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Central American Immigrants in the United States

MAY 10, 2023 SPOTLIGHT | By Nicole Ward and Jeanne Batalova



People hold flags of Central American nations at a march in San Diego. (Photo: iStock.com/shakzu)

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Given the close cultural, geographic, and trade ties between the United States and countries in Central America, migration to the United States and within the region has been a longstanding phenomenon. Persistent economic and political challenges in Central America have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic and political upheaval, and increasingly extreme weather, causing more Central Americans to migrate to the United States.

Much of the recent migration has been irregular. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) encountered nationals of the four

largest Central American sending countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) at the U.S.-Mexico border 109,100 times in fiscal year (FY) 2020, a number that increased to about 705,500 in FY 2022. In the first six months of FY 2023, there were about 287,300 border encounters of these nationals. Between October 2019 and March 2023, nationals of these four countries accounted for nearly one-third of all 5.8 million migrant encounters at the southern border.

The Biden administration has responded to this migration with a mix of stringent and humanitarian approaches. On the one hand, a new rule prohibits many irregularly arriving non-Mexican migrants from seeking asylum at the southern U.S. border unless they had first applied for and been denied asylum in at least one other country along their route. On the other, the administration has also steered billions of dollars in private investments as well as government aid and assistance to Central American countries; extended the Central American Minors (CAM) Program to offer refugee status and parole to some Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans under age 21 with parents in the United States; expanded refugee resettlement; and created new family reunification parole processes for individuals from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as Colombia. And the government will open Regional Processing Centers, initially in Guatemala and Colombia, to screen individuals in the region for possible eligibility for humanitarian protection or other legal pathways, in a bid to forestall chaotic border arrivals and reduce the turn to smuggling operations.

New arrivals join the approximately 3.8 million Central American immigrants already resident in the United

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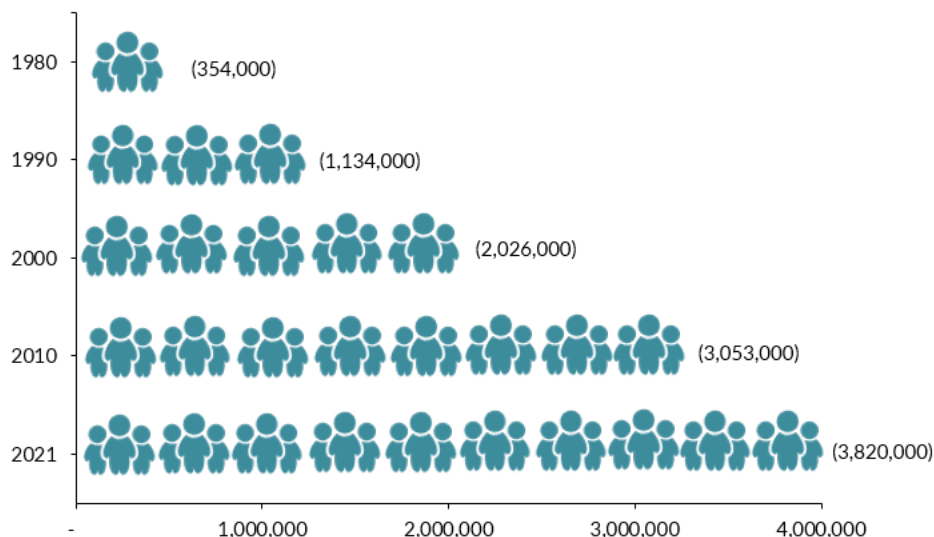
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States as of 2021, who accounted for 8 percent of all 45.3 million immigrants (see Figure 1). The Central American-born population in the United States has grown more than tenfold since 1980 and by 25 percent since 2010.

Figure 1. Central American Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980-2021



Sources: Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2010 and 2021 American Community Surveys (ACS), and Campbell J. Gibson and Kay Jung, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000" (Working Paper no. 81, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, February 2006), available online.

