

FOREIGN BORN IN BOSTON: CHINESE

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 CHINESE IN THE UNITED STATES

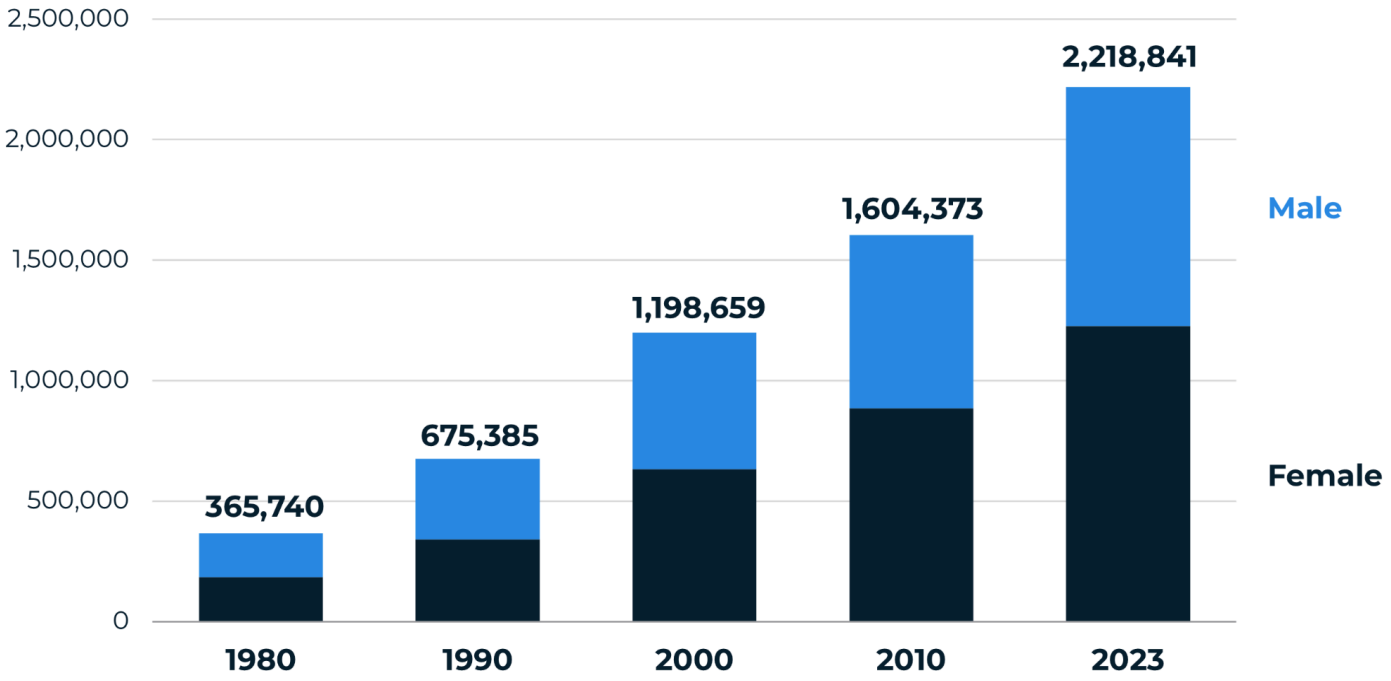
Changing U.S. immigration policy over the last 150 years has influenced the Chinese-born population in the United States. The initial Western construction of U.S. railroads needed Chinese labor. Soon after completing the railroad connecting the East and West coasts, the United States passed the Page Act (1875) and the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). They became the first laws to restrict immigration to the United States from a specific country.[1] These Chinese-specific immigration laws, in conjunction with the 1924 Nation of Origin Act, significantly limited Chinese migration for nearly a century. These policies persisted until President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Act to Repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts in 1943.[2]

[1] https://www.history.com/articles/chinese-immigration-page-act-women
[2] https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/china-development-transformed-migration

Today, Chinese migration is shaped by an influx of Chinese college students. These students possess a temporary visa (F-1) that allows them to remain in the United States for up to 60 days beyond the completion of their academic program. If they wish to stay longer they must qualify for Optional Practical Training (OPT) or obtain an H-1B visa. China has the second largest H-1B population in the United States after India.[3]

FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS FROM CHINA AND HONG KONG

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



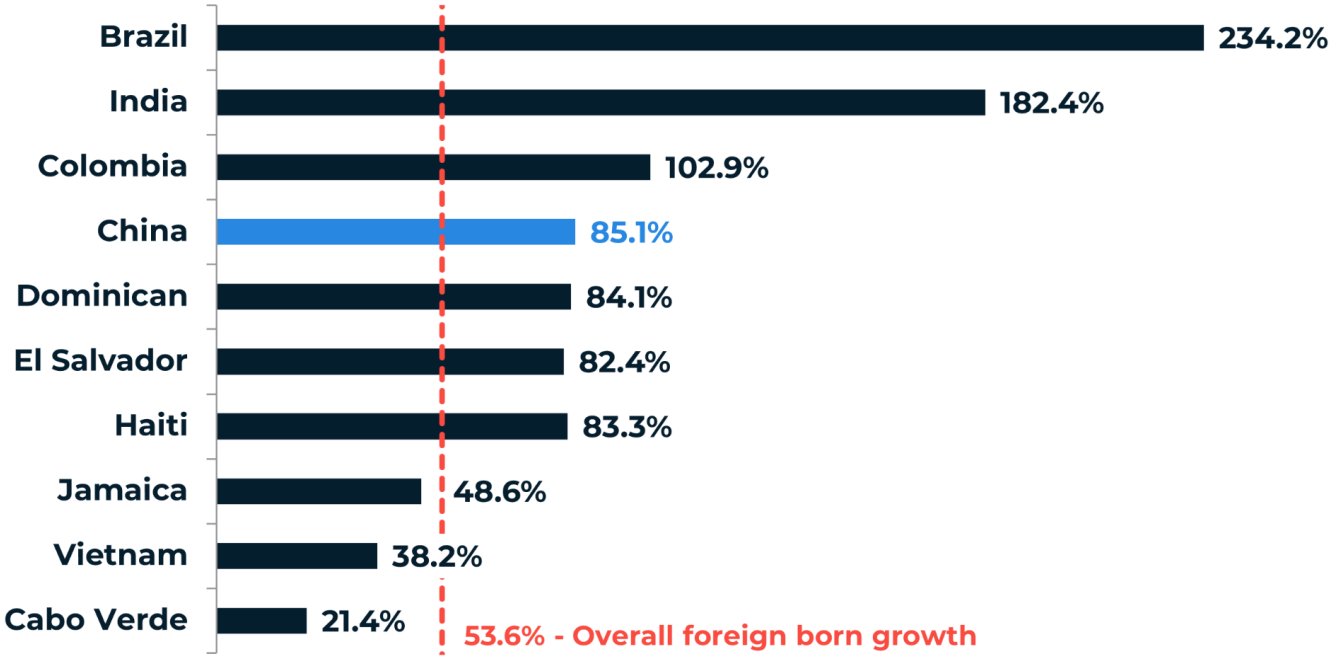
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2010 and 2023 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

[3] https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/h-1b-petitions-by-gender-country-of-birth-fy2019.pdf

From 2000 to 2023, the foreign-born Chinese population increased by 85 percent, faster than 53.6 percent growth for the foreign-born population overall.

