

Current Population Reports

Population Characteristics

The Foreign-Born Population: 1996

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C E N S U S B U R E A U

P20-494
March 1997

Great interest and public debate has been generated by the increase in the number of foreign-born persons in the United States in recent years. To allow for informed discussion based on fact rather than uninformed opinion and anecdotal evidence, the Census Bureau has begun more frequent collection of data about the foreign-born population. Questions on country of birth, citizenship, and year of entry were added to the Current Population Survey (CPS) beginning in 1994. This report, based on data collected in March 1996, is the second using the March CPS data to compare the characteristics of natives and the foreign-born.

The foreign-born population in the United States is not homogeneous. There are great differences in their demographic, social, and economic characteristics, not only based on country of origin but also related to how long they have lived here and whether or not they have become citizens. For instance, recent arrivals among the foreign-born are more likely to be in poverty, to have lower incomes, and to have higher

unemployment rates than the native born. But foreign-born people who have been here more than six years seem to have recovered from their initial economic hardship. In fact, those who arrived during the 1970's are doing as well as natives in terms of income in 1995.

Number and Percent Foreign-Born

In March 1996, 9.3 percent (24.6 million) of the U.S. population were foreign-born (see figure 1). During this century, the percentage who were foreign-born declined from a high of 14.7 percent in 1910, to a low of 4.8 percent in 1970. Since then, that percentage has increased steadily.

Year of Entry and Citizenship

More than one-quarter of the foreign-born population of the United States has come into this country since 1990 and another 34.3 percent entered during the 1980's. The remaining 38.9 percent of the foreign-born have been here more than 15 years.

The 1996 CPS shows that 32.2 percent of the foreign-born population in the United States are naturalized citizens.¹ It is not known what percent of the remainder are only temporary residents or what percent intend to become citizens.

In the past, the rate of naturalization has increased with the length of residence. While only 22.9 percent of those who entered during the 1980's are naturalized citizens, the rate increases to 46.3 percent for those who came during the 1970's and to 71.6 percent for those who entered before 1970.

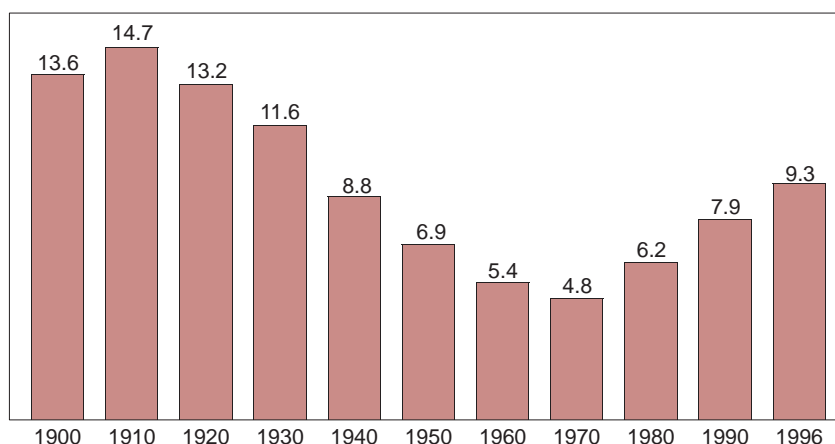
The citizenship rate for the most recent arrivals (5.0 percent) is low for several reasons. Some of these people are temporary residents such as college students and

¹ Foreign-born persons over the age of 18 can become "naturalized citizens" of the United States after they have lived here for a minimum of 5 years and have passed a citizenship exam. Spouses of U.S. citizens (and certain others) can become naturalized after 3 years and children who immigrate generally become citizens when their parents are naturalized if they are under age 18 at that time.

"Natives" are persons born in the United States, Puerto Rico, or an outlying area of the United States such as Guam or the U.S. Virgin Islands, and persons who were born in a foreign country but who had at least one parent who was a U.S. citizen. All other persons are "foreign-born." Although primarily composed of legally admitted immigrants, the foreign-born population includes refugees, temporary residents such as students and temporary workers, and some undocumented immigrants.

Figure 1.

Percent of U.S. Population Who Were Foreign-Born: 1900–1996



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Decennial Censuses and Current Population Survey.

Table A.

