Immigrants in California

Joseph Hayes

California has more immigrants than any other state. California is home to more than 10 million immigrants—about one in four of the foreign-born population nationwide. In 2015, the most current year of data, 27% of California’s population was foreign born, about twice the US percentage. Foreign-born residents represented more than 30% of the population in eight California counties; in descending order, they are Santa Clara, San Mateo, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Alameda, Imperial, Orange, and Monterey. Half of California children had at least one immigrant parent.

Most immigrants in California are documented residents. Almost half (49%) of California’s immigrants are naturalized US citizens, and another 26% have some other legal status (including green cards and visas). According to the Center for Migration Studies, about 25% of immigrants in California are undocumented.

Net immigration to California has slowed. In the 1990s, California’s immigrant population grew by 37% (2.4 million). But in the first decade of the 2000s, that growth slowed to 15% (1.3 million), and in the past 10 years, the increase was 11% (just over 1 million). The decline in international immigration has been a contributing factor in the slowdown of California’s overall population growth.

The majority of recent arrivals are from Asia. The vast majority of California’s immigrants were born in Latin America (52%) or Asia (39%). California has sizeable populations of immigrants from dozens of countries; leading countries of origin are Mexico (4.3 million), China (914,000), the Philippines (859,000), India (581,000), and Vietnam (507,000). However, most (53%) of those arriving between 2011 and 2015 came from Asia; only 22% came from Latin America.

Most immigrants in California are working-age adults. Eight of every ten immigrants (80%) in California are working-age adults (age 18 to 64), compared to four of every seven (57%) US-born California residents. This means that more than a third (34%) of working-age adults in the state are immigrants.

California’s immigrants have both very low and very high levels of education. In 2015, 34% of California’s immigrants age 25 and older had not completed high school, compared with 8% of US-born California residents. Twenty-eight percent of California’s foreign-born residents had attained at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 35% of US-born residents. Foreign-born residents accounted for 71% of state residents without a high school diploma and 31% of college-educated residents. But recent immigrants and immigrants from Asia tend to have very high levels of educational attainment. More than half (52%) of foreign-born residents who came to the state between 2011 and 2015—and 58% of those who came from Asia—had attained at least a bachelor’s degree.

Immigrants are as likely to be working as the US-born—but they make less money. California’s foreign-born residents are about as likely to be in the labor force as are US-born residents: in 2015, 64% of immigrants were in the labor force, compared to 63% of the US-born. They are also slightly more likely to be employed (60% compared to 58%). However, the median income in 2015 for households with foreign-born householders was 14.8% lower than that for households with US-born householders ($52,850 compared to $62,042). Foreign-born residents are also about as likely as US-born residents to live in poverty (17% and 16%, respectively).
California has had high shares of foreign-born residents for decades

Source: US Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses and the American Community Survey.

Asia has surpassed Latin America as the leading source of recent immigrants to California

Source: American Community Survey.
Note: New arrivals are based on the place of residence one year prior to the survey.

Sources: American Community Survey and Decennial Census data from US Census Bureau and IPUMS; Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek. Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 6.0 (University of Minnesota 2015); Center for Migration Studies.
Contact: hayes@ppic.org