

# Chinese Immigrants in the United States

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SPOTLIGHT

By Kate Hooper and Jeanne Batalova



(Photo: Matt Becker)

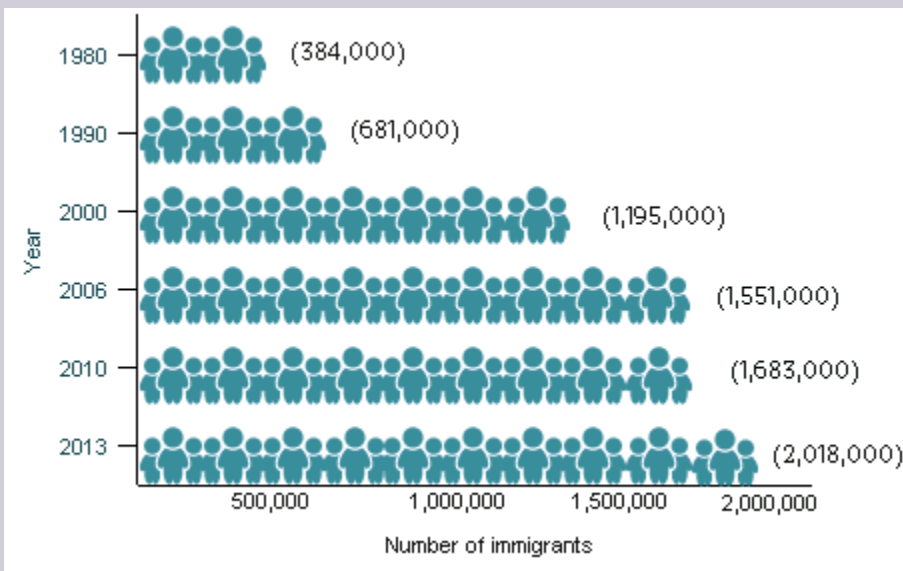
Chinese migration to the United States is a history of two parts: a first wave from the 1850s to 1880s, halted by federal laws restricting Chinese immigration; and a second wave from the late 1970s to the present, following normalization of U.S.-Chinese relations and changes to U.S. and Chinese migration policies. Chinese immigrants are now the third-largest foreign-born group in the United States after Mexicans and Indians, numbering more than 2 million and comprising 5 percent of the overall immigrant population in 2013.

From the 1850s, political unrest and economic pressures at home prompted thousands of Chinese immigrants to move to the western regions of the United States in search of temporary work. Many took low-skilled jobs as manual laborers in mining, construction, agriculture, manufacturing, or service industries. The 1890 decennial census reports a Chinese-born resident population exceeding 100,000; records show that nearly 300,000 Chinese immigrants entered the United States between 1850 and 1889, though historians estimate that as many as half ultimately returned to China. This wave of Chinese migration was accompanied by growing anti-Chinese sentiment and ethnic

discrimination, culminating in the U.S. Congress passing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. The law prohibited Chinese labor migration to the United States and barred Chinese residents from obtaining U.S. citizenship. Though the law was repealed in 1943, little Chinese immigration was permitted until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 overhauled the U.S. immigration system and significantly expanded migration opportunities for non-European immigrants.

Though Hong Kong nationals started moving to the United States in the late 1960s—by 1980, there were 85,000 Hong Kong-born immigrants in the United States, and today, immigrants from Hong Kong account for about one in 10 Chinese immigrants—large-scale immigration from mainland China only resumed after the People’s Republic of China opened its economy to global markets and lifted migration restrictions in 1978. The number of immigrants from mainland China in the United States nearly doubled from 299,000 in 1980 to 536,000 in 1990. Unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrants, post-1965 Chinese immigrants are predominantly skilled: China is now the principal source of foreign students in U.S. higher education, and the second-largest recipient of employer-sponsored temporary work visas, after India.

**Figure 1. Chinese Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980-2013**



Sources: Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2006, 2010, and 2013 American Community Surveys (ACS), and 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census.

Approximately one-quarter of all Chinese emigrants settle in the United States, with other popular destinations including Canada (896,000), South Korea

(657,000), Japan (655,000), Australia (547,000), and Singapore (457,000), according to mid-2013 estimates by the United Nations Population Division. [Click here](#) to view an interactive map showing where migrants from China and other countries have settled worldwide. Around half of Chinese immigrants obtain lawful permanent residence in the United States (also known as receiving a “green card”) through family channels. The remainder qualifies through employment-based preferences, or asylee status. Compared to the overall foreign- and native-born populations, Chinese immigrants are more highly educated, more likely to be employed, and have a higher household

### 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. Data collection constraints do not permit inclusion of those who gained Chinese citizenship via naturalization and later moved to the United States.

