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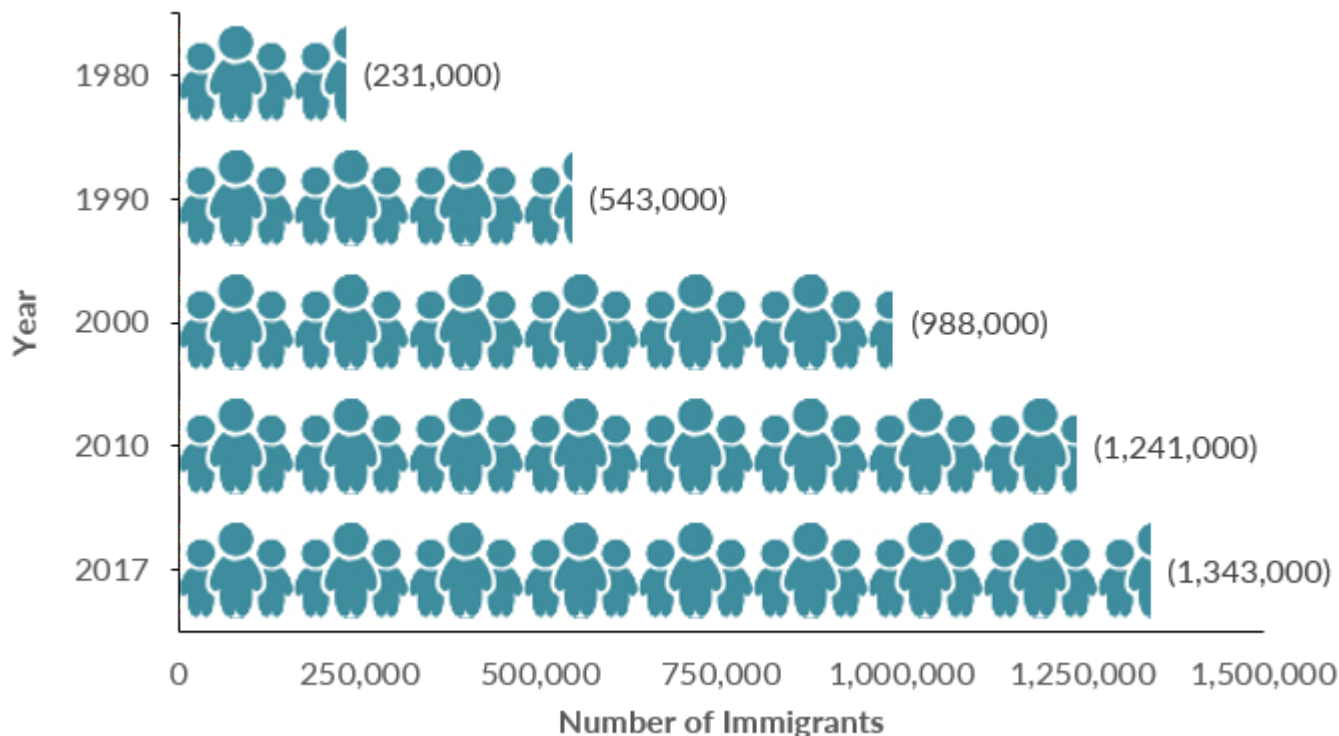
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Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States

SEPTEMBER 13, 2018 SPOTLIGHT | By Elijah Alperin and Jeanne Batalova

Large-scale immigration from Vietnam to the United States began at the end of the Vietnam War, when the fall of Saigon in 1975 led to the U.S.-sponsored evacuation of an estimated 125,000 Vietnamese refugees. As the humanitarian crisis and displacement of people in the Indochina region (Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos) intensified, more refugees and their families were admitted to the United States. The Vietnamese immigrant population has grown significantly since then, roughly doubling every decade between 1980 and 2000, and then increasing 26 percent in the 2000s. In 2017, more than 1.3 million Vietnamese resided in the United States, accounting for 3 percent of the nation's 44.5 million immigrants and representing the sixth-largest foreign-born group in the country.

Figure 1. Vietnamese Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980-2017



Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2010 and 2017 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**.

Click here to view an interactive chart showing trends in the size of U.S. immigrant populations by country of birth, from 1960 to the present.

The United States is the top destination for Vietnamese migrants, followed by Australia (with 238,000 Vietnamese immigrants), Canada (192,000), and France (128,000), according to mid-2017 estimates by the United Nations Population Division.

Click here to view an interactive map showing where migrants from Vietnam and other countries have settled worldwide.

Unlike in the past when most Vietnamese were admitted as refugees, those who obtain lawful permanent residence in the United States today (also known as getting a green card) largely do so through family reunification; very few get green cards through employment or other channels. Vietnamese immigrants are more likely than the overall U.S. foreign-born population to be Limited English Proficient (LEP). Compared to the total immigrant population, a much greater share of Vietnamese are naturalized U.S. citizens; they are also less likely to live in poverty or lack health insurance.

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 persons 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.

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the most recent 2017 American Community Survey [ACS] as well as pooled 2012–16 ACS data) and the Department of Homeland Security’s *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, this Spotlight provides information on the Vietnamese population in the United States, focusing on its size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Data collection constraints do not permit inclusion of those who gained Vietnamese citizenship via naturalization and later moved to the United States.