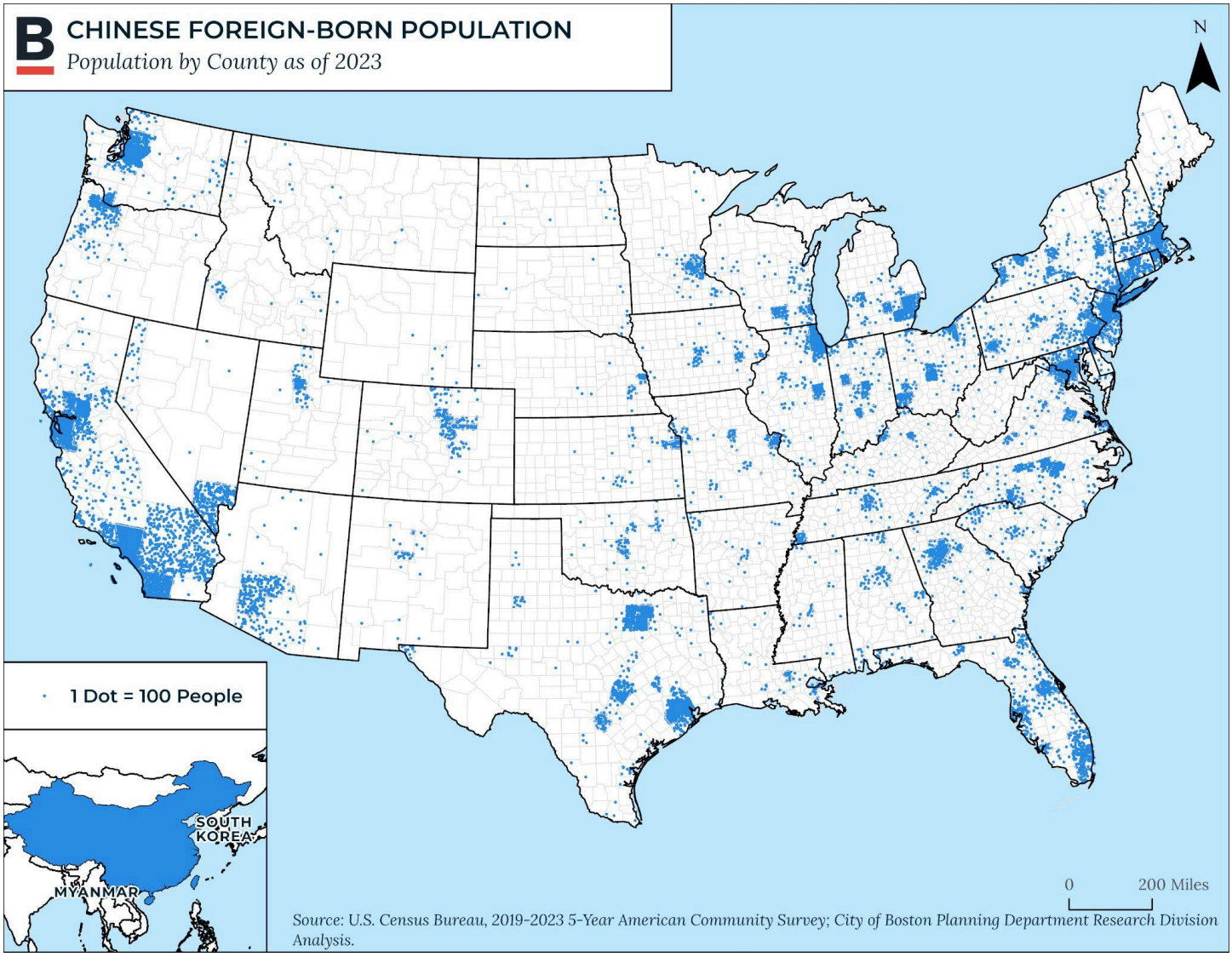
INCREASE IN FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION

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



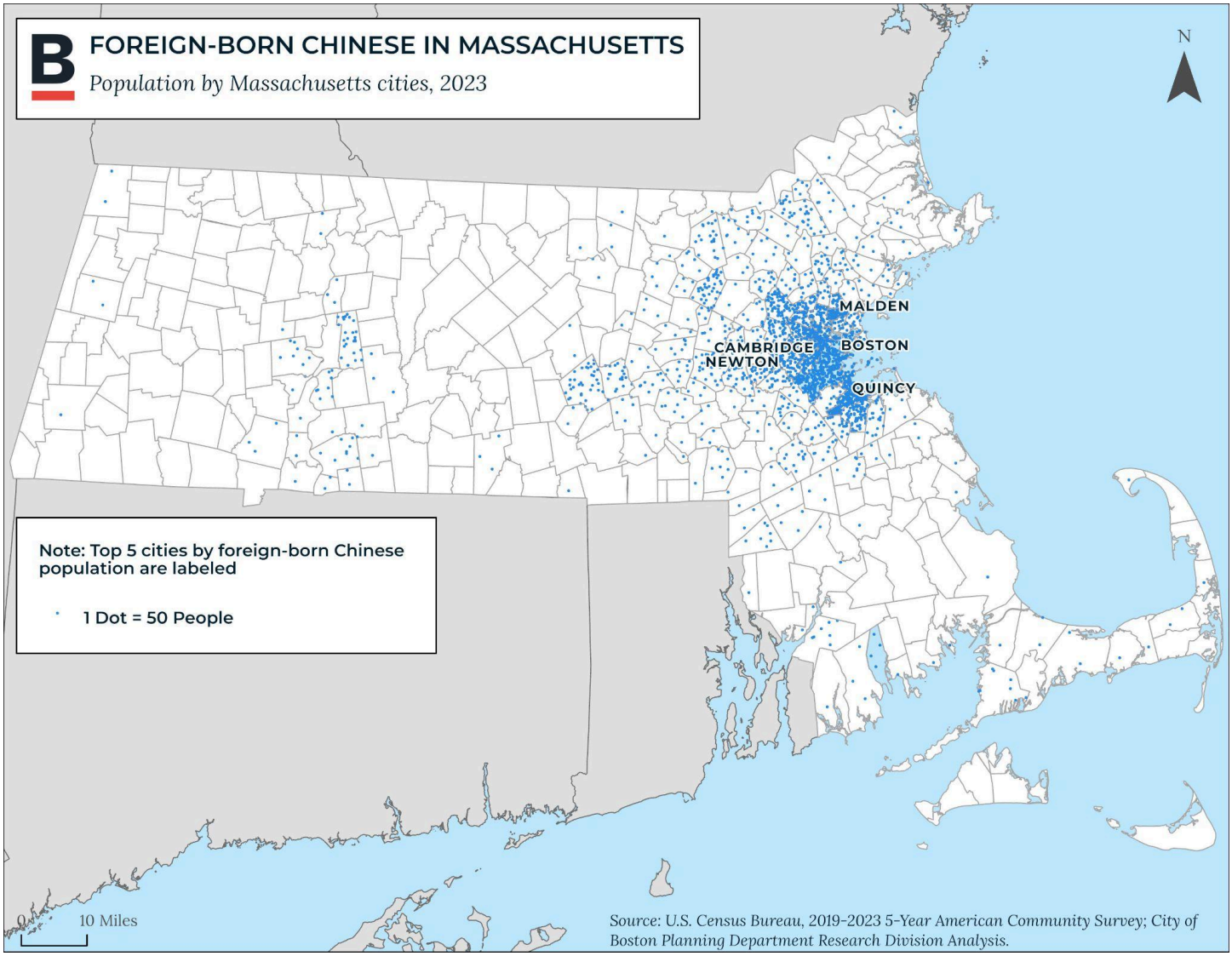
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2023 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Estimates from the 2023 American Community Survey (ACS) show that 2.4 million foreign-born individuals born in China and Hong Kong residing in the United States. Foreign-born Chinese are the third largest foreign-born population in the U.S. behind Mexicans and Asian Indians. The United States is the leading destination for Chinese emigrants followed by Canada, South Korea, Japan, and Australia.[4] Massachusetts has the fourth largest foreign-born Chinese population in the United States behind California, New York, and Texas.



[4] https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/chinese-immigrants-united-states

In Massachusetts, Boston (19 percent) has the largest share of the state's foreign-born Chinese population followed by Quincy (11 percent), Malden (6 percent), Cambridge (5 percent), and Newton (4 percent).



