

European Immigrants in the United States

August 1, 2018 SPOTLIGHT | By Elijah Alperin and Jeanne Batalova

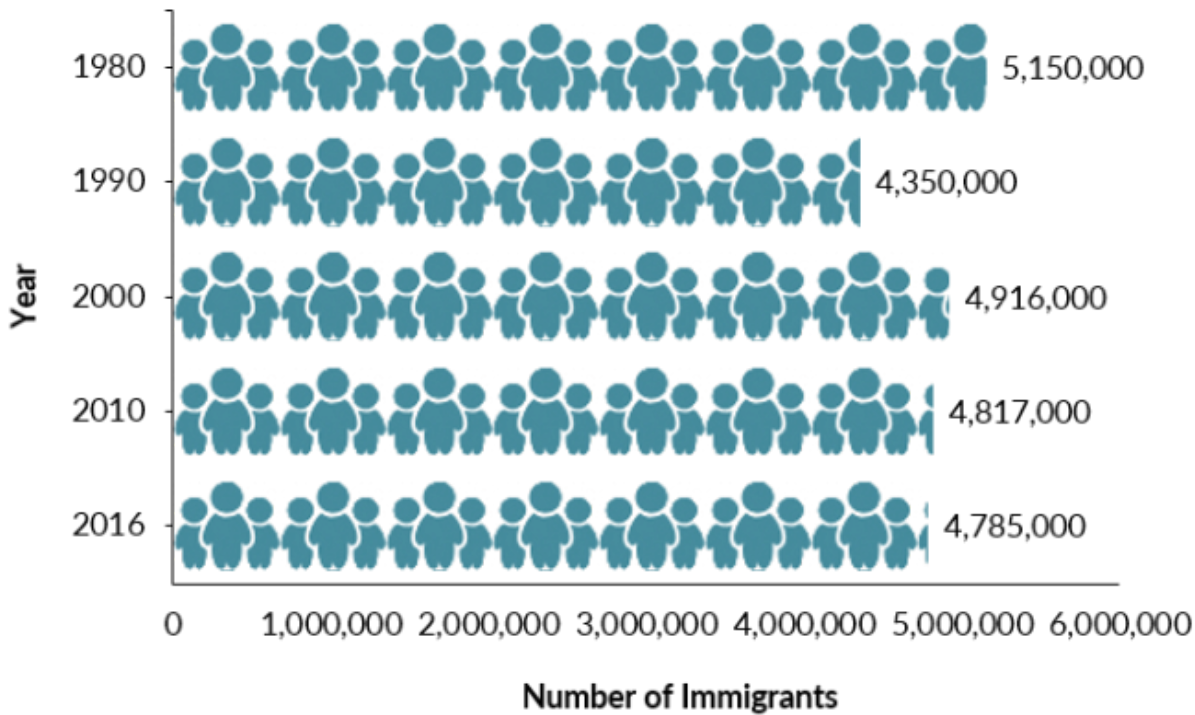
After long constituting the bulk of migration to the United States, European immigration has largely declined since 1960. Following the end of communism in the 1990s, European arrivals slightly increased, but the population has more recently begun to shrink again. In 2016, about 4.8 million Europeans lived in the United States, accounting for 11 percent of the roughly 44 million U.S. immigrants—down from 75 percent in 1960.

The first significant European immigration wave, spanning the 16th to 18th centuries, consisted mostly of settlers from the British Isles attracted by economic opportunity and religious freedom. These early immigrants were a mix of well-to-do individuals and indentured servants. Irish, German, and Scandinavian immigrants arriving during the 1840s and 1850s made up the second wave of European immigration, fleeing famine, religious persecution, and political conflicts. Unlike the first Europeans, who were mostly Protestants, the new arrivals were overwhelmingly Catholic. They came from much poorer backgrounds and were younger and less skilled.

After a pause in European immigration during the U.S. Civil War, more than 20 million immigrants arrived—primarily from Southern and Eastern Europe—between 1880 and 1920. Most Southern European immigrants were motivated by economic opportunity in the United States, while Eastern Europeans (primarily Jews) fled religious persecution. World War I slowed European immigration, and the national-origin quotas established in 1921 and 1924—which gave priority to Western and Northern Europeans—coupled with the Great Depression and the onset of World War II brought immigration from Europe to a near halt.

Even though the 1965 Immigration Act did away with country quotas, by then fewer Europeans were seeking to cross the Atlantic either because their economic fortunes had improved during postwar reconstruction or because their communist governments restricted emigration. The fall of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s ushered in the most recent wave of European immigration, dominated by people from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The number of European immigrants in the United States has declined slightly since 2000 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. European Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980–2016



Sources: Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2006, 2010, and 2016 American Community Surveys (ACS), and Campbell J. Gibson and Emily Lennon, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States: 1850-1990" (Working Paper no. 29, 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.

Of the 61.2 million European migrants worldwide in 2017, the majority (67 percent) lived in other European countries, followed by the United States (8 percent), Kazakhstan (5 percent), and Australia and Canada (4 percent each), according to United Nations Population Division estimates. **[Click here](#)** to view an interactive map showing where migrants from individual European countries have settled.

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.