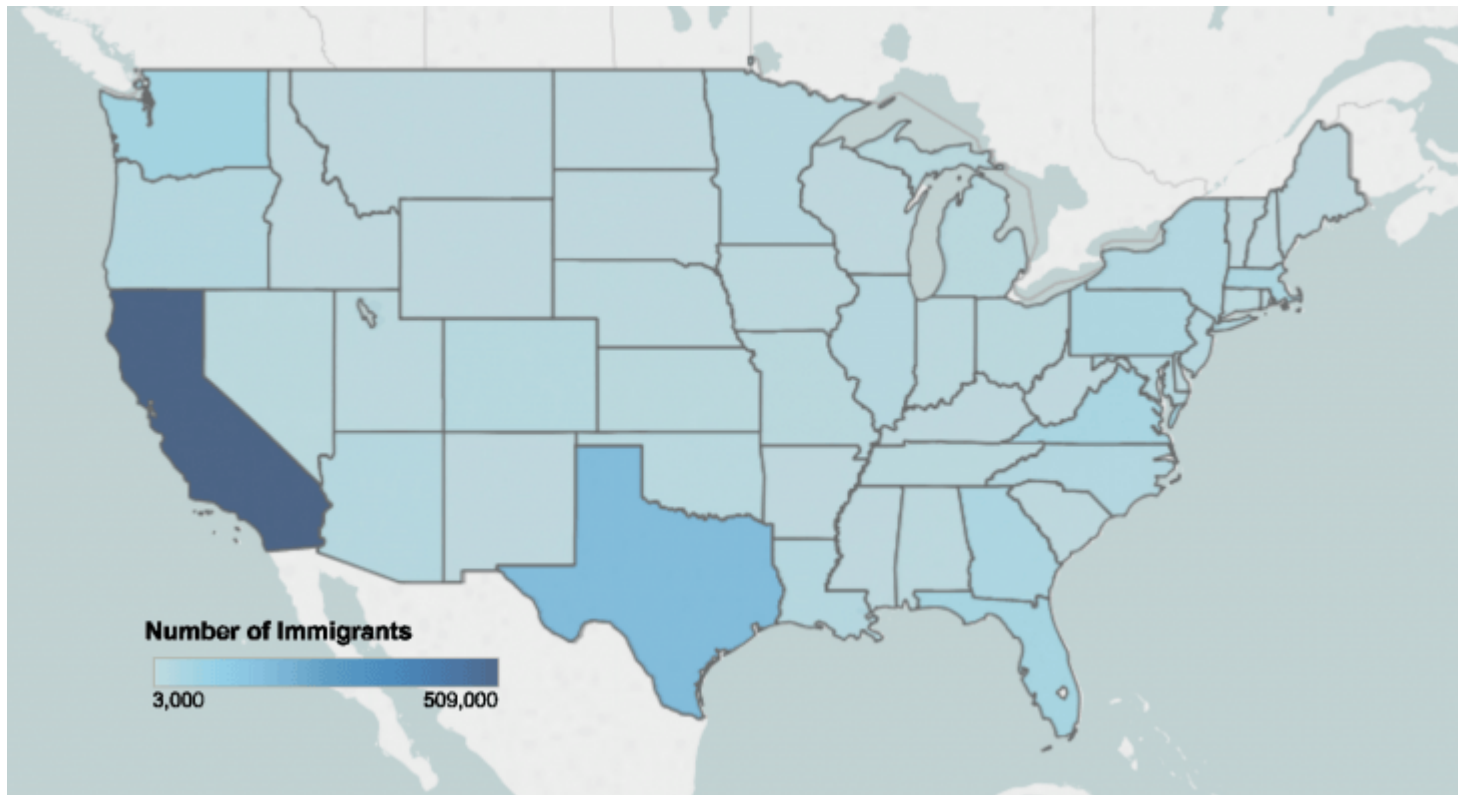
Click on the bullet points below for more information:

- **Distribution by State and Key Cities**
- **English Proficiency**
- **Age, Education, and Employment**
- **Income and Poverty**
- **Immigration Pathways and Naturalization**
- **Health Coverage**
- **Diaspora**
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Distribution by State and Key Cities

In the 2012–16 period, immigrants from Vietnam were highly concentrated in California (39 percent), Texas (13 percent), and Washington State and Florida (4 percent each). Three of the top four county destinations for Vietnamese were in California—Orange County, Santa Clara County, and Los Angeles County—followed by Harris County, Texas. Together these four counties were home to 31 percent of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States.

