



FOREIGN BORN IN BOSTON: SALVADORANS

City of Boston Planning Department Research Division

“Imagine all the people” is a series of publications produced by the City of Boston’s Planning Department’s Research Division for the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Advancement. As the East Boston mural above depicts, Boston’s foreign-born communities make numerous contributions to the city’s social, cultural and economic landscape. This series is part of an ongoing effort to celebrate Boston’s foreign-born populations and gain insight into how they shape our city.

OVERVIEW OF SALVADORANS IN THE UNITED STATES

International migration of Salvadorans over the last half century has been prompted by socioeconomic problems including inequality, lack of job opportunities, insufficient access to land, and most notably, widespread violence during the country’s civil war from 1979 to 1992.¹ Historically, Salvadorans left their country in hopes of finding land and opportunity in neighboring Honduras. However, during the 1960s, Honduras launched agrarian reforms that targeted Salvadoran residents—as much 12 percent of the Honduran population—to quell tension among Honduran agricultural workers. Starting in the 1970s, refugees from wartorn areas of El Salvador sought sanctuary in neighboring countries such as Nicaragua and Guatemala and in the

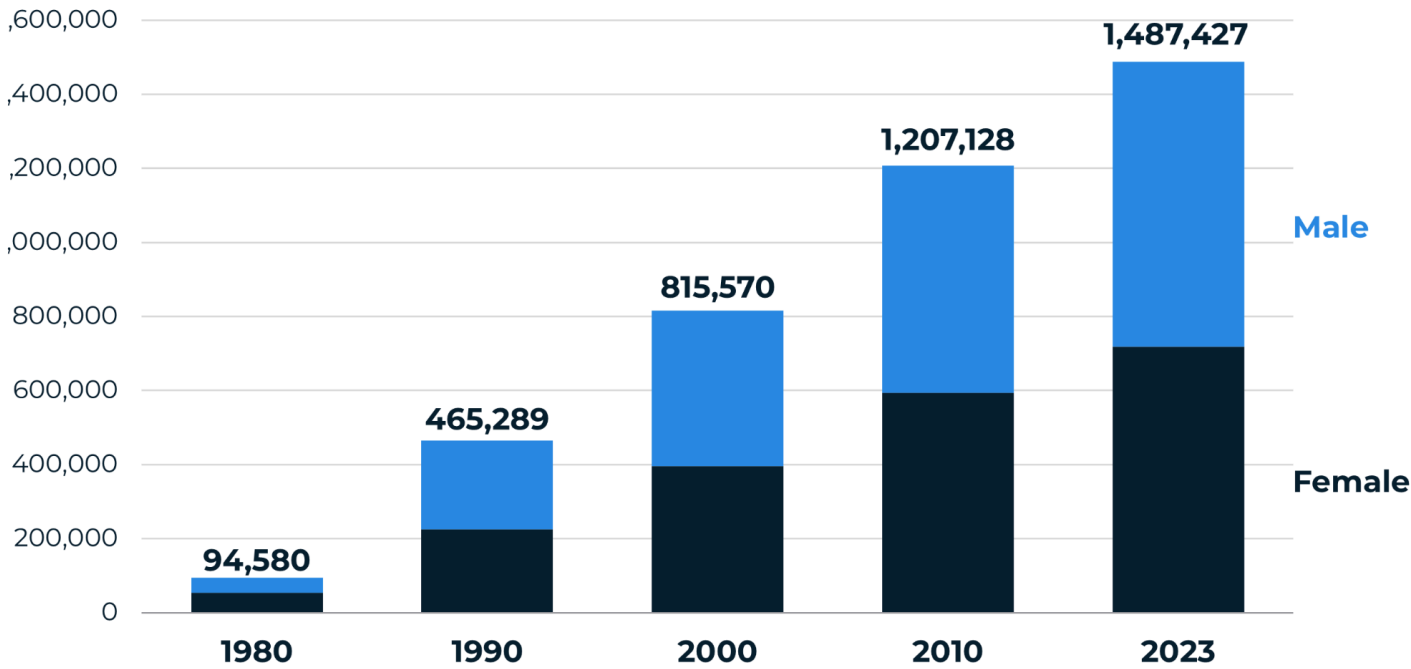
¹<https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/immigrant-places/east-boston/central-americans-in-east-boston/#::~:~:text=Recently%2C%20though%2C%20new%20development%20and,pressures%20remains%20to%20be%20seen>



United States.² Because the United States was reluctant to grant refugee status to Salvadorans fleeing their civil war, many Salvadorans migrated to the United States without authorized status. After an earthquake in 2001, Salvadorans were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS). The Department of Homeland Security in 2010 estimated that 59 percent of foreign-born Salvadorans in the United States were unauthorized.³ The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service has extended Salvadorans TPS until September 9, 2026.⁴ Estimates from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) show 1,487,427 foreign-born Salvadorans reside in the United States. They are the fifth largest foreign-born population in the country. Other primary destinations for Salvadoran emigrants include Canada, Guatemala, Mexico, and Costa Rica.

FOREIGN-BORN SALVADORAN POPULATION GROWTH

Population growth in the U.S. from 1980 to 2023



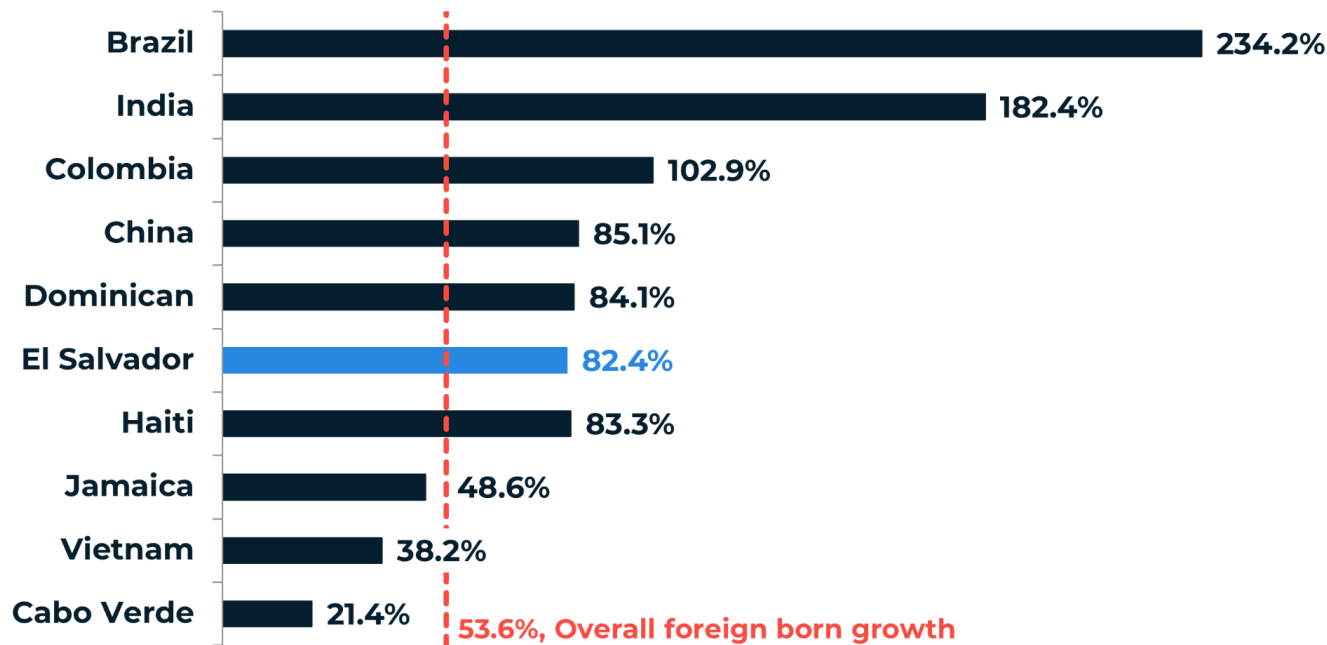
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980–2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2010 1-Year American Community Survey, 2024 Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

² Gammage, Sarah. El Salvador: Despite End to Civil War, Emigration Continues. Migration Policy Institute, 2010.
³ Naker, B & Rytina, N., Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States: January 2012, 2013.
⁴<https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status/temporary-protected-status-designated-country-el-salvador>

The foreign-born Salvadoran population in the United States grew by 82.4 percent from 2000 to 2023, a faster growth rate than that of the overall foreign-born population.

