

Tuesday, August 20, 2024

Dear Mayor John H. Whitmire,

I am honored to write this letter to endorse the nomination of Irma Diaz-Gonzalez as the 2024 recipient of the Houston Mayor's Hispanic Lifetime Achievement Award.

Irma Diaz-Gonzalez personifies a life of service to family and community. Her distinguished professional accomplishments and exemplary commitment to helping tens of thousands of others secure gainful, fruitful employment define her Hispanic culture and personal responsibility and inspire hope and progress in our community.

Irma's life journey, a quintessential Hispanic narrative, is a testament to her resilience and adaptability. From being an immigrant to an itinerant migrant worker, an avid lifelong learner, a volunteer, a successful entrepreneur, a community leader, and always a loving daughter, sibling, Mother, Partner, and Friend, she embodies the spirit of the Hispanic community.

Irma's generosity has left an indelible mark on the Houston community. Since she arrived in 1982, she has dedicated herself to helping others secure their future through employment opportunities, a testament to her unwavering commitment and the profound impact of her work.

First, she was a Youth Program Coordinator for the City of Houston and, for the ensuing forty-two years, through the Employment and Training Center, Inc., the company she launched with her husband, Roberto Gonzalez, in 1986.

Throughout the years, Irma has been the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and the Mi Familia Vota board chair. Her civic engagement includes serving on the board of United Way of Greater Houston, Memorial Hermann Children's Hospital, Houston First Corporation, the Center for Houston's Future, and Baker Ripley.

In addition, Irma and Roberto opened their hearts and homes to raise money for college scholarships for promising students whose economic circumstances prevented them from pursuing their dreams.

Irma's legacy is the success of every person, thousands of Houstonians among them, who might not have secured their dream, but for the success of a young girl who worked in the fields harvesting asparagus, a vegetable she did not know existed when she first arrived in this Country.

I urge you to recognize Irma's lifetime contribution to our community by selecting her as the recipient of the 2024 Houston Mayor's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Thank you for your consideration.

J. Michael Trevino

J. Michael Treviño

Cc: Jackie Schuessler-Kimsey
Jackie.schuessler-kimsey@houstontx.gov

New Americans in Houston

A Snapshot of the Demographic and Economic Contributions of Immigrants in the Metro Area¹

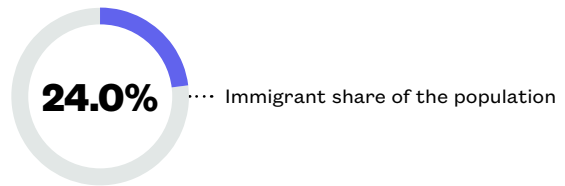
POPULATION

7.2M

Total population in 2021

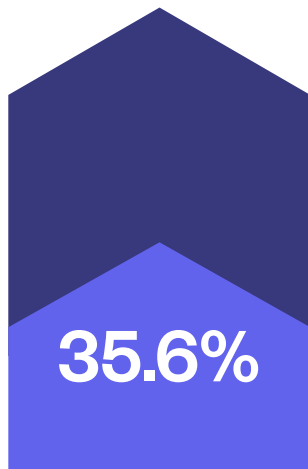
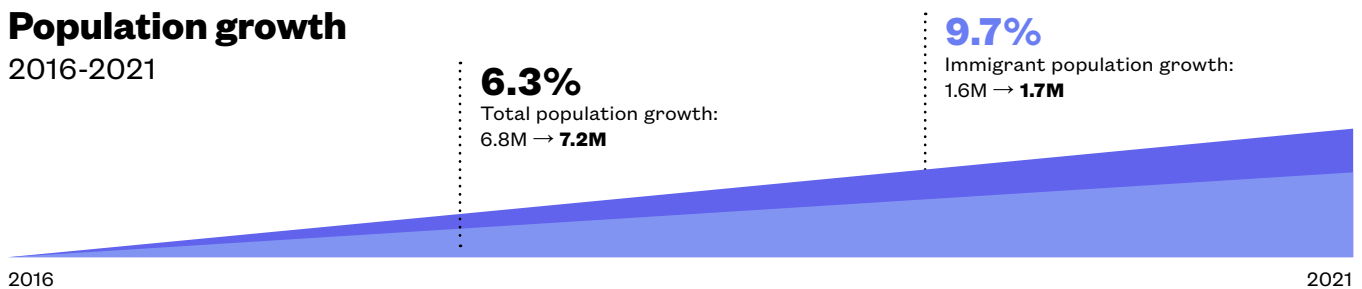
1.7M

