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# CARSEY RESEARCH

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## Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Immigrant and Native-Born Populations in Rural and Urban Places

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In recent years, researchers have documented the changing demographics of rural areas, with a specific focus on changes in racial-ethnic composition and immigration patterns,<sup>1</sup> particularly the increased migration of Hispanics to rural places.<sup>2</sup> In spite of this attention to the changing demographics of rural America, surprisingly little is known about how rural immigrants compare to both their urban peers and native-born counterparts.

In this brief we use American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates to document demographic and economic characteristics of the immigrant and native-born populations in the United States by metropolitan status. We focus on a wide range of demographic and economic indicators that relate to immigrants' ability to assimilate and thrive in rural America.

**Our analysis finds that rural immigrants are different than their rural native-born and urban immigrant counterparts on a host of demographic characteristics, including age, education, and family structure.**

Our analysis finds that rural immigrants are different than their rural native-born and urban immigrant counterparts on a host of demographic characteristics, including age, education, and family structure. Rural immigrants also differ from urban immigrants with regard to when they arrived in the United States and where from. In terms of economic characteristics, rural immigrants have relatively low family income and high poverty rates, even among those currently working and those who work full time.

### KEY FINDINGS



Compared to the native-born rural population, rural immigrants are more likely to be of working age (18–64), are more racially and ethnically diverse, are less educated, and are more likely to have children.

2X

Working rural immigrants are nearly twice as likely as rural native-born workers to be poor.



Rural immigrants are poorer and have lower educational attainment than their urban counterparts.



Roughly 97.5 percent of rural immigrants who are citizens speak at least some English, compared to just 84.2 percent of rural immigrants who are not citizens. Citizens are also far less likely to be poor and are almost twice as likely to have a college degree.

### Age, Education, and Family Structure

Table 1 looks at the demographic characteristics of the immigrant and native-born populations in rural and urban places. There are stark differences between the two groups. Immigrants account for approximately 4.8 percent of the rural population compared to 16.6 percent of the urban population. Among rural immigrants, 9.1 percent are children and 11.6 percent are over age 65. The vast majority of rural (79.3 percent) and urban (79.8 percent) immigrants are working-age (18–65 years old). Far more native-born rural Americans are children (23.4 percent) or seniors (16.8 percent).

**TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMIGRANT AND NATIVE-BORN POPULATIONS BY METROPOLITAN STATUS**

	RURAL		URBAN	
	Immigrant	Native born	Immigrant	Native born
Total	1,605,606	33,708,125	40,531,671	203,907,974
Percent	4.5%	95.5%	16.6%	83.4%
<b>Age</b>				
Under 18	9.1%	23.4%	7.1%	27.0%
18 to 64	79.3%	59.8%	79.8%	60.0%
65 and older	11.6%	16.8%	13.1%	13.0%
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	51.4%	49.9%	48.7%	49.0%
Female	48.6%	50.1%	51.3%	51.0%
<b>Race-ethnicity</b>				
White, non-Hispanic	25.9%	81.6%	20.2%	65.6%
Black, non-Hispanic	3.2%	8.2%	8.2%	14.5%
Asian, non-Hispanic	14.3%	0.5%	25.3%	2.4%
Other, non-Hispanic	2.4%	3.8%	2.2%	2.9%
Hispanic	54.2%	5.9%	44.1%	14.6%
<b>Education<sup>1</sup></b>				
Less than high school	39.4%	14.4%	29.2%	9.1%
High school	23.5%	36.6%	22.2%	26.9%
Some college	19.0%	30.4%	19.5%	31.3%
College grad or more	18.0%	18.6%	29.0%	32.7%
<b>Family structure<sup>2</sup></b>				
Married without children	30.3%	36.0%	30.1%	29.6%
Married with children	29.9%	17.5%	29.2%	18.0%
Single without children	34.6%	40.9%	35.2%	46.7%
Single with children	5.3%	5.5%	5.4%	5.7%
<b>Characteristics of the immigrant population</b>				
Citizen	43.2%	NA	49.3%	NA
Non-citizen	56.8%	NA	50.7%	NA
<b>English language proficiency<sup>3</sup></b>				
Speaks English well	71.6%	NA	72.3%	NA
Does not speak English well	18.3%	NA	18.6%	NA
Does not speak English	10.1%	NA	9.2%	NA
<b>Region of origin</b>				
Other North America / Territory	4.7%	NA	2.1%	NA
Mexico	45.6%	NA	26.2%	NA
Other Central America and Caribbean	8.6%	NA	17.2%	NA
South America	2.8%	NA	6.8%	NA
Europe	17.2%	NA	13.6%	NA
Asia / Oceania	18.6%	NA	29.8%	NA
Africa	2.3%	NA	4.3%	NA
Other	0.2%	NA	0.0%	NA
<b>Year of immigration</b>				
Before 1950	2.0%	NA	1.0%	NA
1950 to 1969	11.9%	NA	8.2%	NA
1970 to 1989	24.5%	NA	28.3%	NA
1990 to 2009	55.5%	NA	55.4%	NA
2010 to 2014	6.1%	NA	7.0%	NA