Figure 2. Top States of Residence for Vietnamese in the United States, 2012-16

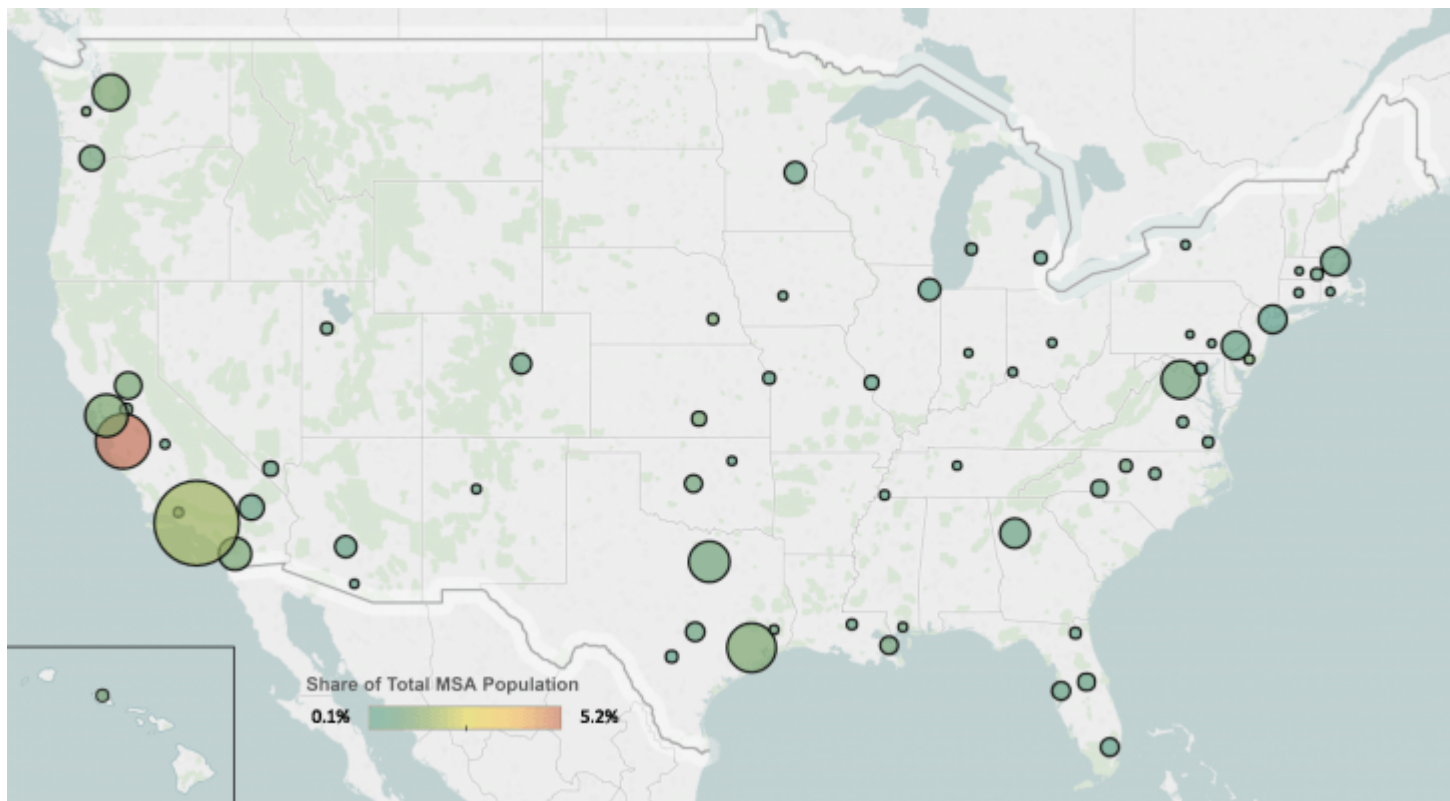


Note: Pooled 2012–16 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state level for smaller-population geographies. Not shown are the populations in Alaska and Hawaii, which are small in size. For details, visit the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub to view an interactive map showing geographic distribution of immigrants by state and county, **available online**.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012–16 ACS.

As of 2012–16, the U.S. cities with the largest number of Vietnamese were the greater Los Angeles (19 percent), San Jose (8 percent), and Houston (6 percent) metropolitan areas. One-third of all Vietnamese immigrants resided in these metro areas.

Figure 3. Top Metropolitan Areas of Residence for Vietnamese in the United States, 2012-16



Note: Pooled 2012–16 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the metropolitan statistical-area level for smaller-population geographies. Not shown is the population in Alaska, which is small in size. For details, visit the MPI Data Hub to view an interactive map showing geographic distribution of immigrants by metropolitan area, **available online**.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS.

Table 1. Top Concentrations of Vietnamese by Metropolitan Area, 2012-16

Metropolitan Area	Immigrant Population from Vietnam	Share of Metro Area Population (%)
Los Angeles–Long Beach–Anaheim, CA	242,000	1.
San Jose–Sunnyvale–Santa Clara, CA	102,000	5.
Houston–The Woodlands–Sugar Land, TX	81,000	1.
San Francisco–Oakland–Hayward, CA	61,000	1.
Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington, TX	56,000	0.
Washington–Arlington–Alexandria, DC–VA–MD–WV	49,000	0.
Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue, WA	44,000	1.
San Diego–Carlsbad, CA	36,000	1.
Atlanta–Sandy Springs–Roswell, GA	30,000	0.
Boston–Cambridge–Newton, MA–NH	28,000	0.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2012-16 ACS.

Click here for an interactive map that highlights the metropolitan areas with the highest concentrations of immigrants from Vietnam and other countries.

English Proficiency

Vietnamese immigrants are less likely to be proficient in English than the overall foreign-born population. In 2017, about 66 percent of Vietnamese ages 5 and over reported limited English proficiency, compared to 48 percent of all immigrants. Eight percent of Vietnamese spoke only English at home, versus 16 percent of the overall foreign born.