Immigrant population



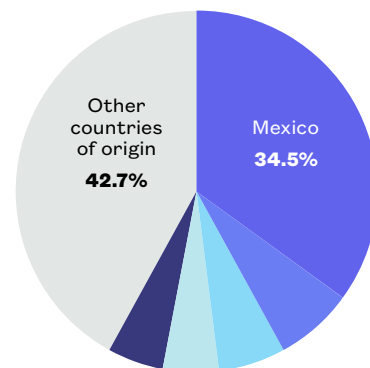
Population growth

2016-2021



Share of total population growth in the Houston metro area attributed to immigrants

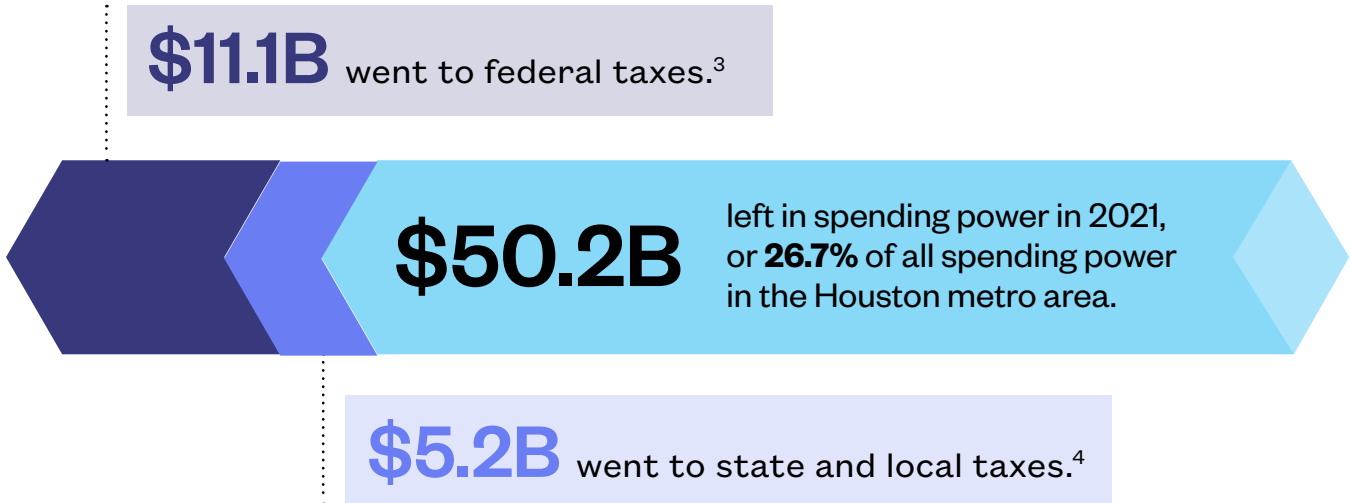
Top five countries of origin:



- 1 Mexico 34.5%
- 2 El Salvador 6.7%
- 3 India 5.5%
- 4 Vietnam 5.4%
- 5 Honduras 5.3%

TAX CONTRIBUTIONS & SPENDING POWER

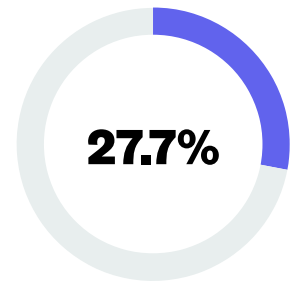
Immigrants in the metro area hold significant **economic power**. In 2021, immigrant households in the Houston metro area earned **\$66.5B**.



Total GDP in the Houston metro area was **\$537.1B** in 2021.

\$56.2B of that was contributed by immigrants.

Share of the Houston metro area's GDP contributed by immigrants.



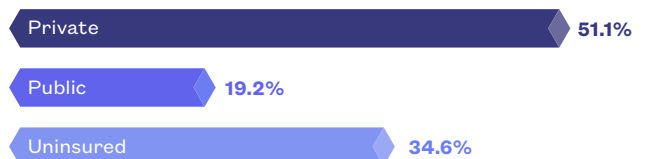
Immigrants also support federal social programs.

In 2021, immigrants in the Houston metro area contributed nearly **\$6.3B** to Social Security and nearly **\$1.7B** to Medicare.

18.9% of immigrants in the area received Medicare or Medicaid, compared with **30.2%** of U.S.-born residents in 2021.



