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Chinese Immigrants in the United States

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The United States is home to about 1.6 million Chinese immigrants (including those born in Hong Kong), making them the fourth-largest immigrant group in the United States after **Mexican**, **Filipino**, and Indian immigrants.

Although Chinese immigration to the United States dates back to the 19th century, the Chinese immigrant population grew rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s. Today there are almost as many native-born US citizens who claim Chinese ancestry as there are Chinese immigrants.

Chinese immigrants are heavily concentrated in California and New York (for more information on immigrants by state, please see the ACS/Census Data tool on the **MPI Data Hub**). Compared to other immigrant groups, the Chinese foreign born are better educated and less likely to live in poverty than the immigrant population overall, but Chinese immigrant men are less likely to participate in the labor force than other immigrant men.

This spotlight focuses on Chinese immigrants residing in the United States, examining the population's size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics using data from the US Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2000 Decennial Census, and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) for 2008 and 2009.

ACS data includes immigrants born in mainland China and Hong Kong but not Taiwan. Data from OIS includes only immigrants born in mainland China. However, immigrants from mainland China account for 86.6 percent of all immigrants from China and Hong Kong so the difference is small.

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

Size and Distribution

- There were about 1.6 million foreign born from China (including Hong Kong) residing in the United States in 2008.
- Over half of the Chinese born resided in California and New York.
- The Chinese born accounted for a large share of all immigrants in New York, Hawaii, and Massachusetts.
- Between 2000 and 2008, two states saw the size of their Chinese immigrant population grow by 75,000 people or more.
- Nearly half of Chinese immigrants resided in three metropolitan areas.
- The Chinese foreign born made up at least 10 percent of the immigrant population in five metropolitan areas.
- There were 3.2 million members of the Chinese diaspora residing in the United States in 2008, including 1.2 million native-born US citizens of Chinese ancestry.

Definitions

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

The terms foreign born and immigrant are used interchangeably.

Demographic and Socioeconomic Overview

- Over one-third of all Chinese foreign born in the United States arrived in 2000 or later.
- Almost two-thirds of Chinese immigrants in 2008 were adults of working age.
- Chinese immigrant women outnumbered men in 2008.
- Chinese immigrants were much more likely than the foreign born overall to be naturalized US citizens.
- Three of every five Chinese immigrants in 2008 were limited English proficient.
- Most limited English proficient Chinese immigrants spoke Chinese, Cantonese, or Mandarin.
- Nearly half of Chinese foreign-born adults had a bachelor's degree or higher.
- Chinese immigrant men were less likely to participate in the civilian labor force than foreign-born men overall.
- Over half of employed Chinese-born men worked in services; management, business, and finance; other sciences and engineering; and information technology.
- One-third of employed Chinese-born women worked in services and in management, business, and finance.
- Chinese immigrants were about as likely to live in poverty as natives.
- Chinese immigrants were more likely than other immigrants to own their own home.
- About one in six Chinese immigrants did not have health insurance in 2008.
- Over one-third of native-born US citizens of Chinese ancestry spoke Chinese at home.
- About 420,000 children under age 18 resided in a household with a Chinese immigrant parent.

Legal and Unauthorized Chinese Immigrant Population

- There were about half a million Chinese-born lawful permanent residents in 2008.
- More than 630,000 Chinese gained lawful permanent residence in the United States in the decade between 2000 and 2009.
- More than half of all Chinese immigrants receiving lawful permanent residence in 2009 were admitted as family-based immigrants.
- The Chinese foreign born accounted for over one-quarter of all those granted asylum in the United States in 2009.
- As of 2008, 200,000 Chinese-born lawful permanent residents were eligible to naturalize.
- In 2009, roughly 1 percent of all unauthorized immigrants in the United States were from China.
- The number of unauthorized immigrants from China decreased 37 percent between 2000 and 2009.

