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# Chinese Immigrants in the United States

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**JANUARY 12, 2023 SPOTLIGHT** | By Raquel Rosenbloom and Jeanne Batalova

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People in a business meeting. (Photo: iStock.com/intmphoto)

People from China make up one of the largest immigrant groups in the United States, but the size and makeup of this population was dramatically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic's upending of global migration.

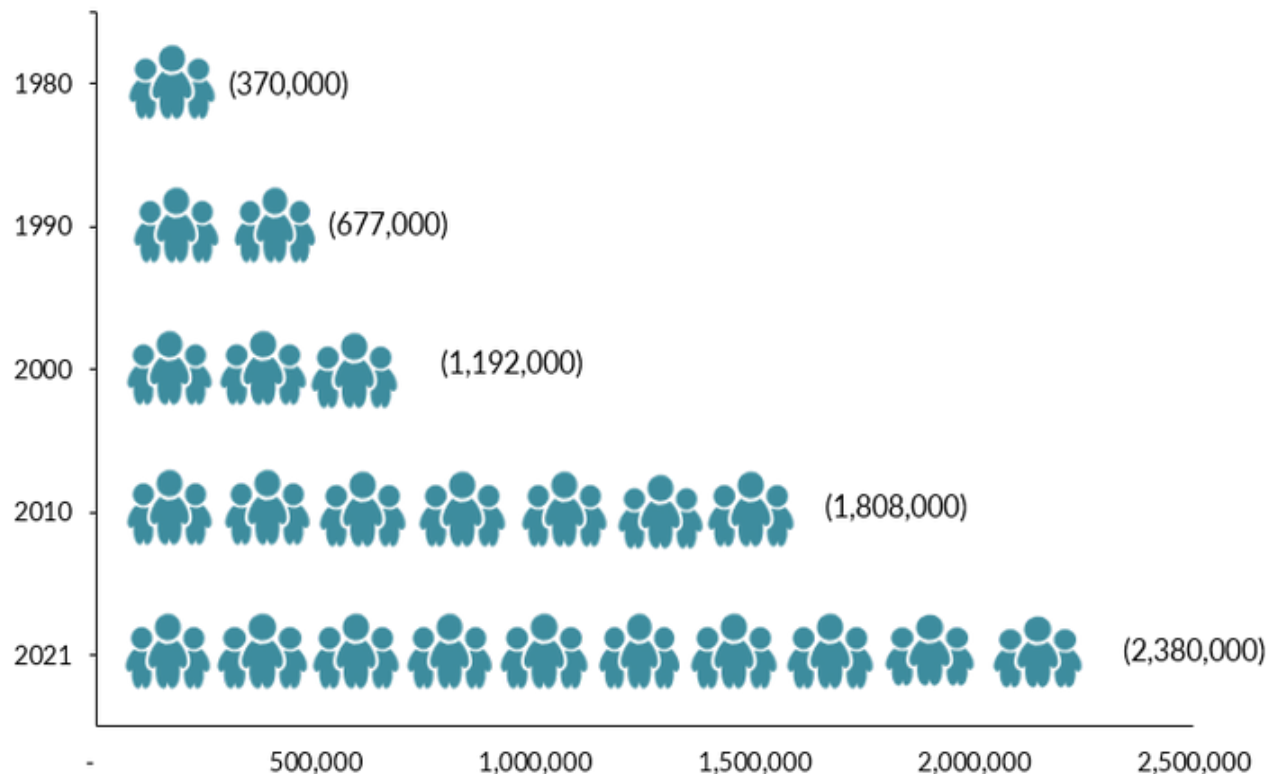
While the number of Chinese immigrants in the United States peaked at almost 2.5 million in 2019, it fell to under 2.4 million in 2021, breaking a long period of growth. This decline was due in part to restrictions placed by the Trump administration on migration from China in the early months of the pandemic, with tighter visa rules for international students and foreign workers throughout 2020, and the Chinese government's "zero-COVID" policies that were in place until late 2022, chilling travel from China. Data show that the numbers of Chinese arrivals have risen in recent months, but it may take some time for pandemic-related population losses to reverse.

Chinese immigration to the United States has a long and at times fraught history. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by Congress in response to anti-Chinese sentiment and organized labor lobbying and brought the arrival of Chinese workers to a near-total halt. Emigration controls imposed by the Chinese government after World War II and the Chinese Communist Revolution limited mobility as well.