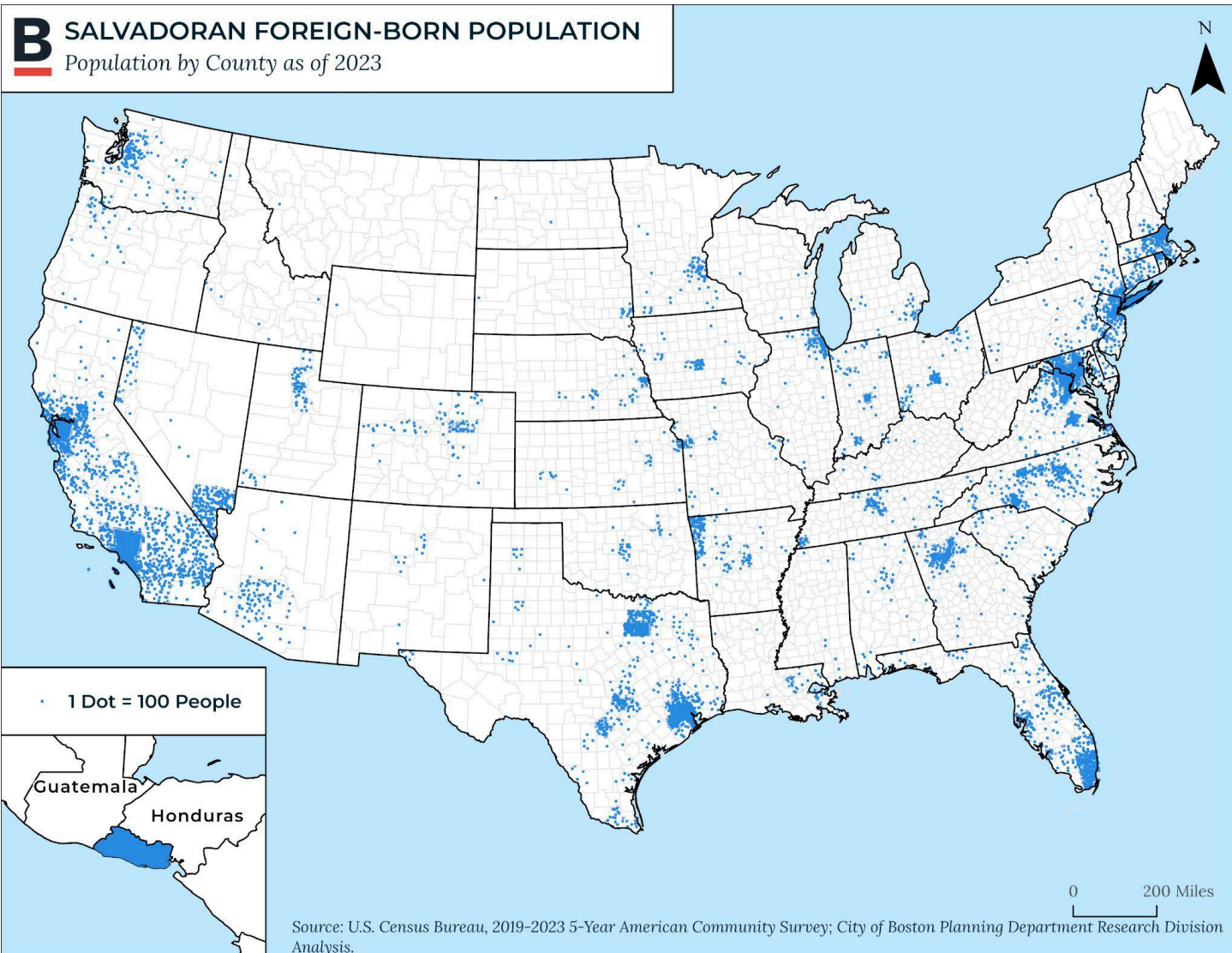
INCREASE IN FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION

Percent increase in foreign born population in the U.S. from 2000 to 2023



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2023 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

The majority of Salvadorans coming to the United States initially settled in southwestern states such as California and Texas, concentrating in Los Angeles and Houston. Salvadorans already in the United States began moving to the East Coast in search of employment. In 2023, Massachusetts had the tenth largest foreign-born Salvadoran population in the United States behind California, Texas, Maryland, New York, Virginia, Florida, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Georgia.

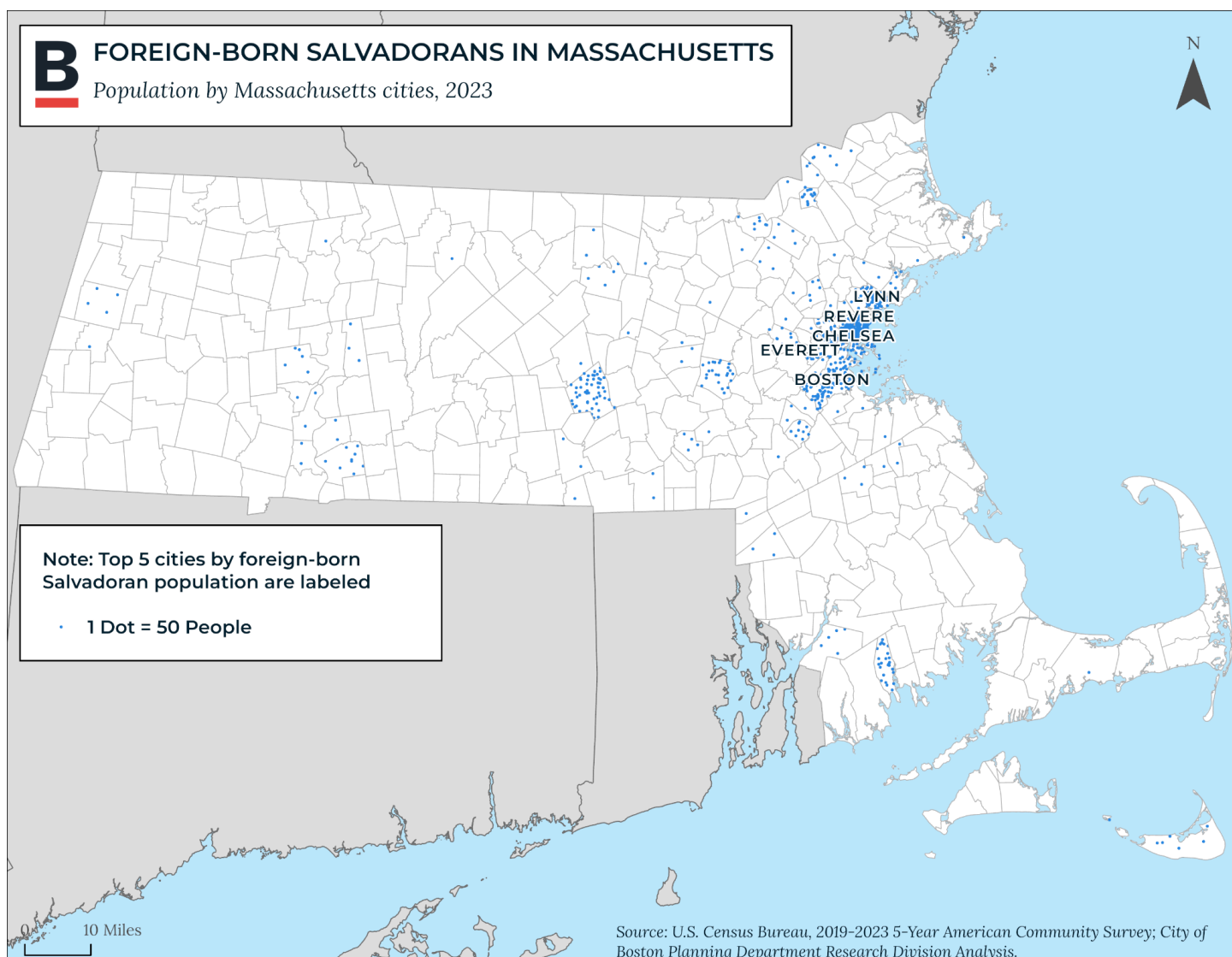


Two developments related to the Salvadoran civil war led to migration to Massachusetts and the Boston area. First, the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America (JPCOCA) lobbied Congressman Joe Moakley in the 1980s to resist Reagan administration policies supporting the Salvadoran government responsible for the murder of the San Salvadoran Archbishop, American priests and nuns, and the people of village of El Mozote.⁵ Second, the Cambridge City Council in 1985 passed a resolution giving sanctuary to Salvadoran and other refugees.⁶ This activism helped facilitate Salvadoran migration to Boston and Cambridge. In 2023 the Massachusetts cities and towns with the largest share of all foreign-born Salvadorans were Boston (15 percent), Chelsea (14 percent), Revere (11 percent), Everett (11 percent), and Lynn (8 percent).

⁵ <https://moakleyandelsalvador.omeka.net/exhibits/show/archival-materials/origins-of-moakley---s-involve>

⁶ <http://rwinters.com/council/sanctuary1985.htm>





FOREIGN-BORN SALVADORANS IN BOSTON

DEMOGRAPHICS

Boston has developed a significant Salvadoran population. Since 1980, Boston has seen a large increase in its foreign-born Salvadoran population. In 1980, there were 240 foreign-born Salvadorans in Boston. In 2024, the City of Boston Planning Department Research Division estimates that 8,066 foreign-born Salvadorans reside in Boston, which is a 3,361 percent increase from 1980. However in 2010, the population was 8,940. The decline in the Salvadoran population in Boston from 2010 to 2024 is not unique to this population. Foreign-born

