

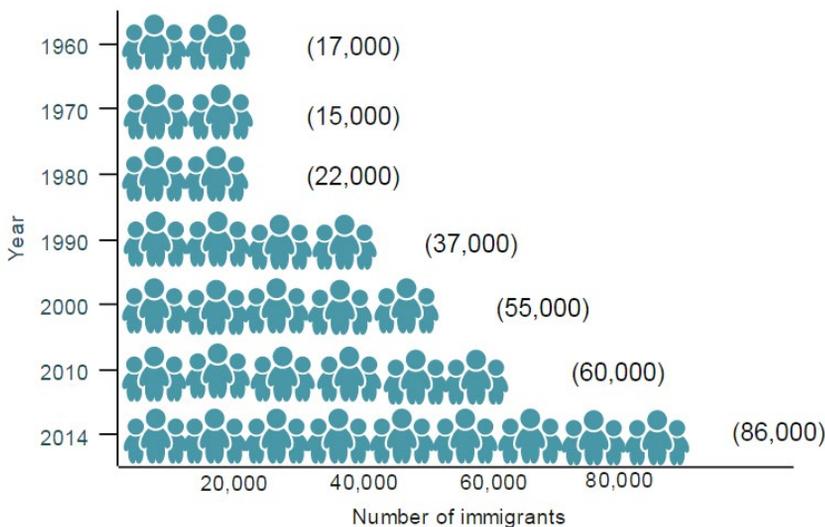
Profile of Syrian Immigrants in the United States

By Jie Zong

Approximately 86,000 Syrian immigrants resided in the United States in 2014, representing 0.2 percent of the nation's 42.4 million immigrants. Migration from Syria to the United States historically has been driven largely by political unrest and religious conflicts in the Middle East. The earliest Syrian immigrants who arrived in the United States were Christians fleeing violence between the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the Ottoman province of Syria. The second significant wave of Syrian immigration occurred as the *Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965* abolished the national-origin quotas system and opened the door to Syrians, mostly Muslims, seeking safety from war and persecution, education and employment opportunities, and family reunification.

Between 1960 and 2000, the number of Syrian immigrants in the United States more than tripled, from 17,000 to 55,000; between 2000 and 2010, the number increased a further 9 percent, to 60,000 (see Figure 1). The population witnessed faster growth (43 percent) between 2010 and 2014 as the Syrian civil war began in 2011.

Figure 1. Syrian Immigrant Population in the United States, 1960-2014



Sources: Data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 and 2014 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), www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/twps0029.html.

The majority of Syrian immigrants obtain legal permanent residence (LPR) in the United States (also known as receiving a green card) through family ties, rather than humanitarian or employment-based channels. Compared to the overall foreign and native-born populations, Syrian immigrants on average are significantly older, more highly educated, less likely to participate in the labor force as a result of lower female workforce participation, and more likely have incomes below the poverty level. However, employed Syrians are more likely to work in high-skilled occupations and have higher earnings than the overall foreign or native-born populations.

This fact sheet provides information on the Syrian immigrant population in the United States, focusing on its size, socioeconomic characteristics, and geographic distribution. To conduct the analysis, the fact sheet uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau (the most recent 2014 American Community Survey [ACS] as well as pooled 2009-13 ACS data), as well as data from the Department of State, Department of Justice, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, and the Department of Homeland Security.

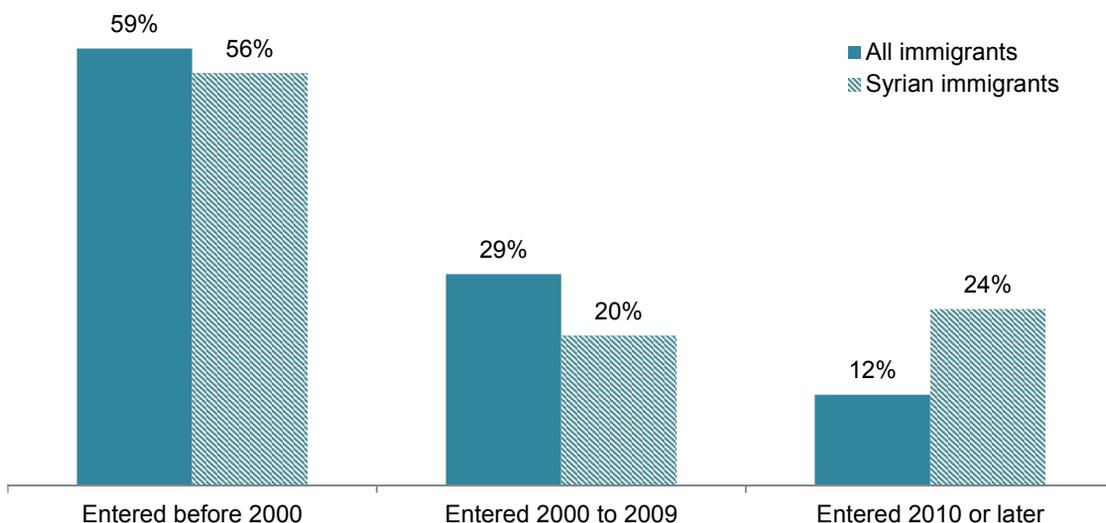
I. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Pathways