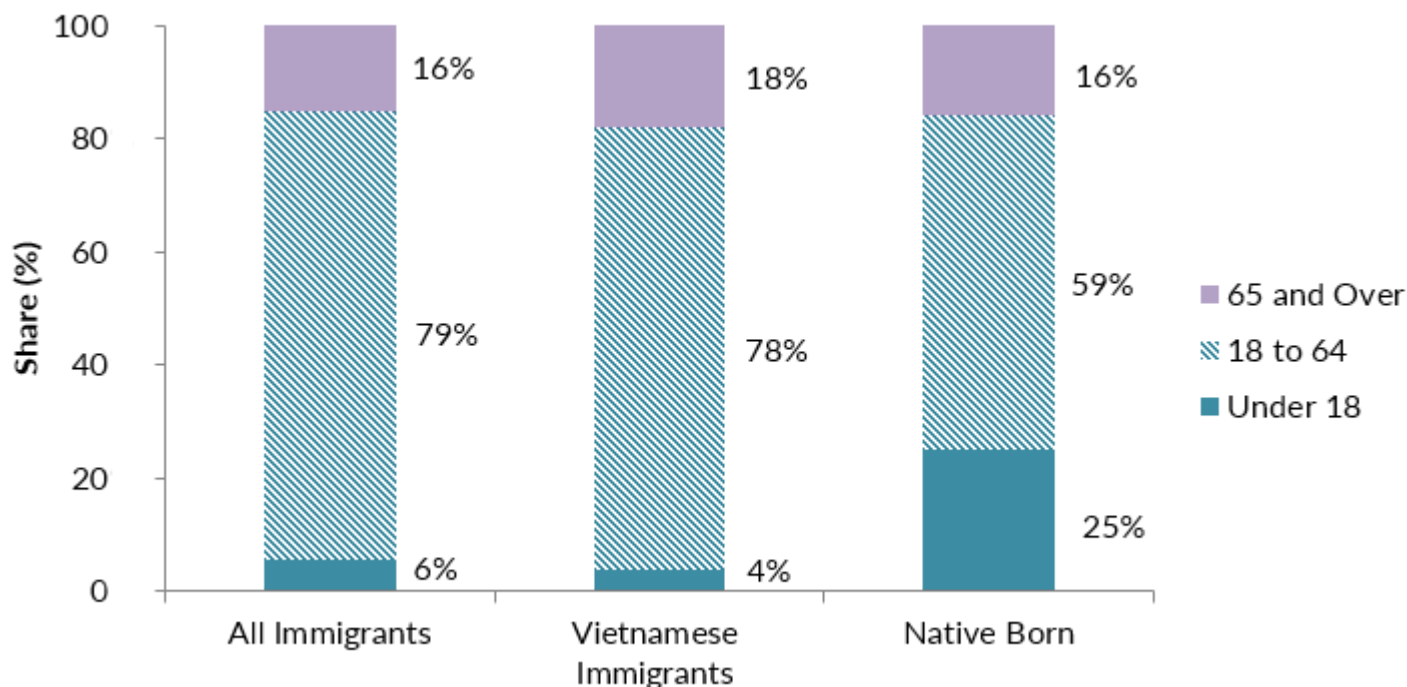
Note: Limited English Proficient refers to those who indicated on the ACS questionnaire that they spoke English less than “very well.”

Age, Education, and Employment

Overall, Vietnamese are older than the overall foreign-born population and the native population. The median age of Vietnamese in 2017 was 50 years, compared to 45 years for all immigrants and 36 years for the U.S. born.

Meanwhile, Vietnamese were more likely than the native born but about as likely as the overall foreign born to be of working age (18 to 64; see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Age Distribution of the U.S. Population by Origin, 2017



Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

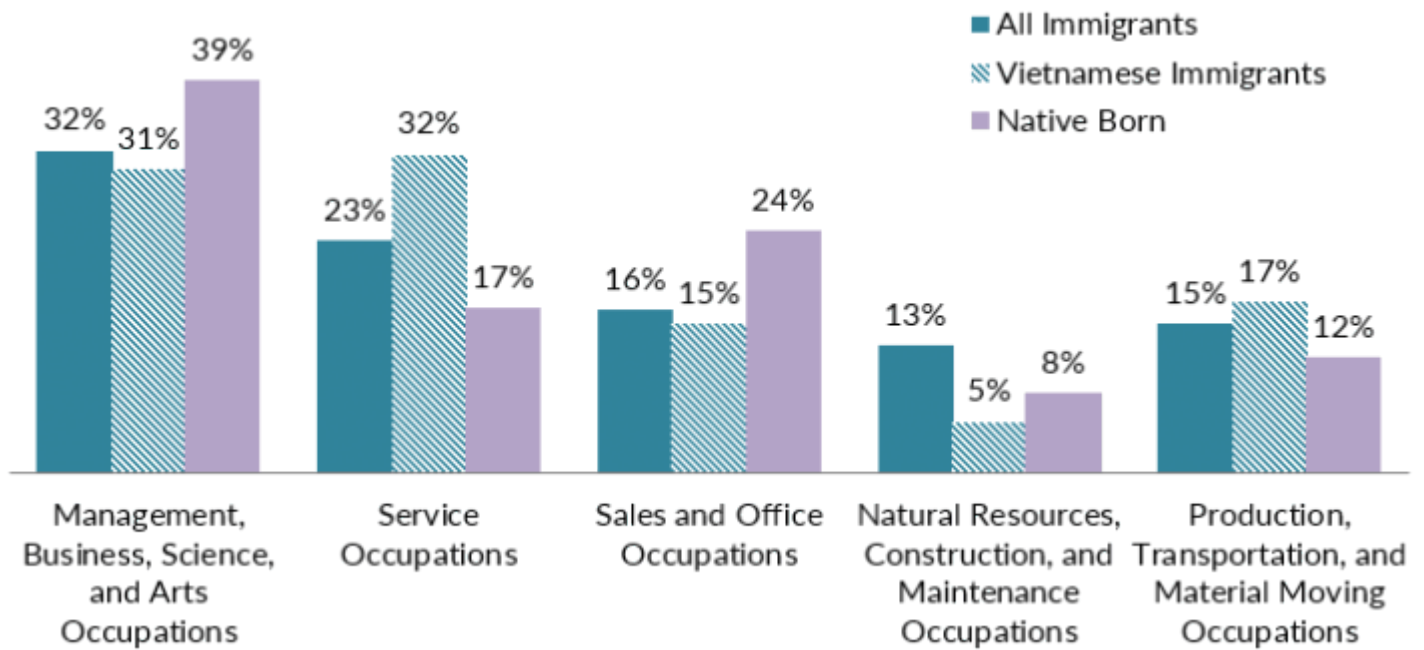
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2017 ACS.