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

The U.S. Census Bureau defines European regions as:

Northern Europe includes Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Western Europe includes Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, the Netherlands, and Switzerland.

Southern Europe includes Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, and Spain.

Eastern Europe includes Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia.

Russia may include other republics of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics not elsewhere classified. In this Spotlight, Czechoslovakia is reported separately from the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

In 2016, most Europeans who obtained lawful permanent residence in the United States (also known as getting a green card) did so as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens or through employment channels. Compared to the overall foreign- and native-born populations, European immigrants on average are significantly older and more educated and have higher household incomes, though they are less likely to participate in the labor force. Sociodemographic and economic characteristics vary considerably by European country of birth, however.

Using data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the most recent 2016 American Community Survey [ACS] as well as pooled 2012–16 ACS data), the Department of Homeland Security’s *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, and the World Bank’s annual remittance data, this Spotlight provides information on the European population in the United States, focusing on its size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Click on the bullet points below for more information:

- **[Regions and Countries of Origin](#)**
- **[Distribution by State and Key Cities](#)**
- **[English Proficiency](#)**
- **[Age, Education, and Employment](#)**
- **[Income and Poverty](#)**
- **[Immigration Pathways and Naturalization](#)**
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Regions and Countries of Origin

In 2016, Eastern European immigrants accounted for the largest share of all Europeans in the United States, at 44 percent (see Table 1). Northern and Western Europeans made up about 20 percent each. The top five origin countries were the United Kingdom, Germany, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine.

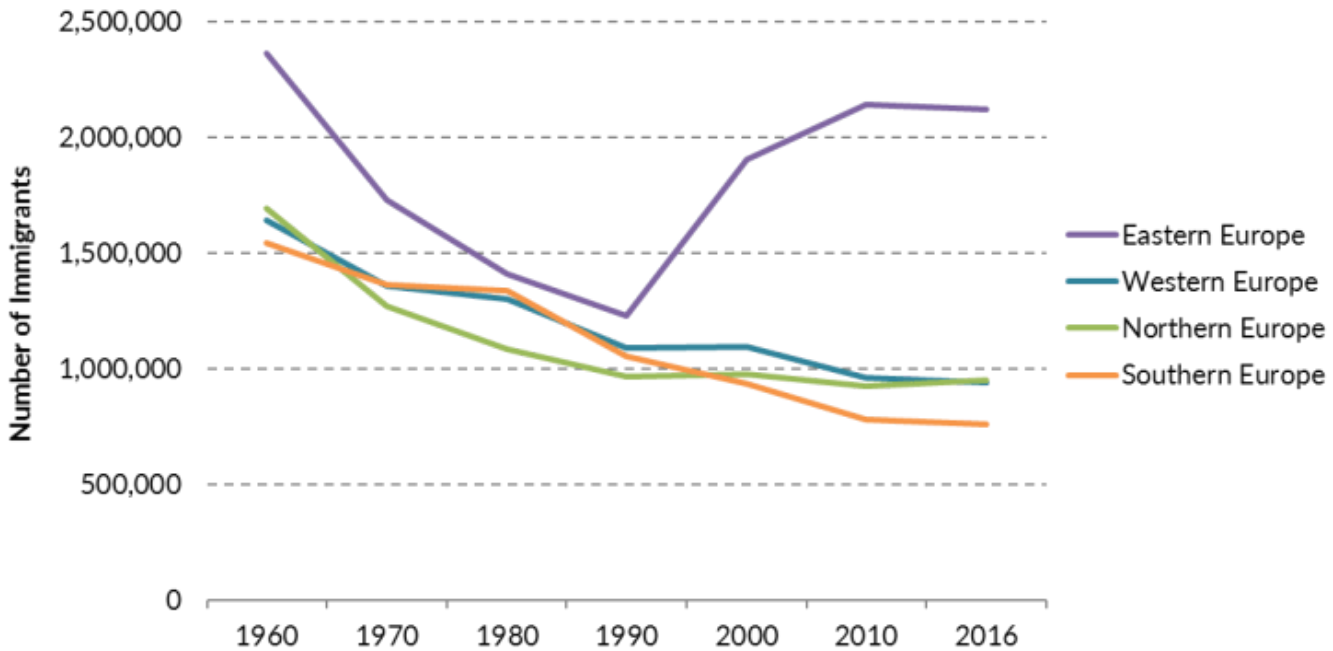
Table 1. European Immigrants by Region and Top Countries of Origin, 2016

Region and Country	Number of Immigrants	Percent (%)
Europe Total	4,785,000	100
Eastern Europe	2,123,000	44
Poland	425,000	9
Russia	397,000	8
Ukraine	348,000	7
Romania	162,000	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina	102,000	2
Northern Europe	951,000	20
United Kingdom	697,000	15
Ireland	126,000	3
Western Europe	939,000	20
Germany	564,000	12
France	175,000	4
Southern Europe	760,000	16
Italy	336,000	7
Portugal	177,000	4
Greece	135,000	3
Spain	106,000	2
Other Europe	12,000	< 1

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 ACS.

Between 1990 and 2010, the number of Eastern European immigrants increased significantly due to the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia (see Figure 2). Over the same period, the population of Europeans from other parts of the continent continued to decrease.