Large racial-ethnic differences are apparent within rural places. More than half of all rural immigrants are Hispanic (54.2 percent) and one-quarter (25.9 percent) are non-Hispanic white. Non-Hispanic Asians make up the next largest group at 14.3 percent, followed by non-Hispanic blacks (3.2 percent) and those who are non-Hispanic of another race or multiracial (2.4 percent). Native-born rural residents, on the other hand, are overwhelmingly non-Hispanic white (81.6 percent). Compared to urban immigrants, rural immigrants are more likely to be Hispanic and non-Hispanic white, but less likely to be Asian.

There are also differences in educational attainment. Rural immigrants have less education than their native-born and urban immigrant counterparts. About two-fifths of rural immigrants (39.4 percent) have less than a high school diploma or equivalent, 19.0 percent have at least some college experience, and 18.0 percent have a bachelor's degree or more. Among native-born rural residents, fewer than 15 percent have less than a high school diploma, but they are about equally as likely to have a bachelor's degree or more (18.6 percent). Education disparities play out across place as well. Almost two-thirds of rural immigrants have a high school degree or less, compared to just half of urban immigrants.

**Note:** <sup>1</sup> Age 25 years and older. <sup>2</sup> Age 18 and over. <sup>3</sup> Age 5 and over.

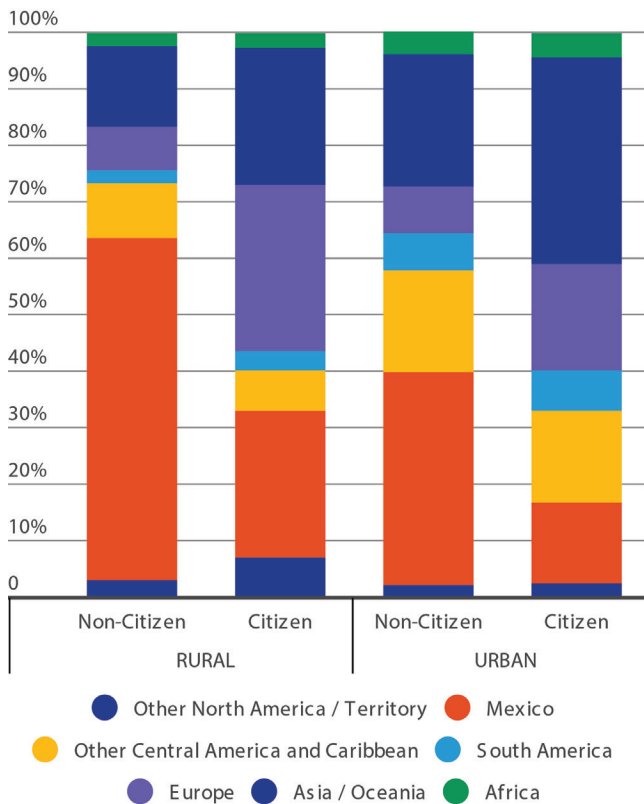
**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

In terms of family structure, 60.1 percent of rural immigrant adults are married, compared to 53.5 percent of rural native born, and 35.2 percent of rural immigrant adults have children under 18 (regardless of marital status), compared to 23.0 percent of native-born rural adults. Family structure is similar among rural and urban immigrants.

