



Immigration Task Force

ISSUE BRIEF:

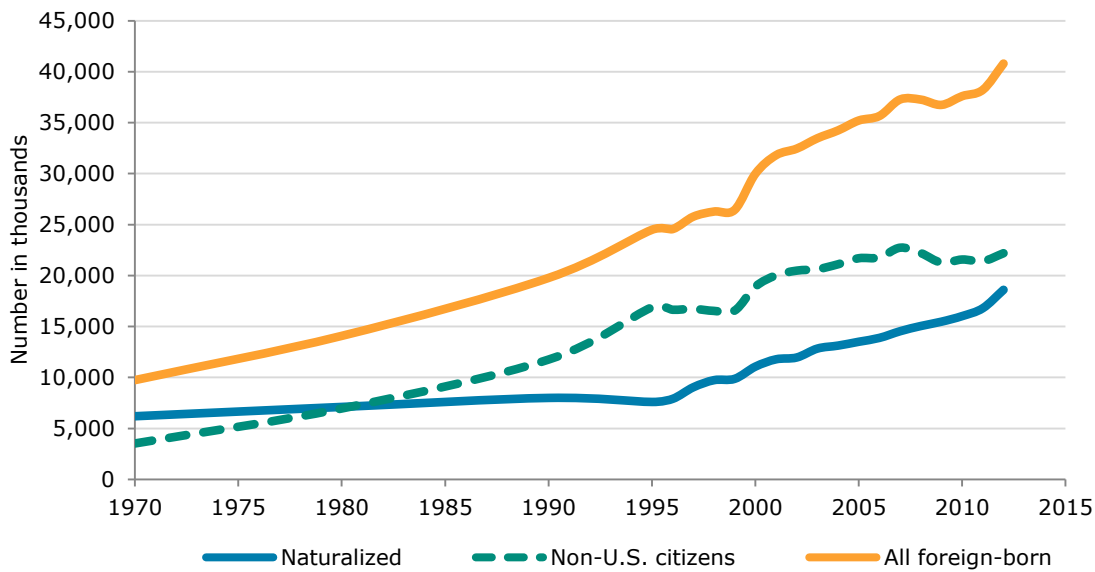
Naturalized Population: Trends and Characteristics

The number of legal immigrants who have gone through the naturalization process and become U.S. citizens has increased every year since the 1990s and currently stands at its highest point ever. The high number of naturalized citizens reflects a significant increase in the foreign-born population in the last 30 years. Between 1980 and 2000, the foreign-born population more than doubled from about 14 million to 30 million persons. Over the past ten years, an average of 700,000 persons have naturalized each year. Naturalized citizens account for about 46 percent (or 18.6 million) of the total estimated 40 million foreign-born persons living in the United States, which includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent and temporary residents, and unauthorized immigrants (Figure 1).

The share of eligible legal immigrants that have naturalized has also steadily been on the rise over the past two decades. Naturalization rates—the percent of all *eligible* lawful permanent residents who naturalize—increased from about 48 percent in 1995 to 61 percent in 2011.¹ Naturalization trends and the characteristics of those naturalized will continue to be part of the discussion as Congress debates the different aspects of immigration reform. This brief summarizes recent naturalization trends among legal immigrants and describes the characteristics of the naturalized population.