Figure 2. European Immigrants in the United States, by Region of Birth, 1960–2016



Note: The increase in Eastern European immigration from 1990 to 2010 is particularly noteworthy, given that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. Census Bureau reclassified some former Soviet Republics such as Armenia and Kazakhstan as part of Asia rather than Eastern Europe.

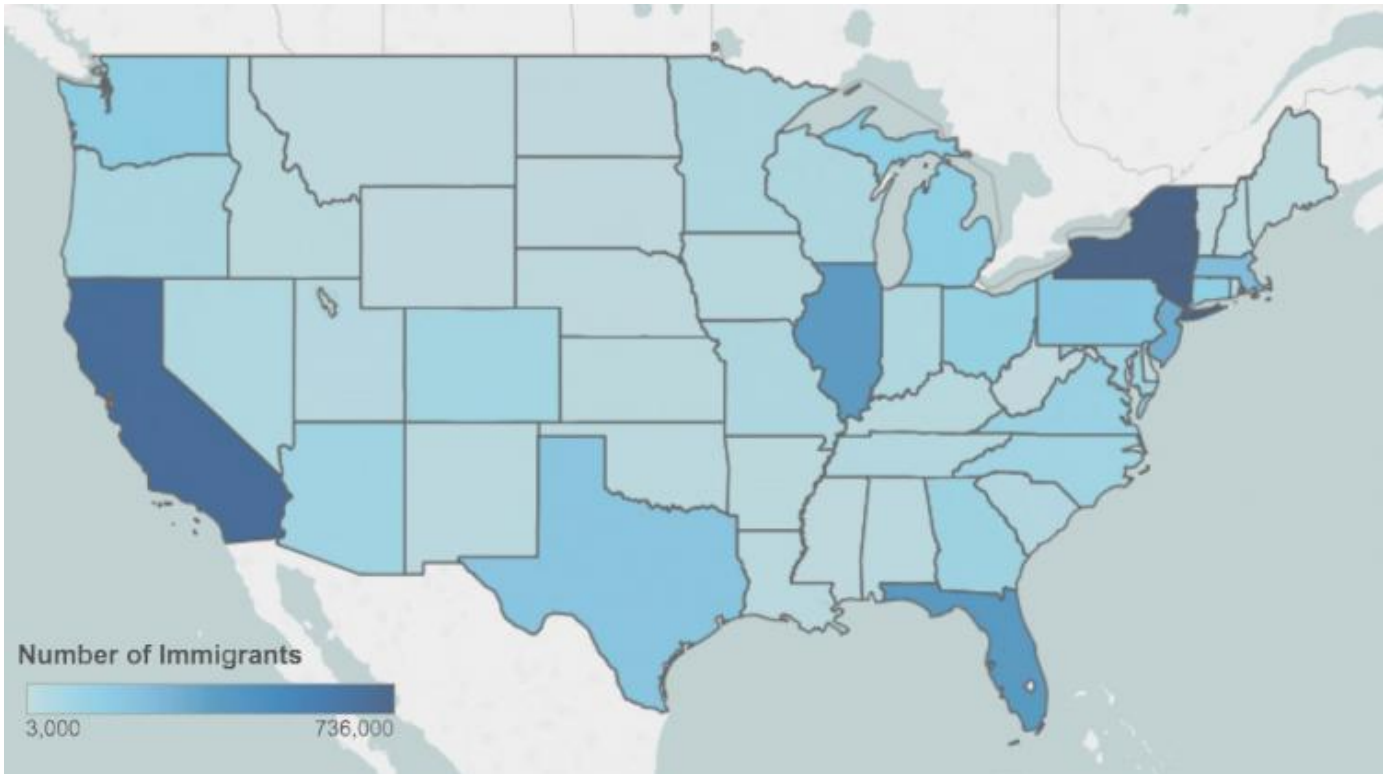
Source: Data from U.S. Census Bureau 2010 and 2016 American Community Surveys (ACS), and Campbell J. Gibson and Kay Jung, “Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-born Population of the United States: 1850-2000” (Working Paper no. 81, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, February 2006), [available online](#).

Click here for an interactive chart showing changes in the number of immigrants from Europe in the United States over time. Select individual European countries from the dropdown menu.

Distribution by State and Key Cities

In the 2012–16 period, 45 percent of immigrants from Europe lived in one of four states: New York (15 percent), California (14 percent), and Florida and Illinois (8 percent each). The top four counties by European population were Cook County in Illinois, Kings County in New York, Los Angeles County in California, and Queens County in New York. Together, these counties accounted for about 15 percent of Europeans in the United States.