### Where Are You From and When Did You Arrive Here?

The bottom of Table 1 shows the region of origin for rural and urban immigrants. The most common place of origin for rural immigrants (45.6 percent) is Mexico, followed by Asia/Oceania and Europe. Urban immigrants, by contrast, are most likely to come from Asia/Oceania (29.8 percent), followed by Mexico (26.2 percent).<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1. REGION OF ORIGIN BY METROPOLITAN AND CITIZENSHIP STATUS**

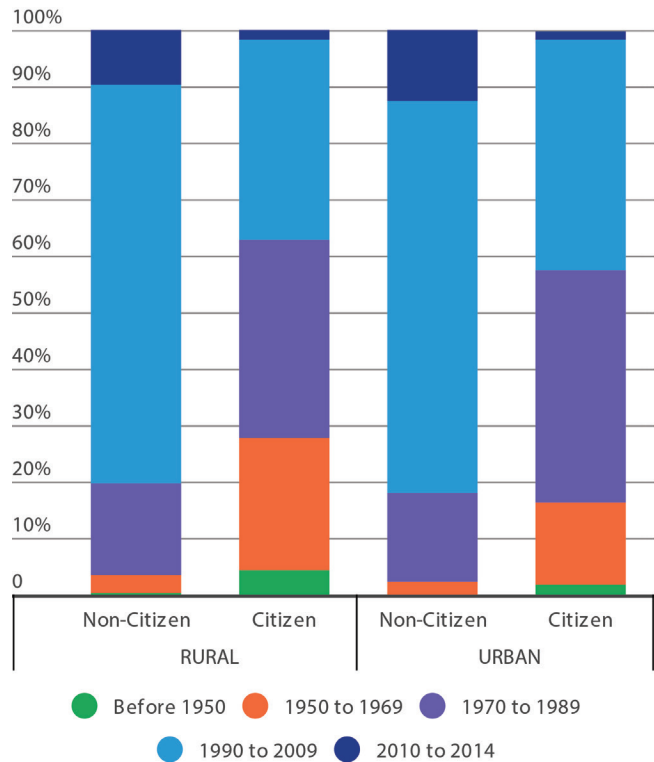


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

Citizenship status is strongly linked to place of origin of rural immigrants (Figure 1). Approximately 60.5 percent of non-citizen rural immigrants are from Mexico, compared to just 26.0 percent of rural immigrants who are U.S. citizens. Among the latter, Europe and Asia/Oceania are far more common regions of origin. This general pattern is similar, though less pronounced, among urban immigrants.

There are few differences between rural and urban immigrants in terms of year of arrival in the United States. Approximately 13.9 percent of rural immigrants arrived before 1970, 24.5 percent arrived between 1970 and 1990, and more than half (55.5 percent) came between 1990 and 2010. Another 6.1 percent arrived since 2010. Citizens, on average, arrived in the United States earlier than non-citizen immigrants, with many more coming before 1970 (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

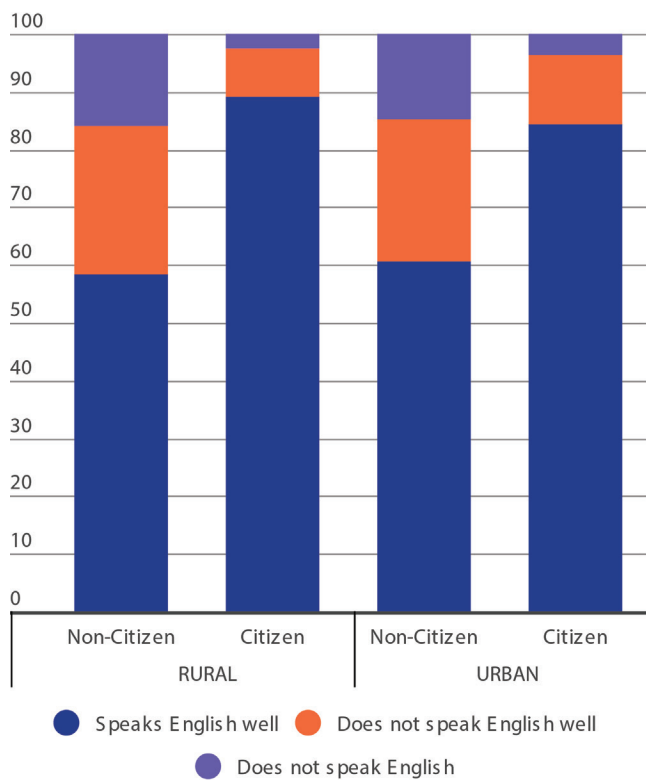
**FIGURE 2. YEAR OF ENTRY BY METROPOLITAN AND CITIZENSHIP STATUS**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