Click here to view an interactive chart showing the age and sex distribution of the top immigrant groups, including Vietnamese.

Vietnamese ages 25 and over have much lower educational attainment compared to the native- and overall foreign-born populations. In 2017, 26 percent of Vietnamese immigrants had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to about 32 percent of the U.S. born and 31 percent of all immigrants. About 30 percent of Vietnamese adults lacked a high school diploma, compared to 28 percent of all immigrant adults.

Vietnamese participate in the labor force at a similar rate as the foreign born overall. In 2017, about 65 percent of Vietnamese ages 16 and over were in the civilian labor force, a rate nearly equivalent to that of all immigrants (66 percent) and higher than of the native born (62 percent). Vietnamese are more likely to be employed in service occupations than the other two groups of workers (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2017



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

Income and Poverty

Vietnamese overall have higher incomes compared to the total foreign- and native-born populations. In 2017, households headed by a Vietnamese immigrant had a median income of approximately \$63,200, compared to \$56,700 and \$60,800 for all immigrant and U.S.-born households, respectively.

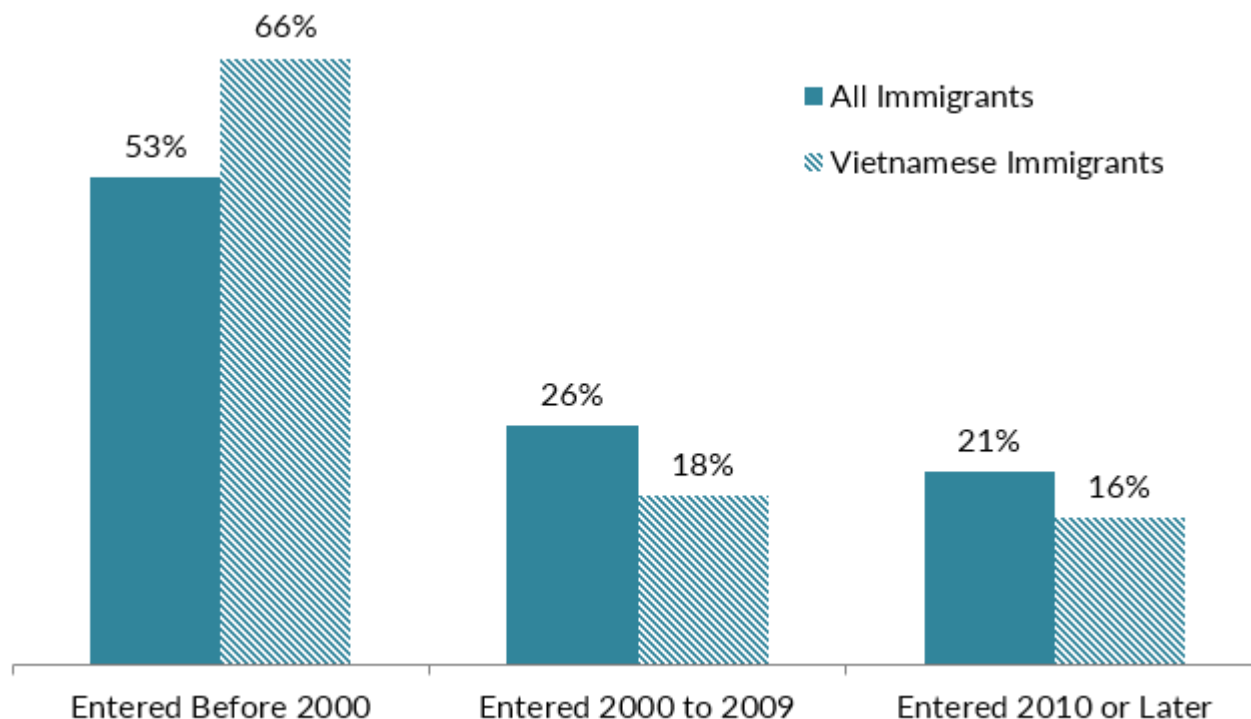
Further, in 2017, some 11 percent of Vietnamese families were living in poverty, a lower rate than for immigrant families overall (14 percent).

Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

Vietnamese are much more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens than immigrants overall. In 2017, 77 percent of Vietnamese were naturalized citizens, compared to 49 percent of the overall foreign-born population.

Compared to all immigrants, the Vietnamese are more likely to have entered before 2000. The largest share of Vietnamese, approximately 66 percent, arrived prior to 2000, followed by 18 percent who entered between 2000 and 2009, and 16 percent in 2010 or later (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Vietnamese and All Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2017