Figure 3. Top States of Residence for Europeans in the United States, 2012–16

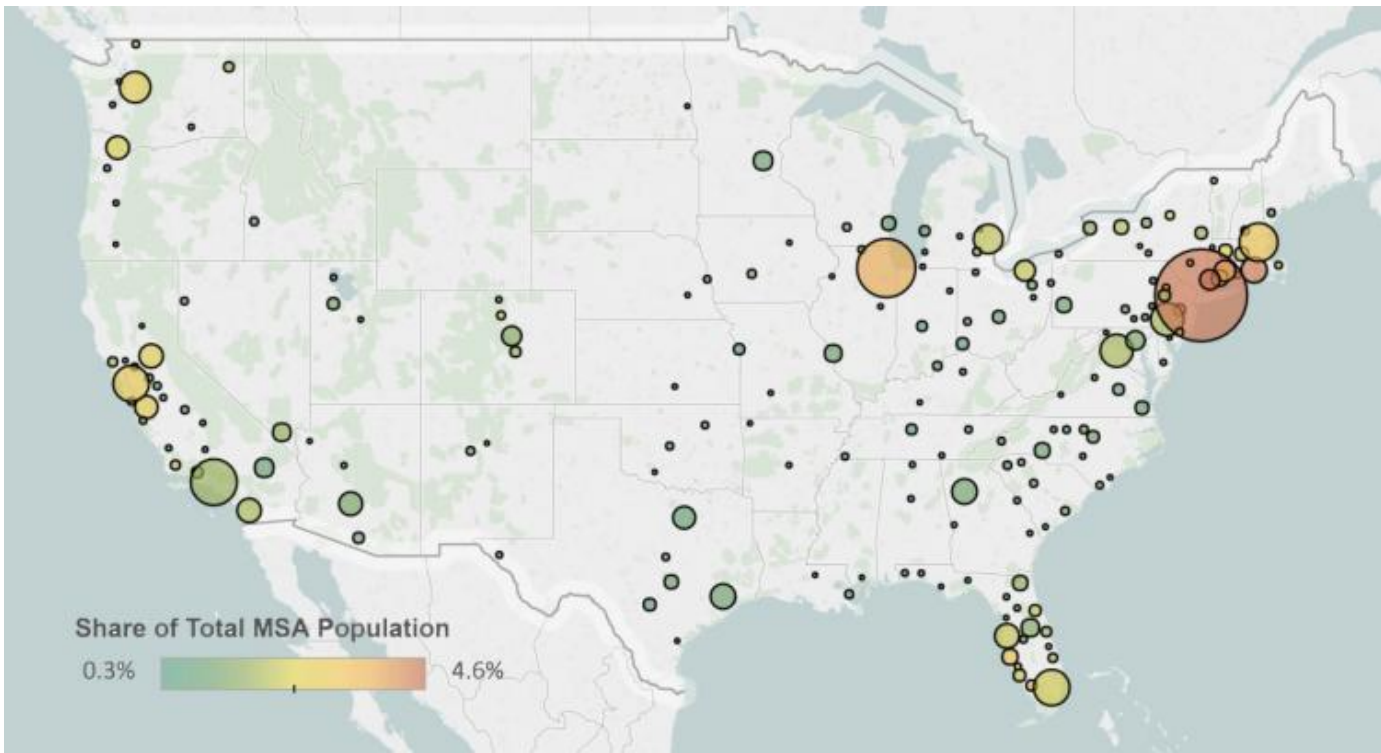


Note: Pooled 2012–16 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state level for smaller-population geographies. Not shown are the populations in Alaska and Hawaii, which are small in size; for details, visit the MPI Data Hub to view an interactive map showing geographic distribution 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 Europeans were the greater New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles metropolitan areas, which together accounted for about 31 percent of Europeans in the United States (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Top Metropolitan Areas of Residence for Europeans 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 are the populations in Alaska and Hawaii, which are small in size.

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

Table 2. Top Concentrations of Europeans by Metropolitan Area, 2012–16

Metropolitan Area	Immigrant Population from Europe	% of Metro Area Population
New York–Newark–Jersey City, NY–NJ–PA	896,000	4.5
Chicago–Naperville–Elgin, IL–IN–WI	360,000	3.8
Los Angeles–Long Beach–Anaheim, CA	224,000	1.7
Boston–Cambridge–Newton, MA–NH	154,000	3.3
Miami–Fort Lauderdale–West Palm Beach, FL	135,000	2.3
San Francisco–Oakland–Hayward, CA	135,000	2.9
Philadelphia–Camden–Wilmington, PA–NJ–DE–MD	114,000	1.9
Washington–Arlington–Alexandria, DC–VA–MD–WV	112,000	1.9
Seattle–Tacoma–Bellevue, WA	100,000	2.7
Detroit–Warren–Dearborn, MI	90,000	2.1

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 individual countries and regions.

English Proficiency

Europeans are much more likely to be proficient in English and to speak English at home than the overall foreign-born population. In 2016, approximately 26 percent of European immigrants ages 5 and over were Limited English Proficient (LEP), compared to 49 percent of all foreign born. Immigrants from Eastern Europe were the most likely to be LEP (40 percent), followed by those from Southern Europe (37 percent) and Western Europe (10 percent), while Northern Europeans were the least likely (2 percent).

At the country level, immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus were the most likely to be LEP (49 percent each), followed by those from Bosnia and Portugal (47 percent each). Meanwhile, less than 10 percent of immigrants from Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden reported being LEP. This list includes countries where English is a lingua franca in business and education.

Approximately 35 percent of all European immigrants spoke only English at home, versus 16 percent of all immigrants.