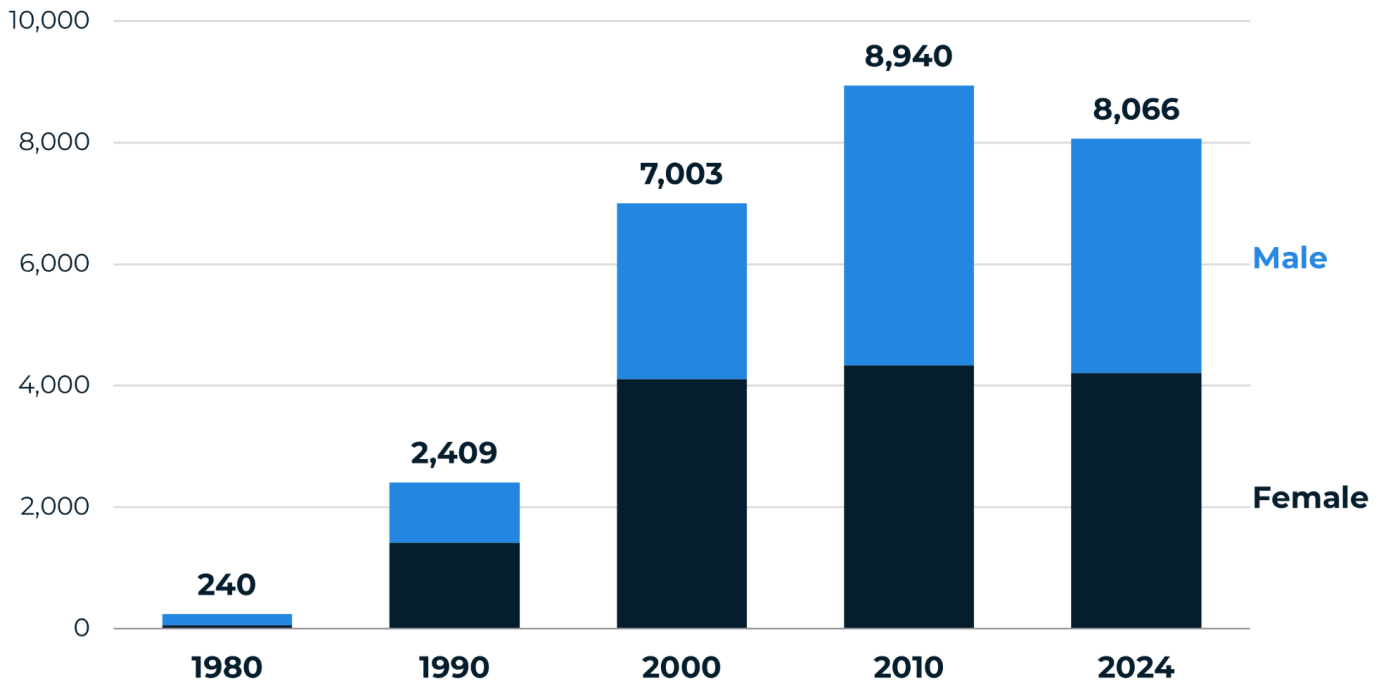


populations are attracted to more economically vibrant metropolitan areas like the Boston metropolitan area. However, foreign-born populations often disperse within a region as they become more economically and socially integrated.⁷ Unless steady migration flows continue, the original destination of the migration can lose people to the surrounding cities and towns.

Of foreign-born Salvadorans, around 48 percent identify as female, which makes it one of only three of the top ten foreign-born populations that has a share of women below 50 percent. In comparison, about 52 percent of all foreign born and 51 percent of Boston’s total population identify as female.⁸

FOREIGN-BORN SALVADORANS

Population growth in Boston, from 1980 to 2024



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1980–2000 Census (IPUMS), 2010 1-Year American Community Survey, 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

⁷ Flippen C, Farrell-Bryan D. New Destinations and the Changing Geography of Immigrant Incorporation. *Annu Rev Sociol.* 2021 Jul;47(1):10.1146/annurev-soc-090320-100926.

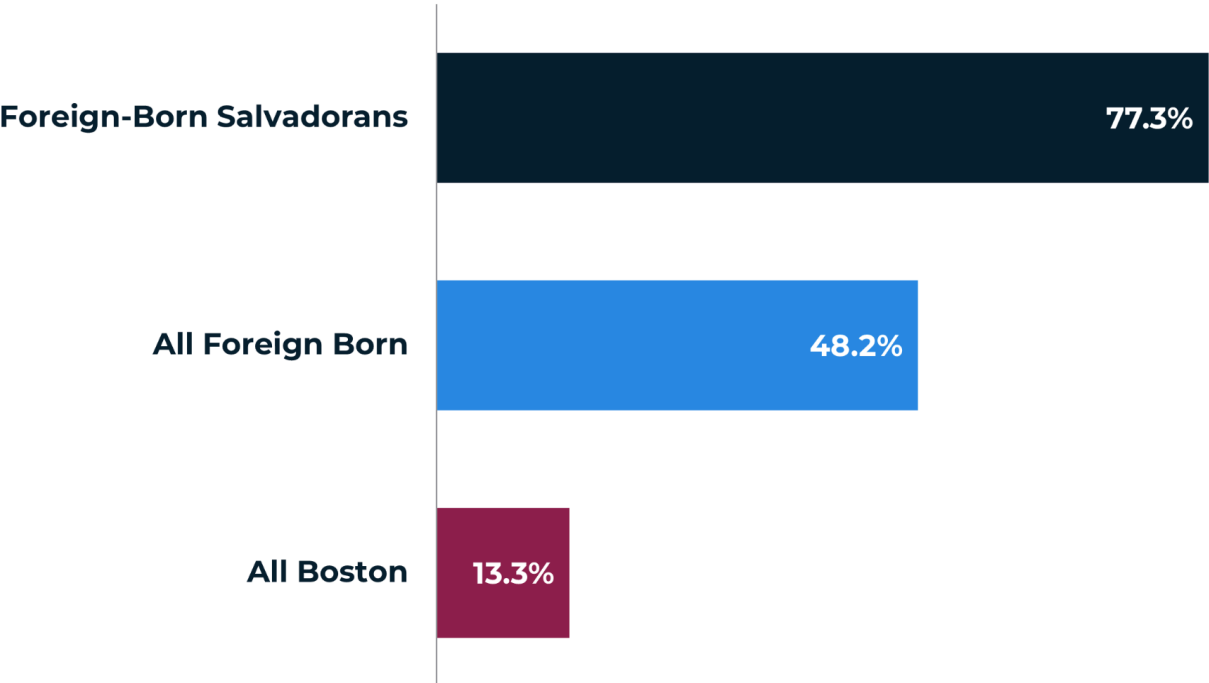
⁸ 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates



More than 77 percent of foreign-born Salvadorans are noncitizens. Of the top ten foreign-born populations, they have the highest noncitizenship rate. Because of U.S. immigration policy, Salvadorans have limited access to become naturalized citizens due to the U.S. government reluctance to grant Salvadorans refugee status during the Salvadoran civil war in the 1980s. Salvadorans received TPS following the 2001 earthquakes. However, TPS, which offers protection from deportation and provides work authorization, fails to offer permanent residency and citizenship as refugee status does.