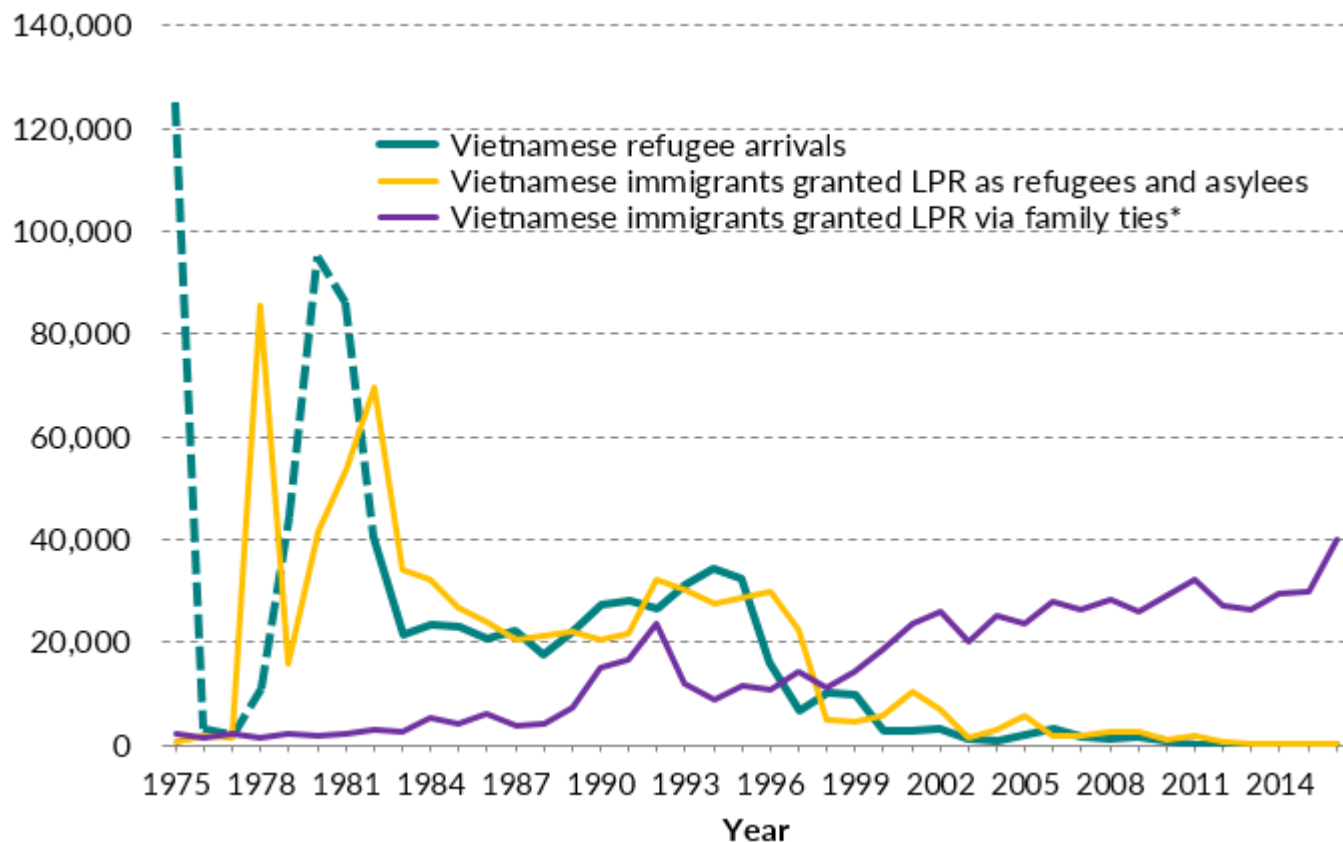
Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

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

Large-scale Vietnamese migration to the United States started as an influx of refugees following the end of the war. Early arrivals consisted largely of military personnel and urban professionals (and their families) who worked with the U.S. military or the South Vietnamese government. The next wave of Vietnamese refugees, known as “boat people,” arrived in the late 1970s. Most of these refugees came from rural areas and were often less educated. Many of the Vietnamese refugees who arrived between 1983 and 2004 were initially resettled in states with large immigrant populations, including California, Texas, and Washington State.

According to U.S. law, refugees must apply for lawful permanent resident (LPR) status one year after being admitted to the United States, and nearly all Vietnamese immigrants (99 percent) who received a green card in 1982 had entered as refugees. Since 1980, there has been a general downward trend in the number of Vietnamese immigrants arriving as refugees and, subsequently, fewer green cards were granted to Vietnamese as refugees or asylees. They have been replaced by immigrants who qualify for LPR status through family ties (either as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens or via family-sponsored preferences), as shown in Figure 7.

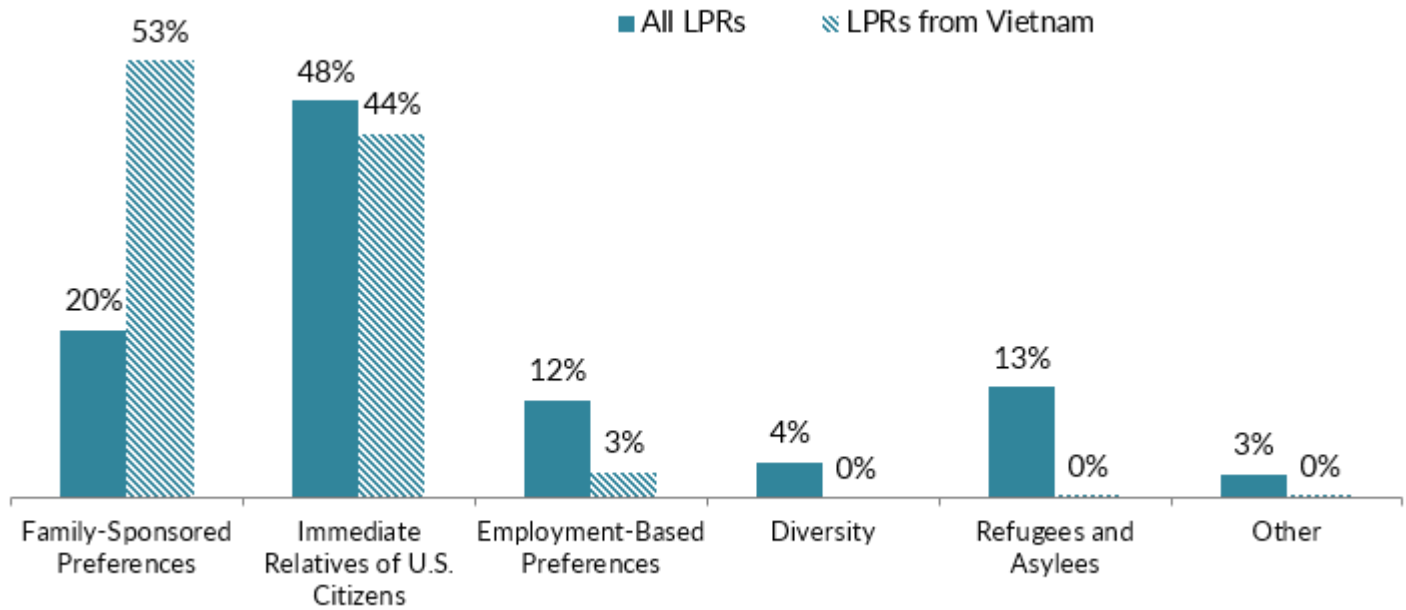
Figure 7. Vietnamese Refugee Arrivals and Vietnamese Immigrants Granted Lawful Permanent Residence (LPR) as Refugees and Asylees or through Family Ties, 1975-2016