In contrast, the 1965 removal of barriers for non-European immigrants to the United States was a game changer for increasing immigration, as were relaxed emigration controls by China in 1978 and improved U.S.-China relations. The number of Chinese immigrants residing in the United States nearly doubled from 1980 to 1990, and again by 2000 (see Figure 1). Since then, the population has continued growing but at a slower pace.

Despite the recent declines, Chinese immigrants still represent the third largest origin group among U.S. immigrants (after those from Mexico and India), accounting for 5 percent of the 45.3 million immigrants in the United States as of 2021.

**Click here** to read a history of migration from and to China since the 19th century.

**Figure 1. Chinese Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980-2021**

*Note:* Estimates refer to immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau.

*Sources:* Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2010 and 2021 American Community Surveys (ACS), and 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census.

The Hong Kong-born population in the United States is far smaller than that from mainland China. There were 80,000 Hong Kong-born immigrants in the United States in 1980, a number that more than doubled to about 204,000 in 2000 and then increased further to 248,000 by 2021. Today, Hong-Kong born immigrants make up about 10 percent of the 2.4 million Chinese immigrants in the United States.

China is the main source of foreign students enrolled in U.S. higher education, and its nationals received the second largest number of employer-sponsored H-1B temporary visas in fiscal year 2021, after Indians. Chinese nationals also received 54 percent of the 2,900 immigrant investor visas issued in 2021.

The United States is the top destination for Chinese immigrants worldwide, accounting for about 28 percent of the 8.6 million Chinese living outside China, Hong Kong, or Macau, according to mid-2020 estimates by the United Nations Population Division. Other popular destinations include Canada (930,000), South Korea (803,000), Japan (776,000), Australia (764,000), and Singapore (514,000).

**Click here** to view an interactive map showing where migrants from China and other countries have settled worldwide.

Compared to the overall foreign- and native-born populations in the United States, Chinese immigrants tend to be significantly better educated and are more likely to be employed in management positions. They are also more likely to obtain lawful permanent residence (also known as getting a green card) through their work, but are less likely to be proficient in English.

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the most recent 2021 American Community Survey [ACS] and pooled 2017-21 ACS data), the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics, the World Bank, and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), this Spotlight

provides information on the Chinese immigrant population in the United States, focusing on its size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics.

## Definitions

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the “**foreign born**” as individuals who had no U.S. citizenship at birth. The foreign-born population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees, legal nonimmigrants (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), and persons residing in the country without authorization.

The terms “**foreign born**” and “**immigrant**” are used interchangeably and refer to those who were born in another country and later emigrated to the United States.

Unless otherwise stated, estimates for China include the **People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and Macau**, but exclude **Taiwan**.

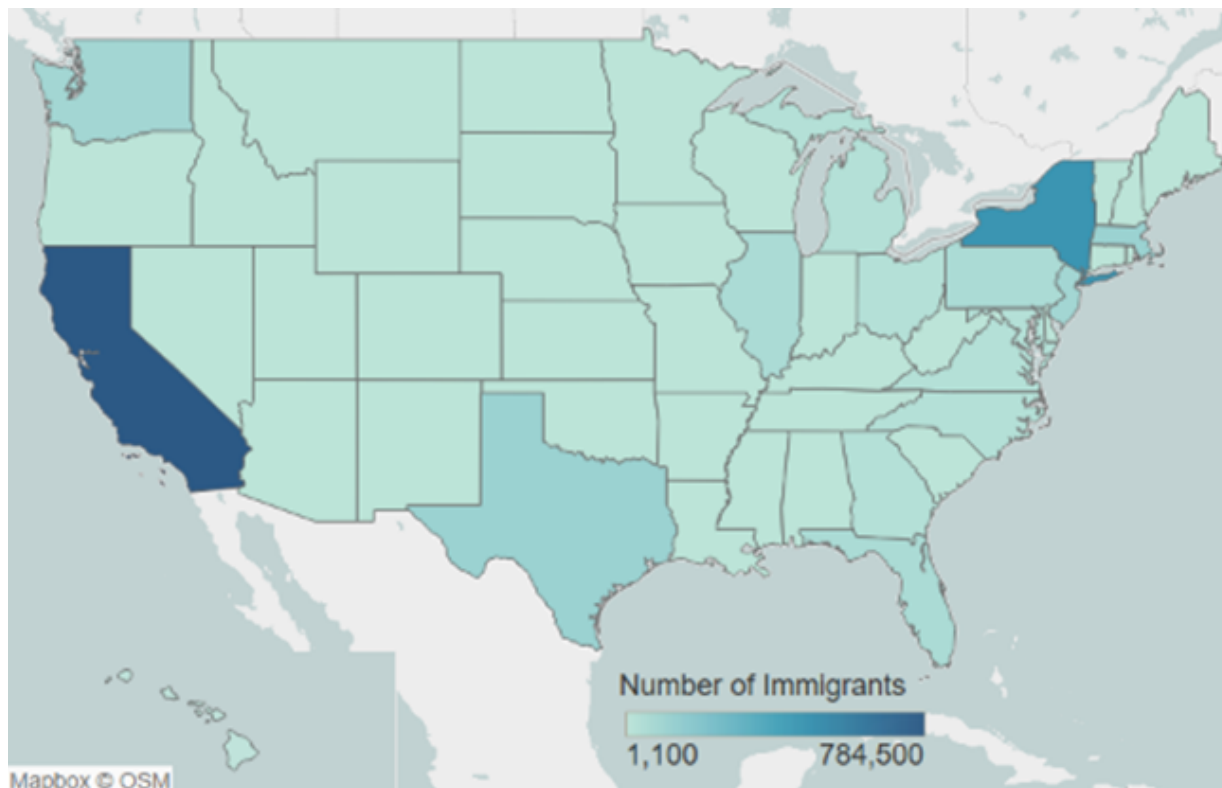
Click on the bullet points below for more information:

- **Distribution by State and Key Cities**
- **English Proficiency**
- **Age, Education, and Employment**
- **Income and Poverty**
- **Immigration Pathways and Naturalization**
- **Unauthorized Immigrant Population**
- **Health Coverage**
- **Diaspora**
- **Remittances**

## Distribution by State and Key Cities

Roughly half of Chinese immigrants reside in just two states: California (32 percent) and New York (19 percent). The top four counties by concentration in the 2017-21 period were Los Angeles County in California, Queens County in New York, Kings County in New York, and Santa Clara County in California. Together, these four counties accounted for 26 percent of the overall Chinese-born population in the United States.

**Figure 2. Top States of Residence for Chinese Immigrants in the United States, 2017-21**

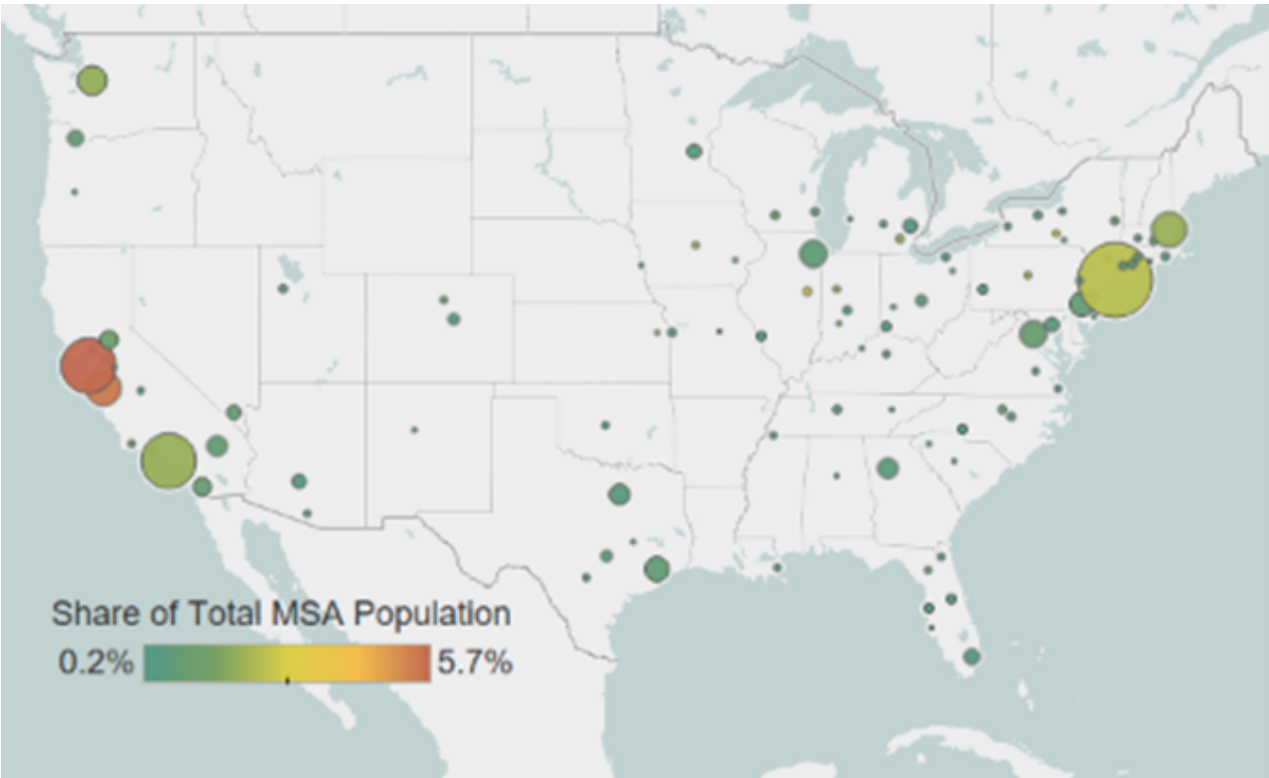


*Note:* Pooled 2017-21 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state level for smaller-population geographies. Not shown is the Chinese population in Alaska, which is small in size; for details, visit the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub for an interactive map showing geographic distribution of immigrants by state and county, available online.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2017-21 ACS.

As of 2017-21, the greater New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles metropolitan areas had the largest number of Chinese immigrants. These three metro areas were home to 43 percent of Chinese immigrants.

**Figure 3. Top Metropolitan Areas of Residence for Chinese Immigrants in the United States, 2017-21**



*Note:* Pooled 2017-21 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the metropolitan statistical-area level for smaller-population geographies.  