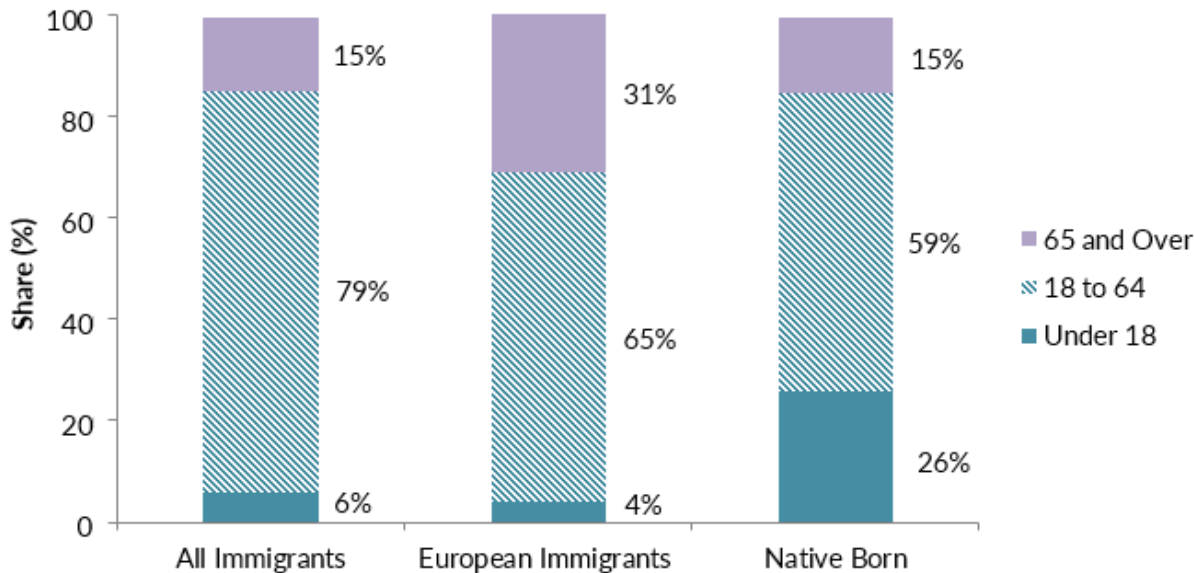
Note: Limited English Proficient refers to those who indicated on the ACS questionnaire that they spoke English less than “very well.”

Age, Education, and Employment

European immigrants are significantly older than the overall foreign- and native-born populations. The median age of European immigrants in 2016 was 53 years, compared to 44 for all immigrants and 36 for the U.S. born. European immigrants were more than twice as likely to be seniors (ages 65 and over) compared to the foreign- and U.S.-born populations (see Figure 5).

However, age distribution varies considerably by origin group. Eastern European immigrants are overwhelmingly of working age, particularly those from Bosnia (88 percent), Albania (86 percent), Bulgaria (84 percent), and Moldova and Macedonia (82 percent each). Meanwhile around half of the foreign born from several countries were 65 or over, including Czechoslovakia (59 percent), Austria and Italy (54 percent each), Latvia (52 percent), Hungary (50 percent each), Greece (49 percent), and Germany (48 percent).

Figure 5. Age Distribution of the U.S. Population by Origin, 2016



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 2016 ACS.

Europeans ages 25 and over have much higher educational attainment compared to the native- and overall foreign-born populations. In 2016, approximately 42 percent of European immigrants had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to about 32 percent of the U.S. born and 30 percent of all immigrants.

The top European immigrant groups by share with a college degree were Belarus (67 percent), Bulgaria and Russia (65 percent), and Finland (60 percent). More than half of immigrants from France, Belgium, Sweden, Switzerland, Iceland, Slovakia, Latvia, Spain, and Ukraine were also college graduates. Meanwhile less than one-quarter of those from Italy (23 percent), Bosnia (22 percent), Montenegro (17 percent), and Portugal (13 percent) held college degrees. In 2016, less than 13 percent of European immigrants had not finished high school, compared to 29 percent of all immigrants and 9 percent of U.S.-born adults.

The high educational attainment of European immigrants overall can be explained by the high levels of education in origin countries as well as the channels through which these immigrants enter the United States. Many arrive as international college students or high-skilled temporary workers on H-1B visas, who later apply for a green card.