Figure 1. Foreign-born population by citizenship status, FY 1970–FY 2012²

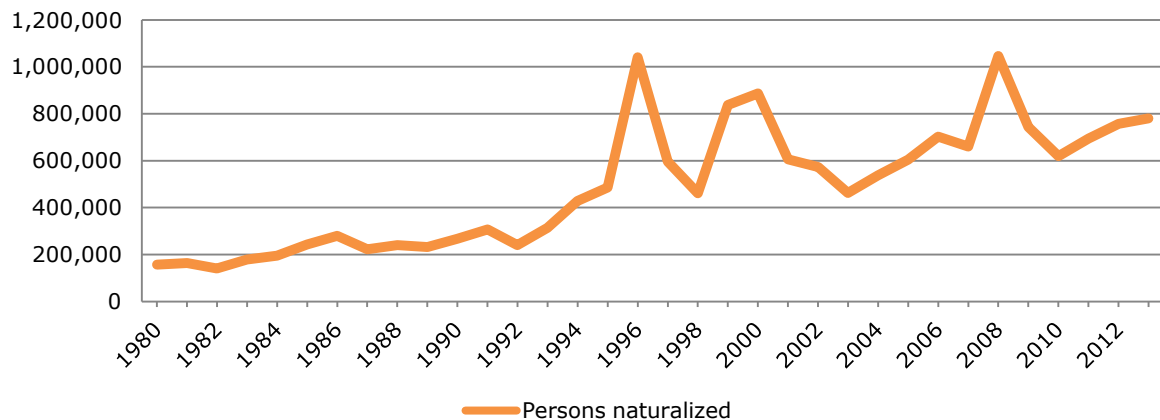


Sources: CPS: FY1970–FY2011; 2012 ACS

Yearly Naturalizations

While there have been periods of significant variation in the number of immigrants naturalized per year over the past two decades, the number of yearly naturalizations has been on the rise since 2010 and has significantly increased in the last two decades. There were about 779,900 naturalizations in 2013, up from 757,000 in 2012 and 694,000 in 2011 (Figure 2). On average, about 700,000 persons per year have been naturalized since 2000.

Figure 2. Number of naturalizations per year, FY 1980–FY 2012³



Source: DHS

The 2008 spike in naturalizations (from 660,477 in 2007 to more than one million) followed a year of unprecedented increase in naturalization application filings. During a hearing before the House Judiciary Committee in 2008, former U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Director Emilio Gonzalez testified that USCIS received 1.4 million naturalization applications in FY 2007, almost double the volume received during FY 2006. The application surge led to a significant backlog and increased processing time, from an average of seven months to 18 months. The increased interest was in part due to a scheduled fee increase from \$300 to \$595 set to begin in mid-2007 and increased political activity and naturalization campaigns ahead of the 2008 presidential election. The elevation of the immigration reform debate to the national stage during congressional deliberations between 2005 and 2007 may have also played a part.⁴

The significant increases in yearly naturalizations in the mid-1990s are partly a result of immigrants who received legal status under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. The increase during this period is also credited to immigration legislation that limited noncitizens' access to public benefits and legal protections and that expanded the list of deportable offenses.⁵

Naturalization Rates and Predictors

Naturalization rates. Naturalization rates, for the most part, have also been on the rise in the past two decades. The naturalization “rate” refers to the share of all *eligible* legal permanent residents (LPRs) who naturalize, which is different from the share of *all* foreign-born people that are naturalized. According to the most recent Pew Hispanic Center estimates released in 2012, the rate of naturalization for all immigrants in 2011 was 61 percent, up from 59 percent in 2005, and 48 percent in 1995. Pew’s 2012 study breaks down Latin American immigrants by select regions—Mexico, Central America, South America, and the Caribbean—and compares these naturalization rates with that of all eligible immigrants. Among these regions, Mexicans are the largest immigrant group and have a much lower rate of naturalization. Just 36 percent of eligible Mexicans had naturalized compared with 44 percent of immigrants from Central America, 63 percent from South America, and 67 percent from the Caribbean (Table 1). Because of several geographic and demographic factors (explained below), Mexican immigrants have historically had lower naturalization rates than other immigrants.

Table 1. Naturalization rates for all eligible persons and by Latin American regions, 2011⁶

REGION OF BIRTH	PERCENT OF PERSONS ELIGIBLE	
	2011	
ALL WORLD REGIONS*	61%	
Latin America	-	
Mexico	36%	
Central America	44%	
South America	63%	
Caribbean	67%	

* Includes Europe and Canada, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, Africa, and others. Specific breakdown not provided.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center 2012

Previous research by both the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Pew Hispanic Center shows that Asian immigrants tend to have the highest naturalization rate among the major immigrant-sending regions (Asia, Europe, and Latin America).⁷ An older study by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2007 calculated that immigrants from Asia had a naturalization rate of 71 percent, compared with 69 percent from Europe and Canada, and 59 percent from Africa. It also showed an increase in the naturalization rate for all eligible immigrants from 48 percent in 1995 to 59 percent in 2005. Each specific region exhibited some increase (Table 2).