*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2017-21 ACS.

**Click here** for an interactive map that highlights the metropolitan areas with the highest concentrations of immigrants from China and other origin countries.

Table 1. Top Concentrations of Chinese Immigrants by U.S. Metropolitan Area, 2017-21

Metropolitan Area	Immigrant Population from China	% of Metro Area Population
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA Metro Area	498,000	2.5%
San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley, CA Metro Area	271,000	5.7%
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA Metro Area	270,000	2.0%
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA Metro Area	110,000	5.5%
Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metro Area	101,000	2.1%
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA Metro Area	78,000	2.0%
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI Metro Area	68,000	0.7%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metro Area	64,000	1.0%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX Metro Area	55,000	0.8%
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD Metro Area	54,000	0.9%

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2017-21 ACS.

English Proficiency

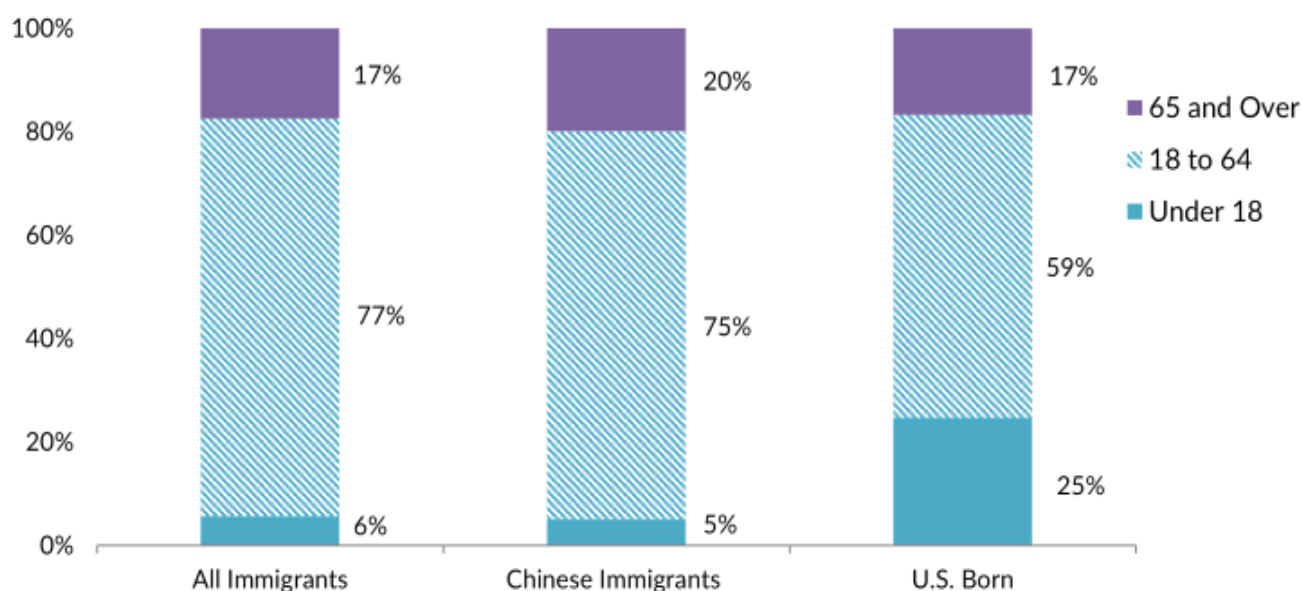
Chinese immigrants are less likely to be proficient in English and speak English at home than the overall U.S. foreign-born population. About 57 percent of Chinese immigrants ages 5 and over reported limited English proficiency in 2021, compared to 46 percent of the total foreign-born population. Eleven percent of Chinese immigrants spoke only English at home, compared to 17 percent of all immigrants.