In 2014, 64 percent of Syrian immigrants residing in the United States were naturalized U.S. citizens, a much higher share than the overall immigrant population (47 percent). Syrians are more likely than other immigrants to be naturalized because larger shares of them were legally admitted, and had legal permanent residence (rather than temporary legal status).

Even though they are more likely to be naturalized, Syrians are also more likely to be recent immigrants than other groups. Syrian immigrants were twice as likely as the overall immigrant population to have entered the United States since 2010 (see Figure 2).

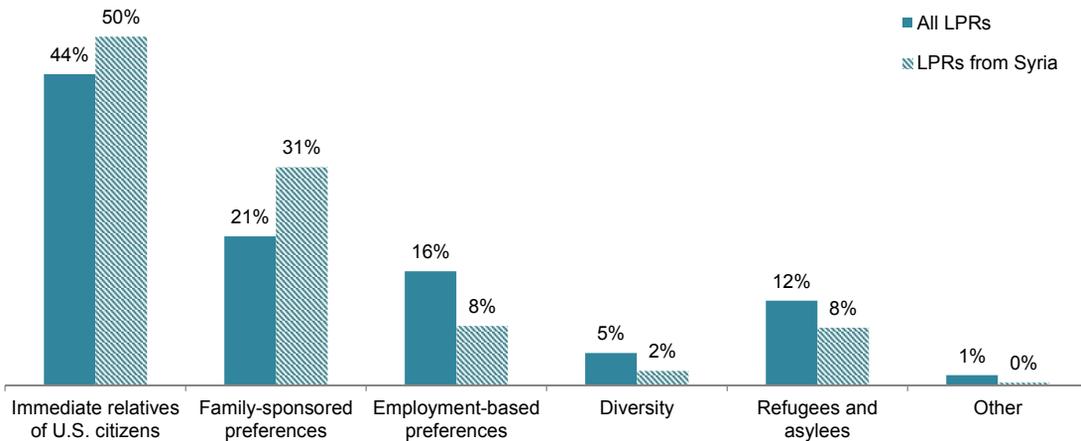
According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) *2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, the most recent data available, most Syrian immigrants who obtained a green card in 2013 did so through family ties: half qualified as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens and another nearly one-third qualified via family-

Figure 2. Immigrants from Syria and All Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2014



Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS. Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figure 3. Immigration Pathways of Syrian Immigrants and All Immigrants in the United States, 2013



Notes: Immediate relatives of U.S. citizens: Include spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens. *Family-sponsored preferences:* Include adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens, as well as spouses and children of green-card holders. *Diversity Visa Lottery:* The *Immigration Act of 1990* established the Diversity Visa (DV) Lottery to allow entry to immigrants from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States, setting aside 55,000 diversity visas each fiscal year. Syrian nationals are eligible for the lottery.

Source: MPI tabulation of data from Department of Homeland Security (DHS), *2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2014), www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics-2013-lawful-permanent-residents.

sponsored preferences (see Figure 3). Syrian immigrants were less likely than other new green-card holders to gain LPR status through employment-sponsored preferences (8 percent versus 16 percent) or as refugees or asylees (8 percent versus 12 percent).

II. Humanitarian Admissions

In response to the continuing violence and mass displacement of millions of Syrians within and beyond the country's borders, the United States offers humanitarian protection to Syrian nationals via three main channels: refugee resettlement, asylum status, and temporary protected status (TPS).

Between October 1, 2011 and November 20, 2015, the United States resettled 2,261 Syrian refugees in 36 states, according to data from the State Department's Worldwide Refugee Admissions Processing System (WRAPS). California,

Texas, and Michigan were the top resettlement states for Syrians, drawing close to one-third of all Syrian refugees. The resettlement pattern of Syrian refugees is much more widely dispersed geographically than the overall Syrian immigrant and diaspora population in the United States. Around two-thirds of Syrian refugees have been resettled in 23 states where governors have opposed accepting Syrian refugees.¹ The power of governors to reject refugees remains unclear, although one Syrian family that arrived in November was relocated to Connecticut after the governor of Indiana indicated his opposition to resettlement.²

Beyond the refugee resettlement program, Syrian nationals who are physically present in the United States or who arrive at a U.S. port of entry can apply for asylum status. They may decide to submit an asylum request either with a U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) asylum officer voluntarily within a year of legal entry to the United States (an affirmative request), or, if apprehended, with an immigra-

tion judge as part of a removal hearing (a defensive request).

