USC Equity Research Institute analysis shows that more than 800,000 undocumented immigrants reside in the county (Otero et al. 2022).



Foreign Born Population in Los Angeles County

The foreign-born population in Los Angeles County is widespread but more concentrated in a few areas including Central, East and South Los Angeles, and the San Fernando Valley.

Rank	Neighborhood	Foreign Born Population
1	Chinatown	72.4%
2	Koreatown	68.0%
3	Westlake	67.6%
4	East Hollywood	66.5%
5	Pico-Union	64.6%
6	Harvard Heights	57.8%
7	Rosemead	56.4%
8	Historic South-Central	56.3%
9	Larchmont	56.0%
10	Huntington Park	55.9%
11	Lincoln Heights	55.8%
12	Maywood	55.2%
13	Lennox	55.1%
14	Panorama City	55.0%
15	Glendale	54.4%
16	Elysian Park	54.4%
17	Hollywood	53.8%
18	Monterey Park	53.6%
19	Bell	53.3%
20	Cudahy	53.1%

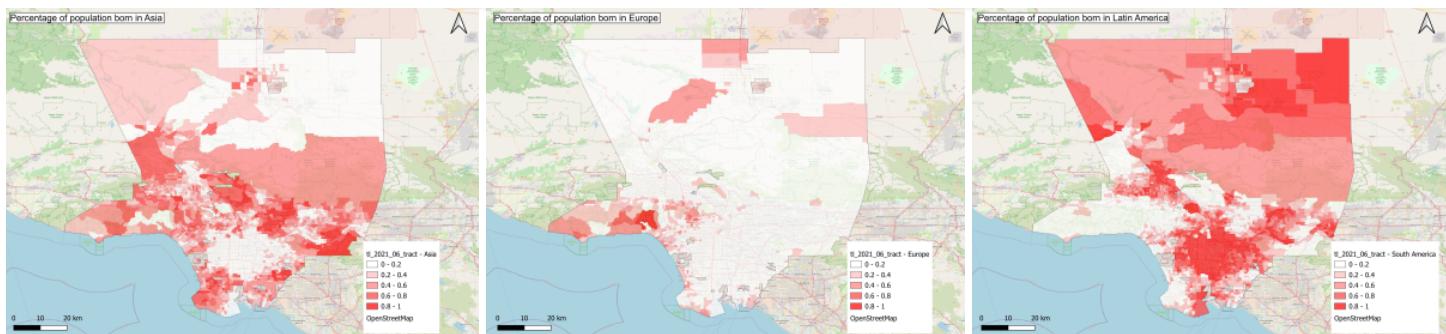
This table, sourced from the LA Times' [Mapping LA](#) project, shows the top 20 LA neighborhoods with the highest percentages of foreign-born populations. As expected, neighborhoods in Central and Downtown LA, such as Chinatown, Koreatown and Westlake are among the ones with the largest immigrant populations.



Chinatown (left) and Koreatown (right) in Los Angeles

Breakdown by Birthplace: Continent of Origin

While immigrants in LA County hail from all over the world, census data shows that the most significant numbers come from Latin America, Asia and Europe.



LA County Immigrant Populations by Continent of Birth (U.S. Census Bureau 2021)

The biggest immigrant populations in LA County are from Latin America (1.8 million) and Asia (1.2 million). European immigrants come in at a distant third, with just below 170,000 of them.

As seen in the maps above, Asian immigrants have a presence in most of the county except some of its southern parts, including areas around the South Los Angeles region. In contrast, Latin American immigrants are heavily concentrated in southern LA County, with a significant presence in San Fernando Valley and the northern parts of the county such as Palmdale and Lancaster. European immigrants, meanwhile, are mainly located in the Westside region and along the coastal areas.

Breakdown by Birthplace: Country of Origin



Top 25 Birthplaces of LA County Residents (Gregory, 2020)