Region and Country of Birth of the Foreign-Born: 1996

(Numbers in thousands)

Country of Birth	Number	Percent
All countries	24,557	100.0
Mexico	6,679	27.2
Canada	660	2.7
Central America	1,715	7.0
El Salvador	701	2.9
Caribbean	2,572	10.5
Cuba	772	3.1
Dominican Republic ..	515	2.1
Jamaica	506	2.1
South America	1,209	4.9
Europe	4,143	16.9
Germany	523	2.1
Great Britain	579	2.4
Asia	6,558	26.7
Philippines	1,164	4.7
China	801	3.3
India	757	3.1
Vietnam	740	3.0
Korea	550	2.2
Elsewhere ¹	637	2.6
Not known	381	1.6

¹ Includes Africa, Australia, and Pacific Islands.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.

persons on temporary business visas who will return to their home country. Others have not been residents long enough to be eligible for naturalization or may have no intention of becoming U.S. citizens.

Country of Origin

In 1996, over half of all foreign-born persons living here were born in the western hemisphere. More than one-quarter (6.7 million) of the total were born in Mexico, 10.5 percent

were born on one of the Caribbean islands, 7.0 percent in Central America, 4.9 percent in South America, and 2.7 percent in Canada (see table A).

More than twenty-five percent of the foreign-born population claim Asia as their birthplace, and 16.9 percent are from Europe. Only about 2.6 percent came from either Africa, Australia, or one of the Pacific Islands. The remaining 1.6 percent could not be categorized by country or continent.

Following Mexico, the Philippines is the second largest country of origin, with 1.2 million persons born there. At least half a million foreign-born persons came from each of the countries shown individually in table A.

State of Residence

The foreign-born population is not distributed evenly throughout the country. California has the largest foreign-born population in terms of both numbers (8 million) and percentage (one-quarter of the State's population), as shown in figure 2.

New York has the second highest number (3.2 million) of foreign-born. Other States with at least a million foreign-born residents include Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois. The other States with at least 10 percent foreign-born

persons are New York, Hawaii, Florida, New Jersey, Nevada, Texas, Arizona, and Rhode Island.

Age

Foreign-born persons are older on average than natives, with a median age of 37.4 years, compared to 33.4 years for natives. When the foreign-born population is divided into those who are naturalized citizens and those who are not, however, a different picture appears. Naturalized citizens are older on average (48.0 years) than natives, whereas the median age of foreign-born persons who are not citizens is about the same as natives — 33.1 years. (See table B for selected characteristics of natives and foreign-born individuals.)

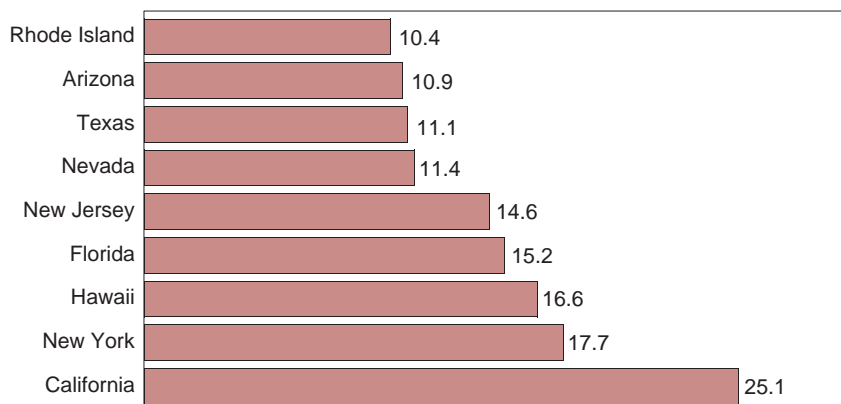
Current age and year of entry have obvious connections. Not surprisingly, the most recently arrived foreign-born are younger, on average, than those who came to this country in earlier decades, but they are also younger than natives. Those who entered the United States in the 1990-1996 period have a median age of only 26.5 years, compared with 60.1 years for those who arrived before 1970.

Race and Hispanic Origin

The foreign-born population includes larger proportions of minorities than the native population. While two-thirds of the foreign-born population are White (67.7 percent), about one-quarter are Asian or Pacific Islander (23.8 percent)

Comparisons of data about country of birth from the 1996 CPS with earlier CPS data will show unusually large increases in the number of people born in some Asian countries because editing procedures for the question on race were revised. The revision, implemented in January 1996, involved assigning one of the four major race categories—White, Black, American Indian, or Asian and Pacific Islander—to records that reported race in the "other" category. This changes the weights by race.