*Note: Limited English proficiency refers to those who indicated on the ACS questionnaire that they spoke English less than “very well.”*

### Age, Education, and Employment

Chinese immigrants’ median age is the same as that of the overall foreign-born population (47 years) and higher than that of the U.S. born (37 years). In 2021, Chinese immigrants were slightly less likely than the overall foreign-born population to be of working age (18 to 64), but more likely than the native-born population (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Age Distribution of the U.S. Population by Origin, 2021**



*Note:* Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 ACS.

Chinese immigrants tend to have considerably higher levels of education than the overall foreign- and U.S.-born populations. In 2021, 52 percent of Chinese immigrants ages 25 and over had at least a bachelor’s degree, significantly higher than for immigrants overall and U.S.-born adults (34 percent and 35 percent, respectively). Notably, Chinese immigrants were more than twice as likely to have a graduate or professional degree: 30 percent, compared to 15 percent for all immigrants and 14 percent for the U.S. born. The share of Chinese immigrants with a college degree is even higher among those who arrived between 2017 and 2021 (62 percent).

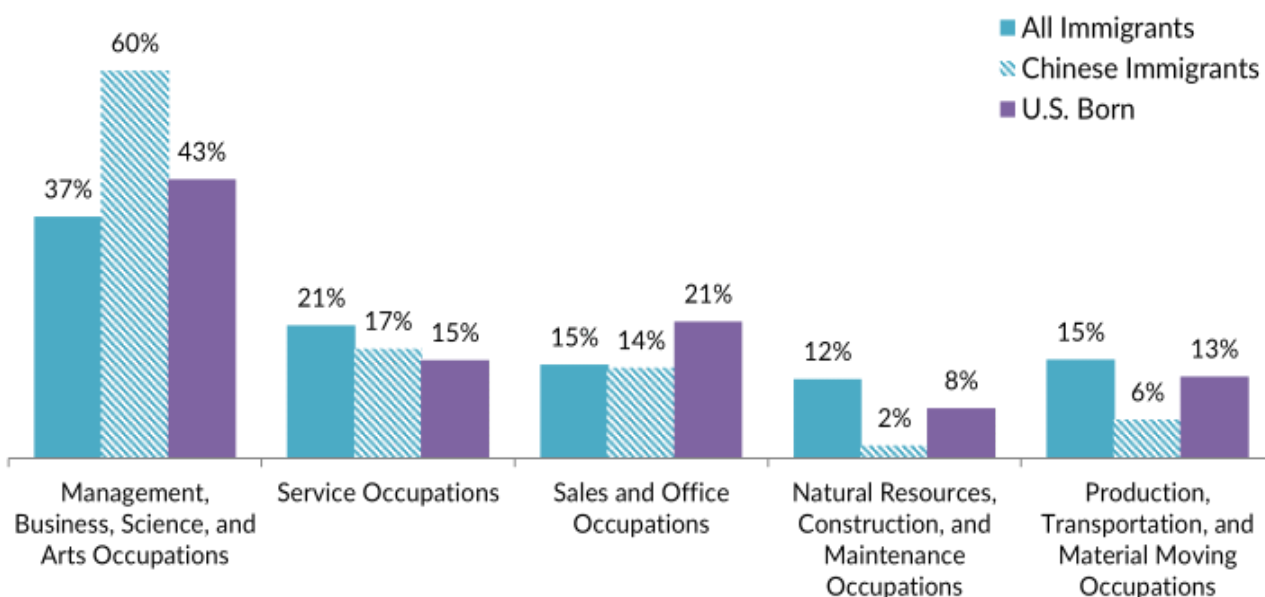
**Click here** for data on immigrants’ educational attainment by country of origin and overall.