An increasing number of Syrian nationals have received asylum status in recent years. The number rose from 60 in fiscal year (FY) 2011 to 364 in FY 2012, and more than doubled to 811 in FY 2013, according to DHS data. A total of 589 asylum requests (525 affirmative and 64 defensive) filed by Syrian nationals were approved in FY 2014, and an additional 272 affirmative asylum cases were granted in the first two quarters of FY 2015.³ From the start of FY 2012 through the second quarter of FY 2015, Syrian nationals filed 4,051 affirmative asylum applications with USCIS, and more than half (2,170 cases) were still pending in the second quarter of FY 2015. Approval rates for completed USCIS asylum applications were high, rising from 72 percent in 2012 to 83 percent in 2015. Meanwhile, of the total 694 defensive asylum claims in immigration courts from FY 2012 through FY 2014, only a small number were adjudicated and most were still pending at the end of FY 2014.

On March 29, 2012, the Secretary of Homeland Security designated Syria for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) through September 30, 2013—a provisional protection against deportation that also grants work authorization for nationals from countries where return is not deemed feasible as a result of violent conflict, natural disaster, or other crisis. The TPS protection for Syrians has been extended and redesignated twice, in September 2013 and January 2015. In September 2015, USCIS estimated 5,000 Syrian nationals were benefitting from

TPS, and an additional 5,000 individuals were eligible to file initial applications under the 2015 redesignation.

III. Distribution Across the United States

California was the top destination, accounting for 30 percent of the total Syrian immigrant population in the United States as of 2009-13, followed by New York, Illinois, and New Jersey (7 percent each). The top four counties with Syrian immigrants were Los Angeles County in California, Cook County in Illinois, Kings County in New York, and Passaic County in New Jersey. Together, these four counties were home to one-third of the total Syrian immigrant population in the United States.⁴

The U.S. cities with the largest number of Syrian immigrants during the 2009-13 period were the Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Detroit metropolitan areas, which accounted for about 47 percent of the Syrian immigrant population.⁵

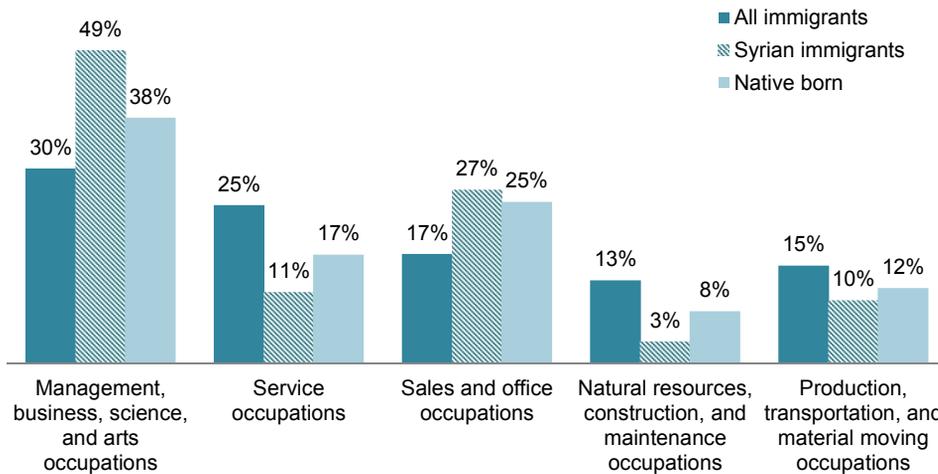
The Syrian diaspora (those either born in Syria or born in the United States and reporting Syrian ancestry) was more dispersed than the Syrian immigrant population during the 2009-13 period. Of the Syrian diaspora of 191,000, 18 percent resided in California, followed by 10 percent in Pennsylvania, 8 percent each in New York and New Jersey, and 6 percent in Florida.

Table 1. Age Distribution by Origin, 2014

Age Group	All Immigrants	Syrian Immigrants	Native-Born Population
Under 18	6%	12%	26%
18-24	7%	4%	10%
25-44	40%	30%	24%
45-64	33%	34%	25%
65 and older	14%	20%	15%

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS. Numbers may not add up to 100 as they are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figure 4. Employed Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (ages 16 and older) by Occupation and Origin, 2014



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2014 ACS.