Unless otherwise stated, estimates for China include Hong Kong and exclude Taiwan.

income.

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the most recent 2013 American Community Survey [ACS] as well as pooled 2009-13 ACS data), the Department of Homeland Security’s *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, and the World Bank’s annual remittance data, this Spotlight provides information on the Chinese immigrant population in the United States, focusing on its size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics.

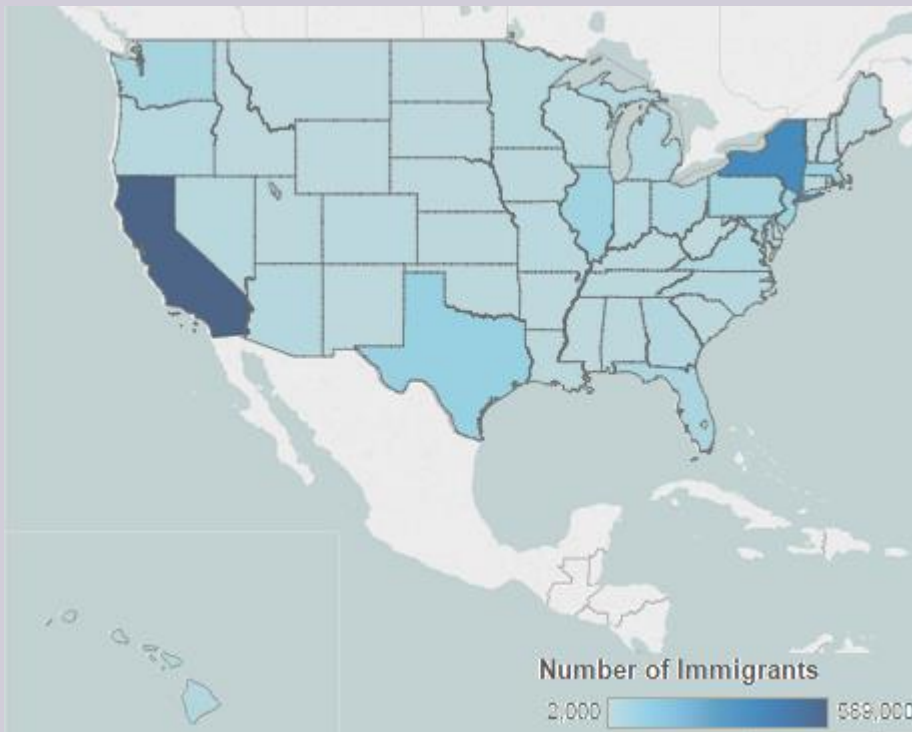
Click on the bullet points below for more information:

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- [English Proficiency](#)
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**[Distribution by State and Key Cities](#)**

Most immigrants from China have settled in California (31 percent), and New York (21 percent). The top four counties with Chinese immigrants in 2013 were Los Angeles County in California, Queens County in New York, Kings County in New York, and San Francisco County in California. Together, these four counties accounted for about 29 percent of the total mainland Chinese immigrant population in the United States