This high educational attainment is linked to the specific channels through which Chinese immigrants enter the United States. Many Chinese immigrants arrive either as international college students or high-skilled H-1B temporary workers (a pathway that generally requires a university degree). Despite drops due to the pandemic, China remains the leading sending country of international students in the United States. In School Year (SY) 2021-22, close to 296,000 students from China were enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions, according to the Institute of International Education, accounting for 31 percent of the 949,000 international students in the United States and 30 percent of those enrolled in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) or health fields. Although the overall international student population is on the rise post-pandemic, up 4 percent from SY 2020-21, the number of Chinese students fell by 8 percent, in part due to China’s zero-COVID

policies. Meanwhile, the more than 50,000 Chinese citizens approved for an H-1B visa in fiscal year (FY) 2021, represented 12 percent of overall beneficiaries, outnumbered only by Indian nationals (74 percent).

Chinese immigrants participate in the labor force at a lower rate than other groups. In 2021, 61 percent of Chinese immigrants ages 16 and older were in the civilian labor force, compared to 66 percent of all immigrants and 62 percent of the native-born population. Sixty percent of Chinese immigrants were employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations, a much higher share than among the overall foreign-born population (37 percent) and the native-born population (43 percent; see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Employed Workers in the U.S. Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2021**



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS.

### Income and Poverty

Chinese immigrants had higher median household incomes than the foreign-born population in 2021: \$78,000 compared to \$70,000 for immigrant and native-born households.

At the same time, Chinese immigrants were slightly more likely to be in poverty (15 percent) than immigrants overall (14 percent) or the U.S. born (13 percent).

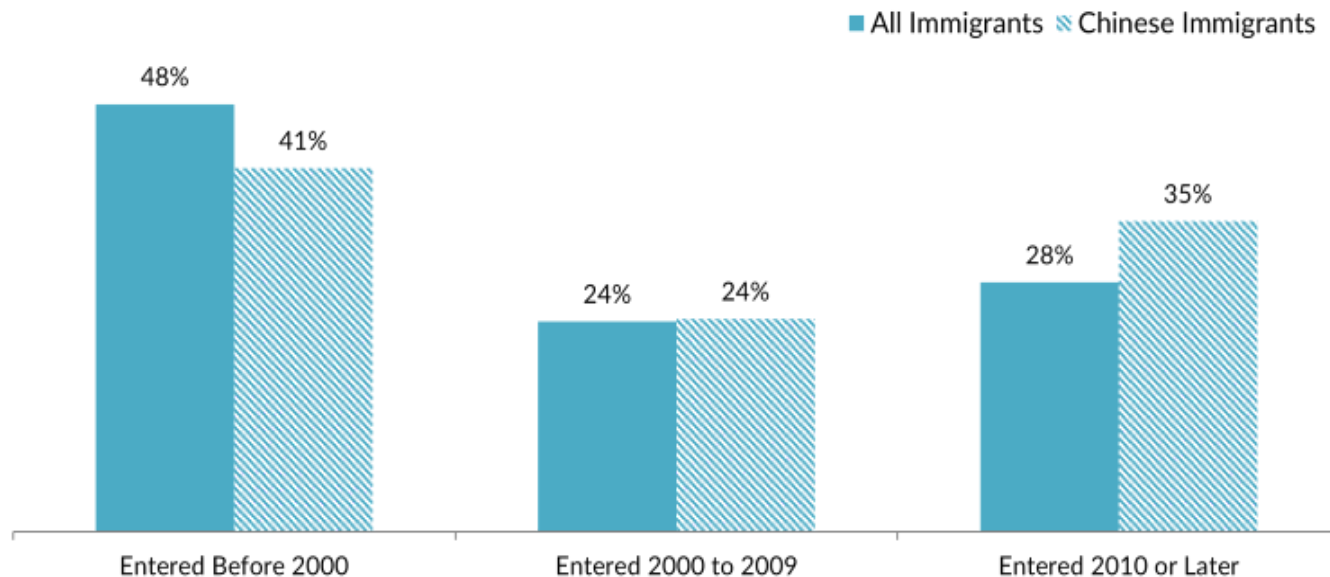
*Note: Official poverty thresholds vary by family size, composition, and the householder's age. The U.S. Census Bureau's poverty threshold for a family of two adults and two children was \$27,480 in 2021.*

### Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

In 2021, 56 percent of Chinese immigrants in the United States were naturalized U.S. citizens, compared to 53 percent of all immigrants.

Compared to the foreign born overall, Chinese immigrants are more likely to have arrived in the United States recently: 35 percent came in 2010 or later (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Immigrants from China and All Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2021**



*Note:* Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS.