Immigration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has been the largest contributor to the growth of the Central American-born population since 1980. Roughly 86 percent of Central Americans in the United States in 2021 were born one of in these three countries (see Table 1). The fastest-growing groups since 2010 are Hondurans (whose numbers grew by 47 percent between 2010 and 2021), Guatemalans (33 percent), and Salvadorans (17 percent).

Table 1. Central American Immigrants in the United States, by Country of Origin, 2021

Country	Number of Immigrants	Share (%)
TOTAL	3,820,000	100.0%
El Salvador	1,418,000	37.1%
Guatemala	1,107,000	29.0%
Honduras	768,000	20.1%
Nicaragua	257,000	6.7%
Panama	113,000	3.0%
Costa Rica	95,000	2.5%
Belize	52,000	1.4%
Other Central America	11,000	0.3%

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS.

About one-third of Central American immigrants are naturalized U.S. citizens, and more than two-thirds of those who received lawful permanent resident (LPR) status (also known as getting a green card) in 2021 did so through family reunification channels. Central American immigrants generally have lower educational outcomes than the overall immigrant population or the U.S. born, and two-thirds report having limited English proficiency. However, they have higher rates of labor force participation than either the overall foreign- or U.S.-born populations.

Worldwide, the United States is the leading destination for Central American migrants overall, according to 2020 estimates from the United Nations Population Division, and the top destination for migrants from all Central American countries except Nicaraguans, whose top destination was Costa Rica. Approximately 15 percent (741,000) of all Central American migrants settled in other Latin American countries, with Mexico being a

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Building a Regional Migration System



Migration profoundly shapes and defines the U.S. relationship with Mexico and increasingly, much of Central America. MPI's Building a Regional Migration System project is examining the changing landscape of migration trends and policies in the region from Canada to Panama. Its work aims to develop actionable ideas, suggest implementation strategies, inform stakeholders inside and outside of government, and foster dialogue across issues, sectors, and countries on shared regional priorities.

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common destination. Outside Latin America, Spain and Canada have notable presences of migrants from Central America (3 percent and 2 percent, respectively).

[Click here](#) to view an interactive map showing where migrants from Central America and elsewhere have settled worldwide.

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 Central American immigrant population in the United States, focusing on its size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics.

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](#)
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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 people residing in the country without authorization.

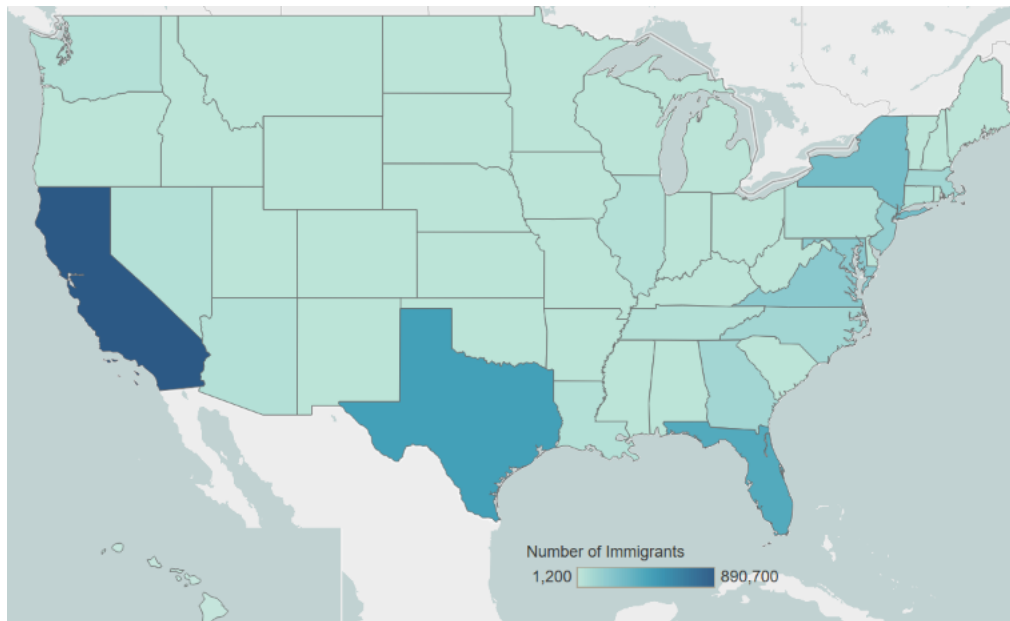
The terms “foreign born” and “immigrant” are used interchangeably and refer to those who were born in another country and later emigrated to the United States.