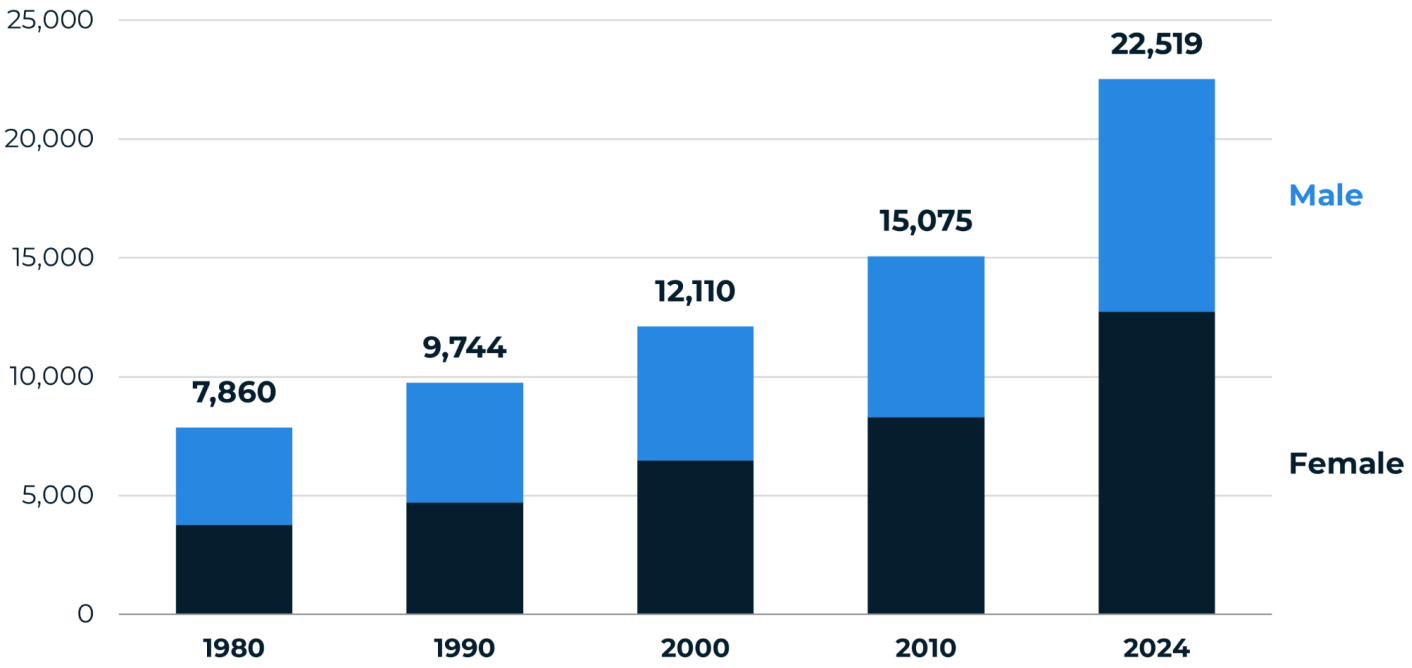
FOREIGN-BORN CHINESE IN BOSTON

DEMOGRAPHICS

The foreign-born Chinese population increased gradually from 1980 to 2010 and had a faster growth rate in the following years. In 2024, there were 22,519 foreign-born Chinese residing in Boston; 43 percent were female and 57 percent were male.

FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS FROM CHINA AND HONG KONG

Population growth in Boston, from 1980 to 2024

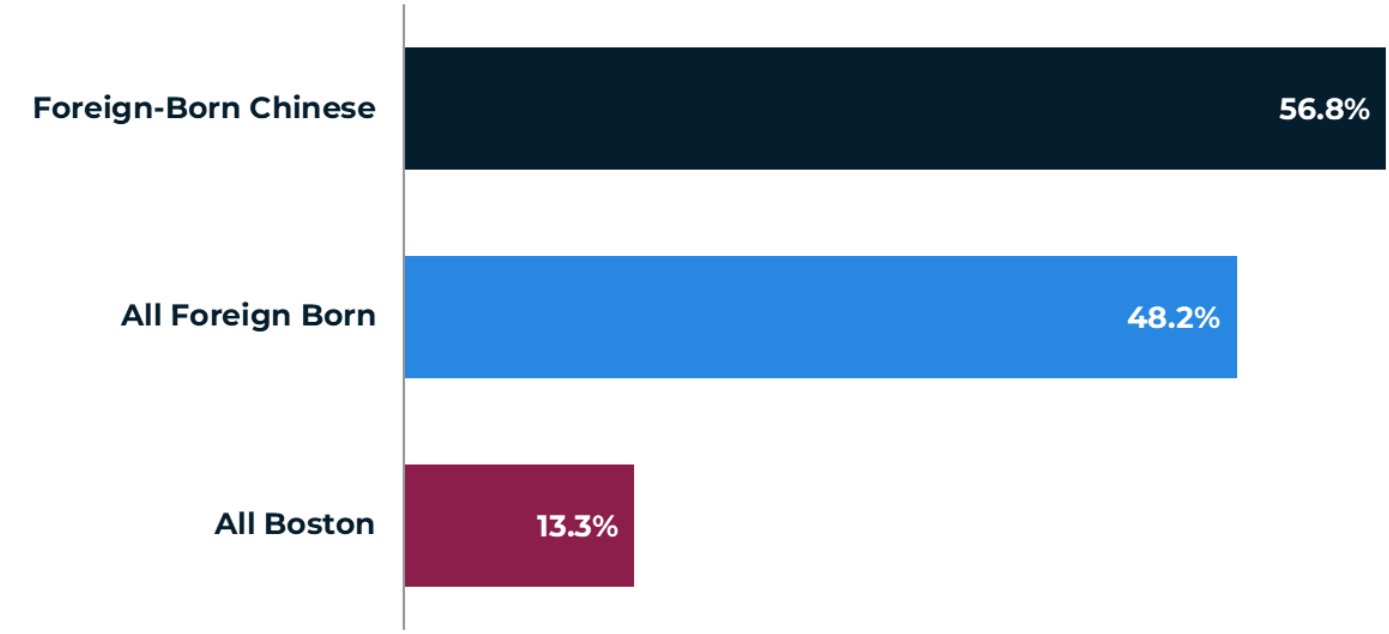


Source: U.S. Census Bureau 1980-2000 Decennial Censuses (IPUMS), 2010 American Community Survey (PUMS), 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

By the 1990s Boston University and Northeastern increasingly recruited students from China, and in 2024, 31 percent of foreign-born Chinese living in Boston were students enrolled in college or university. As a result of this concentration among recently arrived students, the majority of foreign-born Chinese are noncitizens.