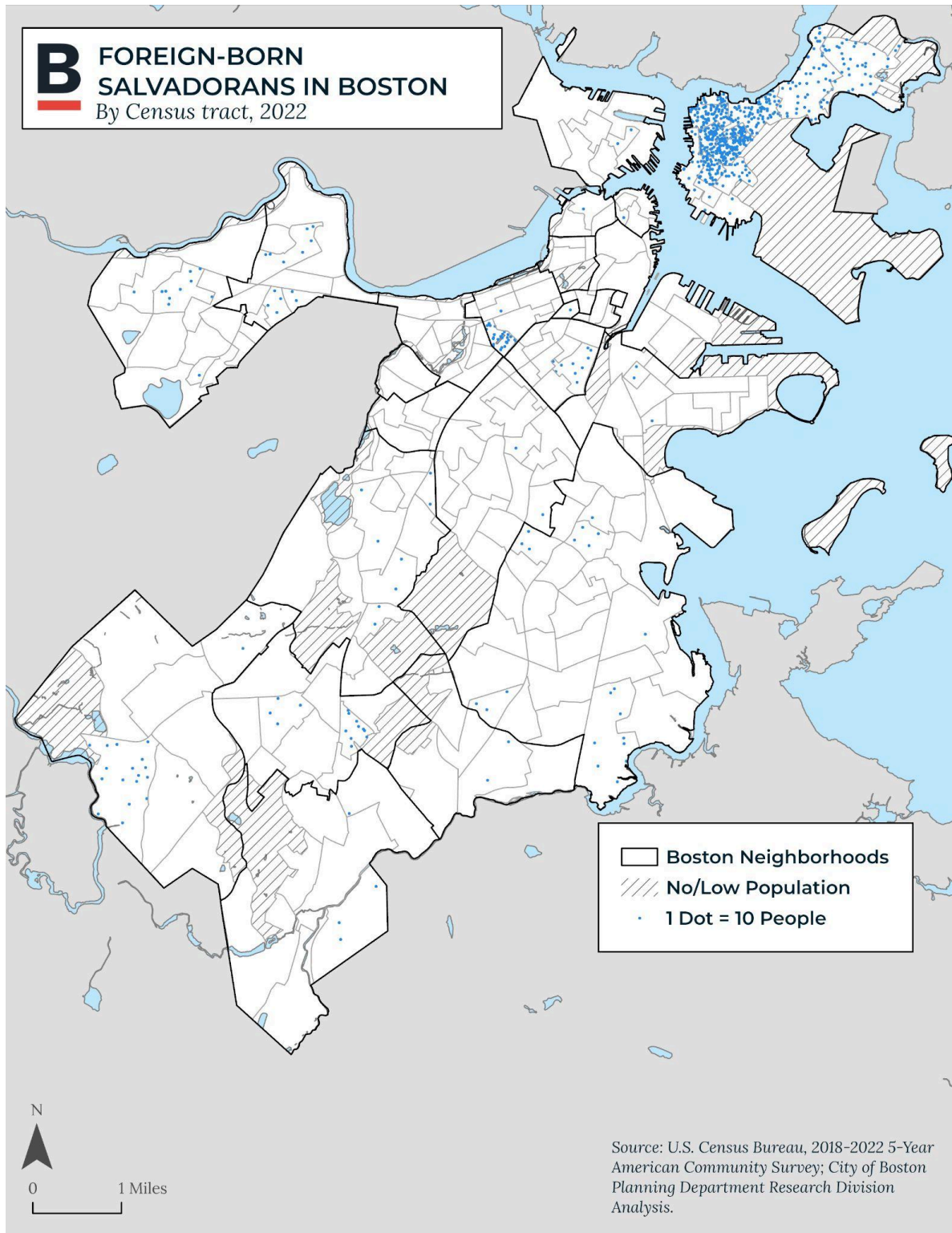
NON-U.S. CITIZENS

Share of non-U.S. citizens



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

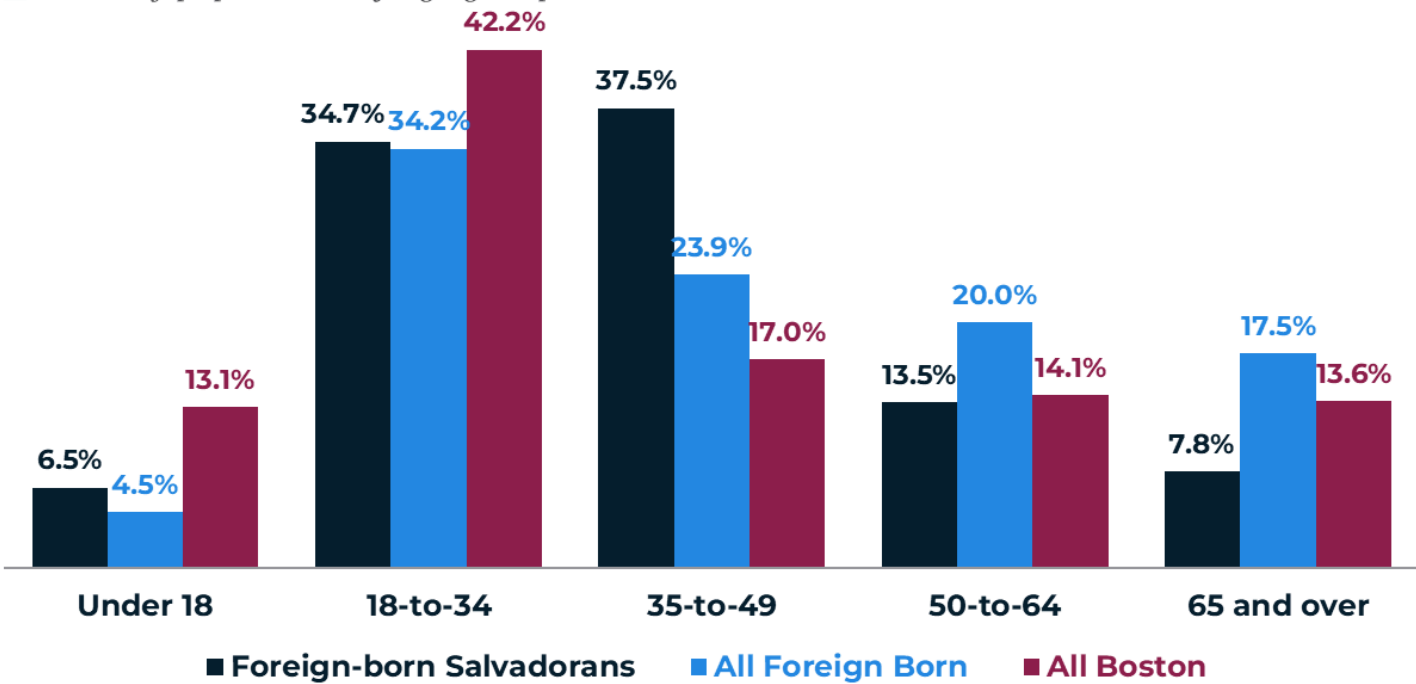
The majority of foreign-born Salvadorans living in Boston reside in East Boston (80 percent). They also live in Back Bay (4 percent) and West Roxbury (4 percent).



Foreign-born Salvadorans are more likely to be aged 35-to-49, at 38 percent of the population. In comparison, only 17 percent of Boston’s overall population is aged 35-to-49.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

Share of population by age group



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

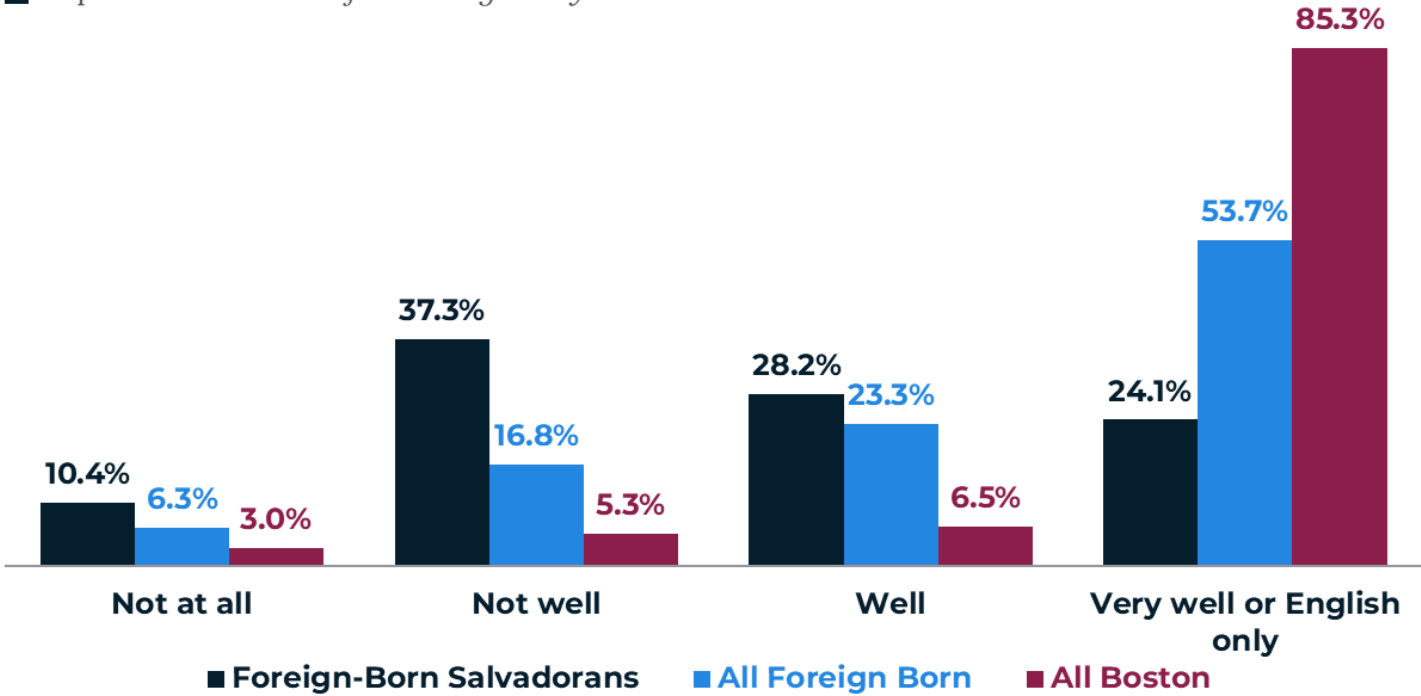


LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

The foreign-born Salvadoran population has varied levels of English-language proficiency, but 37 percent speak English “not well.” About a quarter of the population speaks English very well or English only. Of the foreign-born Salvadorans, 2 percent speak only English at home and 98 percent only speak Spanish at home.⁹

ABILITY TO SPEAK ENGLISH

Population shares of those aged 5 years and over



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

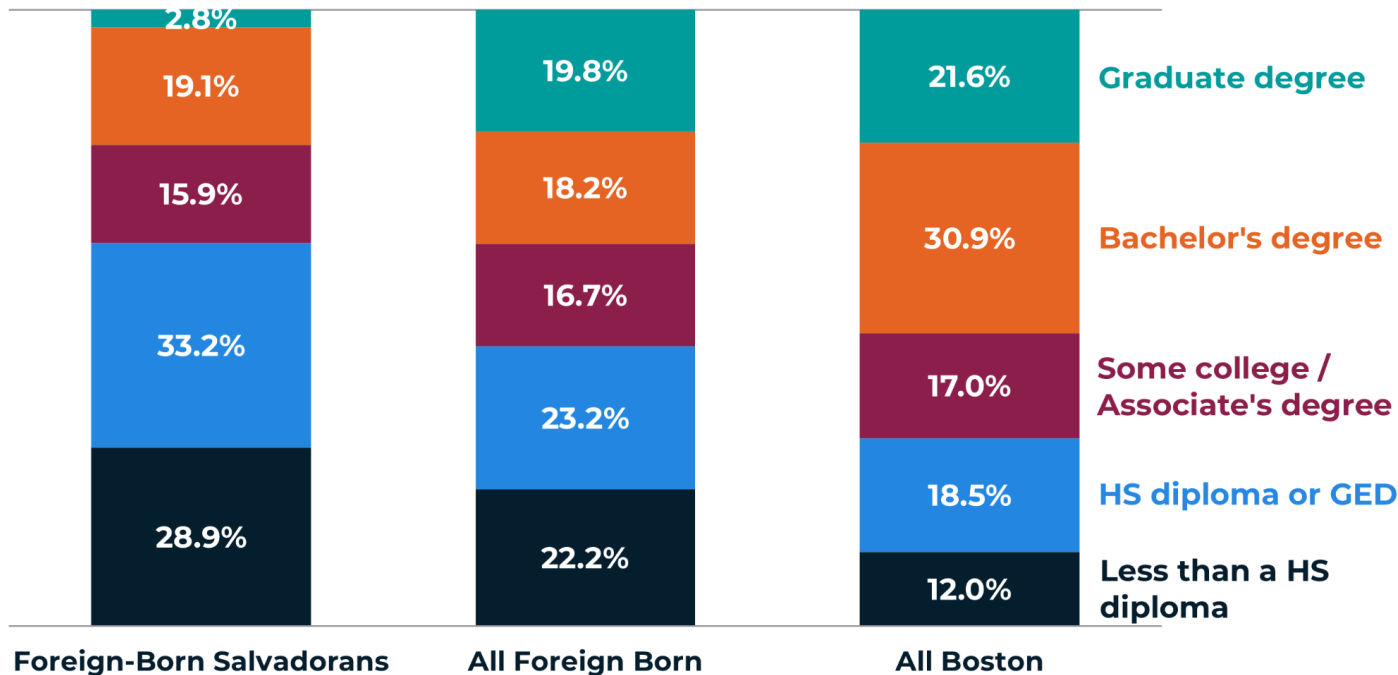
⁹ City of Boston Planning Department Research Division 2024 Population Estimates.