In this Spotlight, **Central America** includes the following countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama. Some data in this analysis also include persons for whom the Census Bureau designation “Other Central America, ns/nec” (not specified or not elsewhere classified) was listed as place of birth. Because immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras account for most immigration from Central America, the characteristics of all immigrants from the region are influenced by the profile of migrants from these three countries.

Distribution by State and Key Cities

Most Central American immigrants live in states along the coasts or the southern border, with more than half of the population in California (25 percent), Texas (13 percent), Florida (11 percent), and New York (7 percent) as of the 2017-21 period. The top five counties for Central Americans were Los Angeles County, California; Harris County, Texas; Miami-Dade County, Florida; Dallas County, Texas; and Prince George’s County, Maryland. Together, these five counties were home to just over one-quarter of all Central American immigrants in the United States.

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



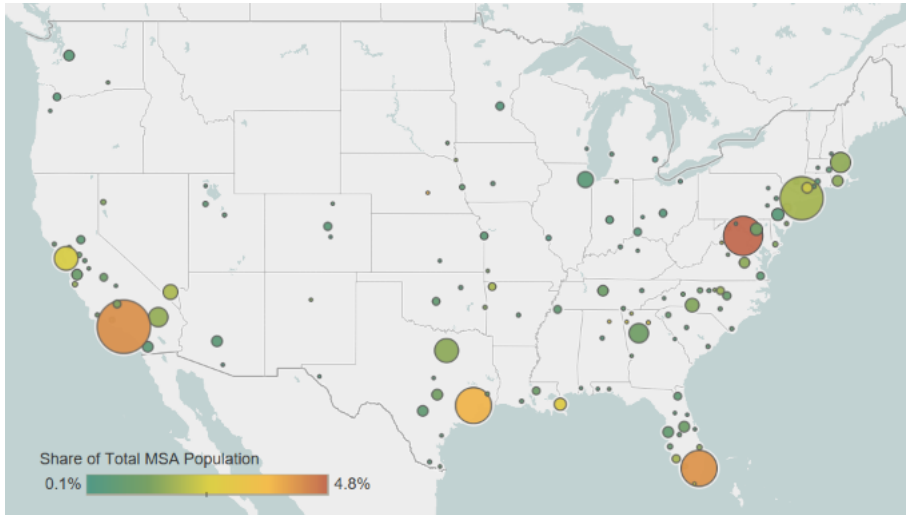
Note: Pooled 2017-21 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state level for smaller-population geographies. Not shown is the Central American immigrant population in Alaska, which is small in size; for details, visit the MPI Data Hub for an interactive map showing geographic distribution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

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

[Click here](#) for an interactive map that highlights the states and counties with the highest concentrations of immigrants from Central America and elsewhere.

The Central American immigrant population has spread widely across the United States, but the highest metro concentrations are in the greater Los Angeles, New York, Washington, DC, Houston, and Miami areas. As of the 2017-21 period, almost half of all Central Americans resided in one of these five metro areas.

Figure 3. Top Metropolitan Destinations for Central American 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 metro areas with the highest concentrations of immigrants from Central American and other countries.

Table 2. Top Concentrations of Central American Immigrants by U.S. Metropolitan Area, 2017-21

Metropolitan Area	Immigrant Population from Central America	% of Metro Area Population
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA Metro Area	564,000	4.3%
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA Metro Area	376,000	1.9%
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV Metro Area	305,000	4.8%
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX Metro Area	265,000	3.8%
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL Metro Area	257,000	4.2%
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX Metro Area	119,000	1.6%
San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley, CA Metro Area	116,000	2.5%
Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metro Area	80,000	1.6%
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA Metro Area	77,000	1.7%
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Alpharetta, GA Metro Area	69,000	1.2%

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

English Proficiency

Nearly all Central American immigrants speak a language other than English as their primary language. A greater share of the population had limited English proficiency (66 percent) than all foreign born (46 percent) as of 2021. Guatemalans (71 percent), Hondurans (71 percent), and Salvadorans (68 percent) were more likely to be Limited English Proficient (LEP) than other Central Americans.