Table 2. Naturalization rates by region for 1995 and 2005⁸

REGION OF BIRTH	PERCENT OF PERSONS ELIGIBLE	
	1995	2005
All Regions	48%	59%
Europe & Canada	67%	69%
Asia	57%	71%
Middle East	56%	77%
Latin America	30%	46%
Africa & other	53%	59%

Source: Pew Hispanic Center 2007

No one indicator or reason explains both the regional variation of naturalization rates and an immigrant's likelihood to naturalize. Instead, several factors related to an immigrant's country of origin can predict the likelihood of naturalization. These include geographic proximity to the country of origin, laws regarding dual citizenship, political conditions, and socioeconomic factors.

Geographic proximity to the home country is usually a significant indicator. For the most part, immigrants from regions in close proximity to the United States naturalize at a lower rate, possibly because they tend to maintain close ties to their home country.⁹ As shown above, immigrants from Latin America have the lowest naturalization rate of any

region (Table 3). Geographic proximity also allows for ease of travel, so immigrants are more likely to frequently visit or spend time in their home country, which can also affect their ability to meet the physical presence requirement for naturalization.

Dual citizenship laws also have some influence. Generally, immigrants from nations that allow dual citizenship are more likely to naturalize, because doing so would not cost them citizenship status or legal rights in their home countries (e.g., land ownership, voting rights, or government benefits). Mexico's policy change allowing dual citizenship in 1998, for example, is commonly cited as a reason why Mexican naturalization rates increased in the late 1990s and early 2000s (from 20 percent in 1995 to 34 percent in 2001).¹⁰

Economic and political conditions can also be indicators. Immigrants are less likely to return to their countries of birth if the countries are experiencing economic turmoil or political instability. Immigrants are also less likely to return to countries under totalitarian rule.¹¹ Both are possible explanations for the higher than usual naturalization rate of immigrants from the Caribbean—especially Cuba—compared with other Latin American regions. Immigrants from the conflict-plagued Middle East also tend to have high naturalization rates. Finally, socioeconomic factors play a significant part, as low levels of education and income correspond to lower rates of naturalization.¹²

Years as Legal Permanent Residents, or "Green Card," status. In total, immigrants naturalized in 2013 spent a median of seven years as LPRs before naturalizing—same as 2012m one year less than 2011 and 2010, and two years less than in 2000 and 1995. (Most immigrants must be permanent residents for five years before applying for naturalization; for spouses of U.S. citizens, it's three years). Compared with immigrants from other regions, immigrants from North America spent the most number of years in lawful permanent resident (LPR) status before naturalizing. DHS estimates that immigrants from North America who naturalized in 2013 spent a median of ten years in LPR status, compared with immigrants from Africa (five years), Asia and South America (six years), Europe (six years), and Oceania (eight years) (Table 3).

Table 3. Median years in LPR status before naturalization (by region and year)¹³

	1995	2000	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Africa	6	7	6	6	6	6	5	5	5	5
Asia	7	8	6	6	7	6	5	6	6	6
Europe	9	7	6	6	7	7	6	6	7	7
N. America	14	11	10	11	12	11	10	10	10	10
Oceania	11	11	8	9	9	8	7	7	8	8
S. America	10	10	7	7	8	6	5	6	6	6
Total	9	9	7	8	9	7	6	6	7	7

Source: DHS

IRCA Naturalization Rates

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 provided two groups of unauthorized immigrants in the country a path to LPR status and therefore eventual eligibility for citizenship: (1) immigrants who had continuously resided within the United States before January 1, 1982 (“pre-1982s”), and (2) special agricultural workers (SAW). Of the estimated three to five million unauthorized immigrants in the country in 1986, 2.7 million became LPRs under IRCA (1.6 million pre-1982s and 1.1 million SAWs). By the end of 2009, DHS estimates that 40 percent (1.1 million) of IRCA immigrants who received LPR status had naturalized. The naturalization rate was 53 percent for pre-1982s and 34 percent for SAWs.¹⁴