NON-U.S. CITIZENS

Share of non-U.S. citizens

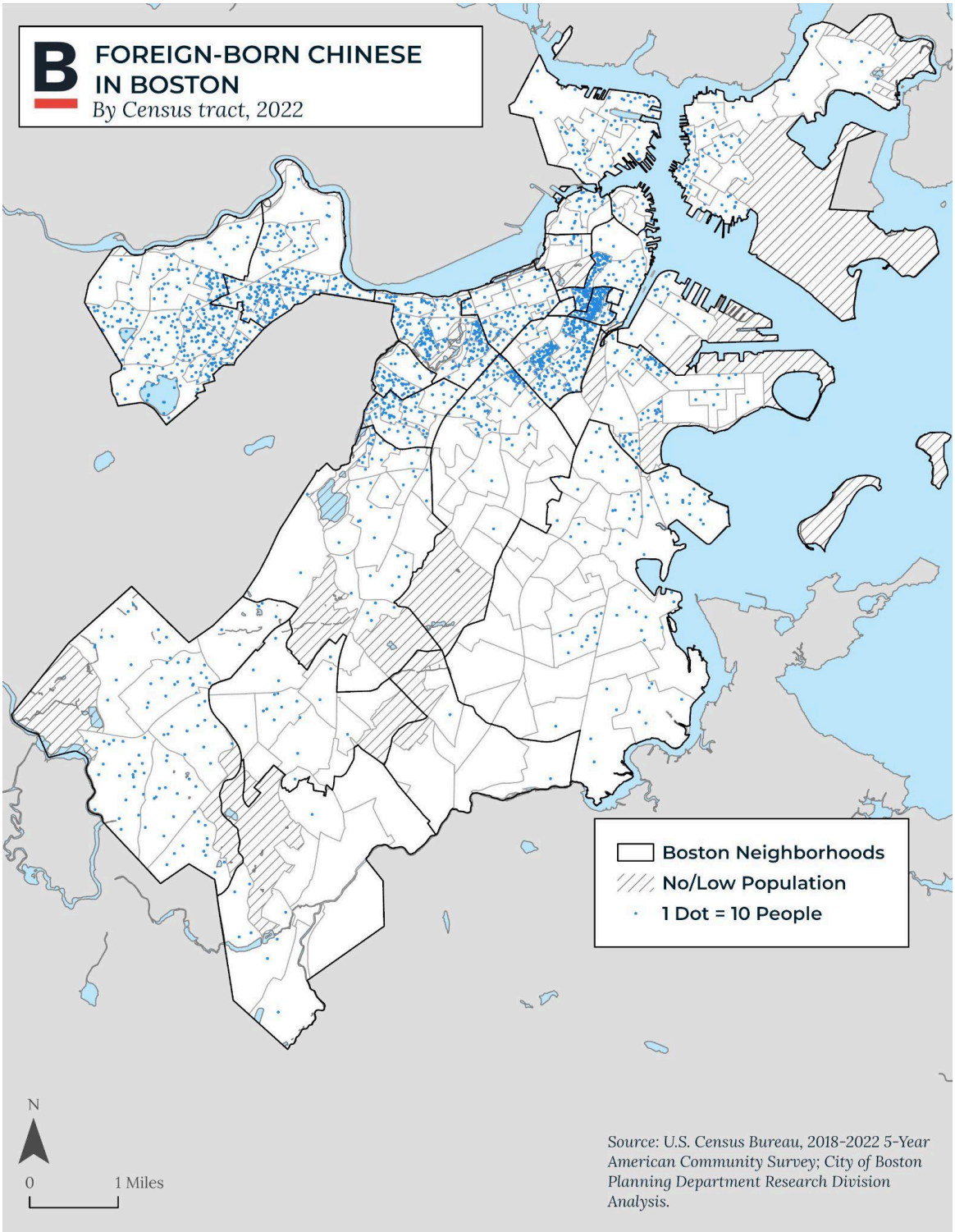


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

The migration of Chinese individuals to Boston goes back over 100 years to the late 1800s when the first Chinese residents settled in what is now known as Boston's Chinatown, centered on Beach Street and bordered by the Boston Common, Downtown Crossing, the South End and the Massachusetts Turnpike. Chinese immigrants who first settled in the area came from California, which had long been a popular destination for Chinese immigrants. Most came to Boston to flee anti-Chinese sentiment in California. Around the same time the first Chinese residents began settling in what would become Chinatown, several of Boston's large garment manufacturing plants relocated to the neighborhood, creating the garment district, which was active into the 1990s. Construction of the Southeast Expressway (I-93) and the Mass Pike (I-90) through Chinatown in the 1950s and expansion of the New England Medical Center in the 1960s and 70s constrained growth of the community.[5] Now, the majority of the foreign-born Chinese population are international students and their distribution is shaped by the location of colleges and universities. Only 8 percent of the population live in Chinatown, while Brighton (17 percent),

[5] https://globalboston.bc.edu/index.php/home/ethnic-groups/chinese/

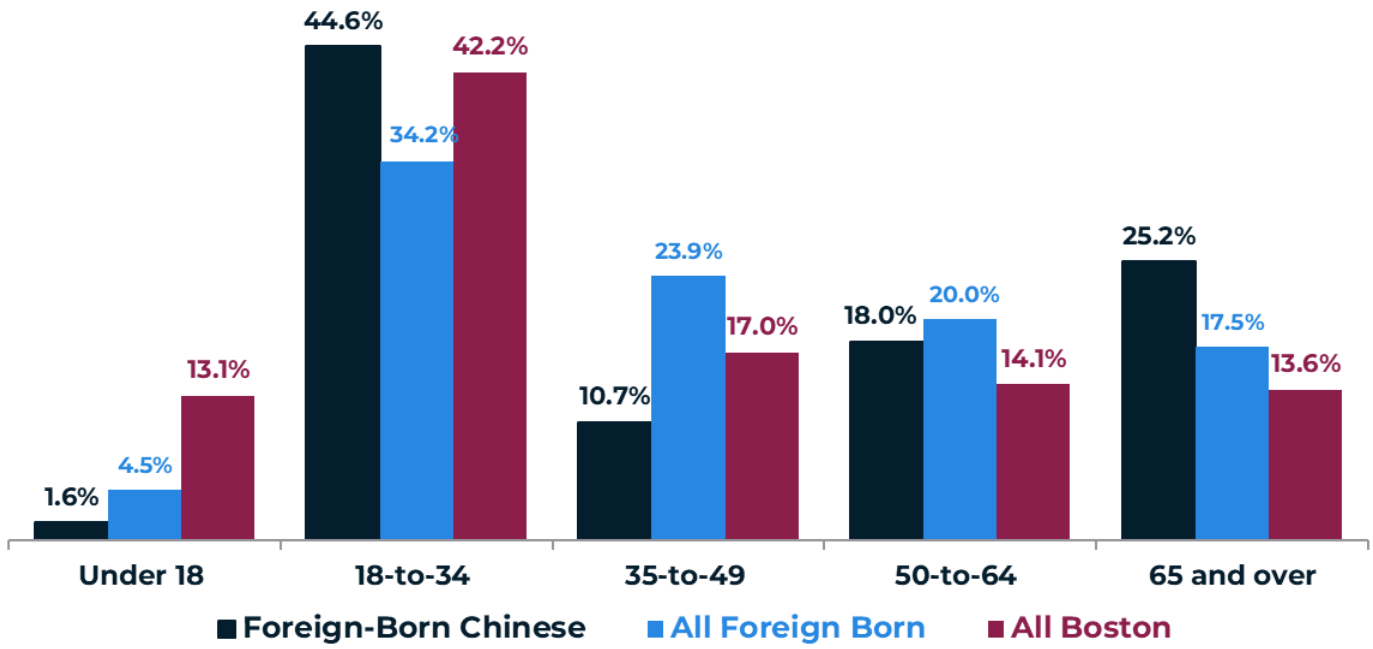
South End (13 percent), and Fenway (10 percent) have larger shares of the city's total foreign-born Chinese population.