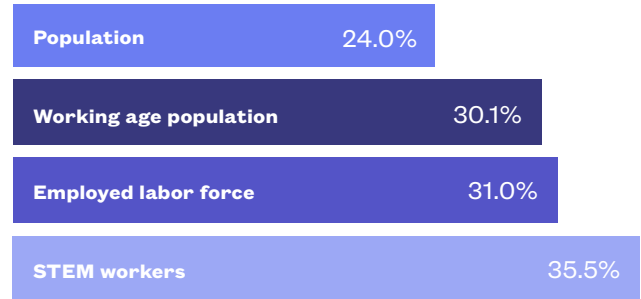
About **51.1%** of immigrants had private health care coverage, while **19.2%** had public health care coverage.⁶ **34.6%** of immigrants in the area were uninsured.



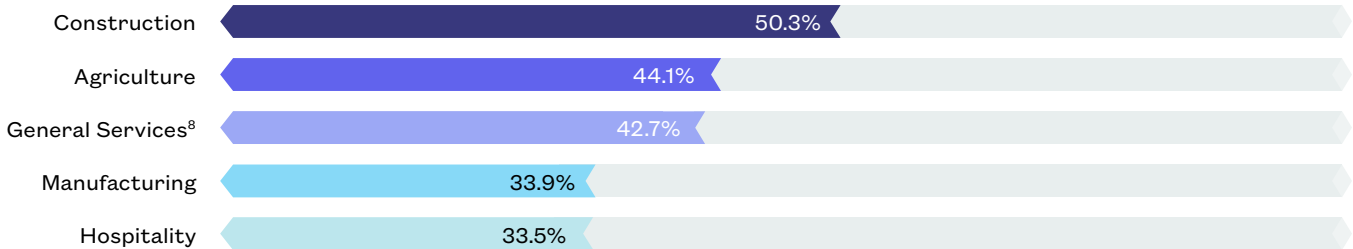
LABOR FORCE

Although the immigrants made up **24.0%** of the metro area's overall population, they represented **30.1%** of the working age⁷ population, **31.0%** of the employed labor force, and **35.5%** of the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) workers in 2021.

Immigrant shares of the...

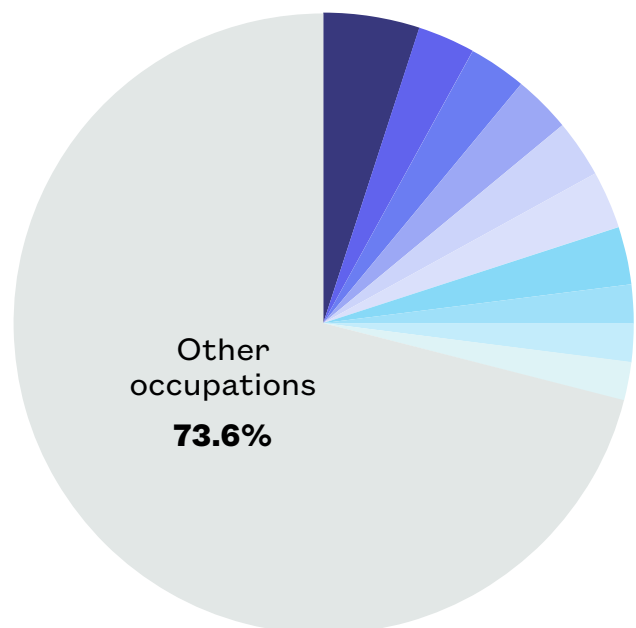


The industries with the highest share of workers that are immigrants were:



The **occupations** with the largest number of immigrant workers:

- 1 Construction Laborers..... 4.6%
- 2 Driver/Sales Workers & Truck Drivers 3.4%
- 3 Janitors & Building Cleaners 2.9%
- 4 Maids & Housekeeping Cleaners..... 2.8%
- 5 Landscaping & Groundskeeping Workers..... 2.6%
- 6 Other Managers 2.5%
- 7 Cooks 2.0%
- 8 Carpenters 2.0%
- 9 Registered Nurses 1.9%
- 10 Hand Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers 1.7%



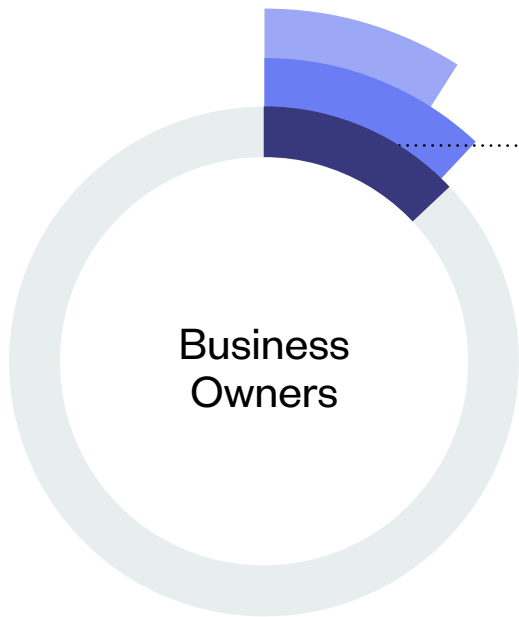
LABOR FORCE CONT.