English language ability is relatively similar among urban and rural immigrants. Among rural immigrants 71.6 percent speak English well, followed by 18.3 percent who speak English but not well and another 10.1 percent who do not speak English at all. There are large differences, however, within rural and urban places by citizenship status (Figure 3). Almost six in ten rural immigrants who are not citizens speak English well, compared to 89.0 percent of their citizen counterparts. Further, approximately 15.8 percent of non-citizen rural immigrants but just 2.5 percent of rural citizens do not speak English.

**FIGURE 3. ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITY BY METROPOLITAN AND CITIZENSHIP STATUS**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

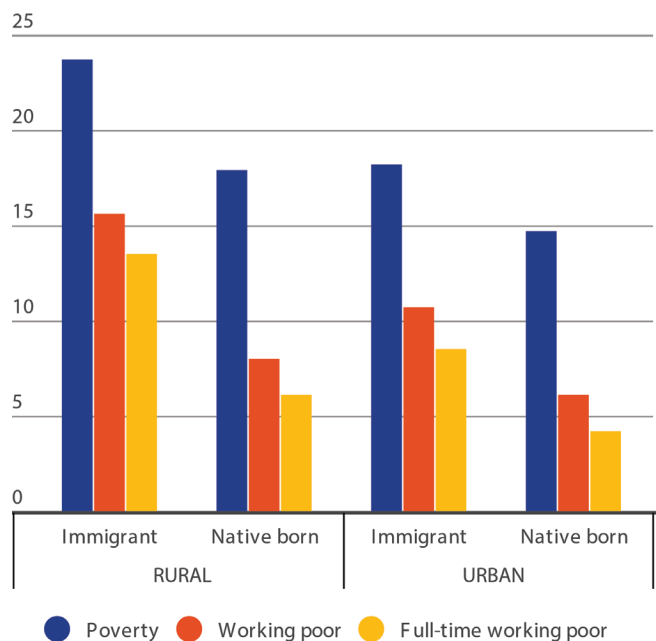
## Work and Poverty

In this section, we compare work and other economic characteristics of rural and urban populations by immigration status. Rural immigrants (71.0 percent) are as likely as their native-born counterparts (71.5 percent) but somewhat less likely than urban immigrants (76.7 percent) to be working or looking for

work (Table 2). This pattern is also evident between rural and urban native born. The unemployment rate for rural immigrants is lower than for native-born rural residents, but about the same as for urban immigrants.

Figure 4 documents poverty status<sup>5</sup> for all people, those currently working, and those working full time (a subset of those currently working) by metropolitan and immigrant status. Among all groups, those working are less likely to be poor, and those working full time are the least likely to be poor. Across the board, however, rural immigrants fare worse than their native-born rural and urban counterparts. Poverty is alarmingly high among working rural immigrants and those who worked full time in the previous year, at 15.6 and 13.5 percent, respectively. The rate for full-time working rural immigrants is more than twice as high as for the rural native born (6.1 percent) and about five percentage points higher than for urban immigrants (8.5 percent).

**FIGURE 4. POVERTY BY WORK, METROPOLITAN, AND IMMIGRATION STATUS**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

**TABLE 2. ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IMMIGRANT AND NATIVE-BORN POPULATIONS BY METROPOLITAN STATUS**