**Figure 2. Top Destination States for Chinese Immigrants in the United States, 2009-13**



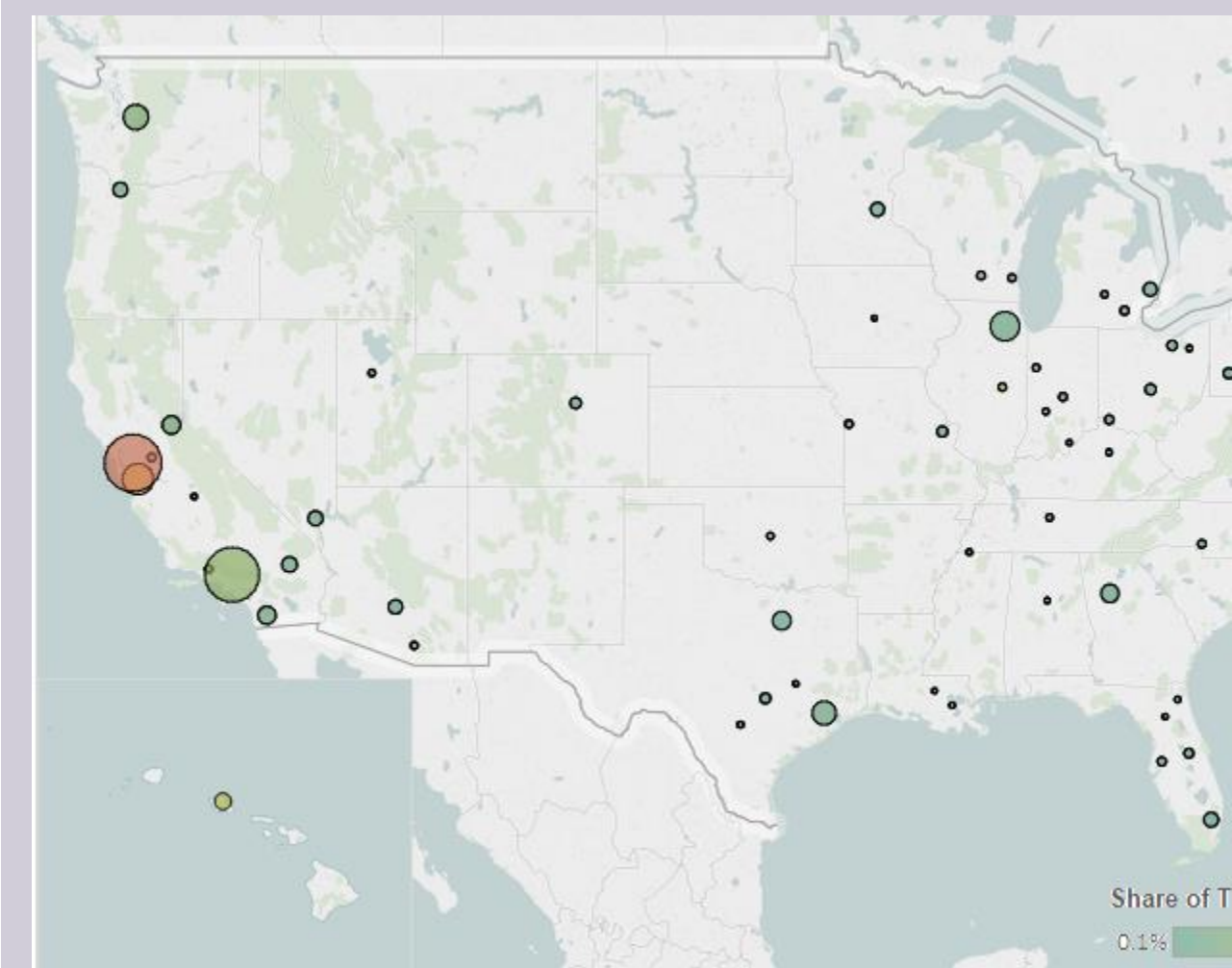
*Note:* Pooled 2009-13 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state level for smaller-population geographies.

*Source:* Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009-13 ACS.

**Click here** for an interactive map that shows the geographic distribution of immigrants by state and county. Select China from the dropdown menu to see which states and counties have the most Chinese immigrants.

In the 2009-13 period, the U.S. cities with the largest number of Chinese immigrants were the greater New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles metropolitan areas. These three metropolitan areas accounted for about 46 percent of Chinese immigrants in the United States.

**Figure 3. Top Metropolitan Destinations for Chinese Immigrants in the United States, 2009-13**



*Note:* Pooled 2009-13 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 2009-13 ACS.

**Table 1. Top Concentrations by Metropolitan Area for the Foreign Born from China, 2009-13**

Metropolitan Area	Immigrant Population from China	Share of Metro Area Population
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA	419,000	2.1%
San Francisco-Oakland-Hayward, CA	227,000	5.2%
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	207,000	1.6%
Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH	69,000	1.5%
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	66,000	3.5%
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI	59,000	0.6%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	52,000	0.9%
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	43,000	1.2%
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD	40,000	0.7%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX	39,000	0.6%

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009-13 ACS.

[Click here](#) for an interactive map that highlights the metropolitan areas with the highest concentrations of immigrants. Select China from the dropdown menu to see which metropolitan areas have the most Chinese immigrants.