Figure 2.

Percent of the U.S. Population Who Were Foreign-Born by State: 1996

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.

Table B.

Selected Characteristics of Natives and the Foreign-Born Population by Citizenship and by Year of Entry: 1996

(Numbers in thousands)

Selected Characteristics	Total population	Natives	Foreign-Born Population						
			Citizenship			Year of Entry			
			Total	Natural- ized citizen	Not a U.S. citizen	Before 1970	1970 to 1979	1980 to 1989	1990 to 1996
Age									
Total, all ages	264,314	239,757	24,557	7,904	16,653	4,806	4,756	8,416	6,579
Under 5 years	20,069	19,777	292	38	254	0	0	2	290
5 to 15 years	43,523	41,636	1,887	198	1,689	0	4	746	1,137
16 or 17 years	7,556	7,000	556	86	470	0	22	290	244
18 to 24 years	24,843	22,109	2,734	364	2,371	0	422	997	1,314
25 to 29 years	19,462	16,817	2,645	539	2,106	56	364	1,217	1,008
30 to 34 years	21,457	18,498	2,959	621	2,338	189	515	1,446	808
35 to 44 years	43,078	37,978	5,100	1,717	3,383	562	1,637	2,041	860
45 to 64 years	52,668	47,045	5,624	2,631	2,993	2,112	1,462	1,347	701
65 years or more	31,658	28,897	2,761	1,712	1,050	1,888	327	330	217
Median age (years)	33.9	33.4	37.4	48.0	33.1	60.1	41.4	33.3	26.6
Sex									
Male	129,143	117,118	12,025	3,728	8,297	2,070	2,293	4,357	3,304
Female	135,171	122,639	12,532	4,176	8,356	2,735	2,463	4,059	3,275
Race									
White	218,442	201,814	16,629	5,010	11,619	4,124	3,177	5,242	4,087
Black	33,889	31,908	1,981	623	1,358	200	463	741	575
Asian or Pacific Islander	9,653	3,799	5,855	2,249	3,606	453	1,108	2,411	1,883
Hispanic Origin ¹	28,438	17,652	10,786	1,969	8,817	1,549	2,254	4,155	2,829
Educational Attainment									
Total 25 years and over	168,323	149,234	19,088	7,219	11,869	4,806	4,307	6,382	3,595
Not a high school graduate	30,724	23,924	6,800	1,530	5,269	1,476	1,541	2,460	1,322
HS graduate or some college	97,931	90,131	7,800	3,469	4,331	2,403	1,750	2,413	1,234
Bachelor's degree	26,540	23,695	2,845	1,427	1,418	560	668	997	621
Graduate or professional degree	13,128	11,485	1,643	793	850	366	348	512	418
Labor Force Status²									
Total 16 years and over	200,722	178,343	22,378	7,669	14,710	4,806	4,752	7,668	5,153
In the civilian labor force	132,324	118,025	14,298	4,883	9,416	2,295	3,513	5,440	3,051
Employed	124,513	111,309	13,203	4,674	8,530	2,182	3,289	5,032	2,701
Unemployed	7,811	6,716	1,095	209	886	113	224	408	350
Not in the labor force	67,600	59,562	8,039	2,750	5,289	2,504	1,211	2,224	2,101
Income in 1995									
Total 16 years and over	200,722	178,343	22,378	7,669	14,710	4,806	4,752	7,668	5,153
Without income	14,018	10,712	3,308	492	2,815	280	421	1,202	1,401
With income	186,704	167,631	19,070	7,177	11,895	4,526	4,331	6,466	3,752
\$1 to \$9,999 or less	59,534	52,571	6,962	2,060	4,902	1,563	1,349	2,269	1,782
\$10,000 to \$19,999	45,270	39,878	5,392	1,795	3,597	1,208	1,103	2,008	1,074
\$20,000 to \$34,999	42,041	38,394	3,646	1,565	2,082	837	949	1,330	531
\$35,000 to \$49,999	20,281	18,726	1,555	828	727	398	494	470	194
\$50,000 or more	19,578	18,062	1,515	929	587	520	436	389	171
Median income	\$17,470	\$17,835	\$14,772	\$18,515	\$12,907	\$15,795	\$17,403	\$14,801	\$10,875
With means-tested cash benefits³									
Received AFDC	9,278	7,983	1,295	291	1,004	220	261	501	313
Received SSI	3,788	3,259	529	72	458	18	103	257	151
Received SSI	4,808	4,145	662	188	475	183	135	227	117
Received general welfare	1,217	1,042	175	41	134	23	33	48	71
Poverty Status⁴									
In poverty	36,425	30,972	5,452	833	4,619	478	800	1,989	2,186
Not in poverty	227,308	208,233	19,075	7,071	12,004	4,328	3,957	6,417	4,373
Homeownership									
In owner-occupied unit	178,866	167,379	11,487	5,559	5,828	3,631	2,898	3,506	1,451
In renter-occupied unit	85,448	72,378	13,070	2,346	10,725	1,175	1,858	4,910	5,128