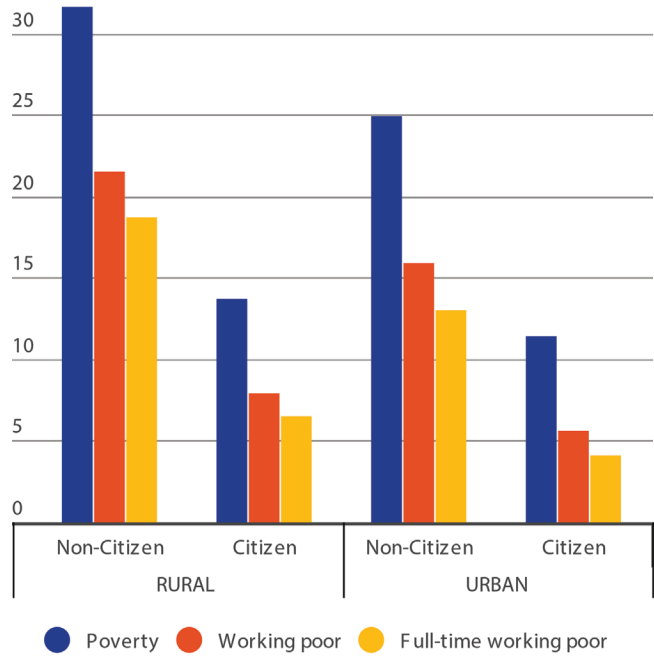
	RURAL		URBAN	
	Immigrant	Native born	Immigrant	Native born
<b>Work</b>				
Working-age adults in the labor force <sup>1</sup>	71.0%	71.5%	76.7%	77.0%
Unemployed	8.3%	9.5%	8.4%	9.2%
Employed	91.7%	90.5%	91.6%	90.8%
Employed full time, full year	66.5%	67.3%	70.0%	68.8%
Self-employed	10.1%	10.9%	11.5%	8.7%
<b>Means of transportation to work</b>				
Private transport <sup>2</sup>	92.4%	94.4%	83.9%	89.6%
Public transport	1.9%	0.6%	11.0%	5.1%
Other	1.7%	0.9%	1.3%	0.7%
Worked at home	4.0%	4.1%	3.7%	4.5%
<b>Income and Poverty</b>				
Median family income	\$43,154	\$48,669	\$55,475	\$64,934
Poverty	23.7%	17.9%	18.2%	14.7%
Under 18	31.8%	25.7%	28.6%	21.3%
18 to 64	24.0%	16.9%	17.7%	13.2%
65 and older	15.7%	10.1%	16.1%	7.8%
Low-income	51.7%	40.3%	42.0%	31.8%
Under 18	60.1%	52.0%	54.7%	42.7%
18 to 64	52.1%	36.5%	41.2%	27.8%
65 and older	42.3%	37.1%	40.0%	27.5%
Working poor <sup>3</sup>	15.6%	8.0%	10.7%	6.1%
Full-time working poor	13.5%	6.1%	8.5%	4.2%
Working low income <sup>3</sup>	43.5%	24.8%	33.2%	18.2%
Full-time working low income	41.6%	22.0%	29.8%	15.1%

**Note:** <sup>1</sup> Among adults age 18 and older. <sup>2</sup> Includes those who car pool. <sup>3</sup> Among employed people age 18 to 64.

**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

Among both rural and urban immigrants, citizens fare better than non-citizens in terms of poverty status (Figure 5). Approximately 31.6 percent of rural non-citizen immigrants are poor, compared to just 13.7 percent of citizens. Among rural non-citizens who are working, over one-fifth (21.5 percent) are poor, as are close to one-fifth (18.7 percent) of those working full time.

**FIGURE 5. POVERTY BY WORK, METROPOLITAN, AND CITIZENSHIP STATUS**



**Source:** U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey five-year estimates, 2010–2014

## Discussion

In this brief we document the demographic and economic characteristics of the immigrant population in rural places and highlight areas where immigrants differ from native-born rural Americans and urban immigrants. We find that the rural immigrant population is disproportionately of working age (thus comprising fewer children or seniors), more racially and ethnically diverse, and less educated than the rural native-born population. Rural immigrants are more likely than urban immigrants to come from Mexico and are less likely to be naturalized citizens.

One in ten rural immigrants do not speak English at all and another 18.3 percent do not speak English well. Inability to speak the language could lead to difficulty for organizations aiming to help immigrants in rural places, especially organizations with limited resources to hire workers skilled in dealing with non-natives. These findings regarding English language ability replicate research on rural immigrants<sup>6</sup> and underscore the vulnerability of this population.

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**Our findings on the working poor suggest that economic stability is out of reach for many rural immigrants, particularly those without U.S. citizenship.**

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Our findings on the working poor suggest that economic stability is out of reach for many rural immigrants, particularly those without U.S. citizenship. The relatively high poverty rate of Hispanic immigrants is well documented, and some recent scholarship suggests that rates would be even higher absent changes in the composition of this population over the past several decades, particularly in terms of increased educational attainment, labor force participation, and lower fertility.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, working immigrants in rural places are far more likely to be poor than the rural native-born population and urban immigrants. These discrepancies are more severe when looking at residents who work full time.