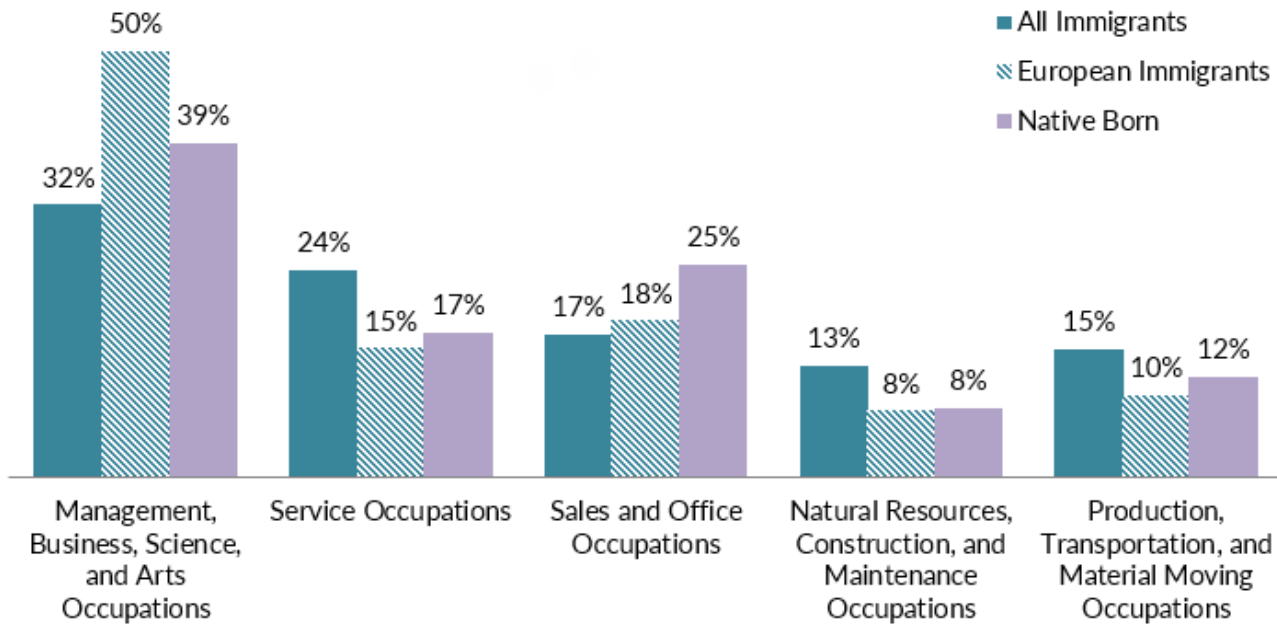
In the 2016-17 school year (SY), approximately 81,200 international students from Europe studied in the United States, out of 1 million international students. The top European origin countries were the United Kingdom (11,500 international students), Germany (10,200), France (8,800), Spain (7,200), and Russia (5,400).

Several European countries were among the top 20 countries of origin for immigrants receiving coveted H-1B visas in fiscal year (FY) 2017. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and Spain jointly accounted for 2 percent of the 366,000 petitions for initial and for continuing employment that were approved by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Most H-1B petitions, 76 percent, went to Indian nationals.

Europeans participate in the labor force at a lower rate than both the native- and overall foreign-born populations. In 2016, about 58 percent of Europeans ages 16 and over were in the civilian labor force,

compared to 66 percent of all immigrants and 62 percent of the native born. Half of all Europeans were employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations, a much higher share than the overall foreign- and native-born populations (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2016



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 ACS.

While a sizable share of European immigrants are in management occupations, the primary occupation varies by country of origin. Around one-third of immigrants from Montenegro (34 percent) and Albania (33 percent) were employed in service occupations in 2016, while more than one-quarter of their peers from Bosnia (26 percent) were in production, transportation, and material-moving occupations. Meanwhile around 70 percent of the foreign born from Finland (72 percent), Belgium, and Iceland (68 percent each) were employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations.

Income and Poverty

European immigrants have significantly higher incomes than the native born and foreign born overall. In 2016, households headed by a European immigrant had a median income of \$64,000, compared to \$54,000 and \$58,000 for all immigrant and U.S.-born households, respectively.

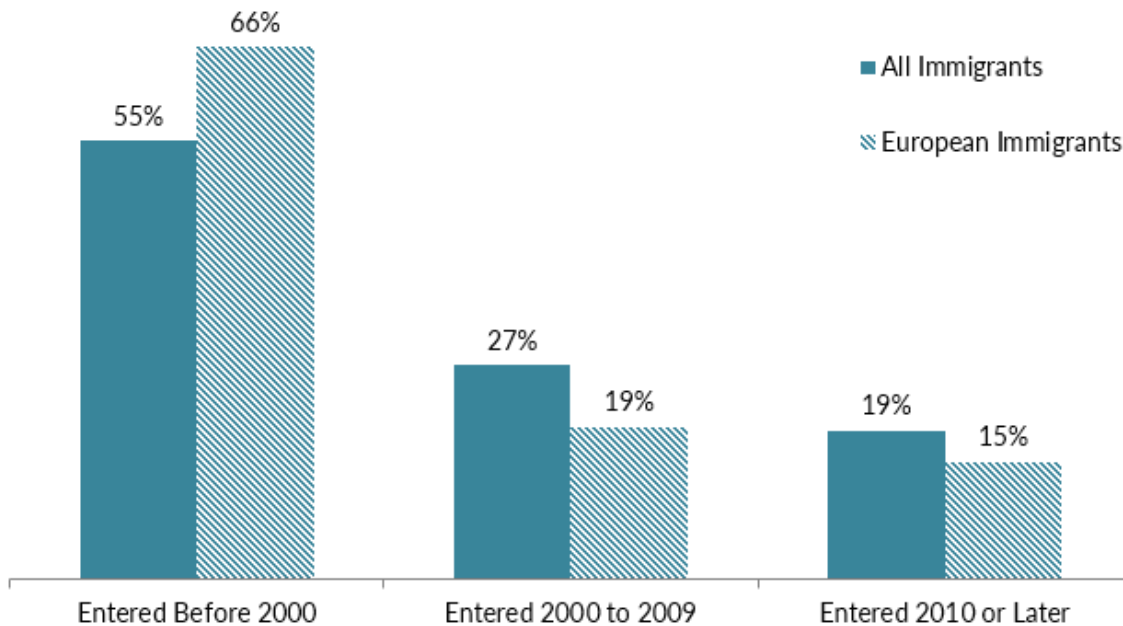
In 2016, just 10 percent of Europeans were living in poverty, a lower rate than the 14 percent for the native born and 17 percent for immigrants overall. Poverty levels also varied by country of origin, with 17 percent of immigrants from Ukraine and 6 percent to 7 percent of those from the Netherlands, Slovakia, and Ireland living in poverty.

Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

European immigrants are more likely than the overall foreign-born population to be naturalized citizens. About 65 percent of European immigrants residing in the United States had acquired U.S. citizenship as of 2016, compared to 49 percent of all immigrants. Immigrants from Croatia (83 percent), Bosnia, Latvia, Greece, and Hungary (79 percent each) were the most likely to be naturalized, while those from Spain, Sweden (41 percent each), and Denmark (40 percent) were the least likely to be U.S. citizens.

In general, Europeans have resided in the United States longer than the total immigrant population. The largest share, approximately 66 percent, arrived prior to 2000 (see Figure 7). In contrast, a sizeable share of Spanish (38 percent), Swedish, and French (31 percent each) immigrants arrived since 2010, compared to 4 percent of those from Bosnia.

Figure 7. Europeans and All Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2016

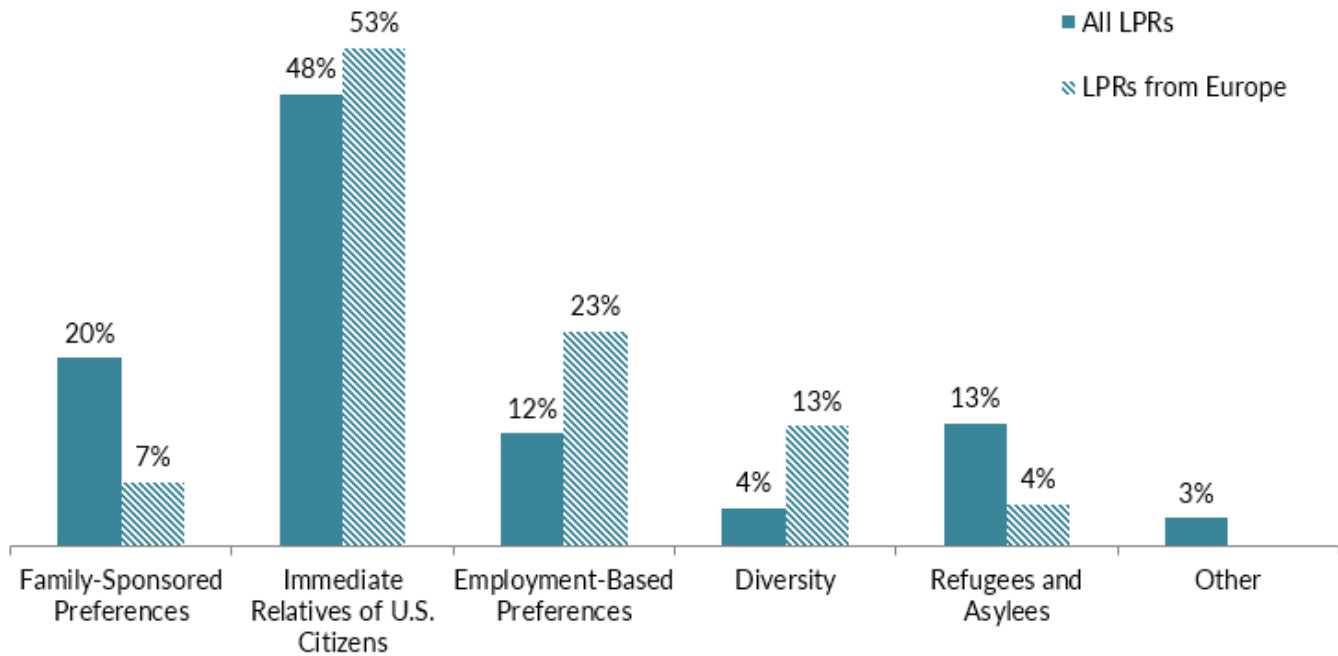


Note: Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 ACS.

Most Europeans who obtain green cards do so through family reunification channels. In FY 2016, 60 percent of the roughly 94,000 Europeans who became lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders) did so as immediate relatives or other family members of U.S. citizens, a lower share than the 68 percent of all new green-card holders. In contrast, a greater share of Europeans versus immigrants overall obtained their green cards through employment channels and the Diversity Visa lottery (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Immigration Pathways of European 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.

Source: 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](#).