¹Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race. ²Includes persons in the Armed Forces, not shown separately.³Does not include any noncash benefits such as food stamps. Some receive benefits from more than one program.⁴Poverty status cannot be determined for some persons under 16, such as foster children.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.

Table B.

Selected Characteristics of Natives and the Foreign-Born Population by Citizenship and by Year of Entry: 1996—Con.

(In percent)

Selected Characteristics	Total population	Natives	Foreign-Born Population						
			Total	Citizenship		Year of Entry			
				Natural-ized citizen	Not a U.S. citizen	Before 1970	1970 to 1979	1980 to 1989	1990 to 1996
Age									
Total, all ages	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Under 5 years	7.6	8.2	1.2	0.5	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.4
5 to 15 years	16.5	17.4	7.7	2.5	10.1	0.0	0.1	8.9	17.3
16 or 17 years	2.9	2.9	2.3	1.1	2.8	0.0	0.5	3.4	3.7
18 to 24 years	9.4	9.2	11.1	4.6	14.2	0.0	8.9	11.8	20.0
25 to 29 years	7.4	7.0	10.8	6.8	12.6	1.2	7.7	14.5	15.3
30 to 34 years	8.1	7.7	12.0	7.9	14.0	3.9	10.8	17.2	12.3
35 to 44 years	16.3	15.8	20.8	21.7	20.3	11.7	34.4	24.3	13.1
45 to 64 years	19.9	19.6	22.9	33.3	18.0	43.9	30.7	16.0	10.7
65 years or more	12.0	12.1	11.2	21.7	6.3	39.3	6.9	3.9	3.3
Sex									
Male	48.9	48.8	49.0	47.2	49.8	43.1	48.2	51.8	50.2
Female	51.1	51.2	51.0	52.8	50.2	56.9	51.8	48.2	49.8
Race									
White	82.6	84.2	67.7	63.4	69.8	85.8	66.8	62.3	62.1
Black	12.8	13.3	8.1	7.9	8.2	4.2	9.7	8.8	8.7
Asian or Pacific Islander	3.7	1.6	23.8	28.5	21.7	9.4	23.3	28.6	28.6
Hispanic Origin ¹	10.8	7.4	43.9	24.9	52.9	32.2	47.4	49.4	43.0
Educational Attainment									
Total 25 years and over	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Not a high school graduate	18.3	16.0	35.6	21.2	44.4	30.7	35.8	38.5	36.8
HS graduate or some college	58.2	60.4	40.9	48.1	36.5	50.0	40.6	37.8	34.3
Bachelor's degree	15.8	15.9	14.9	19.8	11.9	11.7	15.5	15.6	17.3
Graduate or professional degree	7.8	7.7	8.6	11.0	7.2	7.6	8.1	8.0	11.6
Labor Force Status ²									
Total 16 years and over	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
In the civilian labor force	65.9	66.2	63.9	63.7	64.0	47.8	73.9	70.9	59.2
Employed	62.0	62.4	59.0	60.9	58.0	45.4	69.2	65.6	52.4
Unemployed	3.9	3.8	4.9	2.7	6.0	2.4	4.7	5.3	6.8
Not in the labor force	33.7	33.4	35.9	35.9	36.0	52.1	25.5	29.0	40.8
Income in 1995									
Total 16 years and over	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Without income	7.0	6.0	14.8	6.4	19.1	5.8	8.9	15.7	27.2
With income	93.0	94.0	85.2	93.6	80.9	94.2	91.1	84.3	72.8
\$1 to \$9,999 or less	29.7	29.5	31.1	26.9	33.3	32.5	28.4	29.6	34.6
\$10,000 to \$19,999	22.6	22.4	24.1	23.4	24.5	25.1	23.2	26.2	20.8
\$20,000 to \$34,999	20.9	21.5	16.3	20.4	14.2	17.4	20.0	17.3	10.3
\$35,000 to \$49,999	10.1	10.5	6.9	10.8	4.9	8.3	10.4	6.1	3.8
\$50,000 or more	9.8	10.1	6.8	12.1	4.0	10.8	9.2	5.1	3.3
With means-tested cash benefits ³									
Received AFDC	4.6	4.5	5.8	3.8	6.8	4.6	5.5	6.5	6.1
Received SSI	1.9	1.8	2.4	0.9	3.1	0.4	2.2	3.4	2.9
Received general welfare	2.4	2.3	3.0	2.5	3.2	3.8	2.8	3.0	2.3
Received general welfare	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.5	0.9	0.5	0.7	0.6	1.4
Poverty Status ⁴									
In poverty	13.8	12.9	22.2	10.5	27.8	9.9	16.8	23.7	33.3
Not in poverty	86.2	87.1	77.8	89.5	72.2	90.1	83.2	76.3	66.7
Homeownership									
In owner-occupied unit	67.7	69.8	46.8	70.3	35.2	75.6	60.9	41.7	22.1
In renter-occupied unit	32.3	30.2	53.2	29.7	64.8	24.4	39.1	58.3	77.9