DHS compared IRCA naturalization rates with other groups of immigrants, finding that IRCA immigrants naturalized at a lower rate (53 percent for IRCA pre-1982s, compared with 59 percent for non-IRCA immigrants who obtained status in 1979–1981 and 58 percent for 1989–1991 immigrants). However, DHS explained that naturalization rates for IRCA immigrants were lower because IRCA immigrants were disproportionately born in Mexico, which has lower naturalization rates overall. When distinguishing between those born in Mexico and those born in other countries, DHS estimates that pre-1982 IRCA immigrants’ naturalization rate was actually higher: among Mexicans, 46 percent for IRCA pre-1982s versus 44% (1979–1981) and 37 percent (1989–1991) for non-IRCA, and among non-Mexicans, 68 percent versus 62 percent (1979–1981) and 61 percent (1989–1991). For SAWs, the rate for those born in other countries was the same (60 percent), but the rate for those born in Mexico was lower: 28 percent (SAWs) and 36 percent (1990–1992 immigrants).¹⁵

Characteristics of the Naturalized Population

Region and country of birth. Nearly eight in ten naturalized citizens were born in either Latin America or Asia (Table 4). The same is true for the non-citizen foreign-born

population (86 percent), which includes LPRs and temporary residents as well as unauthorized immigrants. The third-largest immigrant-sending region is Europe, making up about 17 percent of the naturalized population, but only 8 percent of the overall non-citizen population.

Table 4. Foreign-born population by citizenship and region of birth¹⁶

REGION	ALL FOREIGN-BORN		NATURALIZED		NON-CITIZENS	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Total	39,846,006	100%	17,621,312	100%	22,224,694	100%
Latin America	21,009,614	53%	6,880,226	39%	14,129,388	64%
Asia	11,369,159	29%	6,563,880	37%	4,805,279	22%
Europe	4,843,065	12%	3,000,809	17%	1,842,256	8%
Africa	1,586,733	4%	732,365	4%	854,368	4%
North America	812,069	2%	365,499	2%	446,570	2%
Oceania & Other	225,366	1%	78,533	0%	146,833	1%

Source: ACS

When narrowed by specific country, Mexico also tops every foreign-born population group (Table 5). Considering persons from Mexico make up between 52 and 60 percent of the unauthorized immigrant population and about a quarter of the LPR population, according to DHS and other estimates,¹⁷ its share of the non-citizen population is especially high at 40 percent. The Philippines and China trail Mexico in the naturalized citizen population with a 6.7 percent and 5.2 percent share, respectively.

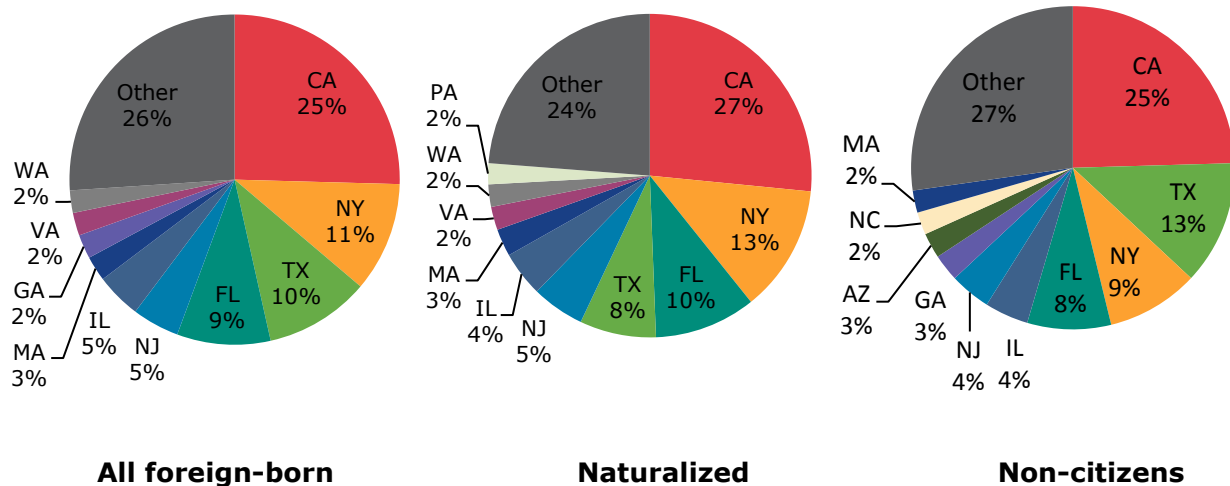
Table 5. Foreign-born population by citizenship and country of birth (top ten)¹⁸