A more complex analysis is necessary to better understand why so many rural immigrants currently working and who work full time are poor. Such widespread poverty of a group working full time in a first-world country is cause for alarm, especially considering how poorly the United States safety net performs compared to that of other wealthy nations.<sup>8</sup> These findings raise important questions for policy makers, service providers, and rural residents. What are the short- and long-term consequences of an economic climate in which full-time work doesn't necessarily lead to economic stability and in which the safety net doesn't meet the needs of poor residents?

## Data

The data for this project come from the American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates for 2010–2014. The ACS, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, is based on a 1 percent sample of U.S. households. The ACS is ideal for this analysis because it includes a large variety of demographic and economic questions, as well as many questions referring specifically to the immigration process. Further, the large sample in the ACS allows for nuanced analyses of the relatively small populations discussed here. Data are weighted to account for the complex sampling design of the ACS based on race-ethnicity, sex, and age.

Readers should be cautious when comparing estimates between groups because the ACS is based on a sample of the population rather than the population as a whole. Although some estimates may appear different from one another, it is possible that any difference is due to sampling error. Further, in some cases very small differences may be statistically significant due to the large sample size of the ACS. Nonetheless, all differences discussed in this brief are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

## Endnotes

1. See D.T. Lichter, "Immigration and the New Racial Diversity in Rural America," *Rural Sociology* 77, no. 1 (2012): 3–35; A. Kirschner, E.H. Berry, and N. Glasgow, "The Changing Demographic Profile of Rural Areas," *Rural New York Minute* 25 (2009).
2. See Kenneth M. Johnson and Daniel T. Lichter, "Population Growth in New Hispanic Destinations," Policy Brief No. 8 (Durham, NH: Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, 2008); C. Garcia, "The Role of Quality of Life in the Rural Resettlement of Mexican Immigrants," *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 31, no. 4 (2009): 446–67. More recent scholarship has begun to tease out ways that "urban-focused" understandings of international migration might be altered to help explain changes taking place in rural communities; see M. Somashekhar, "A Theoretical and Empirical Foundation for the Study of Suburban and Rural Ethnic Economies in the United States," *Michigan Sociological Review* 28, no. 1 (2014).
3. This is in line with recent research documenting migration trends of Hispanic immigrants to rural destinations. For more on this topic, see Johnson and Lichter (2008).
4. Immigration and citizenship laws have changed dramatically over the course of time, and obtaining citizenship can be a long process. As such, we expect some differences in year of entry for citizens and non-citizens. For a detailed discussion of evolving U.S. immigration laws, see D'Vera Cohn, "How U.S. Immigration Laws Have Changed Throughout History" (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).
5. Poverty is a family-level construct. To determine a family's poverty status, total family income is compared to a threshold based on family size and number of children. Families with total income below their assigned threshold are poor, or in poverty. If a family is poor, then all people within the family are considered poor.
6. See K. Derose, J.J. Escarce, and N. Lurie, "Immigrants and Health Care: Sources of Vulnerability," *Health Affairs* 26, no. 5 (2007).
7. See Marybeth J. Mattingly and Juan M. Pedroza, "Why Isn't the Hispanic Poverty Rate Rising?" *Pathways* (Spring 2015): 9–12.
8. See David B. Grusky, Marybeth J. Mattingly, and Charles E. Verner, "Executive Summary," *Pathways* (Special Issue, 2016): 3–9; Karen Jusko, "Safety Net," *Pathways* (Special Issue, 2016): 25–31.

## Box 1: Definitions

**Immigrants:** all those born in another country, regardless of citizenship status.

**Native born:** all those born in the United States.

**Non-citizens:** immigrants who are not citizens of the United States.

**Citizens:** includes immigrants who are citizens of the United States.

**Metropolitan status:** We divide the U.S. population into two categories based on metropolitan status. Urban residents are those living in homes within a metropolitan statistical area as defined by the Office of Management and Budget (see <http://www.census.gov/population/metro/> for more information on defining metropolitan statistical areas). Rural residents are those not living within metropolitan statistical areas. For confidentiality reasons, approximately 13 percent of the ACS sample has an unidentifiable metropolitan status. They are not included in these analyses.

### About the Authors

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