Size and Distribution

There were about 1.6 million foreign born from China (including Hong Kong) residing in the United States in 2008.

There were 1,570,999 foreign born from China (including Hong Kong) residing in the United States in 2008, accounting for 4.1 percent of the country's 38.0 million immigrants. Of these, 86.6 percent were from mainland China and 13.4 percent were from Hong Kong.

Relative to other groups, the Chinese and Hong Kong-born population in the United States grew rapidly during the 1990s and 2000s, rising from the seventh largest group in 1990 to the third largest group in 2000.

The Chinese foreign-born population has since fallen in rank to the fourth largest group in 2008, surpassed by the Indian-born population for the first time since at least 1960. But in absolute terms, the number of Chinese immigrants continued to grow by nearly 400,000 during the first decade of the 21st century (see Table 1; see also the pie charts showing the top 10 countries of birth of immigrants residing in the United States over time [here](#)).

Table 1. Total and Chinese Foreign-Born Populations, 1960 to 2008
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Year	Foreign born	Chinese born		
		Number	Share of all foreign born	Rank ^(a)
1960	9,738,091	314,226	3.2%	9
1970	9,619,302	299,202	3.1%	9
1980	14,079,906	363,277	2.6%	10
1990	19,797,316	583,513	2.9%	7
2000	31,107,889	1,192,437	3.8%	3
2008	37,960,773	1,570,999	4.1%	4

Notes: ^a Rank refers to the position of the Chinese and Hong Kong born relative to other immigrant groups in terms of size of the population residing in the United States in a given census year.
Source: Data for 2000 from the 2000 census; data for 2008 from the American Community Survey 2008. Data for earlier decades from Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, US Census Bureau, Working Paper No. 29, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990" (US Government Printing Office: Washington, DC, 1999). [Available online.](#)

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Over half of the Chinese born resided in California and New York.

California had the largest number of Chinese immigrants (498,815 or 31.8 percent of the Chinese-born population) in 2008, followed by New York (349,133, or 22.2 percent), Texas (69,402, or 4.4 percent), Massachusetts (68,626, or 4.4 percent), New Jersey (60,431, or 3.8 percent), and Illinois (53,502, or 3.4 percent).

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The Chinese born accounted for a large share of all immigrants in New York, Hawaii, and Massachusetts.

The Chinese born made up 8.2 percent of all immigrants in New York and 7.9 percent of all immigrants in Hawaii. Chinese immigrants also accounted for an above-average share of the immigrant population in Massachusetts (7.3 percent) and Pennsylvania and Vermont (6.4 percent each).

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Between 2000 and 2008, two states saw the size of their Chinese immigrant population grow by 75,000 people or more.

The Chinese immigrant population grew by more than 75,000 people between 2000 and 2008 in California (+80,000, from 419,000 to 499,000) and New York (+78,000 from 271,000 to 349,000).

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Nearly half of Chinese immigrants resided in three metropolitan areas.

New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA, was the metropolitan area with the largest number of Chinese born (378,714, or 24.1 percent) in 2008, followed by San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA (202,248, or 12.9 percent), and Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA (165,649, or 10.5 percent). These three metropolitan areas accounted for 47.5 percent of the 1.6 million Chinese immigrants in the United States.

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The Chinese foreign born made up at least 10 percent of the immigrant population in five metropolitan areas.

The Chinese born accounted for 16.1 percent of all immigrants in the San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA, metropolitan area in 2008. They accounted for 15.6 percent of all immigrants in Ann Arbor, MI; 12.1 percent in Albany-Schenectady-Troy, NY; 10.3 percent in Madison, WI; and 10.2 percent in Honolulu, HI.

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There were 3.2 million members of the Chinese diaspora residing in the United States in 2008, including 1.2 million native-born US citizens of Chinese ancestry.