Immigrants fill critical gaps in the workforce, helping companies keep jobs on U.S. soil. We estimate that immigrants living in the area helped **create or preserve**

79,597 local manufacturing jobs

that would have otherwise been eliminated or moved elsewhere by 2021.⁹

ENTREPRENEURSHIP



In 2021, **13.6%** of all employed immigrants were business owners in the Houston metro area.

Compared to...

- 12.9%** Immigrant national average
- 9.3%** U.S.-born average

142,100 immigrant entrepreneurs generated nearly **\$4.4B** in business income for the metro area

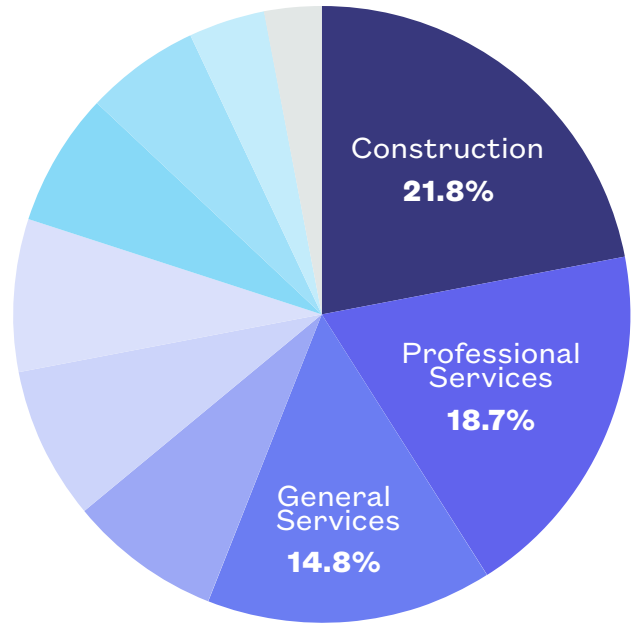
Immigrants were **60.7%** more likely to be entrepreneurs than their U.S.-born counterparts, and made up **41.9%** of all entrepreneurs in the Houston metro area.



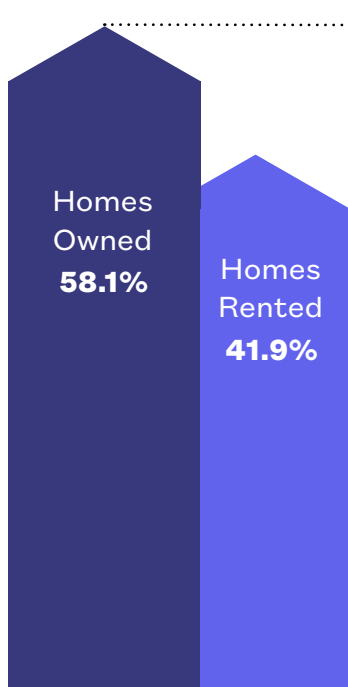
ENTREPRENEURSHIP CONT.

The industries with the largest share of immigrant entrepreneurs were:

- 1 Construction21.8%
- 2 Professional Services¹⁰18.7%
- 3 General Services14.8%
- 4 Health Care & Social Assistance... 8.1%
- 5 Retail Trade7.8%
- 6 Transportation & Warehousing... 7.5%
- 7 Finance 6.6%
- 8 Hospitality5.5%
- 9 Manufacturing..... 3.8%



HOUSING



In 2021, **58.1%** of immigrant households in the metro area owned their homes.

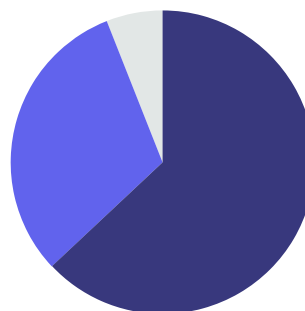
41.9% of immigrant households were renters.

\$132.8B

Total property value

\$3.9B

Total annual rent



62.7% of immigrant households lived in **houses**, while **31.0%** lived in **apartments**.