IV. Age, Education, and Employment

The Syrian immigrant population is older than the overall foreign and native-born populations. The median age of Syrian immigrants in 2014 was 47—compared to 44 for the foreign born overall and 36 for the U.S. born. In 2014, Syrian immigrants were more likely to be seniors (65 and older) than either the foreign or U.S.-born populations, and considerably less likely to be under age 45 (see Table 1).

Syrian immigrants have higher educational attainment than the general foreign-born population. At the higher end, Syrians (39 percent) were more likely in 2014 than both the native and foreign-born populations to have a bachelor's degree (30 percent and 29 percent, respectively). In addition, among Syrians with a bachelor's degree, 47 percent had a graduate or professional degree, a higher share than their immigrant (42 percent) and native (37 percent) peers. Nonetheless, 26 percent of Syrian immigrants (ages 25 and over) had not completed high school, compared to 10 percent of the U.S. born and 30 percent of the foreign born.

Syrian immigrants participate in the labor force at a lower rate than the total immigrant and U.S.-born populations, due to lower participation among Syrian women. As of 2014, 57 percent of Syrian immigrants ages 16 and over were in the civilian labor force, compared to 66 percent and 63 percent of foreign and native-born adults. Labor force participation rates were especially low for Syrian women: 41 percent versus 56 percent and 59 percent for their foreign and U.S.-born counterparts. Syrian men, on the other hand, participated in the labor force at a slightly higher rate (70 percent) than native-born men (66 percent), but a lower rate than immigrant men (77 percent).

Employed Syrian immigrants work overwhelmingly in skilled occupations. Forty-nine percent of Syrian immigrants were employed in management, business, science, and arts occupations in 2014, a much higher share than both the overall foreign-born (30 percent) and U.S.-born (38 percent) populations (see Figure 4). They were also more likely to be employed in sales and office occupations than their immigrant and native-born counterparts, and considerably less likely to work in sales or construction.

Syrian immigrants were heavily concentrated in two employment sectors: educational services, health care, and social assistance (28 percent) and retail trade (24 percent). Foreign- and U.S.-born workers were more evenly distributed across industries.

V. English Proficiency and Language Diversity

Syrian immigrants are slightly more likely to be proficient in English than the overall immigrant population. In 2014, approximately 45 percent of Syrian immigrants (ages 5 and over) reported limited English proficiency (defined as speaking English less than very well), compared with 50 percent of the total foreign-born population. Most (72 percent) Syrian immigrants spoke Arabic at home, followed by Armenian (12 percent); approximately 10 percent spoke only English (versus 16 percent of all immigrants).

VI. Income and Poverty

Syrian immigrants have higher family incomes than the overall foreign born. In 2014, the median income of families headed by a Syrian immigrant was \$62,000, compared to \$53,000 and \$68,000 for immigrant and native-born families. Syrian men who were employed full-time, year-around earned \$66,000 on average, significantly above the median earnings of \$38,000 for immigrant men overall and \$51,000 for U.S.-born men.

Despite these income levels, Syrian immigrant families are more likely to have incomes below the federal poverty level (20 percent) than foreign-born families overall (18 percent) and U.S.-born families (10 percent), possibly due to large family size and low level of female labor force participation. The mean size for families headed by a Syrian immigrant was 4.1 people, versus 3.8 and 3.1 for average immigrant and native-born families. Notably, Syrian-born children ages under 18, who overwhelmingly (88 percent) came to the United States since 2010, were more than twice as likely to live in poverty (66 percent) than immigrant or native-born children (29 percent and 21 percent, respectively).

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Endnotes

- 1 These states include: Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin. Although governors in Alabama, Iowa, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, and Wyoming also have made similar statements; as of November 20, 2015, no Syrian refugees had been resettled to these states.
- 2 "Indiana Blocks Syrian Refugee Family from Resettling," *Time* magazine, November 18, 2015, <http://time.com/4119412/indiana-diverts-syrian-refugees/>.
- 3 More than one person can be included on an asylum application.
- 4 To see the distribution of Syrian immigrants for top states and counties, visit the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub for an interactive map (select Syria from the dropdown menu). MPI Data Hub, "U.S. Immigrant Population by State and County," <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-state-and-county>.
- 5 For distribution of Syrians by top metropolitan areas, see MPI Data Hub, "U.S. Immigrant Population by Metropolitan Area," <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/us-immigrant-population-metropolitan-area>.

About the Author



Jie Zong is a Research Assistant at the Migration Policy Institute, where she provides quantitative research support across MPI programs, particularly the National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. Her research areas include structural and cultural integration of first- and second-generation immigrants, protective factors for children in refugee families, and workforce development in the United States.

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