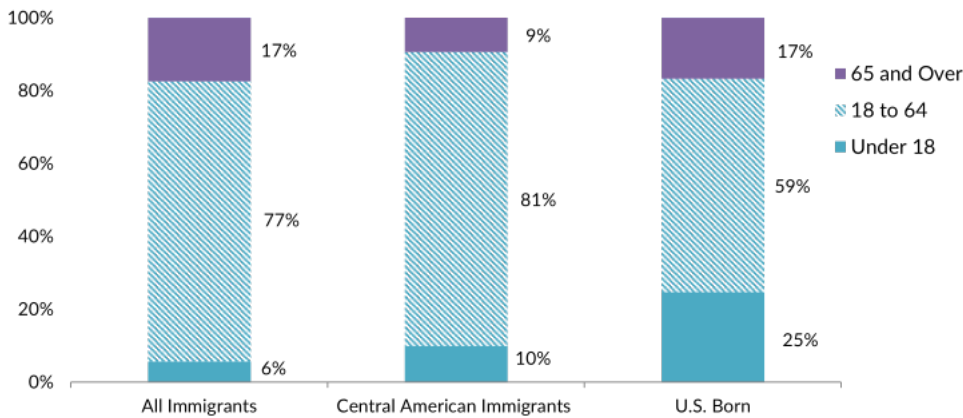
Eight percent of Central American immigrants reported speaking only English at home compared to 17 percent of the total foreign-born population. Panamanians stood out: 20 percent reported speaking only English at home.

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

Age, Education, and Employment

In 2021, 81 percent of Central American immigrants were of working age (18 to 64), higher than the share of all immigrants (77 percent) or U.S. natives (59 percent). Fewer Central American immigrants were minors (10 percent) or aged 65 and older (9 percent) than the U.S. born (25 percent and 17 percent, respectively). The median age for Central Americans was 41 years old, between that of all immigrants (47 years) and natives (37 years). The median ages for immigrants from Honduras and Guatemala were 36 and 37, respectively—the lowest for the region—while the region’s highest was among immigrants from Panama, at 56.

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



Note: Percentages 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.

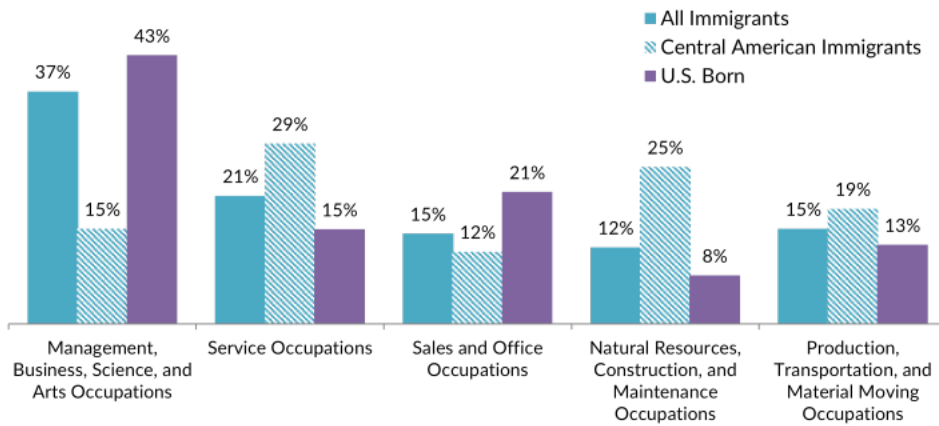
About 46 percent of Central Americans ages 25 and older had less than a high school diploma, versus 26 percent of all foreign-born adults and 7 percent of U.S.-born adults as of 2021. More than half of Guatemalan immigrant adults (56 percent) lacked a high school education, the lowest educational attainment rate for Central American immigrants, followed by 49 percent of Salvadoran adults. Moreover, 12 percent of immigrants from Central America had a bachelor’s degree or higher, below the rates of the total immigrant (34 percent) and total U.S.-born (35 percent) adult populations. Costa Ricans tended to be the most educated among immigrants from the region, with 33 percent being college graduates, followed by Panamanians (30 percent).