Notes: The purple line represents Vietnamese immigrants granted lawful permanent resident (LPR) status both through family-sponsored preferences and as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens. The dotted portion of the line for refugee arrivals prior to 1982 indicates that these numbers are estimates obtained from Table 7.2 in Linda W. Gordon, "Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States," *Center for Migration Studies special issues* 5(3): 153-73. In 1975, about 125,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States as the result of a U.S.-sponsored evacuation program following the end of the Vietnam War. From 1976 to 1977, the number of refugee arrivals dropped sharply for the most part because the United States denied admission to Vietnamese individuals except for family reunification. As a result of continuing political and ethnic conflicts within Southeast Asia, the number of refugees from Vietnam and its neighboring countries rose dramatically beginning in 1978. In response to this humanitarian crisis, Western countries, including the United States, began admitting greater numbers of refugees from the region, many of whom were living in refugee camps. *Sources:* MPI tabulation of data from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 2016 and 2002 *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics), **available online**; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, various years); INS, *Annual Reports* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977, 1976, and 1975); Linda W. Gordon, "Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States," *Center for Migration Studies special issues*, 5(3) (1987): 153-73; Rubén G. Rumbaut, "A Legacy of War: Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia," in *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*, eds. Silvia Pedraza and Rubén G. Rumbaut (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996); Gail P. Kelly, "Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 487 (1996): 138-49.

Most Vietnamese who obtain green cards now do so through family reunification channels. In fiscal year (FY) 2016, 97 percent of the roughly 41,450 Vietnamese who became lawful permanent residents (LPRs) did so as either immediate relatives of U.S. citizens or other family members, a much higher share than the 68 percent of all new LPRs (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Immigration Pathways of Vietnamese Immigrants and All Immigrants in the United States, 2016



Notes: Family-sponsored: Includes adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens as well as spouses and children of green-card holders. *Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens:* Includes spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. *Diversity Visa lottery:* The Immigration Act of 1990 established the Diversity Visa lottery program 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 Vietnam are not eligible for the lottery.

Sources: MPI tabulation of data from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *2016 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2017), **available online**.

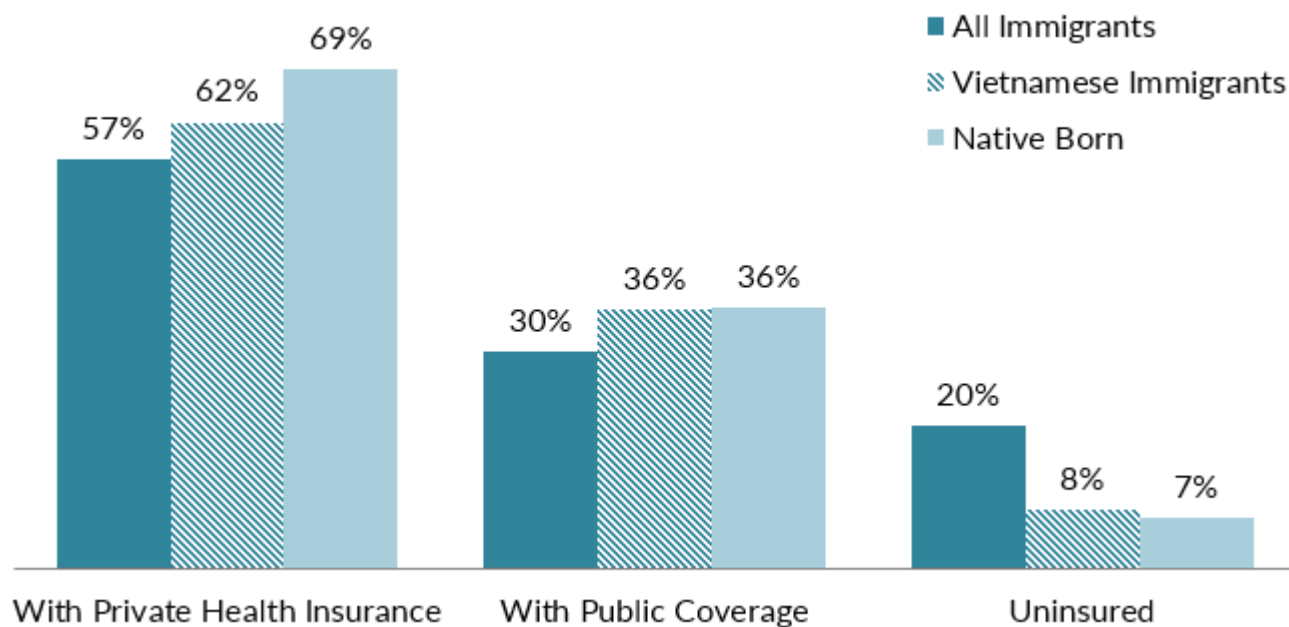
Although most Vietnamese immigrants in the United States are legally present, approximately 118,000 were unauthorized in the 2010–14 period, according to Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates, comprising approximately 1 percent of the overall unauthorized population of about 11 million.