Approximately 62 percent of adult foreign-born Salvadorans have a high school education or less and 19 percent have a Bachelor’s degree. Just 3 percent of foreign-born Salvadorans have a graduate or professional degree. Overall this educational profile shows lower educational attainment for foreign-born Salvadorans than all foreign born and all Boston adults.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Share of population aged 25 years and over

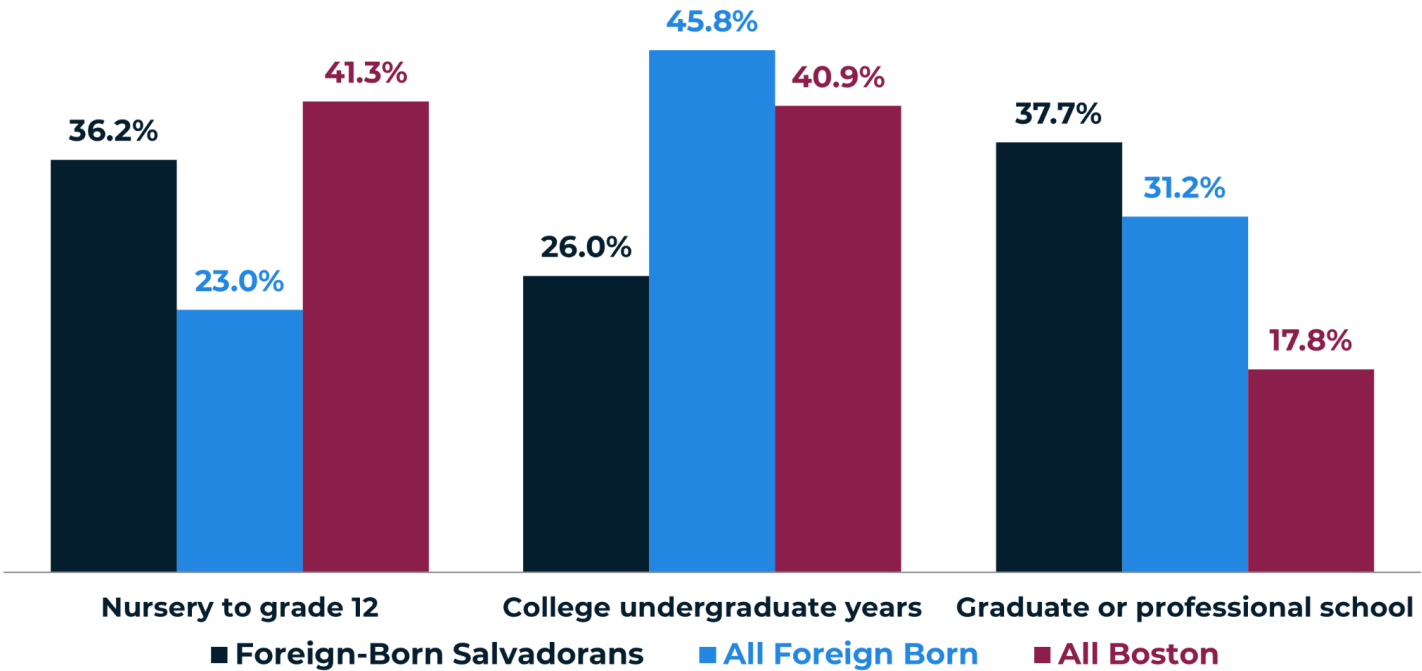


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Foreign-born Salvadorans enrolled in school have a higher share of individuals enrolled in graduate or professional school (38 percent) than all foreign born in Boston and all Boston residents in general, but a lower share of those enrolled in college undergraduate years (26 percent).

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

School enrolled population by level, aged 3 years and over

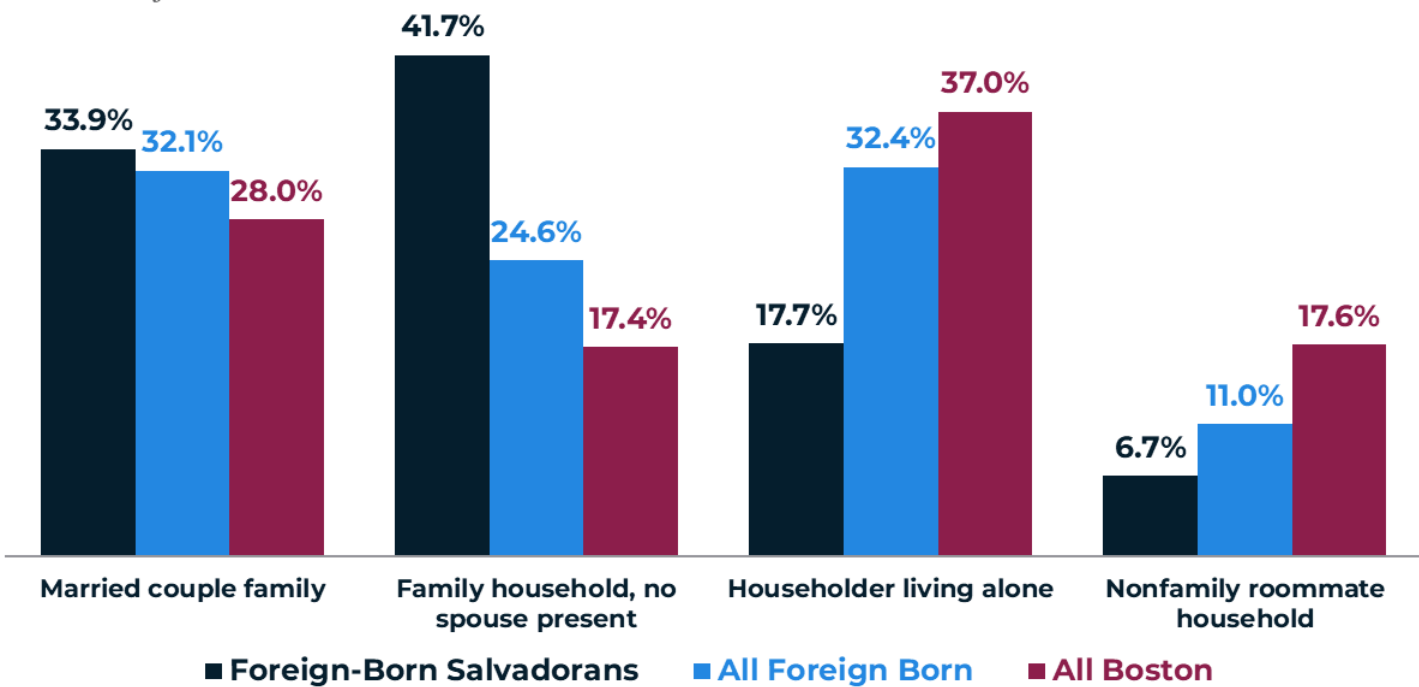


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Approximately 42 percent of Salvadoran foreign-born households are family households without a spouse present. This share is substantially higher than other populations. Only about 7 percent of Salvadoran foreign-born householders live with a nonfamily roommate, which may be due to the lower share of young adults in the Salvadoran foreign-born population.

TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD

Share of households

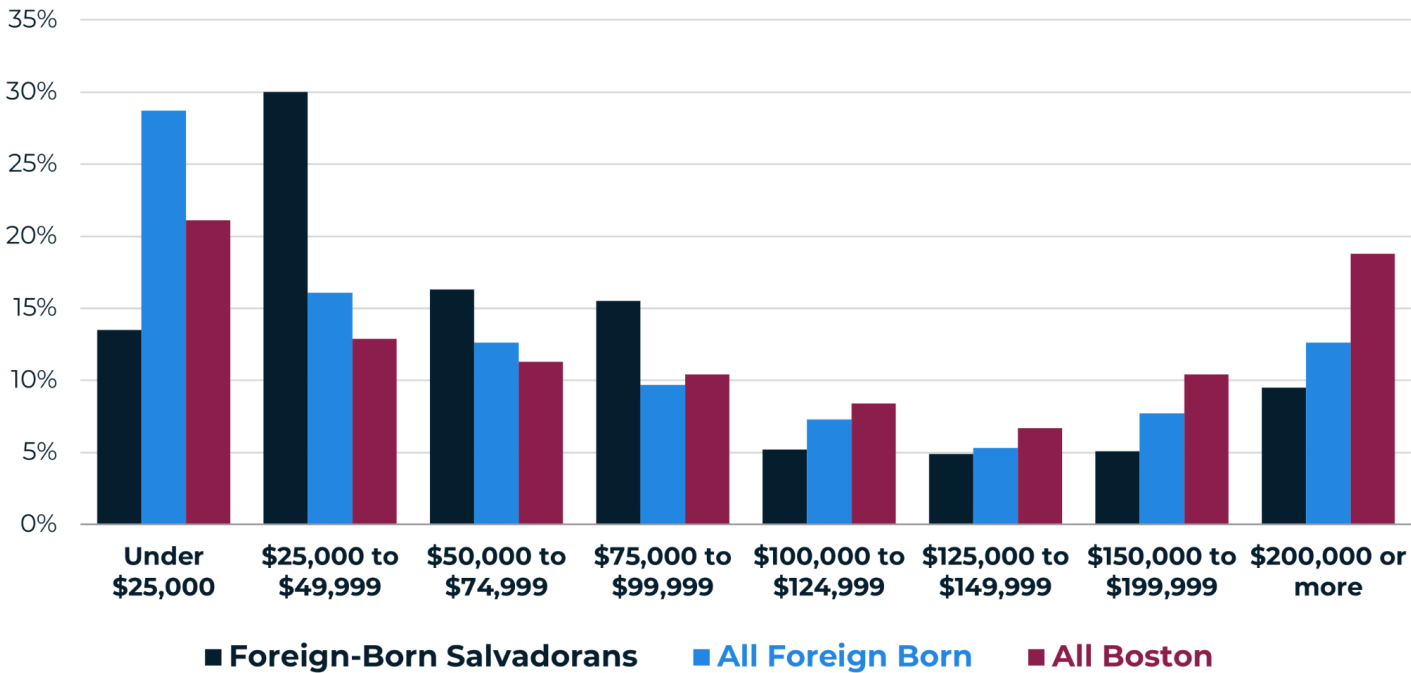


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Only around 14 percent of foreign-born Salvadoran households have an income of less than \$25,000 and about 10 percent have a household income of \$200,000 or higher.

HOUSEHOLD INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Share of households

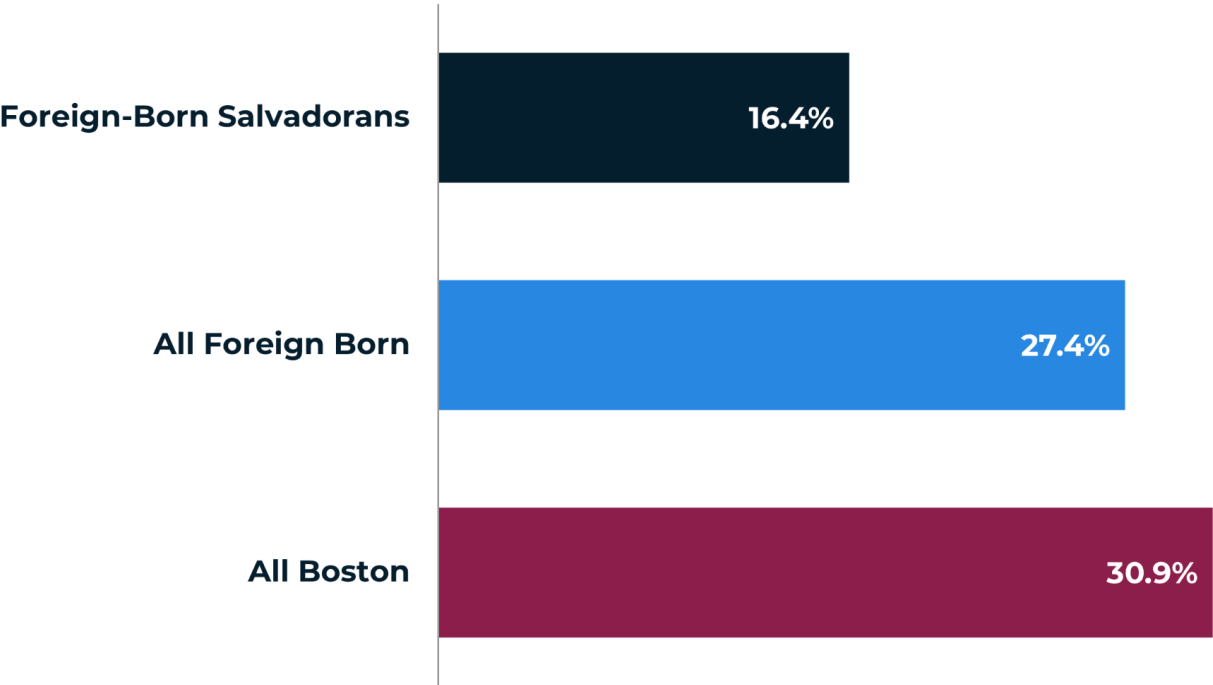


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis



Only 16 percent of Salvadoran foreign-born householders live in owner occupied households. This share is significantly lower than all foreign born (27 percent) and all Boston (31 percent) households.

OWNER-OCCUPIED HOUSEHOLDS
Share of householders that own their residence

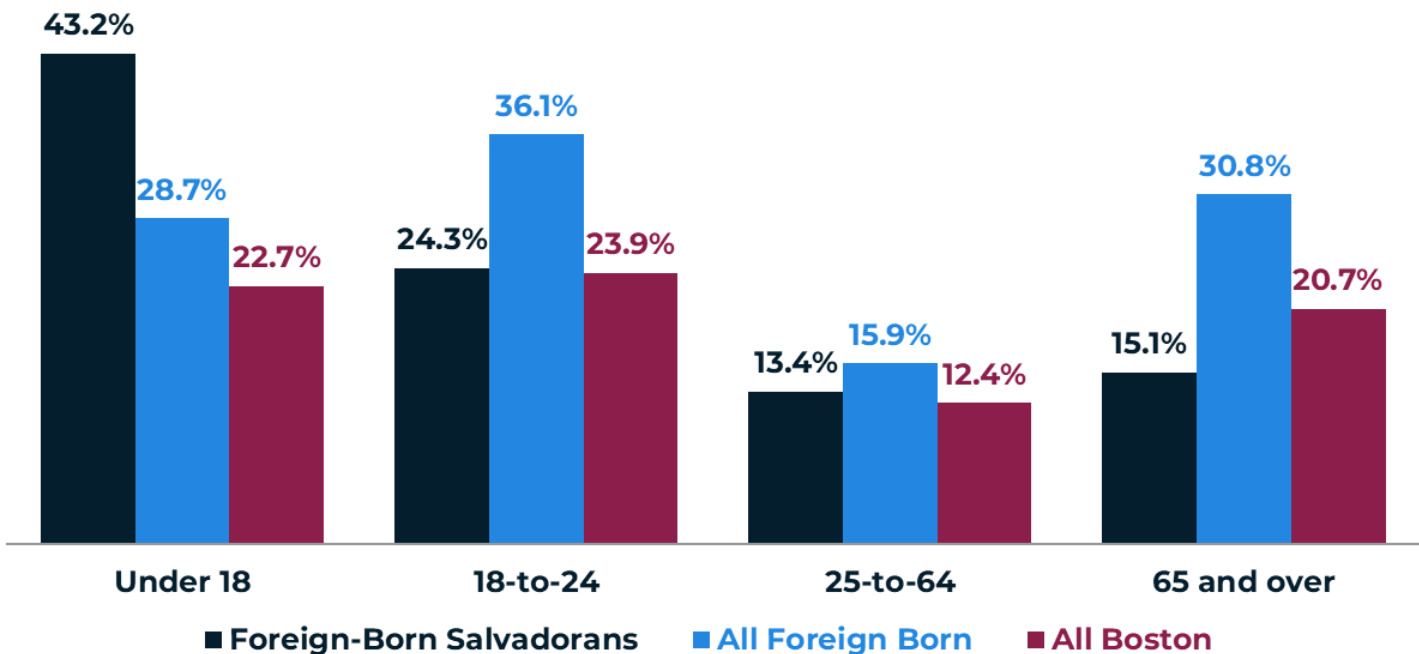


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Approximately 43 percent of those aged under 18 years old in the foreign-born Salvadoran population live in poverty. Other than this age group, the foreign-born Salvadoran population is either nearly identical or lower in terms of share living below the poverty line compared to all Boston residents. Around 15 percent of those aged 65 and over live below the poverty line, which is lower than the same age group in all of Boston. As a whole, about 16 percent of all foreign-born Salvadorans live below the poverty line.