ALL-FOREIGN (~40 MILLION PERSONS)		NATURALIZED (~18 MILLION PERSONS)		NON-CITIZENS (~22 MILLION)	
Country	Percent	Country	Percent	Country	Percent
1. Mexico	29.2%	1. Mexico	15.4%	1. Mexico	40.1%
2. India	4.6%	2. Philippines	6.7%	2. India	4.5%
3. Philippines	4.6%	3. China	5.2%	3. El Salvador	3.8%
4. China	4.0%	4. Vietnam	4.8%	4. China	3.4%
5. Vietnam	3.1%	5. India	4.7%	5. Philippines	2.8%
6. El Salvador	3.0%	6. Dominican Republic	3.3%	6. Guatemala	2.8%
7. Cuba	2.7%	7. Jamaica	3.1%	7. Korea	2.2%
8. Dominican Republic	2.6%	8. Cuba	2.5%	8. Cuba	2.1%
9. Canada	2.1%	9. Colombia	2.3%	9. Dominican Republic	2.0%
10. Guatemala	2.1%	10. Korea	2.3%	10. Canada	2.0%

Source: ACS

State of residence. In general, heavily populated states also have the largest immigrant populations. Just four states are home to nearly 55 percent (22 million) of the foreign-born persons in the United States (Figure 3). California, Florida, New York, and Texas are home to 58 percent (10.5 million) of naturalized citizens and 55 percent (2.1 million) of non-citizens. California leads every group with at least a quarter of the immigrant population.

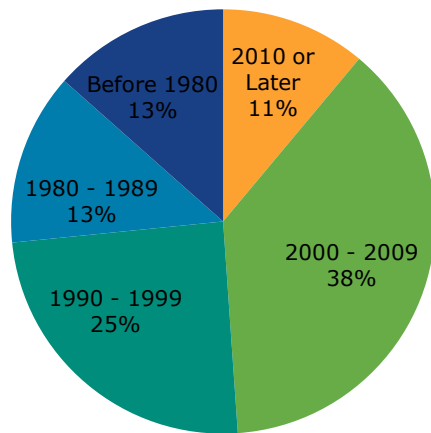
Figure 3. Foreign-born by state of residency¹⁹



Source: ACS

Period of naturalization. Nearly half (nine million) of the current population of naturalized citizens in the United States naturalized between 2000 and 2010. Thirteen percent (2.5 million) naturalized before 1980 and 13 percent between 1980 and 1989 (2.4 million); 25 percent (4.6 million) naturalized between 1990 and 1999 (Figure 4).