In FY 2021, China was the third largest country of origin for new lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders), after Mexico and India. Approximately 51,000 (7 percent) of the nearly 740,000 new LPRs were from mainland China, Hong Kong, or Macau. Compared to all new green-card holders, Chinese immigrants were much more likely to obtain the status via employment-based preferences (44 percent versus 26 percent of all LPRs; see Figure 7). In contrast, Chinese immigrants were less likely to obtain green cards as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (33 percent, compared to 52 percent for all immigrants).

There are significant backlogs for mainland Chinese applying for LPR status through employment-based and family-sponsored channels, due to annual per-country caps. In December 2022, Chinese applicants being processed for some types of family-sponsored green cards had been waiting since March 2007, while those being processed for some employment-related applications had been in the queue since June 2013.

**Figure 7. Immigration Pathways of Chinese and All New Legal Permanent Residents in the United States, 2021**



*Notes: Immediate Relatives of U.S. Citizens:* Includes spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. *Family-Sponsored Preferences:* Includes adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens as well as spouses and children of green-card holders. The Diversity Visa lottery was established by the Immigration Act of 1990 to allow entry to immigrants from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The law states that 55,000 diversity visas in total are made available each fiscal year. Individuals born in mainland China or Hong Kong were not eligible for the DV-2024 lottery, but those from Macau were. Percentages may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "Table 10D: Persons Obtaining Lawful Permanent Resident Status by Broad Class of Admission and Region and Country of Birth: Fiscal Year 2021," updated September 26, 2022, available online.

## Unauthorized Immigrant Population

Although most Chinese immigrants in the United States are legally present, approximately 390,000 were unauthorized as of 2019, according to Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates, comprising around 4 percent of the 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States.

[Click here](#) to view an interactive map showing MPI's estimates of the number and geographic distribution (by state and county) of unauthorized immigrants from China and other top origin countries. [Click here](#) to view MPI demographic profiles for unauthorized immigrants nationwide, in most states, and in top counties.

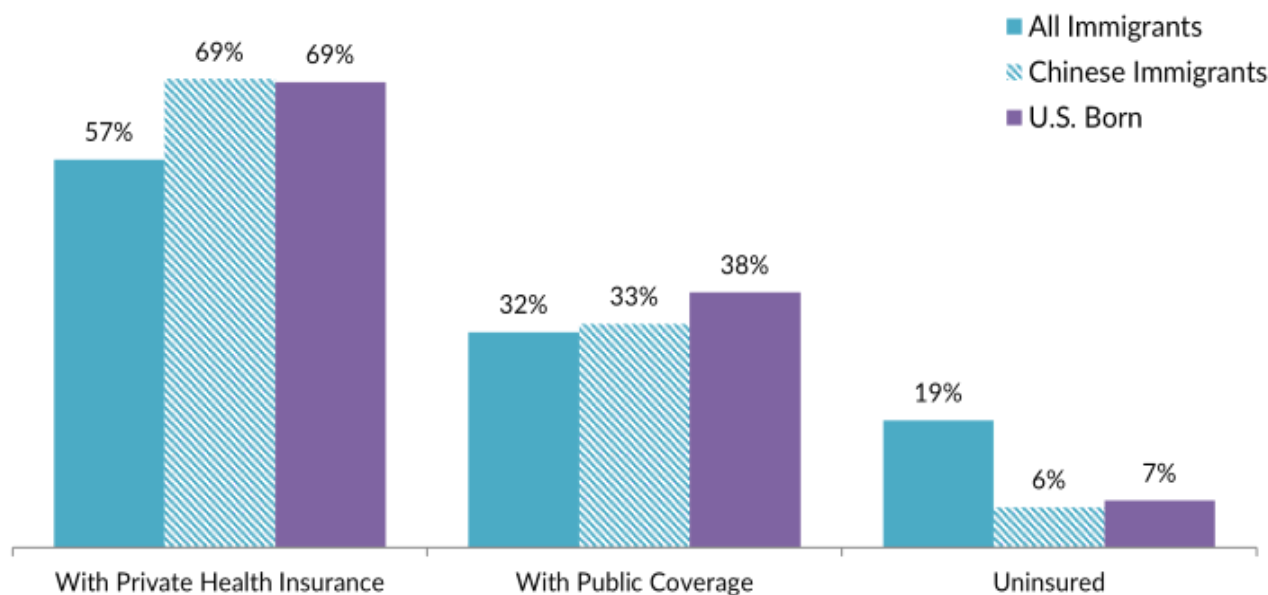
As of September 30, 2022, 640 immigrants from China or Hong Kong participated in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, accounting for a tiny share of the total 589,660 DACA recipients. DACA provides temporary deportation relief and work authorization to unauthorized migrants who arrived as children and meet the program's education and other eligibility criteria.