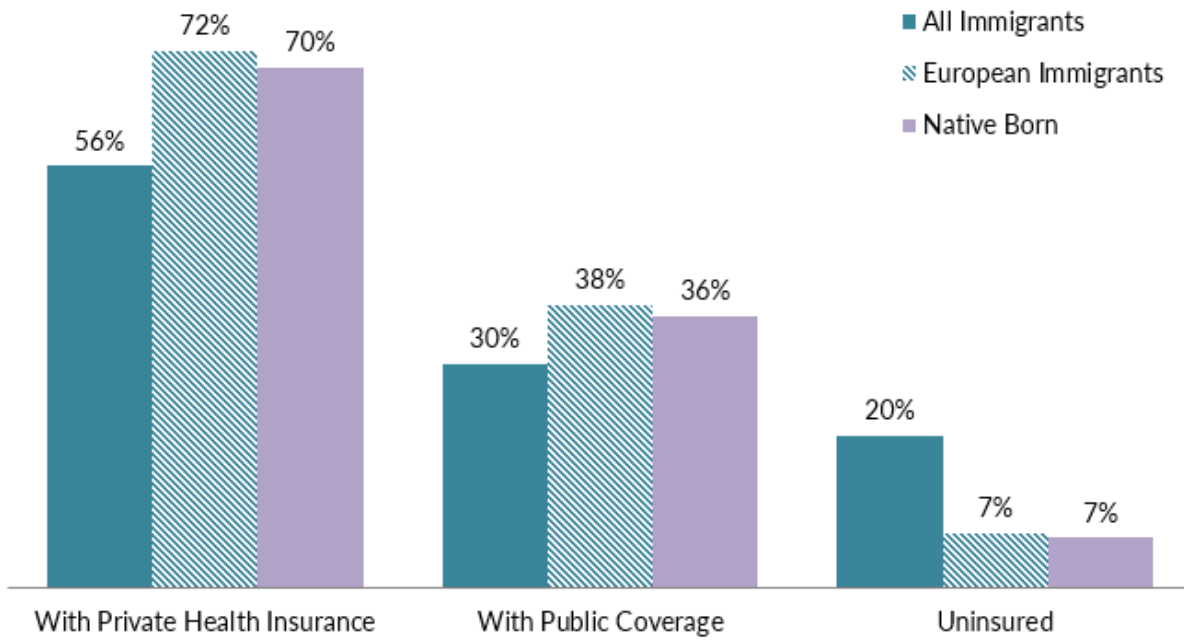
However, immigration pathways varied by country of origin. Roughly half of immigrants from Luxembourg, France, Denmark (47 percent each), Finland (46 percent), and Belgium (45 percent) gained green cards via employment-based preferences. On the other hand, 46 percent of new LPRs from Malta, and 28 percent each from the former Serbia and Montenegro and the former Soviet Union qualified as refugees or asylees. A significant share of Eastern Europeans received their green cards through the Diversity Visa lottery, including those from Moldova (49 percent), Belarus (37 percent), Albania (30 percent), Bulgaria (27 percent), and Macedonia (21 percent).

About 4,900 unauthorized Europeans were active participants of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, out of 702,250 immigrants participating overall, according to May 2018 data from USCIS. The top five European countries by DACA participation are Poland (1,380 recipients), Portugal (500), the United Kingdom (500), Italy (350), and Germany (220).

Health Coverage

European immigrants were more likely to have health insurance coverage than the foreign- and U.S.-born populations, and had a similar uninsured rate as the native born (see Figure 9). Immigrants from Moldova and Albania (about 18 percent each), and Macedonia (16 percent) were more than twice as likely as Europeans overall to be uninsured.

Figure 9. Health Coverage for Europeans, All Immigrants, and the Native Born, 2016



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 European-origin diaspora in the United States is composed of approximately 133 million people who were either born in Europe or reported European ancestry, according to tabulations from the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 ACS. The European diaspora accounts for 41 percent of the 323 million people living in the United States.

The German diaspora is the largest of all major European ethnic groups, with 14 percent of all U.S. residents, or 45 million individuals, either reporting German ancestry or having been born in Germany (see Table 3). Ireland and the United Kingdom were also among the top diaspora groups, followed by Italy, France, and Poland.

Table 3. Estimates of the Top European Diaspora Groups, 2016

Country	Diaspora	Share of Total U.S. Population (%)
Germany	45,124,000	14.0
Ireland	37,513,000	11.6
United Kingdom	31,708,000	9.8
Italy	16,927,000	5.2
France	10,130,000	3.1
Poland	9,296,000	2.9
Norway	4,449,000	1.4
Netherlands	4,047,000	1.3
Sweden	3,872,000	1.2

Notes: Ireland includes individuals who identified as Irish as well as Irish-Scotch and Scotch-Irish; the United Kingdom includes individuals who identified as British, English, Scottish, Welsh, British Isles, or Anglo; France excludes individuals who identified as Basque, but includes French Canadian.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2016 ACS.

Remittances

Remittances sent to Europe have grown rapidly since 2000. In 2017, global remittances sent via formal channels to European countries equaled nearly US \$154.8 billion, up 6 percent from \$145.9 billion in 2016.

For many European countries, remittances accounted for a tiny share of GDP. In contrast, remittance dependence was higher in Moldova (22 percent), Kosovo (16 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (11 percent), and Albania (10 percent).

Figure 10. Annual Remittance Flows to Europe, 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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