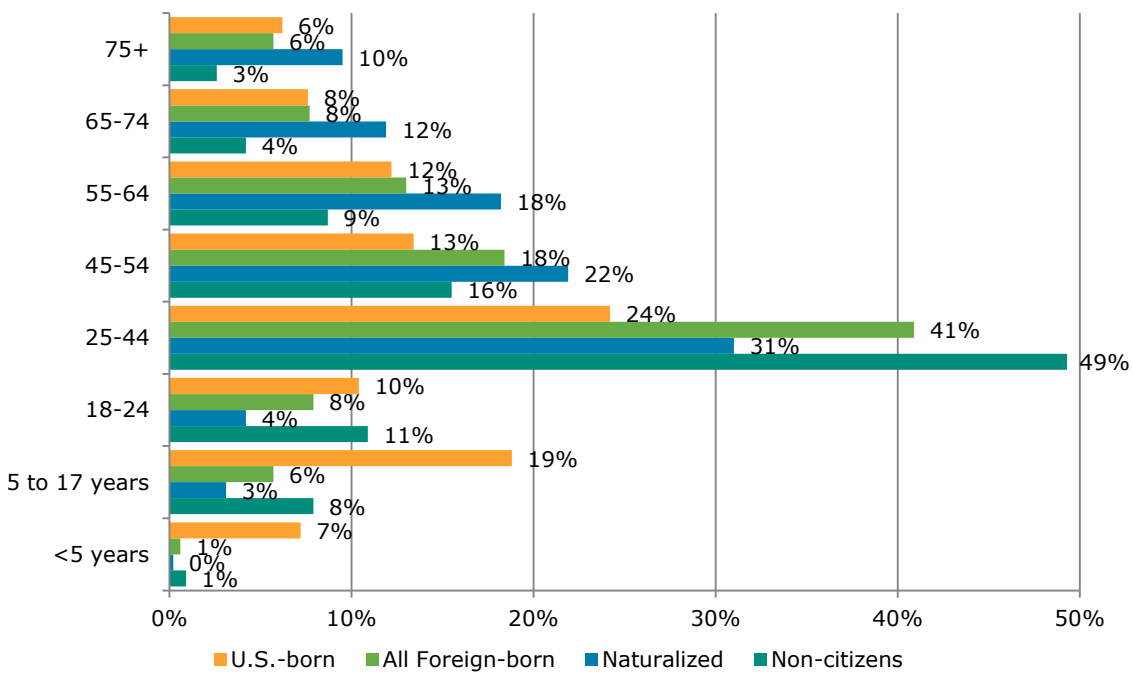
Figure 4. Period of naturalization for the total population of naturalized citizens²⁰



Source: ACS

Age, sex, and marital status. Three-quarters of the naturalized population in the country is between the ages of 18 and 64, compared with 85 percent of the non-citizen population, and 59 percent of U.S.-born population. The share of the naturalized population over 65 (22 percent) is slightly higher than that of the total foreign-born and U.S.-born populations (both 14 percent) (Figure 5). The female and male share of the naturalized citizen population (46 percent male; 54 percent female) was only slightly different than the comparison groups. Lastly, naturalized citizens are more likely to be married (63 percent) than both non-citizens (54 percent) and the U.S.-born population (46 percent) (Table 6).

Figure 5. Age by population type²¹



Source: ACS

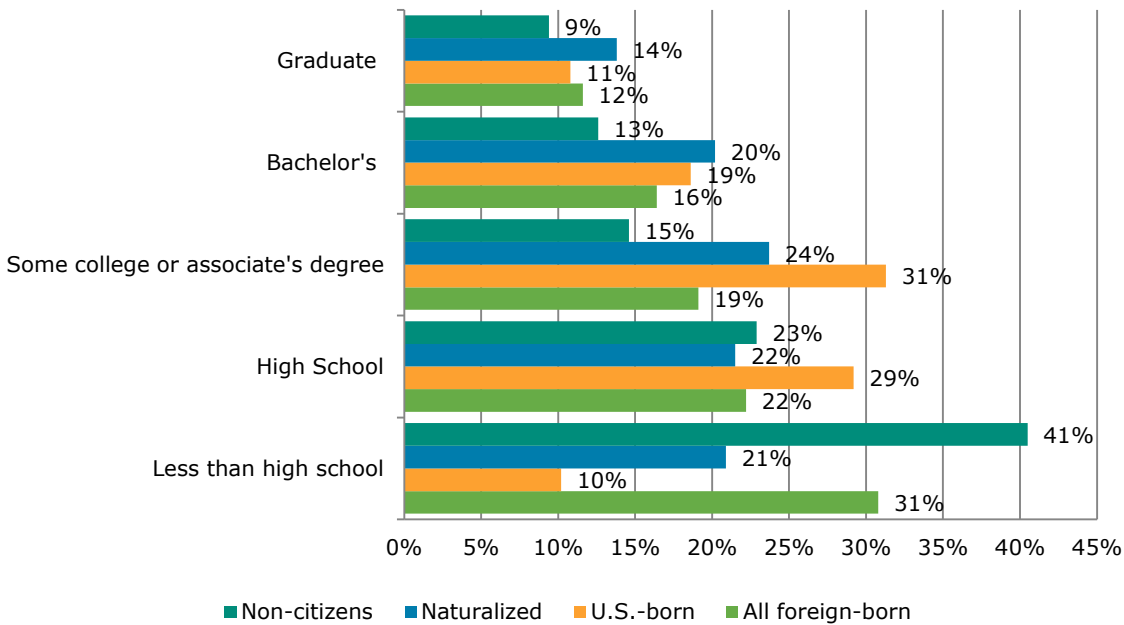
Table 6. Sex and marital status by population type²²