¹Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race. ²Includes persons in the Armed Forces, not shown separately.³Does not include any noncash benefits such as food stamps. Some receive benefits from more than one program.⁴Poverty status cannot be determined for some persons under 16, such as foster children.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.

and 8.1 percent are Black. The remainder reported their race as “American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut”. Over 40 percent of all foreign-born persons are of Hispanic origin.² In comparison, 84.2 percent of natives are White, 13.3 percent are Black, and 1.6 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander. Only 7.4 percent of natives are of Hispanic origin.

Foreign-born Asian and Pacific Islanders have higher rates of naturalization than foreign-born Hispanics. At least two-thirds of each group have lived in the United States long enough to qualify for naturalization (they arrived before 1990). While 38.4 percent of the foreign-born Asian and Pacific Islanders are naturalized citizens, only 18.3 of foreign-born Hispanics have been naturalized. This lower rate of naturalization among Hispanics may result from their relatively low educational attainment compared with many Asian and Pacific Islanders, larger numbers being undocumented and afraid to apply for citizenship, or a desire among many to return “home” eventually.

Educational Attainment

Educational attainment of the foreign-born population is correlated with citizenship. Foreign-born persons 25 years and over are just as likely as natives to have a college degree (23.5 percent compared with 23.6 percent). But naturalized citizens are more likely to have college degrees (30.8 percent) than either foreign-born persons who are not citizens (19.1 percent) or natives. At the same time, foreign-born persons as a group are also less likely to have graduated from high school than natives. Only 16.0 percent of natives over the age of 25 do not have a high school degree, compared with 35.6 percent of the foreign-born.

When educational attainment of the foreign-born is disaggregated by year of entry, the most recent arrivals (those who came to this country during the 1990’s) have the highest percentage of persons with college

degrees — 28.9 percent. Many of them (11.6 percent of the recent arrivals) have graduate or professional degrees.

Labor Force Status

The foreign-born population as a whole had a higher unemployment rate in March 1996 than natives (4.9 percent compared with 3.8 percent). However, the unemployment rate of naturalized citizens (2.7 percent) was lower than that of natives, while the rate for foreign-born persons who are not citizens was higher (6.0 percent).

Foreign-born people who arrived before 1970 have a lower unemployment rate (2.4 percent) than more recent arrivals, but that may be more a reflection of their older age structure than a direct result of the length of time they have been in the United States. In addition to having a much lower unemployment rate than either natives or later arrivals, those who entered before 1970 also have a much higher percentage of persons not in the labor force — 52.1 percent compared with 33.4 percent for natives.

Income in 1995

Foreign-born persons as a group had a lower median income in 1995 than natives (\$14,772 compared with \$17,835). However, there is no significant difference between the median incomes of foreign-born persons who came during the 1970’s and natives. Recent arrivals have the lowest median income (\$10,875) of the foreign-born groups.