### English Proficiency

Chinese immigrants were less likely to be proficient in English and speak English at home than the overall U.S. foreign-born population. In 2013, about 62 percent of Chinese immigrants (ages 5 and over) reported limited English proficiency, compared to 50 percent of the total foreign-born population. Approximately 10 percent of Chinese immigrants spoke only English at home, versus 16 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.”*

### The Hong Kong-Born Population

As of 2013, there were approximately 213,000 Hong Kong-born Chinese immigrants in the United States. Most Hong Kong-born immigrants arrived before 2000, and 82 percent have become U.S. citizens. The immigrant population from Hong Kong has a median age of 49. Eighty-nine percent of this population is of working age, with 9 percent aged 65 or over, and 2 percent under 18. Families headed by a Hong Kong-born immigrant reported a median household income of \$89,600, compared to \$48,000 for foreign-born families in the United States. Less than 10 percent of immigrants from Hong Kong live in poverty.

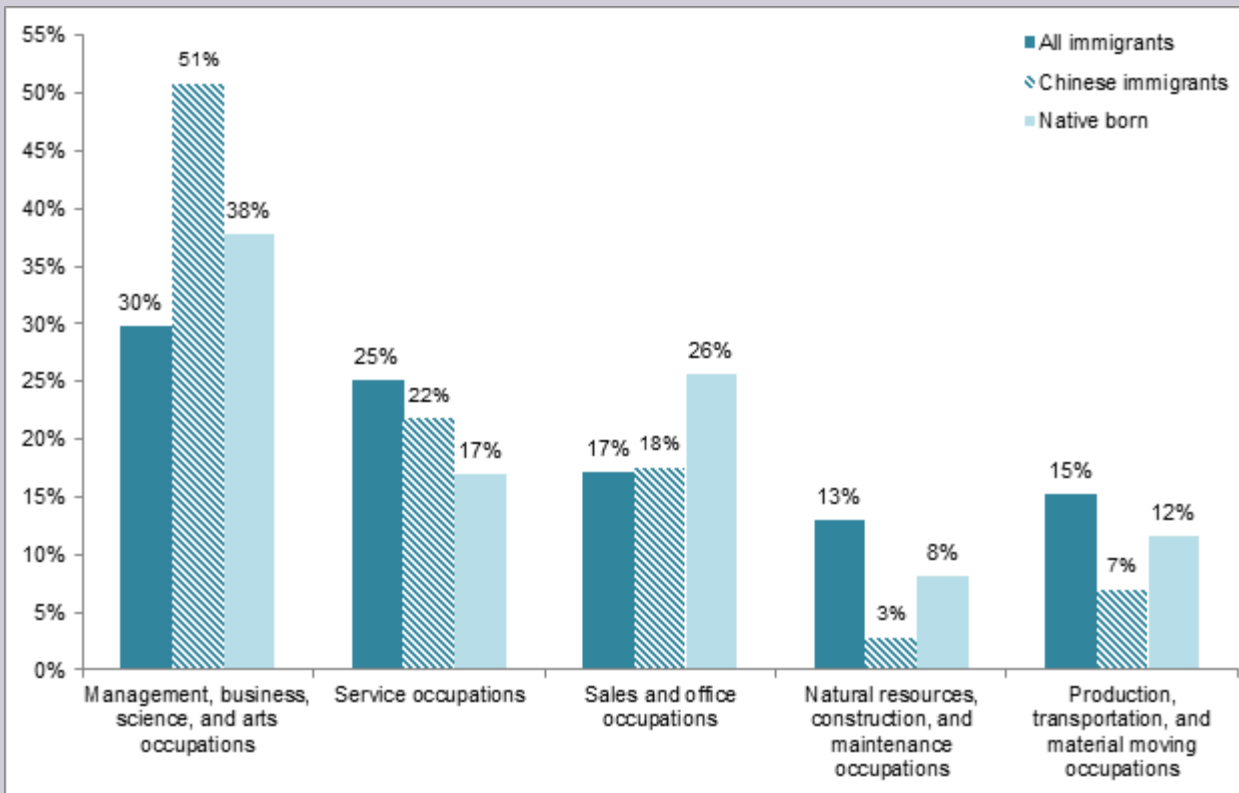
### Educational and Professional Attainment

Chinese immigrants tend to have much higher educational attainment compared to the overall foreign- and native-born populations. In 2013, 47 percent of Chinese immigrants (ages 25 and over) had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 28 percent of the total immigrant population and 30 percent of the native-born population.