Of the 3.2 million members of the Chinese diaspora residing in the United States in 2008, 44.7 percent were born in China and Hong Kong and just over one-third (38.3 percent) were born in the United States or in US territories. The remaining 17.0 percent were born elsewhere, mainly in East and Southeast Asian countries such as Taiwan, Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Cambodia.

(Note: There is no universally recognized definition of the term diaspora. Most often, the term includes individuals who self-identify as having ancestral ties to a specific country of origin. To calculate the size of the Chinese diaspora in the United States, we included all individuals who selected "Chinese" or "Cantonese" (either alone or in combination with another option) in response to the two ACS questions on ancestry.)

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Demographic and Socioeconomic Overview

Over one-third of all Chinese foreign born in the United States arrived in 2000 or later.

As of 2008, 32.8 percent of the 1.6 million Chinese foreign born entered the country in 2000 or later, with 30.0 percent entering between 1990 and 1999, 20.1 percent between 1980 and 1989, 9.3 percent between 1970 and 1979, and the remaining 7.9 percent prior to 1970.

By contrast, 29.5 percent of the 38.0 million total foreign born entered the country in 2000 or later with 28.7 percent entering between 1990 and 1999, 20.0 percent entering between 1980 and 1989, 11.4 percent between 1970 and 1979, and the remaining 10.4 percent prior to 1970.

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Almost two-thirds of Chinese immigrants in 2008 were adults of working age.

On average, Chinese immigrants were older than other immigrant groups in the United States. Of the Chinese immigrants residing in the United States in 2008, 7.7 percent were minors (under age 18), 62.5 percent were adults of working age (between 18 and 54), and 29.8 percent were seniors (age 55 and older).

Of the total foreign-born population in the United States in 2008, 7.4 percent were minors, 69.0 percent were of working age, and 23.6 percent were seniors.

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Chinese immigrant women outnumbered men in 2008.

Over half of Chinese immigrants residing in the United States in 2008 were women (54.0 percent) and 46.0 percent were men. Among all immigrants, 49.8 percent were women and 50.2 percent were men.

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Chinese immigrants were much more likely than the foreign born overall to be naturalized US citizens.

Among the Chinese foreign born, 56.8 percent were naturalized US citizens, compared to 43.0 percent among the overall foreign-born population.

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Three of every five Chinese immigrants in 2008 were limited English proficient.

About 8.3 percent of Chinese immigrants age 5 and older reported speaking "English only" while 29.9 percent reported speaking English "very well."

A relatively large share, 61.8 percent, reported speaking English less than "very well" (making them limited English proficient) – significantly above the 52.1 percent reported among all foreign born age 5 and older.

(Note: The term limited English proficient refers to any person age 5 and older who reported speaking English "not at all," "not well," or "well" on their survey questionnaire. Individuals who reported speaking only English or speaking English "very well" are considered proficient in English).

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Most limited English proficient Chinese immigrants spoke Chinese, Cantonese, or Mandarin.

Among the 940,000 limited English proficient Chinese immigrants age 5 and older, 63.7 percent indicated that they spoke Chinese, 21.2 percent Cantonese, and 11.9 percent Mandarin.

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Nearly half of Chinese foreign-born adults had a bachelor's degree or higher.

In terms of academic achievement, Chinese immigrants were better educated than other immigrants and the native born. In 2008, 45.7 percent of Chinese-born adults age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 27.1 percent among all 31.9 million foreign-born adults and 27.8 percent of all 168.1 million native-born adults. An additional 12.6 percent had some college education or an associate's degree compared to 16.4 percent among all immigrant adults and 30.8 percent of all native-born adults.

On the other end of the education continuum, 25.5 percent of Chinese-born adults had no high school diploma or the equivalent general education diploma (GED), lower than the 32.5 percent among all foreign-born adults but higher than among native-born adults (11.7 percent). About 16.2 percent of Chinese immigrant adults had a high school diploma or GED compared to 21.9 percent among all foreign-born adults and 29.8 percent among native-born adults.