Irma Diaz-Gonzalez

I was 12 when my family left economic hardship in Mexico and resettled in America. From that moment, I learned to adapt. It is the most important skill I've gained as an immigrant, and it ultimately helped me run a successful employment business in Houston for 37 years.

I have happy memories of my childhood in Zaragoza, Mexico, a small town about 30 miles from Eagle Pass, Texas. My father was a farmer and rancher, who raised chickens and pigs, and grew sorghum and corn. It was honorable work, and my father carved out a decent living for our family. We easily traveled back and forth across the border, heading to Eagle Pass for shopping trips or visiting my extended family in Texas.

In the early 1960s, our region experienced a severe, years-long drought. My father couldn't harvest enough crops to sustain his business, and he was eventually forced to sell the land. He began traveling to California to work as a bracero during harvest season. In his absence, my mother struggled to run a small grocery store and raise me and my siblings. She gave him an ultimatum: either he stayed in Mexico with us, or we went with him to America. My father was soon hired by a farm in Illinois, and this meant our family qualified for employer-sponsored permanent residency—a pathway that no longer exists for Mexican farmworkers— and on April 25, 1968, a friend drove our family of eight to the Eagle Pass border where we hitched a ride in the back of a pickup truck for 1,200 miles to Princeville, IL.

In Illinois, we moved into migrant farmworker housing which included a single room-bungalow where we slept on bunk beds and cooked our meals in a tiny kitchen. Throughout the spring and summer, my older brother and sister worked at the local cannery, while the rest of us rose at 4 a.m. each day to harvest asparagus—a vegetable I had never even seen or heard of. The work was awful; we picked hundreds of pounds of produce a day from 5 a.m. until late afternoon. We worked in rain, wind and 100-degree heat. Pesticides were often sprayed while we were working, and there were no bathrooms.

When winter arrived, we loaded up our recently-purchased pickup truck and returned to Mexico. The money my dad earned in the States wasn't enough to carry us through the winter, so he picked up odd farm jobs and my mom sold clothing.

Each harvest season, we returned to different parts of Illinois or Wisconsin. I was never in one place long enough to feel settled or secure and the seasonal schedule made regular school attendance difficult. I had an especially tough time and was often treated differently because I didn't speak much English, had dark hair, and looked different. I remember how employees would follow our family around the local grocery store to make sure we didn't steal anything.

I was never in one place long enough to feel settled or secure.

Sometimes, we'd enroll in summer school programs, but the kids there were cruel. I was called names and told to go back to where I came from. I got into fights and often ended up in the principal's office. A number of times I was suspended, but my mother didn't understand what this punishment meant, so instead of going home, I'd sit in the principal's office all day. To pass the time, I'd check out books from the library, including the school's single Spanish-English dictionary. To this day, I still have that dictionary; it gave me hope that my hardships were temporary, and that I'd one day find my place in America. Later, as an adult, I made an anonymous donation to the school's library to pay for it.

The year I turned 16, we were living in Rock Island, IL, where my parents were connected to a nonprofit called the Illinois Migrant Council (IMC). A case worker there encouraged them to settle in one place so that we could attend school for the entire term. The organization helped my father find a permanent job doing maintenance at a housing complex for elderly residents. They enrolled us in school and helped us find housing. When I entered school as a junior, I could tell it was going to be different. I felt more motivated to make friends and invest in the community.

IMC's office was on the way home from school, so one day, I decided to go in and ask if I could volunteer. I knew how important this organization was to our family, and I wanted to give back. I started going every day after school to help out around the office and organize files.

Later that year, I found out I couldn't graduate high school because I had too many absences from the winters we spent in Mexico. I was devastated, but my supervisor at the IMC suggested I get my GED and helped me register for a program at the local community college. Six months later I received my GED certificate and secured a full-time job at IMC as a receptionist. I also enrolled in human resources and management courses at Black Hawk College and after a year, IMC promoted me to employment counselor, where I helped families like my own.

I loved the work. Early on, I met two men who'd been harvesting tomatoes and corn for \$1.30 per hour. I couldn't help but see my father in these two men: hardworking and dedicated to providing a better life for their families. I knew they deserved better, so I sent them to the Oscar Mayer factory in Davenport, Iowa, just across the bridge from Rock Island. I'd already spoken to the human resources representative, still, I was surprised when the men were hired at a starting wage of \$10.50 per hour—a life-changing amount. About a month later, their wives came to my office to thank me and bring me homemade taquitos. The ability to make a living wage had given these families hope for their future in the U.S. It touched me so deeply. I knew then that I wanted to dedicate my life to this work.