The Chinese immigrant population was older than both the overall foreign- and native-born populations. The median age of Chinese immigrants was 45 years—compared to 43 for the foreign-born population overall and 36 for the native-born population. In 2013, 76 percent of Chinese immigrants were of working age (18 to 64), 17 percent were ages 65 and over, and 7 percent were under 18. In comparison, 80 percent of all foreign born in the United States were of working age, 14 percent were 65 and over, and 6 percent were under 18. Meanwhile, 60 percent of the native-born population was of working age, 14 percent was 65 and over, and 26 percent was under 18.

Chinese immigrants participated in the labor force at a slightly lower rate than the overall immigrant and native-born populations. In 2013, about 59 percent of Chinese immigrants ages 16 and over were in the civilian labor force, compared to 67 percent and 63 percent of the total foreign- and native-born populations, respectively. Chinese immigrants were much more likely to be employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations (51 percent) compared to the other two groups.

**Figure 4. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2013**



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2013 ACS.

### Income and Poverty

Chinese immigrants had much higher incomes compared to the total foreign- and native-born populations. In 2013, the median income of households headed by a Chinese immigrant was \$57,000, compared to \$48,000 and \$53,000 for overall immigrant and native-born households, respectively.

In 2013, 19 percent of Chinese immigrants lived in poverty, a rate similar to all immigrants but slightly higher than the 15 percent posted by the native-born population.

### Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

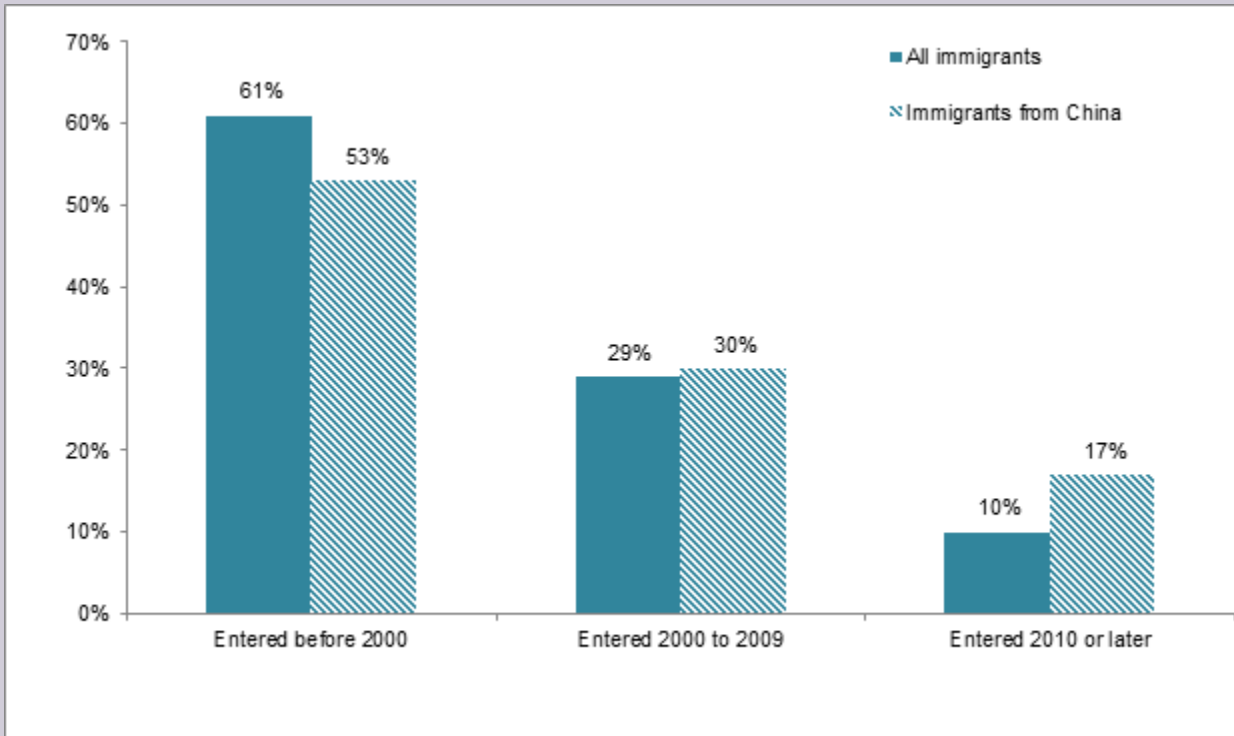
In 2013, 54 percent of the approximately 2.01 million Chinese immigrants residing in the United States were naturalized U.S. citizens, compared with 47 percent of the overall foreign-born population.