According to the Institute of International Education, about 9,000 international students from Central America were enrolled in U.S. higher education institutions in the 2021-22 school year, comprising a relatively small share of the total 949,000 international students in the United States. They represented 12 percent of the 78,000 students from Latin America in the United States.

At 71 percent, Central American immigrants had a higher rate of labor force participation than both the total foreign-born (66 percent) and U.S.-born (62 percent) populations. Among immigrants from the region, Guatemalans (73 percent), Salvadorans (72 percent), and Hondurans (71 percent) had the highest labor force participation rates.

Most Central American immigrants were in service (29 percent); natural resources, construction, and maintenance (25 percent); or production, transportation, and material moving (19 percent) occupations. In contrast, the top occupational group for all immigrant workers was management, business, science, and arts (37 percent), followed by service occupations (21 percent).

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



Note: Percentages 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.

About one-third of Salvadoran and Guatemalan workers worked in service occupations. Panamanian and Costa Rican immigrants more closely resembled all immigrant workers, with 38 percent and 36 percent, respectively, employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations.

Income and Poverty

The median household income for Central Americans in 2021 was \$55,000, lower than that of all immigrants and the U.S. born (\$70,000 for each). Households headed by an immigrant from Nicaragua (\$66,000) and Costa Rica (\$65,000) had the highest median incomes of all Central American immigrants, followed by those headed by Panamanians (\$61,000), Salvadorans (\$60,000), Guatemalans (\$52,000), and Hondurans (\$49,000).

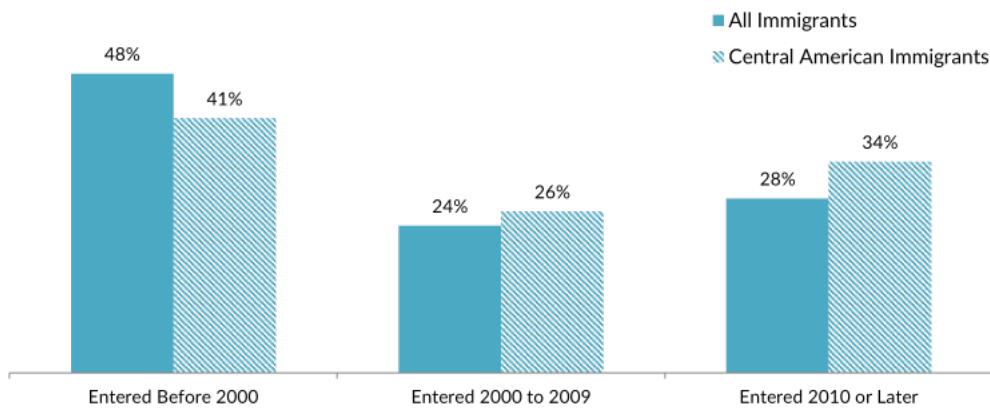
In 2021, 20 percent of Central American individuals lived in poverty, versus 14 percent of all immigrants and 13 percent of natives. Poverty rates were the highest among Hondurans (27 percent) and Guatemalans (22 percent).

Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

About 34 percent of Central Americans were naturalized U.S. citizens as of 2021, compared to 53 percent of all immigrants. Panamanians (74 percent), Nicaraguans (58 percent), and Costa Ricans (51 percent) were more likely to be naturalized citizens, while Hondurans (23 percent), Guatemalans (28 percent), and Salvadorans (36 percent) were less likely.