POVERTY RATES

Share of age group that is living below the poverty line



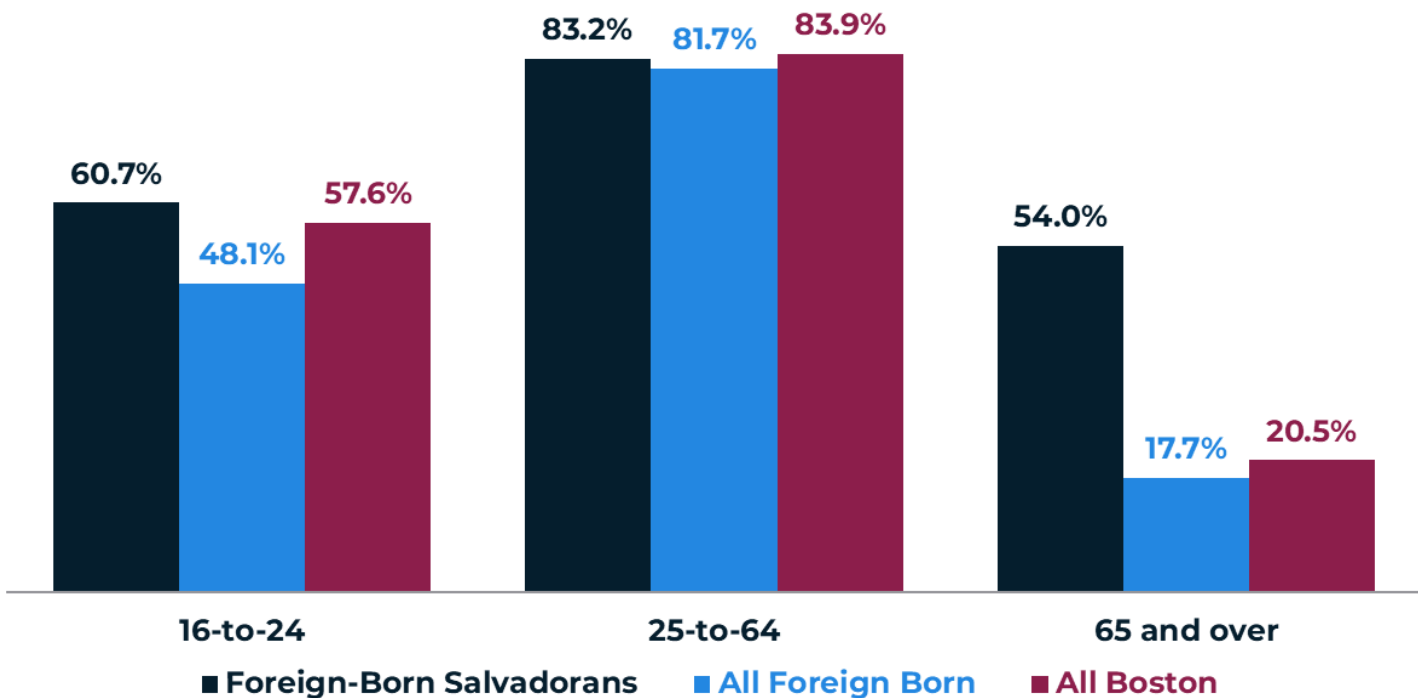
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

EMPLOYMENT

Approximately 61 percent of foreign-born Salvadorans 16-to-24 years old participate in the labor force.¹⁰ This share is consistent with lower rates of college enrollment and employment opportunities as the motivation for immigration. While the Salvadoran share of labor force participation among 24-to-64 year olds (83 percent) is similar to the other groups, it is striking that 54 percent of Salvadorans 65 years and older are in the labor force. This share is more than double that of both all foreign born and all Boston residents of the same age group.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

Share of population participating in the labor force



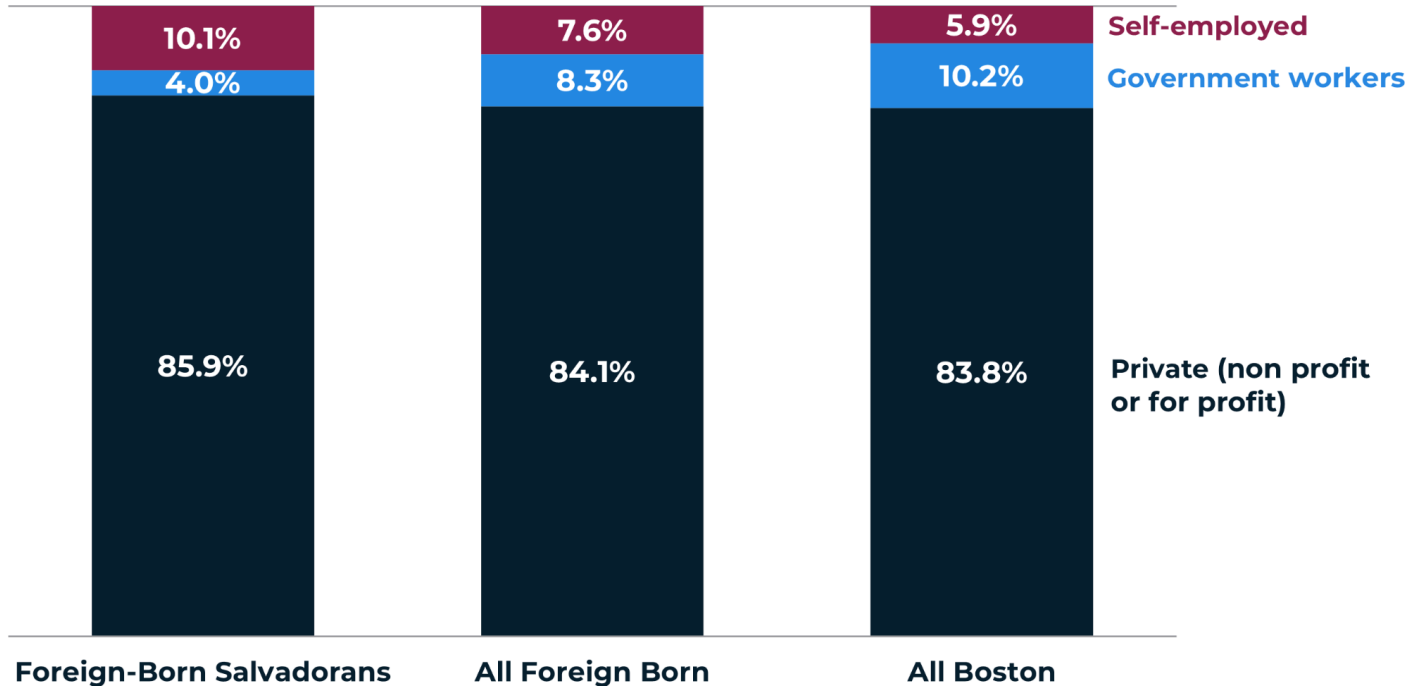
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

¹⁰ The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics defines participating in the labor force as the population who is either working or actively looking for work. <https://www.bls.gov/cps/definitions.htm>.

The foreign-born Salvadoran population has a higher share (10 percent) of self-employed individuals and a lower share of government workers (4 percent) than the other groups. Only foreign-born Brazilians have a high share of self-employed workers among the top 10 foreign-born populations in Boston.

CLASS OF WORKERS

Share of those in the labor force, 16 years and over

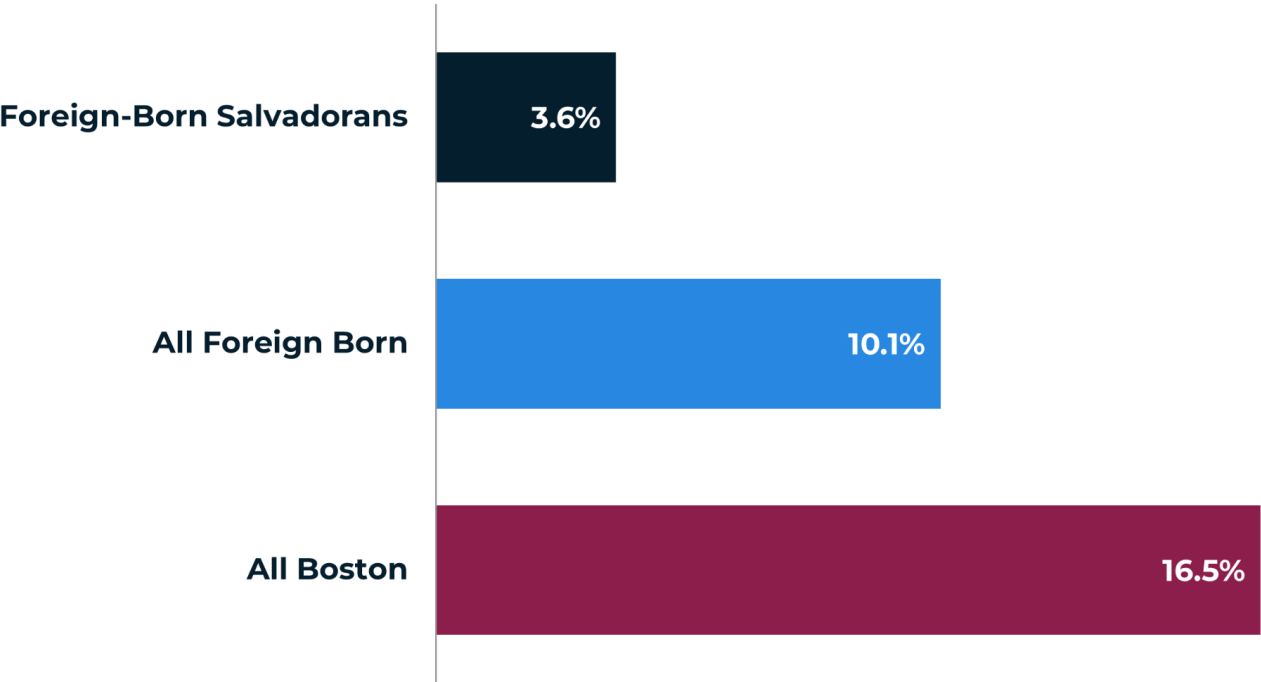


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Foreign-born Salvadoran workers are also much less likely to work from home (4 percent) compared to all foreign born (10 percent) and all Boston resident workers (17 percent). This trend is likely due in part to their over-representation in in-person service occupations such as cleaning, food preparation, and transportation.