[Click here](#) to view the top origin countries of DACA recipients and their U.S. states of residence.

## Health Coverage

Chinese immigrants are more likely to have private health insurance than the overall foreign-born population and less likely than the U.S. born to be covered by public health insurance programs (see Figure 8). Chinese immigrants are less likely to be uninsured than other groups.

Figure 8. Health Coverage for Chinese Immigrants, All Immigrants, and the U.S. Born, 2021



*Note:* The sum of shares by type of insurance is likely to be greater than 100 because people may have more than one type of insurance.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 ACS.

## Diaspora

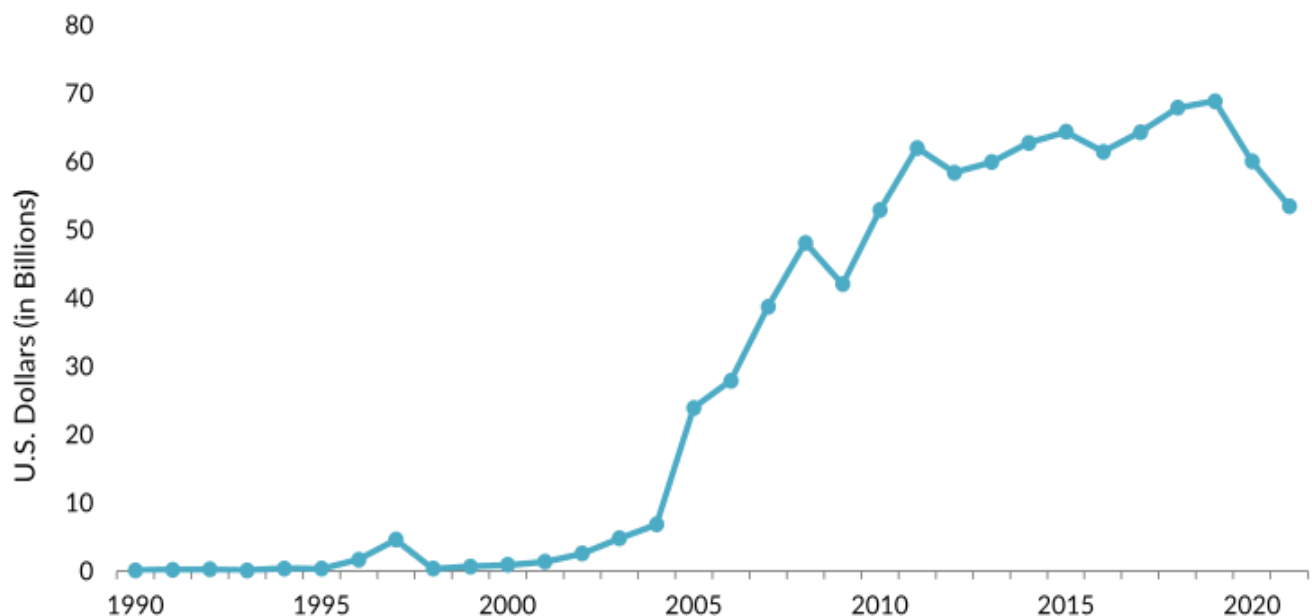
The Chinese diaspora in the United States is comprised of approximately 5.4 million individuals who were born in China, Hong Kong, or Macao, or reported Chinese ancestry or race, according to MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 ACS. The Chinese diaspora is the ninth largest in the country.

[Click here](#) to see estimates of the top 35 diasporas groups in the United States in 2021.

## Remittances

With some fluctuation, remittances sent to China via formal channels grew rapidly from the mid-2000s up until the pandemic, before declining sharply in 2020 and 2021. About \$53.5 billion in formal remittances was received by China, Hong Kong, and Macao in 2021, a decline of 22 percent from the 2019 high of \$68.8 billion. Remittances represented less than 0.3 percent of China's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021.

**Figure 9. Annual Remittance Flows to China, 1990-2021**



Note: The 2021 figure represents World Bank estimates.

Source: MPI tabulations of data from the World Bank Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD), "Remittance Inflows," May 2022 update, available online.

[Click here](#) to view an interactive chart showing annual remittances received and sent by China and other countries.

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