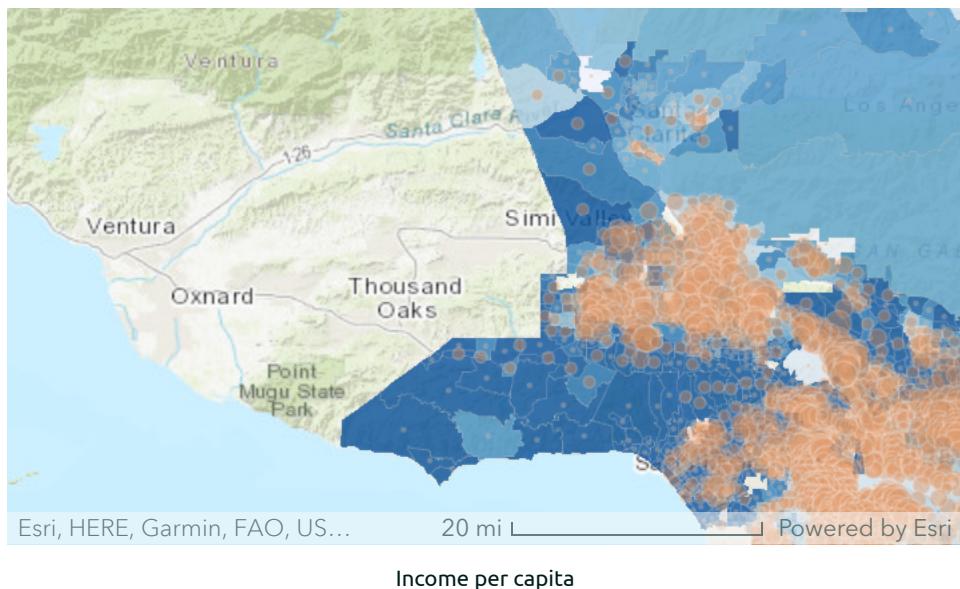
This map shows the top 25 birthplaces of residents of Los Angeles County. While native Californians make up the majority of the residents, the county is incredibly diverse, with significant numbers of residents born in Mexico, El Salvador, Philippines, China and Korea.

The widely varied birthplaces of Los Angeles County's immigrants have created great linguistic and cultural diversity with educational and economic benefits. Unfortunately, they have also resulted in language barriers that have complicated assimilation and reduced the accessibility of education, healthcare and public services for those not fluent in English.

Next, we take a look at the challenges faced by immigrants in Los Angeles County, including poverty, rent burden and accessibility of immigration resources.



Income Levels



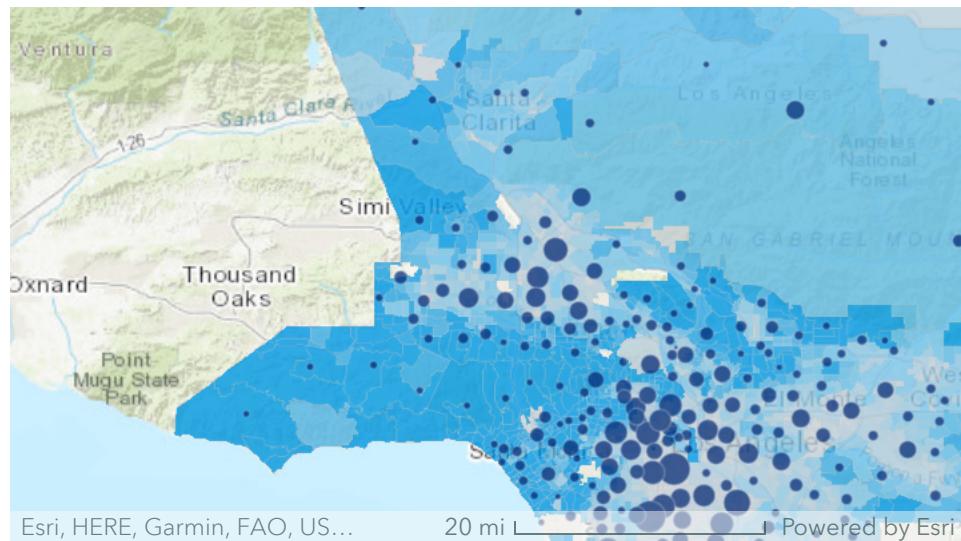
According to census data, the median household income (in 2021 dollars) of Los Angeles County is \$76,000, while the per capita income is \$37,900. Mapping out the income per capita by census tract overlaid with the foreign-born population shows that neighborhoods with low income per capita are found in South LA, East LA and the San Fernando Valley. There is a considerable overlap between high foreign-born population areas and low income per capita neighborhoods.

Figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in 2022 show that across the country, foreign-born workers are more likely to be employed in service, natural resources, construction, maintenance, production, and transportation occupations than native-born workers. On the other hand, they are less likely to be employed in management, professional, sales and office occupations. Accordingly, the statistics show that median usual weekly earnings of foreign-born full-time wage and salary workers were 86.9 percent of the earnings of their native-born counterparts.

Several factors likely contribute to this wage disparity. Firstly, the status of immigrants makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and wage theft, especially if they are undocumented. Their skills and qualifications are less likely to be recognized locally and they

often lack the professional networks to be hired in better-paying occupations. Moreover, research has shown that a significant number of highly educated immigrant workers are employed in unskilled occupations due to factors such as a lack of U.S. work experience and technical English fluency (Fix et al. 2008). Educational attainment rates are another factor in the wage disparity, but this varies widely across the different racial and ethnic groups, with Asian Americans, Mixed/Other races and White immigrants having the most college degrees, followed by Black and then Pacific Islander and Latino immigrants in Los Angeles County (Otero et al. 2022).