Because foreign-born people who came to the United States before 1970 are, on average, older than the more recent arrivals, the former group includes larger numbers of retirees. As a result, the median income for those entering before 1970 (\$15,795) is smaller than those of either natives (\$17,835) or the foreign born who arrived during the 1970’s (\$17,403).

Poverty Status

The foreign-born as a whole have a much higher poverty rate than natives (22.2 compared with 12.9

percent), while the most recent arrivals have the highest rate (33.3 percent). Only persons who arrived prior to 1970 are less likely than natives to be in poverty (9.9 percent).

Public Assistance Income

Participation in programs for those with low incomes is another measure of how well or poorly a person or group is doing economically. The CPS includes data on the three major sources of means-tested cash benefits — Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and general welfare. The total receiving means-tested cash assistance includes persons 16 years and over who received income from one or more of these three sources.

Foreign-born persons were more likely to receive one or more of these types of cash public assistance than natives (5.8 percent compared with 4.5 percent). However, the rates decline as length of residence increases. While 6.3 percent of the foreign-born who entered the United States after 1979 received some form of cash public assistance in 1995, the rates for foreign-born persons who have been here more than 15 years are no different from those of natives.

Non-Cash Benefits

The most widely received means-tested non-cash benefit is food stamps. While there is a slight difference in the percentages of all natives and foreign-born persons who receive this benefit, elderly foreign-born persons are much more likely to depend on food stamps than elderly natives.

While foreign-born persons as a whole are no more likely to be enrolled in Medicaid than are natives, foreign-born people over the age of 65 are more likely to participate. A likely explanation is that more of the elderly foreign-born have not worked in the United States long enough to be eligible for Medicare, which covers 99 percent of elderly natives.

There are two ways that the poor get direct assistance with housing costs — some live in public housing

² While persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race, most report their race as White.

Table C.

Percent Receiving Selected Means-Tested Non-Cash Benefits: 1996

Selected Benefits	Natives	Foreign-Born
Receiving food stamps	10.5	11.9
65 years and over	4.3	8.5
Enrolled in Medicaid.	12.0	12.6
65 years and over.	7.7	21.2
In public housing	2.8	3.1
In rent subsidized housing	1.6	1.8

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.

projects and others receive rent subsidies. The foreign-born are no more likely to receive housing assistance than natives, and only very small percentages of either group receive it.

Homeownership

Over two-thirds of natives live in owner-occupied housing units, compared with less than half of the foreign-born. However, homeownership among the foreign-born increases with length of residence. Persons who arrived before 1970 have higher homeownership rates than natives, while only 22.1 percent of the most recent arrivals are living in their own homes.

Source of the Data

In 1994, the Bureau of the Census began collecting nativity data on the Current Population Survey (CPS). Beginning in January 1994, all persons in sample were asked their

country of birth and their parents' countries of birth. Persons born outside the United States were also asked their citizenship status and year of entry into the United States. In subsequent months, the nativity questions were only asked for persons in new sample households and for persons without data from the previous month.

More Information

A package of tables showing detailed characteristics of the foreign-born by country of birth and selected States for 1996 is available on two floppy disks for \$40 (PE-54) or on paper for \$54 (PPL-59). A detailed package of tables for 1995 is also available on two floppy disks for \$40 (PE-53) or on paper for \$55 (PPL-58). Both table packages can be purchased from the Population Division's Statistical Information Office (301-457-2422). The 1995 and 1996 table packages are also available on the Internet (www.census.gov); look in "Subjects A-Z" under the letter "F" for data on the "Foreign-born". Technical information about the collection, processing, and quality of the nativity data from the CPS is available in "Comparison of the Nativity Data from the Current Population Survey with the 1990 Census and INS Data" by J. Gregory Robinson (301-457-2103).

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Accuracy of the Estimates

All statistics are subject to sampling error, as well as non-sampling error such as survey design flaws, respondent classification and reporting errors, data processing mistakes, and undercoverage. The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors in the form of quality control and editing procedures to reduce errors made by respondents, coders, and interviewers. Ratio estimation to independent age-race-sex population controls partially corrects for bias due to undercoverage in the survey. However, biases exist in the estimates when missed persons have characteristics different from those of interviewed persons in the same age-race-sex group.

Analytical statements in this report have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources. Contact Don Keathley, Demographic Statistical Methods Division, at 301-457-4214 or on the Internet at dkeathley@census.gov for information on the source of data, the accuracy of estimates, the use of standard errors, and the computation of standard errors for estimates in this publication.