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Chinese immigrant men were less likely to participate in the civilian labor force than foreign-born men overall.

In 2008, Chinese-born men age 16 and older were less likely to participate in the civilian labor force (71.3 percent) than all foreign-born men (80.5 percent). Chinese-born women (57.5 percent) were about as likely to participate in the labor force as other immigrant women (57.1 percent).

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Over half of employed Chinese-born men worked in services; management, business, and finance; other sciences and engineering; and information technology.

Among the 482,000 Chinese immigrant male workers age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force in 2008, 19.2 percent reported working in services; 14.8 percent in management, business, and finance; 14.8 percent in other sciences and engineering; and 10.2 percent in information technology (see Table 2).

A smaller share of the 13.6 million adult foreign-born men worked in services (17.4 percent), with 10.7 percent in management, business, and finance; 4.1 percent in other sciences and engineering; and 4.0 percent in information technology.

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One-third of employed Chinese-born women worked in services and in management, business, and finance.

Among the 433,000 Chinese-born female workers age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force in 2008, 18.3 percent reported working in services and 16.5 percent in management, business, and finance (see Table 2). By contrast, among the 9.5 million foreign-born female workers age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force in 2008, 25.7 percent reported working in services and 10.4 percent in management, business, and finance.

Chinese-born women were also concentrated in sales (10.4 percent) and administrative support (13.1 percent).

Table 2. Occupations of Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force Age 16 and Older by Gender and Origin, 2008

	Chinese foreign born		All foreign born	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Persons age 16 and older employed in the civilian labor force	482,498	433,065	13,630,931	9,505,339
Total percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Management, business, finance	14.8	16.5	10.7	10.4
Information technology	10.2	6.6	4.0	1.9
Other sciences and engineering	14.8	8.7	4.1	2.2
Social services and legal	1.1	1.2	1.1	2.0
Education/training and media/entertainment	8.1	8.8	3.4	7.1
Physicians	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.0
Registered nurses	0.4	2.0	0.4	3.4
Other health-care practitioners	1.2	2.0	1.0	2.9
Health-care support	0.5	2.5	0.6	5.4
Services	19.2	18.3	17.4	25.7
Sales	6.7	10.4	7.5	10.5
Administrative support	5.7	13.1	5.3	14.7
Farming, fishing, and forestry	0.1	0.0	2.6	0.9
Construction, extraction, and transportation	9.1	1.4	25.9	3.3
Manufacturing, installation, and repair	6.5	7.3	14.6	8.5

Source: 2008 American Community Survey.

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Chinese immigrants were about as likely to live in poverty as natives.

About 29.4 percent of Chinese immigrants lived in poverty in 2008 compared to 37.9 percent of all immigrants and 28.7 percent of the native born.

(Note: Poverty is defined as individuals residing in families with total annual income of less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line. Whether an individual falls below the official "poverty line" depends not only on total family income, but also on the size of the family, the number of children, and the age of the householder. ACS reports total income over the 12 months preceding the interview date.)

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Chinese immigrants were more likely than other immigrants to own their own home.

In 2008, nearly two-thirds (62.2 percent) of Chinese immigrants age 18 and older owned the home they resided in compared to just over half (56.5 percent) of all immigrants age 18 and older. The homeownership rate among Chinese immigrants was still below the homeownership rate among native-born US citizens (72.6 percent).

Chinese immigrants age 18 and older were as likely as other immigrants, and less likely than natives, to reside in a household with a mortgage or home loan. About 43.6 percent of Chinese immigrants age 18 and older resided in households with a mortgage or home loan compared to 44.3 percent of all immigrants and 50.8 percent of natives.

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About one in six Chinese immigrants did not have health insurance.

About one in six Chinese immigrants (16.0 percent) did not have health insurance in 2008 — much lower than the one in three uninsured rate (32.9 percent) among all immigrants but higher than among the native born (12.9 percent).

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Over one-third of native-born US citizens of Chinese ancestry spoke Chinese at home.