Chinese immigrants are more likely to have entered the United States more recently than the overall immigrant population, as Figure 5 shows. More than



half of Chinese immigrants (53 percent) arrived prior to 2000, followed by 30 percent who arrived between 2000 and 2009, and 17 percent in 2010 or later.

**Figure 5. Chinese and All Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2013**

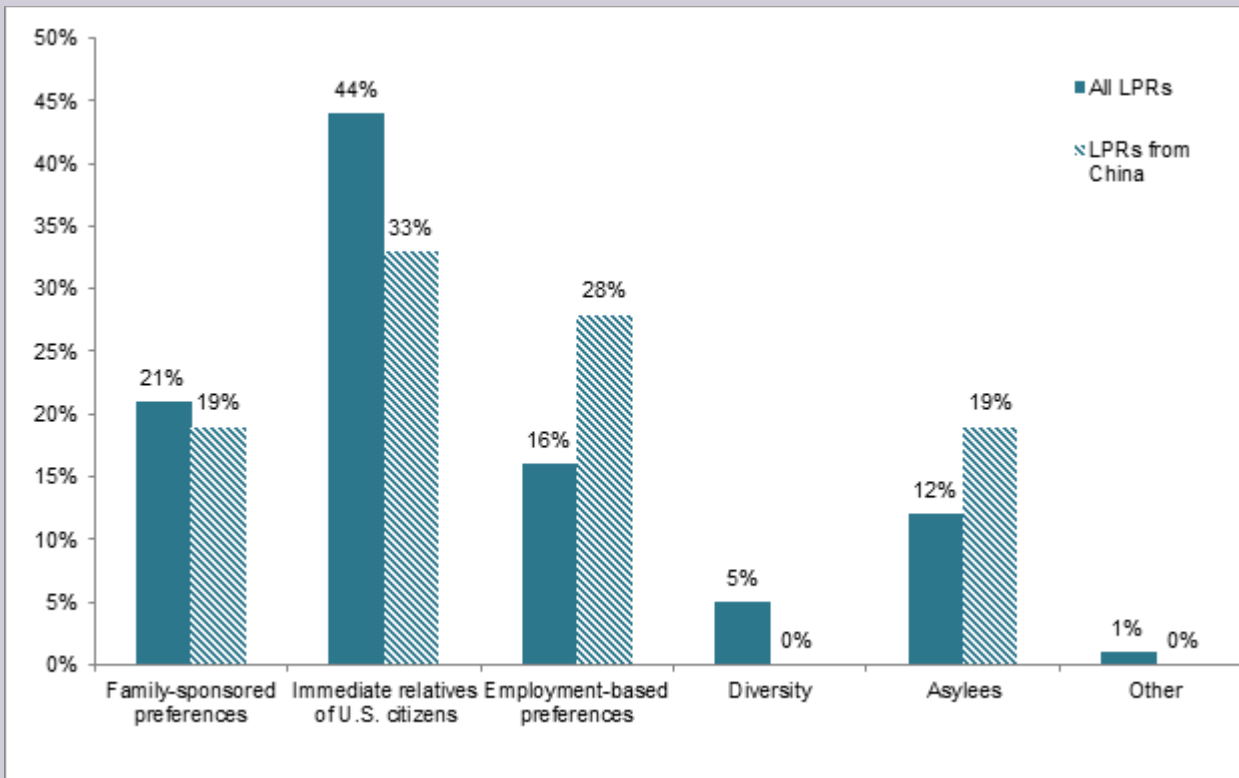


*Note:* Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2013 ACS.

In 2013, Chinese immigrants were more likely to become lawful permanent residents (LPRs) via employment pathways (28 percent) than the overall LPR population (16 percent). Chinese immigrants were less likely than the overall LPR population to gain green cards as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens (33 percent, compared with 44 percent), or through family-sponsored preferences (19 percent, compared with 21 percent). Although no Chinese nationals arrive in the United States as refugees, China is the leading country of U.S. asylum applicants—34 percent of the 25,200 individuals granted asylum in fiscal year (FY) 2013 were from China. Also, Chinese immigrants were more likely to obtain a green card adjusting from an asylee status (19 percent) compared to the total LPR population (12 percent).