One potential reason for the relatively low rates of naturalization is that Central American immigrants tend to have slightly fewer years of residence in the United States than the overall immigrant population. Forty-one percent of Central Americans entered the United States before 2000, compared to 48 percent of all immigrants. Twenty-six percent of Central Americans entered between 2000 and 2009, and 34 percent entered the United States in 2010 or later (see Figure 6). Most Hondurans (74 percent) and Guatemalans (67 percent) entered in 2000 or later, whereas roughly half of Costa Ricans (53 percent) and Salvadorans (52 percent) arrived during that time. In contrast, 68 percent of Panamanians and 59 percent of Nicaraguans entered before 2000.

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

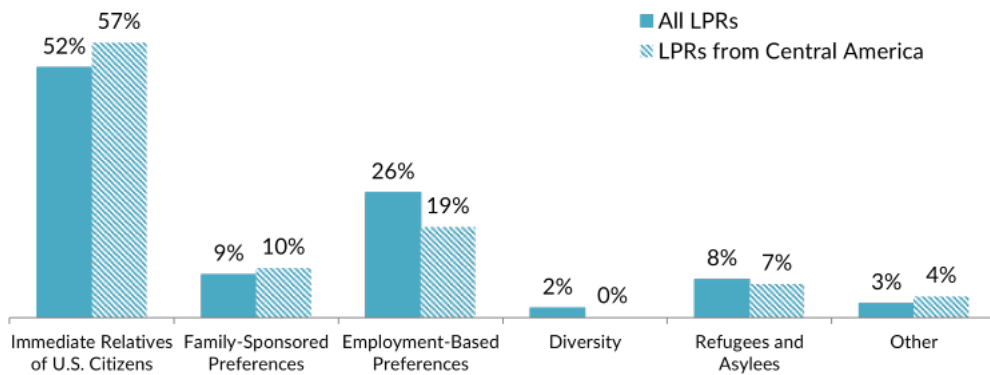


Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.
 Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2021 ACS.

Most of the 45,400 immigrants from Central America who became LPRs in FY 2021 did so through family reunification channels (68 percent). About 19 percent obtained a green card through employment sponsorship and 7 percent did so after being resettled as a refugee or having received asylum.

Guatemalans (29 percent) and Hondurans (20 percent) were more likely than other Central Americans to become LPRs through employment sponsorship. Guatemalans were also most likely to obtain green cards through humanitarian protection pathways (13 percent).

Figure 7. Immigration Pathways of Central Americans and All Lawful Permanent Residents in the United States, FY 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 El Salvador and Honduras were not eligible for the 2024 lottery. 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

MPI estimates that approximately 2.1 million unauthorized immigrants from Central America resided in the United States as of 2019, accounting for approximately 19 percent of the total 11 million unauthorized immigrant population. The top origin countries for unauthorized immigrants from Central America were El Salvador (741,000), Guatemala (724,000), and Honduras (490,000).

[Click here](#) for an interactive map of the 2019 unauthorized immigrant population in the United States.

Many migrants from these countries have remained in the United States with Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which grants work authorization and relief from deportation. El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua are among the 16 countries under TPS designations. As of November 2022, TPS protections covered approximately 190,900

Salvadorans, 57,600 Hondurans, and 3,100 Nicaraguans. Nationals of these three countries made up 47 percent of the 537,100 individuals with an approved TPS application.

In addition to comprising the largest share of TPS recipients, Central Americans account for one of the largest shares of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, after Mexicans. 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. As of December 2022, an estimated 55,300 Central American youths and young adults had DACA status, representing 10 percent of the 580,300 active DACA recipients. Among these were 22,600 Salvadorans, 15,400 Guatemalans, and 14,100 Hondurans.