The ability to make a living wage had given these families hope for their future in the U.S. It touched me so deeply. I knew then that I wanted to dedicate my life to this work.

Both of the new hires impressed their supervisor, and soon, the human resources manager at Oscar Mayer asked if I could send them five more people. He also invited me to a local chamber of commerce meeting, where he introduced me and told everyone about the excellent workers I had referred. I began receiving job orders from International Harvester, John Deere, Alcoa, and other local factories. These were all good-paying jobs with benefits—the kind of jobs that change people's lives. At 22, I became IMC's youngest regional director. All of my clients were current or former migrant workers, people whose stories and experiences I'd lived myself.

Nine years into my time at the IMC, I met Roberto Gonzalez, an auditor for the U.S. Department of Labor. We married in July 1982, and moved to Houston in September of that same year. I became a youth programs coordinator for the City of Houston, placing young people in jobs, and Roberto helped organize job training programs for the Department of Labor. We discussed launching our own employment agency, but branching out on our own scared me because I was the only one receiving a steady paycheck.

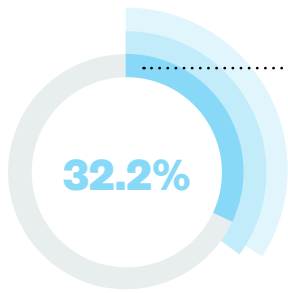
Still, we decided to take the risk. In 1986, we launched [Employment & Training Centers, Inc.](#) Our business took off immediately and at one point, we had 200 employees and contracts with the Texas Workforce Commission, the City of Houston, Harris County, the Houston Independent School District, and the Department of Labor. As our success grew, we used our platform to give back to the community. Throughout the years, I've been the chair of the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Mi Familia Vota; I've been on multiple boards, including United Way of Greater Houston, Memorial Hermann Children's Hospital, Houston First Corporation, the Center for Houston's Future, and Baker Ripley.

Since opening our business, we have noticed a particularly high demand for bilingual employees, so it's become one of our specialties. We recently helped the Harris County Toll Road Authority hire 200 bilingual workers. Spanish-English fluency is especially needed in Houston, and there's a growing need for many other languages as well—we recently helped recruit a customer service representative who spoke Vietnamese and another who spoke Mandarin.

Two years ago, I decided I needed to prepare to retire. My middle daughter, Sofia, has taken over the company, and it's a joy and privilege to see her carry our work forward. Because of my childhood, I invested in my children's education, and all three of them attended university. My daughters have opportunities I could've never dreamed of when I was working in asparagus fields 55 years ago. It's a reminder that the American Dream persists, and regardless of the hardships we face, we adapt and rise above them.

EDUCATION

BACHELOR'S DEGREE OR HIGHER

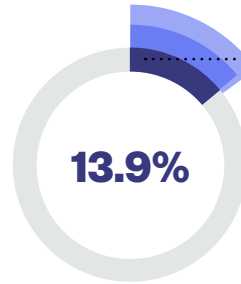


Share of the metro area's immigrant population aged 25 or above that held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2021

Compared to...

- 35.3% U.S.-born average
- 33.9% Immigrant national average

ADVANCED DEGREE



Share of the metro area's immigrant population aged 25 or above that held an advanced degree in 2021

Compared to...

- 13.5% U.S.-born average
- 13.3% Immigrant national average

In fall 2019, **16,206 students** enrolled in colleges and universities in the Houston metro area were temporary U.S. residents.¹¹

International students supported

3,824

local jobs...

And contributed

\$425.0M

to the local economy.¹²

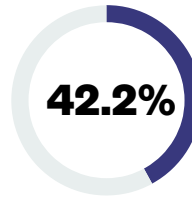
Students under 18 who attended public schools in the metro area in 2021:



NATURALIZATION

729,400

Number of immigrants in the Houston metro area who had naturalized^{13,14} as of 2021

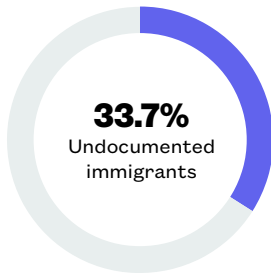


Share of immigrants who had naturalized as of 2021

Among the **just over 1 million** immigrants who were not citizens...