**Figure 6. Immigration Pathways of Chinese Immigrants and All Immigrants in the United States, 2013**



*Notes: Family-sponsored:* Includes adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens as well as spouses and children of green-card holders. *Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens:* Includes spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. *Diversity Visa Lottery:* The Immigration Act of 1990 established the Diversity Visa Lottery to allow entry to immigrants from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. The law states that 55,000 diversity visas are made available each fiscal year. Nationals of the People's Republic of China are ineligible to participate in the DV Lottery.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2014), [www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2013-lawful-permanent-residents](http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2013-lawful-permanent-residents).

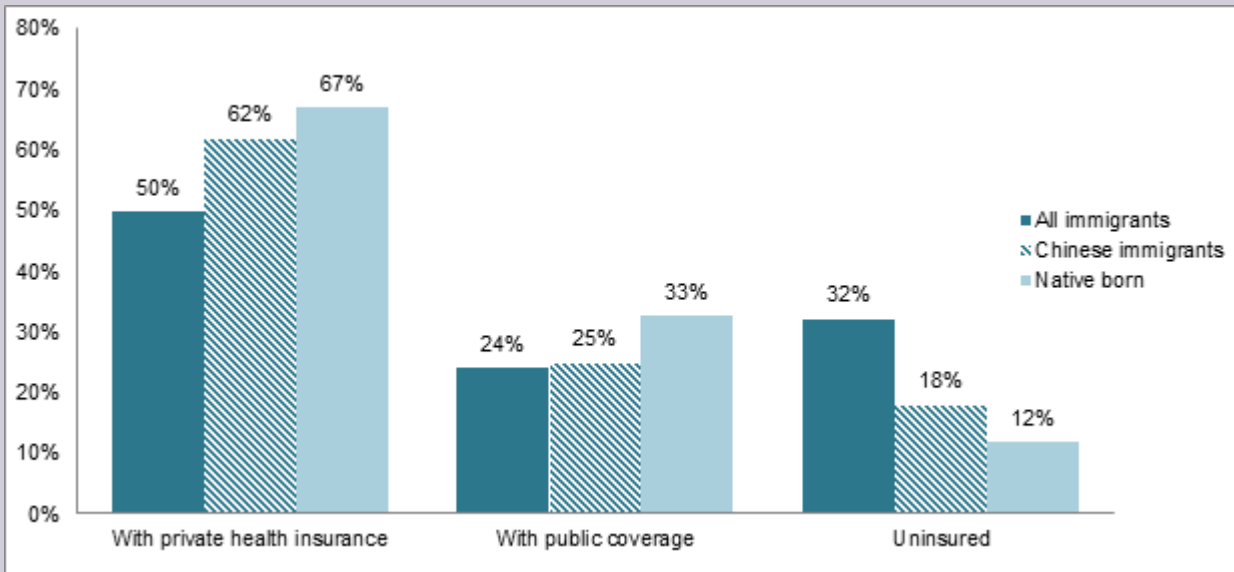
As of January 2012, there were approximately 210,000 unauthorized Chinese nationals living in the United States, comprising nearly 2 percent of the 11.4 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States. Around 12,000 Chinese youth were eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program as of March 31, 2014, according to MPI estimates, yet very few applied for DACA in the first two years of the program. Advocates suggest the low application rate in the Chinese immigrant community may stem from factors including limited outreach, cultural inhibitions, fear of disclosing their unauthorized status, and language barriers.

## Health Coverage

Chinese immigrants were much less likely to be uninsured (18 percent) compared to the overall immigrant population (32 percent), but more likely to

be uninsured than the native-born population (12 percent). Chinese immigrants were more likely to have private health insurance than the total foreign-born population, though their insurance levels were still below those of the native-born population.

**Figure 7. Health Coverage for Chinese Immigrants, All Immigrants, and the Native Born, 2013**



*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 2013 ACS.