	U.S.-BORN	ALL FOREIGN-BORN	NATURALIZED	NON-CITIZEN
SEX				
Male	49%	49%	46%	51%
Female	51%	51%	54%	49%
MARITAL STATUS				
Single	34%	25%	17%	33%
Married	46%	59%	63%	54%
Divorced/separated	14%	11%	13%	10%
Widowed	6%	5%	7%	3%

Source: ACS

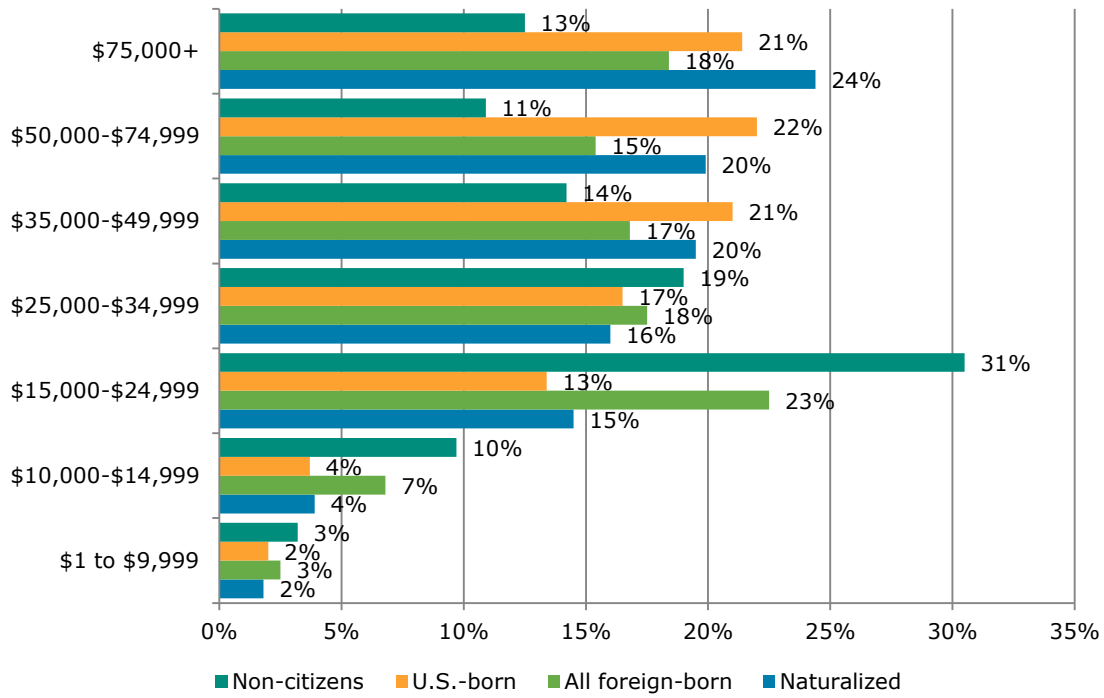
Education level and earnings. The naturalized population is slightly more educated than the non-citizen and U.S.-born populations, with 34 percent of naturalized having at least a bachelor’s degree, compared with 22 percent of non-citizens and 30 percent of the U.S.-born population (Figure 6). An estimated 22 percent of the naturalized population has no education beyond high school, which is about the same for the non-citizen population (23 percent) and slightly lower than the U.S.-born population (29 percent). The naturalized population also earned much more when compared with the non-citizen population in 2012, with 44 percent making at least \$50,000 in a year, compared with only 24 percent of the non-citizen population (Figure 7). Nearly a third of non-citizens only made between \$15,000 and \$25,000 per year.

Figure 6. Education level by population type²³



Source: ACS

Figure 7. Earnings by population type²⁴



Source: ACS

Note: Earnings for a 12-month period in 2012 dollars

Endnotes

¹ Ana Gonzalez-Barrera, Mark Hugo Lopez, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Paul Taylor (2013) "The Path Not Taken." Pew Research Center. Available at: http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2013/02/Naturalizations_Jan_2013_FINAL.pdf.