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

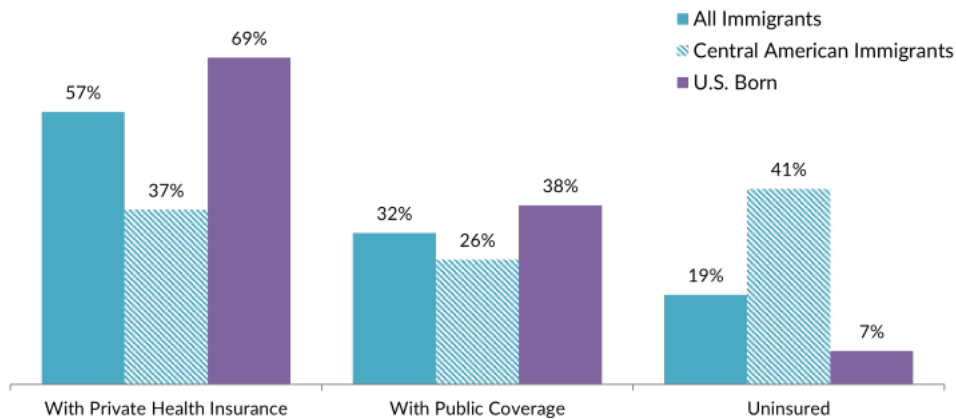
In recent years, significant numbers of unaccompanied children from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua have arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border without authorization. These minors accounted for 75 percent of the total 222,000 CBP encounters of unaccompanied youth between October 2021 and March 2023. Overall, citizens of these four countries accounted for 28 percent of the more than 3.6 million encounters of irregularly arriving migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border in this period.

Health Coverage

Central American immigrants are less likely than other groups to have health insurance, with 41 percent lacking coverage compared to 19 percent of all immigrants and 7 percent of natives (see Figure 8). The least insured populations were Hondurans (55 percent) and Guatemalans (49 percent).

Approximately 37 percent of Central Americans had private health insurance coverage and 26 percent had public coverage.

Figure 8. Health Coverage for Central American 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 Central American diaspora is comprised of close to 7.2 million U.S. residents who were either born in Central America or reported Central American ancestry, according to MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2021 ACS. The Salvadoran diaspora is the largest from the region, with nearly 2.9 million U.S. members, followed by more than 2 million with links to Guatemala, and 1.3 million people with Honduran ancestry or origin.

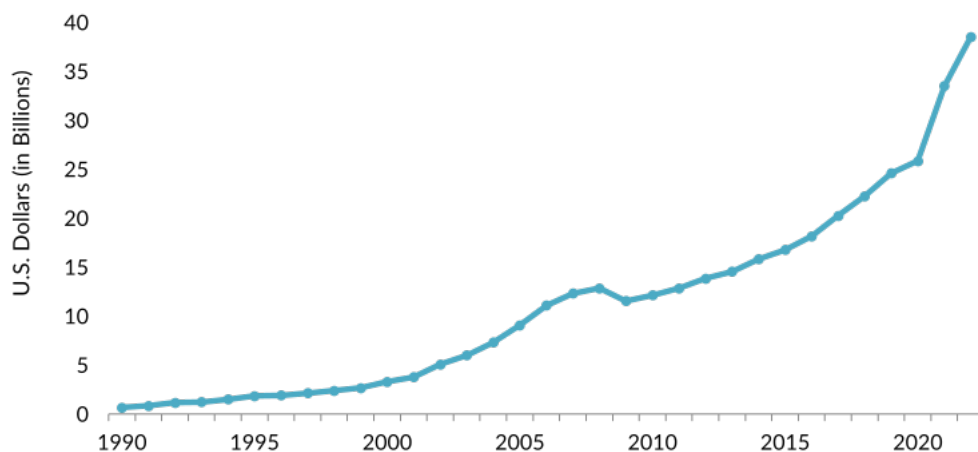
[Click here](#) to see estimates of the top 35 diasporas groups in the United States in 2021.

Remittances

Global remittances sent to Central America via formal channels have grown almost 12-fold since 2000, reaching

more than an estimated \$38.5 billion as of late 2022, according to the World Bank. Remittances represented a different share of each individual country's gross domestic product (GDP), ranging from under 1 percent for Costa Rica and Panama to 24 percent for El Salvador and 27 percent for Honduras.

Figure 9. Annual Remittance Flows to Central America, 1990–2022*



*2022 data are a World Bank estimate.

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

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

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