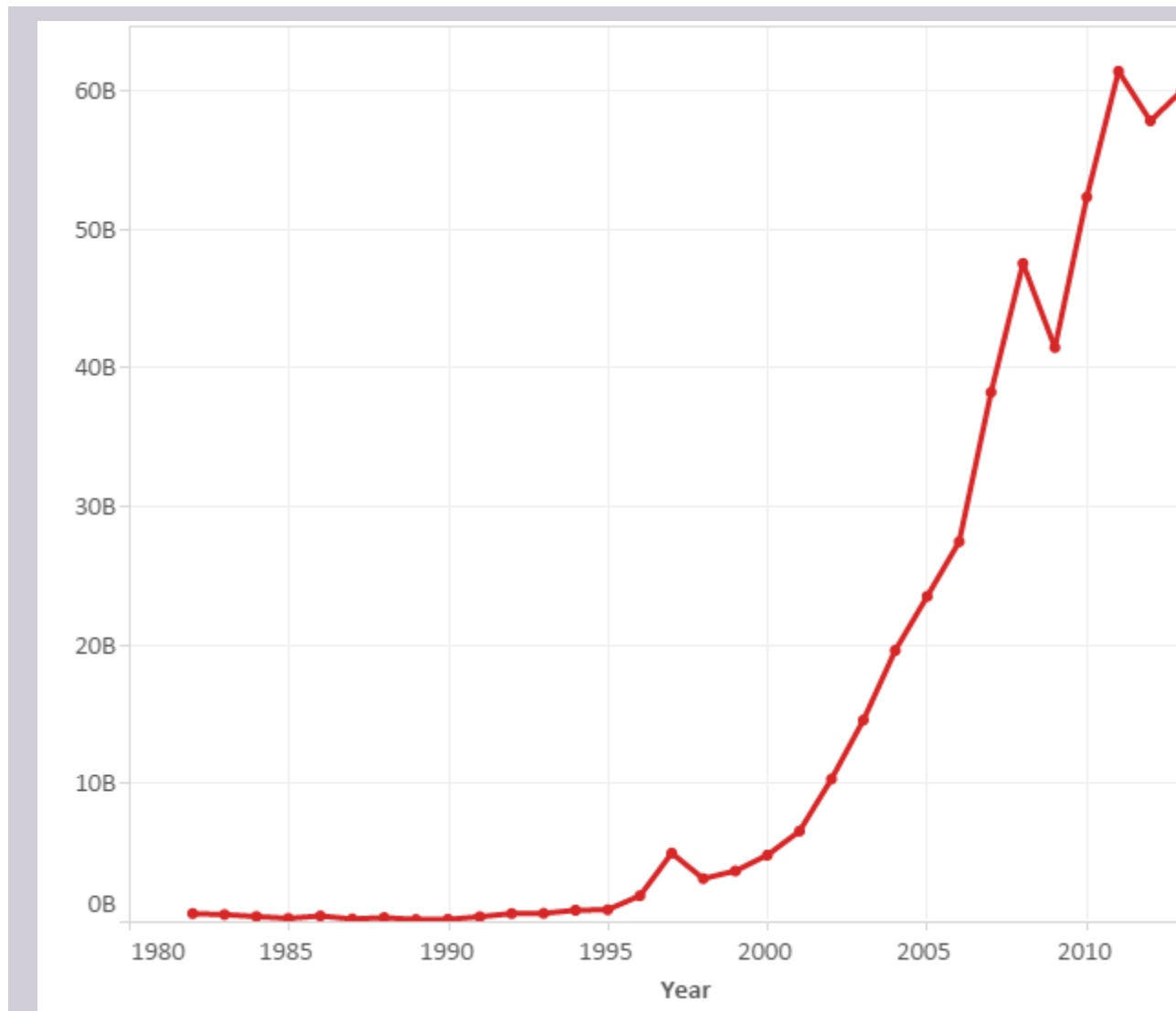
## Diaspora

The Chinese diaspora population in the United States is comprised of approximately 4.4 million individuals who were either born in the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan, or reported Chinese or Taiwanese ancestry or race, according to tabulations from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009-13 ACS.

## Remittances

Global remittances sent to China via formal channels equaled nearly \$60 billion in 2013, though this represented less than 1 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), according to data from the World Bank. Remittances sent to China have seen a 67-fold increase since 1995.

**Figure 8. Annual Remittance Flows to China, 1982-2013**



Source: MPI tabulations of data from the World Bank Prospects Group, "Annual Remittances Data," October 2014 update.

Visit the [Data Hub's collection of interactive remittances tools](#), which track remittances by inflow and outflow, between countries, and over time.

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