² Data compiled from U.S. Census Bureau and Current Population Survey for FY 1970–FY 2011. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/population/foreign/data/cps.html>.

The 2012 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S0501, generated using American FactFinder. Available at: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.

³ Department of Homeland Security (2012) *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2012*. "Naturalizations Table 20." Available at: <https://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2012-naturalizations>.

⁴ Emilio T. Gonzalez, director, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (2008) Testimony on Naturalization Delays: Causes, Consequences and Solutions. Copy available at: <http://www.aila.org/content/default.aspx?docid=24925>.

Released USCIS statement: <http://www.uscis.gov/archive/archive-news/statement-uscis-director-emilio-t-gonzalez-processing-naturalization-applications>.

Read more: Muzaffar Chishti and Claire Bergeron (2008) "USCIS: Backlog in Naturalization Applications Will Take Nearly Three Years to Clear." Available at: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/uscis-backlog-naturalization-applications-will-take-nearly-three-years-clear/>.

⁵ For the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), and the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), see: Gregory Auclair and Jeanne Batalova (2013) "Naturalization Trends in the United States." Available at: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/naturalization-trends-united-states>.

⁶ Gonzalez, et al. (2013).

⁷ Bryan C. Baker (2009) "Trends in Naturalization Rates: 2008 Update." Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics. Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ntz_rates508.pdf.

Jeffrey S. Passel (2007) "Growing Share of Immigrants Choosing Naturalization." Pew Hispanic Center. Available at: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/74.pdf>.

⁸ Passel (2007).

⁹ Passel (2007).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Bryan C. Baker (2007) "Trends in Naturalization Rates." Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics. Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ntz_rates508.pdf.

Passel (2007).

Michael Fix, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Kenneth Sucher (2003) "Trends in Naturalization." Urban Institute. Available at: http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/310847_trends_in_naturalization.pdf.

Leon F. Bouvier (1996) "Embracing America: A look at Which Immigrants Become Citizens." Center for Immigration Studies. Available at: <http://cis.org/ImmigrantsBecomingCitizens>.

¹³ James Lee (2013) "U.S. Naturalizations: 2012." Department of Homeland Security. Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_natz_fr_2012.pdf.

¹⁴ Nancy Rytina (2002) "IRCA Legalization Effects: Lawful Permanent Residence and Naturalization through 2001." Department of Homeland Security. Available at:

<http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/irca0114int.pdf>; Bryan C. Baker (2010) "Naturalization Rates among IRCA Immigrants: A 2009 Update." Department of Homeland Security. Available at: <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/irca-natz-fs-2009.pdf>.

¹⁵ Baker (2010).

¹⁶ Data compiled from 2010–2012 American Community Survey 3-Year Estimates Table B05007, generated using American FactFinder. Available at: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.

¹⁷ Department of Homeland Security (2011) "[Latest] estimate of the unauthorized immigrant population calculates that Mexican unauthorized immigrants account for 6.8 million of the 11.5 million total unauthorized resident population (or about 59 percent) DHS's latest (2012)." Available at: https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf.

Its latest (2012) estimate of the LPR population calculates that Mexican unauthorized immigrants account for 3.3 million of the 13.3 million LPRs in the United States (about 25 percent). Available at: http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_lpr_pe_2012.pdf.

In 2013, the Congressional Budget Office also estimated that Mexicans make up 59 percent of the total unauthorized population. Available at: http://www.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/attachments/44134_Description_of_Immigrant_Population.pdf.

Lastly, a more recent Pew Hispanic Center study (2012) estimates that Mexicans make up about 52 percent of the total unauthorized population (6.05 million out of 11.7 million). Available at: <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2013/09/Unauthorized-Sept-2013-FINAL.pdf>.

¹⁸ Retrieved and calculated from American Community Survey, 2008–2012 five-year averages.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ 2012 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table B05011, generated using American FactFinder. Available at: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.

²¹ 2012 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S0501, generated using American FactFinder. Available at: <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.