24.4% of immigrants were likely eligible to naturalize. This represents a total of **244,557** immigrants.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS



33.7%
Undocumented immigrants

Share of the immigrant population in the Houston metro area that was undocumented in 2021

8.0%, or 46,800

undocumented immigrants, were likely to be eligible for **Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)**.¹⁵

In 2021, undocumented immigrant households earned **\$13.0B**.¹⁶

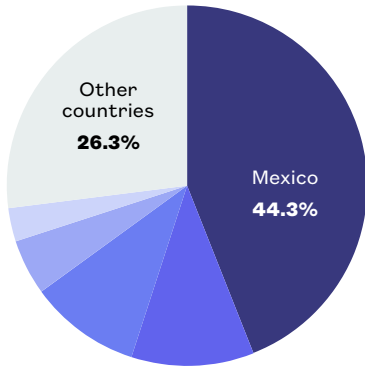
\$794.8M went to federal taxes.¹⁷

\$11.6B left in spending power¹⁸

\$595.6M went to state and local taxes.

UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

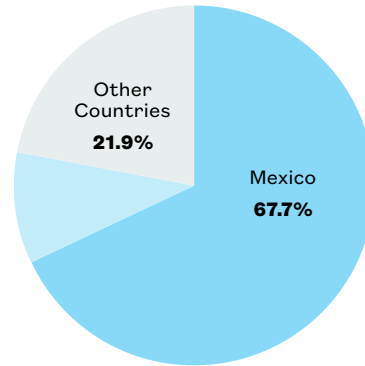
Top Countries of Origin:



- 1 Mexico 44.3%
- 2 Honduras 11.1%
- 3 El Salvador 9.8%
- 4 Guatemala 5.3%
- 5 India 3.2%

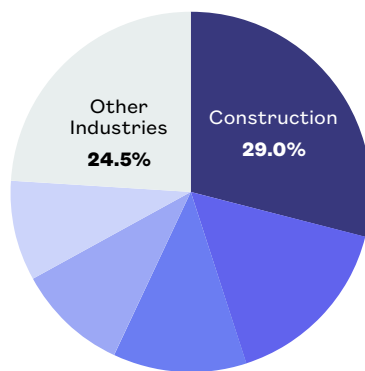
DACA-ELIGIBLE IMMIGRANTS

Top Countries of Origin:



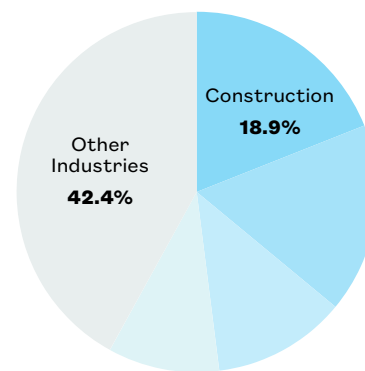
- 1 Mexico 67.7%
- 2 El Salvador 10.4%

Industries with the largest share of undocumented immigrant workers:



- 1 Construction 29.0%
- 2 Professional Services 15.6%
- 3 Hospitality 12.3%
- 4 Manufacturing 9.5%
- 5 Retail Trade 9.1%

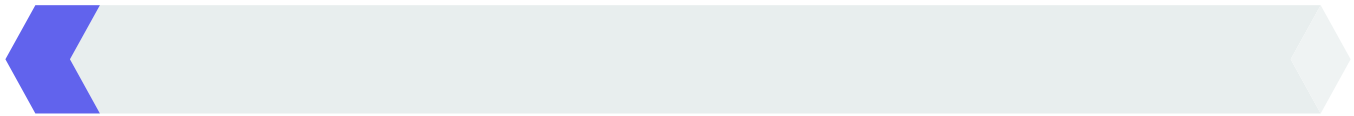
Industries with the largest share of DACA-eligible workers:



- 1 Construction 18.9%
- 2 Retail Trade 16.5%
- 3 Professional Services 12.3%
- 4 Manufacturing 9.9%

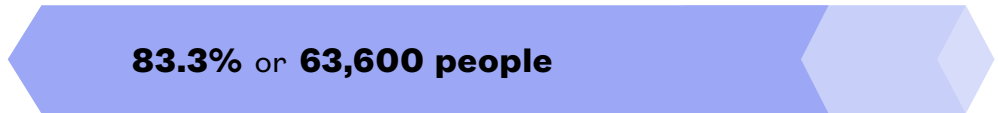
76,400 people, or **4.4%** of the immigrant population in the area, were likely refugees in 2021.¹⁹