WORKED FROM HOME

Share of those in the labor force, 16 years and over

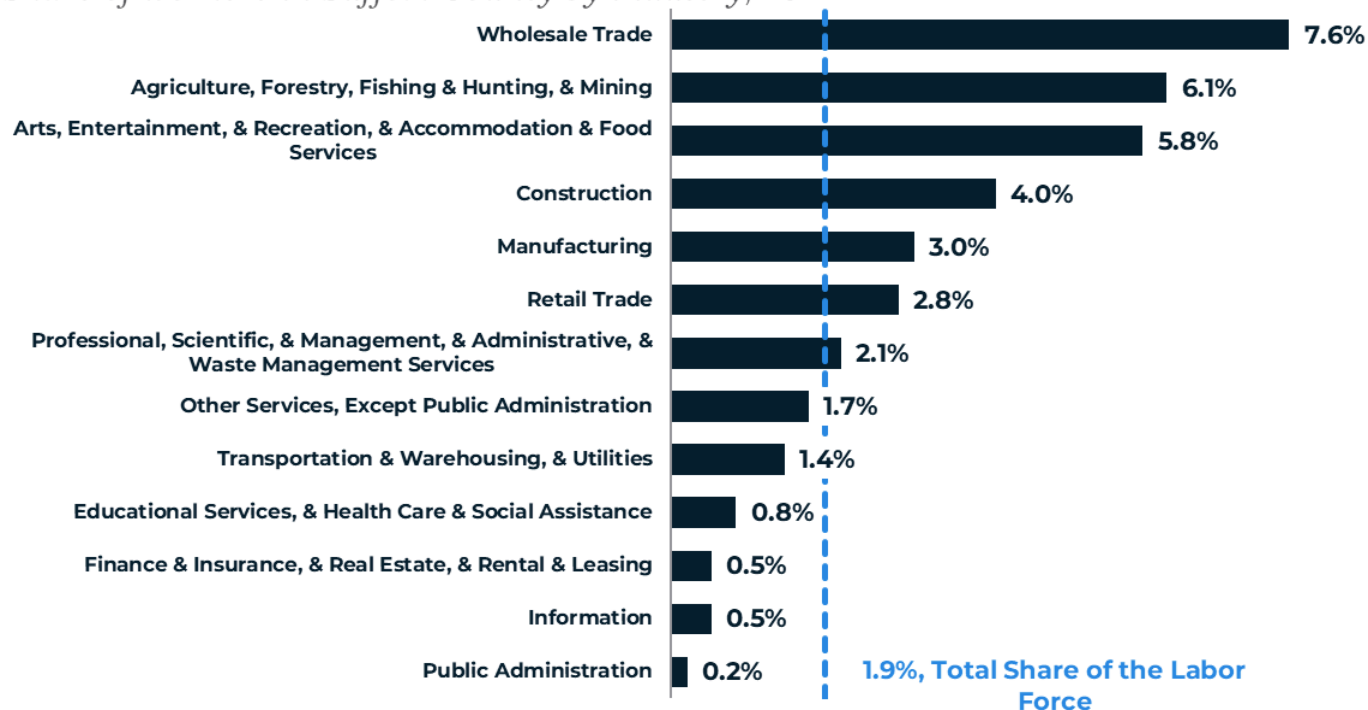


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

There are 12,443 foreign-born Salvadoran workers working in Suffolk County, making up 1.9 percent of Suffolk County's workforce. Salvadoran foreign-born workers working in Suffolk county make up 7.6 percent of wholesale trade, 6.1 percent of agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining, and 5.8 percent of arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services workers. They are underrepresented in certain industries such as educational services, health care, and social assistance (0.5 percent), information (0.5 percent), and public administration (0.2 percent).

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY

Share of workers in Suffolk County by industry, 2022



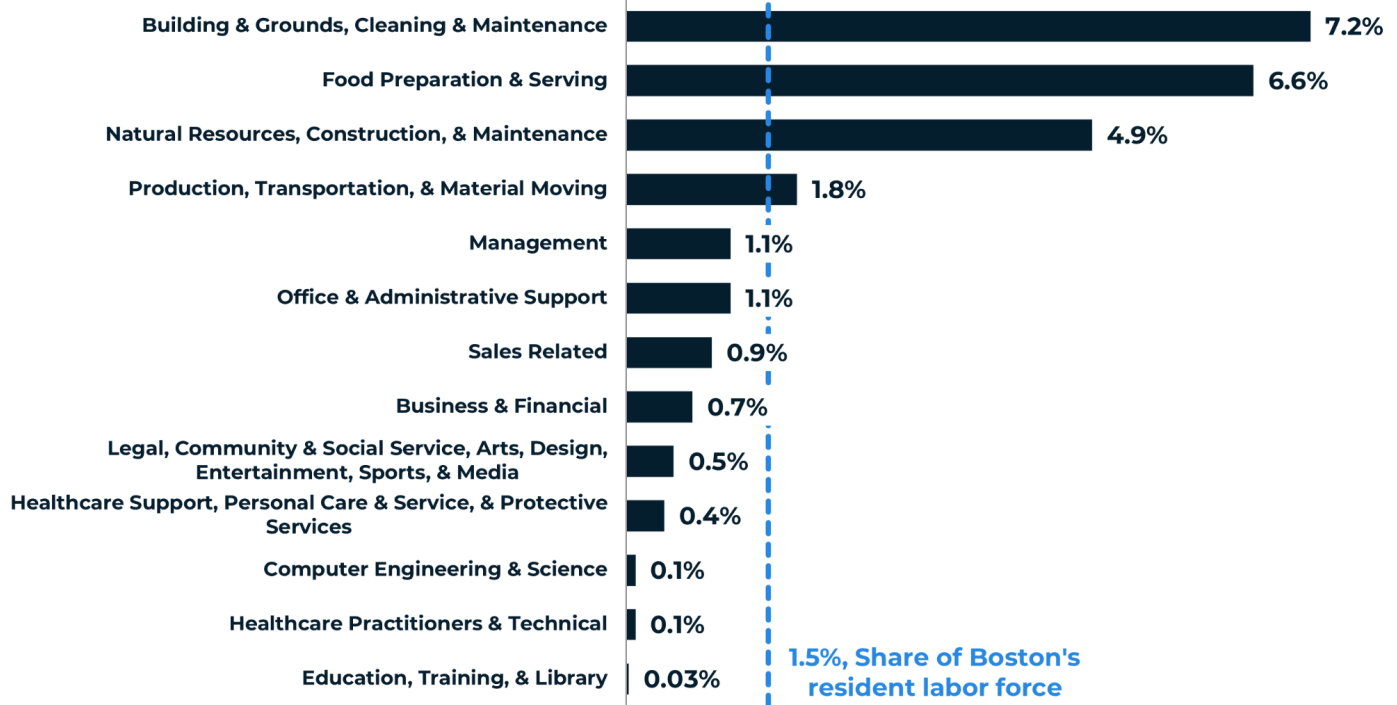
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018–2022 5-Year American Community Survey (IPUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Foreign-born Salvadorans comprise 1.5 percent of the Boston resident labor force, but approximately 7.2 percent of Boston workers in building and grounds, cleaning and maintenance occupations. Of these occupations, foreign-born Salvadorans are most likely to be janitors and building cleaners, maids and housekeeping cleaners, and landscaping and groundskeeping workers. Furthermore, foreign-born Salvadorans comprise 6.6 percent of food preparation and serving occupations. Within this group, foreign-born Salvadorans are most likely to be cooks, food preparation workers, and waiters or waitresses. Foreign-born Salvadorans only make up 0.03 percent of education, training, and library occupations.



FOREIGN-BORN SALVADORAN OCCUPATIONS

Share of Boston's resident labor force, by occupation



Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

STANDARD OF LIVING

Approximately 26.1 percent of foreign-born Salvadorans have achieved a middle-class standard of living, compared with 43.5 percent of Boston's overall population, and 33.5 percent of all foreign born. A family income four times the poverty line is used as a proxy for a middle-class standard of living. The actual income needed to achieve this standard depends on the size and composition of the family. For a two-person family in 2022, a middle-class income would be at least \$75,600.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Salvadoran foreign-born workers contribute to Boston's economy. Many foreign-born Salvadorans commute into Boston to work. Their labor generates an additional 5,093 indirect and induced jobs in Suffolk County. They contribute 2.4 billion dollars to Boston's GCP. Salvadoran



foreign-born workers employed in Suffolk County pay \$39 million in federal income tax and \$28 million in state income tax.¹¹

CONCLUSION

Salvadorans are the 7th largest foreign-born population in Boston with 8,066 residents. Foreign-born Salvadorans actively contribute to the economy, culture, and civic life of their new home in Boston, particularly in East Boston. Foreign-born Salvadorans have a higher labor force participation rate at 84 percent, and therefore likely come to Boston for employment opportunities. Without Salvadoran migration to Boston, the city would have 7 percent fewer maintenance workers and 7 percent fewer food preparation and serving workers.

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¹¹Research Division estimates using Regional Economic Model, Inc., (REMI), PI+ Massachusetts Regions, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