Of the 1.0 million native-born US citizens age 5 and older with Chinese ancestry, 39.4 percent reported speaking Chinese at home (including Cantonese, Mandarin, Miao, Hmong, Miao-Yao, or Mien — all languages spoken in China). By contrast, 83.6 percent of immigrants with Chinese ancestry spoke Chinese at home.

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About 420,000 children under age 18 resided in a household with a Chinese immigrant parent.

In 2008, about 420,000 children under age 18 resided in a household with an immigrant parent born in China. Most of these children (85.3 percent) were native-born US citizens.

Note: Includes only children who reside with at least one parent and households where either the household head or spouse is an immigrant from China or Hong Kong.

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Legal and Unauthorized Chinese Immigrant Population

There were about half a million Chinese-born lawful permanent residents in 2008.

The 510,000 Chinese-born lawful permanent residents (LPRs) in the United States in 2008 made up 4.0 percent of all LPRs (12.6 million). They are the fourth-largest LPR group after the foreign born from Mexico (26.9 percent or 3.4 million), the Philippines (570,000 or 4.5 percent), and India (520,000 or 4.1 percent).

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More than 630,000 Chinese foreign born gained lawful permanent residence in the United States in the decade between 2000 and 2009.

Between 2000 and 2009, about 10.3 million immigrants obtained green cards, including 637,400 Chinese born. The Chinese born accounted for 5.7 percent (or 64,238) of the 1.1 million immigrants who received lawful permanent residence in 2009.

The number of Chinese immigrants receiving LPR status in 2009 was lower than in 2008 (80,271) and in 2007 (76,665).

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More than half of all Chinese immigrants receiving lawful permanent residence in 2009 were admitted as family-based immigrants.

In 2009, 53.3 percent of Chinese immigrants receiving lawful permanent residence were admitted as family-based immigrants — principally as the immediate relatives of US citizens (23,244 or 36.2 percent) and as family-sponsored immigrants (11,013 or 17.1 percent). More than a quarter obtained LPR status as asylees or refugees (28.8 percent or 18,486) and another fifth (17.6 percent or 11,295) as work-based immigrants or their family members.

For comparison, among the 1.1 million immigrants overall who became LPRs in 2009, 47.4 percent (535,554) came as US citizens' immediate family, 18.7 percent (211,859) as family-sponsored immigrants, and another 12.7 percent (144,034) as employment-based immigrants. About 15.7 percent (177,368) of new LPRs were refugees and asylees who were admitted in prior years and adjusted their status to LPR in 2009.

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The foreign born from China accounted for over one-quarter of all those granted asylum in the United States in 2009.

Of the 22,119 people granted asylum in the United States in 2009, 6,109 (27.6 percent) were from China (excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan), a higher percentage than in 2008 (23.9 percent). Those born in Ethiopia, Haiti, and Colombia each accounted for about 5 percent of asylees.

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As of 2008, 200,000 Chinese-born lawful permanent residents were eligible to naturalize.

US Citizenship and Immigration Service's Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) estimates the Chinese born accounted for 2.5 percent of all the 8.2 million LPRs eligible to naturalize in 2008. Those 200,000 Chinese-born LPRs who were eligible to naturalize in 2008 made up 39.2 percent of all Chinese-born LPRs. Roughly 40,000 Chinese-born LPRs naturalized in 2008.

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In 2009, roughly 1 percent of all unauthorized immigrants in the United States were from China.

OIS has estimated that 120,000, or about 1 percent, of the approximately 10.8 million unauthorized migrants in January 2009 were born in China.

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The number of unauthorized immigrants from China decreased 37 percent between 2000 and 2009.

The estimated number of unauthorized immigrants from China has declined from about 190,000 in 2000 to about 120,000 in 2009, a drop of 37 percent.

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For information about ACS methodology, sampling error, and nonsampling error, click [here](#).

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