Share of immigrants in the Houston metro area who were likely refugees



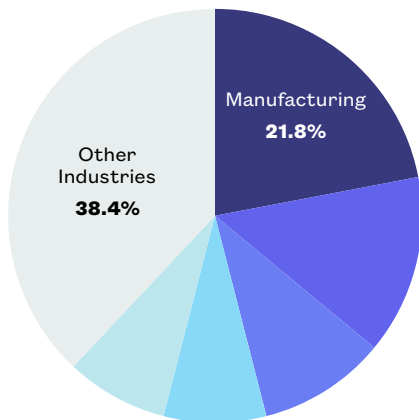
4.4%

Share of likely refugees who had naturalized as of 2021



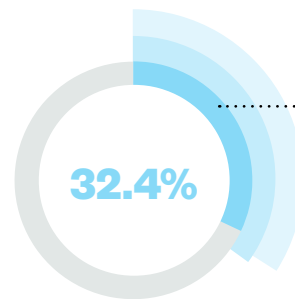
83.3% or 63,600 people

Industries with the largest share of refugee workers were:



- 1 Manufacturing21.8%
- 2 General Services13.5%
- 3 Healthcare and Social Assistance 10.0%
- 4 Professional Services8.4%
- 5 Retail Trade7.9%

Education attainment in the refugee community:



Share of likely refugees aged 25 or above who held a **bachelor's degree or higher in 2021**

Compared to...

- **35.3%** U.S.-born average
- **33.9%** Immigrant national average

For more city, district, and state-level data, visit [MapTheImpact.org](https://www.maptheimpact.org) and explore our interactive map.



1. Unless otherwise specified, data comes from the 1-year sample of the American Community Survey (ACS) from 2021 and figures refer to the Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, Texas, Metropolitan Statistical Area.
2. Data comes from the American Immigration Council analysis of the 1-year sample of the American Community Survey from 2016 and 2021.
3. U.S. Congressional Budget Office, The Distribution of Household Income and Federal Taxes, 2019 (Washington, DC: 2021), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58353>.
4. Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, Who Pays? A Distributional Analysis of the Tax Systems in All Fifty States (Washington, DC: 2018), <https://itep.org/whopays/>.
5. These figures derive from our calculations based on immigrants' share of wage income and self-employment income in the 1-year ACS sample from 2021 and GDP statistics from the Bureau of Economic Analysis.
6. The percentage of immigrants who had private healthcare coverage includes immigrants who had only private healthcare coverage and those who had both private and public healthcare coverage; likewise, for the percentage of immigrants who had public healthcare coverage.
7. We define working age as 16-64 years of age.
8. General services include personal services (e.g., laundry services, barber shops, and repair and maintenance), religious organizations, social services, and labor unions.
9. Jacob Vigdor, Immigration and the Revival of American Cities: From Preserving Manufacturing Jobs to Strengthening the Housing Market (New York, NY: Americas Society/Council of the Americas and New American Economy, 2013), <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/revival-of-american-cities.pdf>.
10. Professional services: Most of these industries include professions that require a degree or a license, such as legal services, accounting, scientific research, consulting services, etc.
11. Data on student enrollment in the area is derived from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System maintained by the National Center for Education Statistics.
12. Economic data is derived from the International Student Economic Value Tool maintained by NAFSA, the Association of International Educators.
13. We identify immigrants who are potentially eligible for naturalization based on a set of criteria of eligibility identified by the USCIS, such as immigration status, age, English language proficiency, and length of stay in the United States.
14. Naturalization is the process through which one can become a U.S. citizen, dependent on certain eligibility requirements. Learn more here: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/how-united-states-immigration-system-works>.
15. Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a program established in 2012 which permits certain individuals who were brought to the United States while under the age of 16 and who have resided continuously in the United States since June 15, 2007, to remain in the U.S. and work lawfully for at least two years, so long as they meet certain eligibility requirements. Learn more here: <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/how-united-states-immigration-system-works>.
16. Lisa Christensen Gee, Matthew Gardener, and Meg Wiehe, Undocumented Immigrants' State and Local Tax Contributions, The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, 2016, <https://itep.org/immigration/>.
17. U.S. Congressional Budget Office, The Distribution of Household Income and Federal Taxes, 2019 (Washington, DC: 2021), <https://www.cbo.gov/publication/58353>.
18. Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, Who Pays? A Distributional Analysis of the Tax Systems in All Fifty States (Washington, DC: 2018), <https://itep.org/whopays/>.
19. American Immigration Council, From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America, (Washington, DC: 2023), https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/sites/default/files/research/05.23_refugee_report_v3_0.pdf.



Acknowledgements

The American Immigration Council would like to thank the following organizations for their partnership and support in the release of this report.