MPI also estimated that in 2017 approximately 9,000 unauthorized immigrants who are Vietnamese were immediately eligible for the 2012 Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. However, as of May 31, 2018, just 60 Vietnamese were active participants of the program, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) data. Overall, about 702,250 unauthorized youth are participating in the DACA program.

Health Coverage

Vietnamese are much more likely than the foreign born overall to have both private and public health insurance coverage. In 2017, just 8 percent of Vietnamese were uninsured versus 20 percent of all immigrants (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. Health Coverage for Vietnamese, All Immigrants, and the Native Born, 2017



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 2016 ACS.

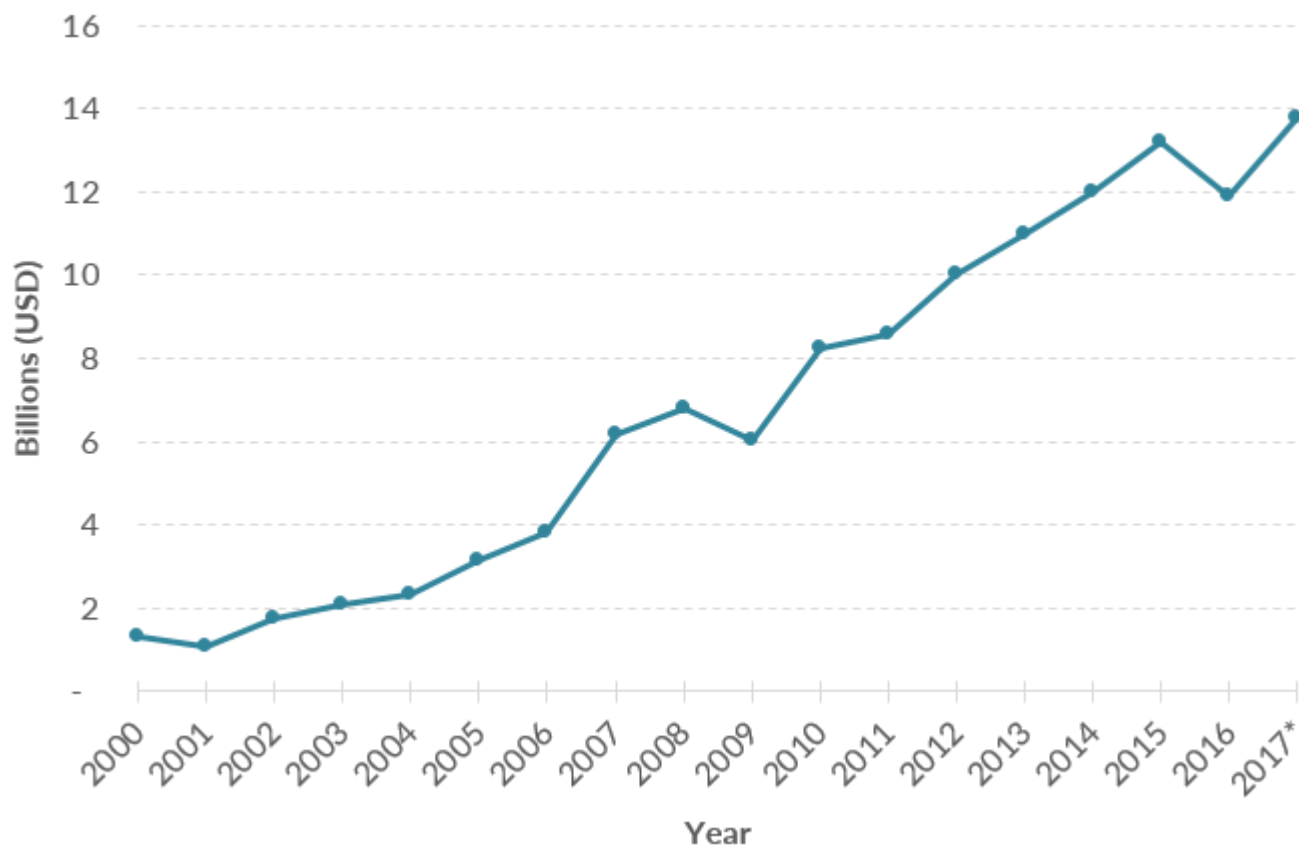
Diaspora

The Vietnamese diaspora in the United States is comprised of about 2.2 million individuals who were either born in Vietnam or reported Vietnamese ethnicity or ancestry, according to tabulations from the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 ACS.

Remittances

In 2017, Vietnamese living abroad sent nearly \$14 billion in remittances to Vietnam via formal channels, according to World Bank data (see Figure 10). Remittances tripled in the past decade and represented about 6 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016.

Figure 10. Annual Remittance Flows to Vietnam, 2000–17



Note: The 2017 figure represents World Bank estimates.

Source: MPI tabulations of data from the World Bank Prospects Group, "Annual Remittances Data," April 2018 update.

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