Rent Burden



This map shows the Tenant Vulnerability Index scores of census tracts across LA county. The Tenant Vulnerability Index is a measure of the vulnerability of tenants in an area to the threat of eviction, based on contributing variables such as income levels, rent burden, immigrant population and educational attainment. Rent burden is a significant issue in Los Angeles, with areas in the San Fernando Valley, Central and South LA show high numbers of tenants vulnerable to eviction.

Rosen et al. (2020) studied 800 households in the Central and South Los Angeles areas and found that seventy-three percent of them were rent burdened, with forty-eight percent severely so (i.e., they spent more than half of their income on rent and utilities). There were no significant differences in cutbacks of food, clothing, family and leisure between immigrant and native-born households. While immigrant households had smaller housing units, lower incomes and lower rents, they had similar levels of rent-burden rates as native-born households in the surveyed areas. Nevertheless, immigrants in Los Angeles County are still disproportionately affected by the housing crisis, especially those that lack the language skills necessary to navigate the local housing market and face legal barriers that prevent them from getting aid or fighting illegal evictions.

Accessibility of Immigration Resources



The above map shows the locations of immigration resources around the county. These locations, which include adult schools, agencies and centers, provide employment services, services for elderly adults, assistance for trafficking victims, child care, youth services and adult education, legal assistance, counseling services, etc.

There is a concentration of services in the central LA area, but areas such as East LA and South LA show lower accessibility to immigration services. This could pose a problem as the large immigrant population in these underserved areas already face issues with a lack of transit options. While legal services such as those provided for free under the Los Angeles Justice Fund (a partnership between the California Community Foundation, County and City of Los Angeles, and Weingart Foundation to provide attorneys to people at risk of deportation) are undoubtedly crucial, other services such as adult English language instruction are just as important. Fix et al. (2008) point out that language is a powerful barrier to employment and assimilation, so it is vital to provide support for adult education systems geared towards the needs of immigrants with an emphasis on program accessibility, relevance, and student retention.

Conclusions

On June 9, 2023, the Los Angeles City Council approved a motion to prohibit “any city resources, property or personnel from being utilized for any federal immigration enforcement.” This was an important step towards becoming an official sanctuary city for immigrants for the city of Los Angeles (Radin 2023).

With its substantial population of immigrants and third-generation immigrants, unauthorized immigrants, lawful permanent residents, and refugees, it is imperative that the city of Los Angeles and its residents work to address issues among its immigrants such as wage disparities and the housing crisis while expanding services and resources for immigrants and refugees from around the globe. Steps should be taken to encourage civic engagement among the immigrant population and comprehensive immigration reform across the country is needed to cope with the influx of a record number of asylum-seekers in recent years.

Data Sources

My main source of data for the maps was the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, Table DP02 on the data.census.gov website. The ACS is a highly reputable and up-to-date source of demographic data, with over 3.5 million households across the country participating in the survey annually. This dataset is also comprehensive, providing data on the percentage of foreign-born populations in every county or census tract, their countries of birth, household income levels, etc. I chose to use the 5-year estimates of the ACS data because they provide data for the over 3,000 counties in the United States, compared to the 1-year estimate, which only provides data for areas with populations of 65,000+. The 5-year estimate has the largest sample size and is the most reliable, but it is also the least current dataset, which I thought was an acceptable tradeoff. An issue I faced with this dataset was its large and unwieldy size, which made it difficult to find the appropriate variables to analyze. This was solved by looking at the metadata of the dataset and reading up on the census methodology.

To process the data, I downloaded the dataset as an Excel spreadsheet, removed extraneous columns/variables, then imported it into QGIS as a delimited text layer. To create a map, I had to download cartographic boundary files formatted as shapefiles from <https://www.census.gov/geographies/mapping-files/time-series/geo/carto-boundary-file.html> or <https://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/geo/shapefiles/index.php> and then perform a join with the delimited text layer. After adjusting various attributes and the symbology, the maps were exported to the jpeg format and uploaded to this StoryMap.

Other datasets were obtained from the [Los Angeles GeoHub](#) website, the City of Los Angeles' public platform for "exploring, visualizing, and downloading location-based Open Data." These include the immigration resources, tenant vulnerability index and income per capita datasets. Elsewhere, the table of the top 20 LA neighborhoods with the highest percentages of foreign-born populations was taken from the Los Angeles Times' Mapping LA project, while the breakdown by birthplace (country of origin) map was created from data obtained from work done by Professor James Gregory in the Department of History at the University of Washington, a website titled America's Great Migrations Project.

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