The foreign-born Chinese population in Boston has two distinct age clusters. Almost 45 percent are young adults, 18-to-34 years, and 25 percent are 65 or older. Even though the share of foreign-born Chinese 18-to-34 years is similar to the city's population share, the share of foreign-born Chinese aged 65 and over is almost double that of the city's population.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

Share of population by age group



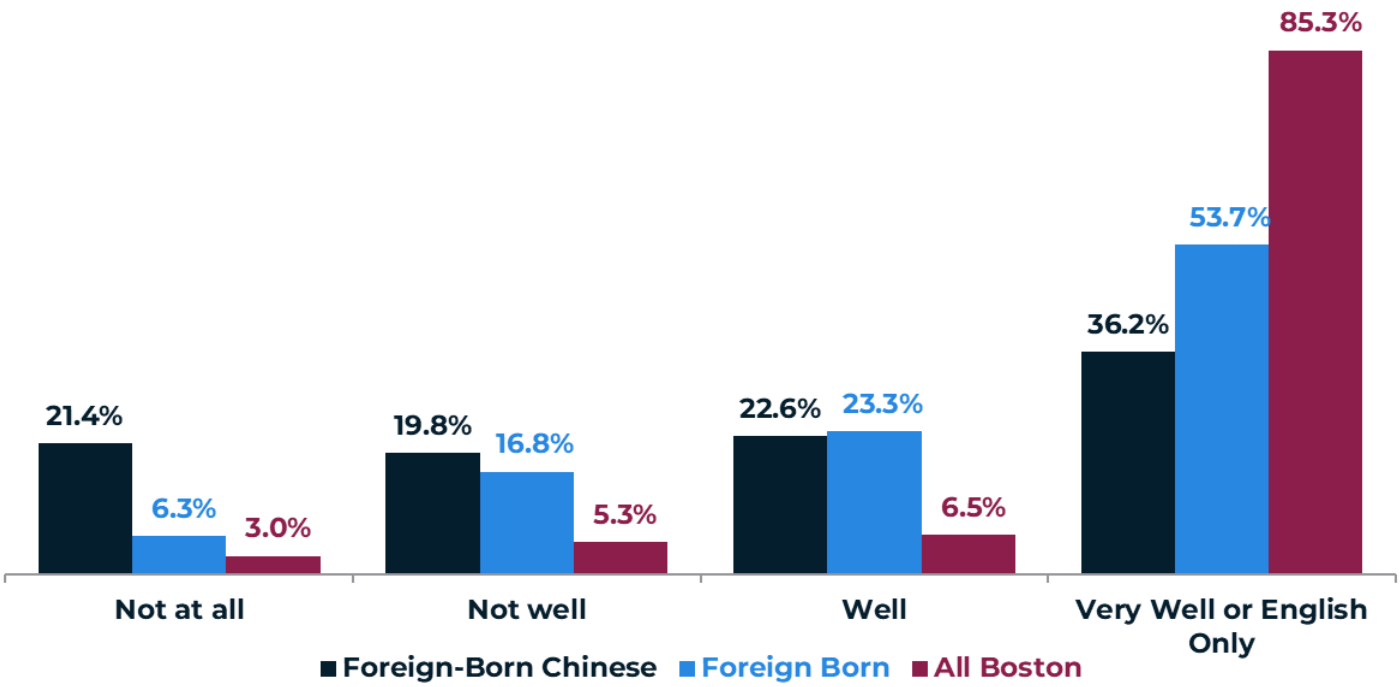
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Foreign-born Chinese in Boston have varied levels of English language proficiency: approximately 36 percent speak English only or very well, but 21 percent do not speak English at all. Of the foreign-born Chinese, 7 percent speak only English at home, 57 percent only speak Chinese at home, 19 percent only speak Cantonese at home, and 15 percent only speak Mandarin at home.[6]

ABILITY TO SPEAK ENGLISH

Population shares of those aged 5 years and over



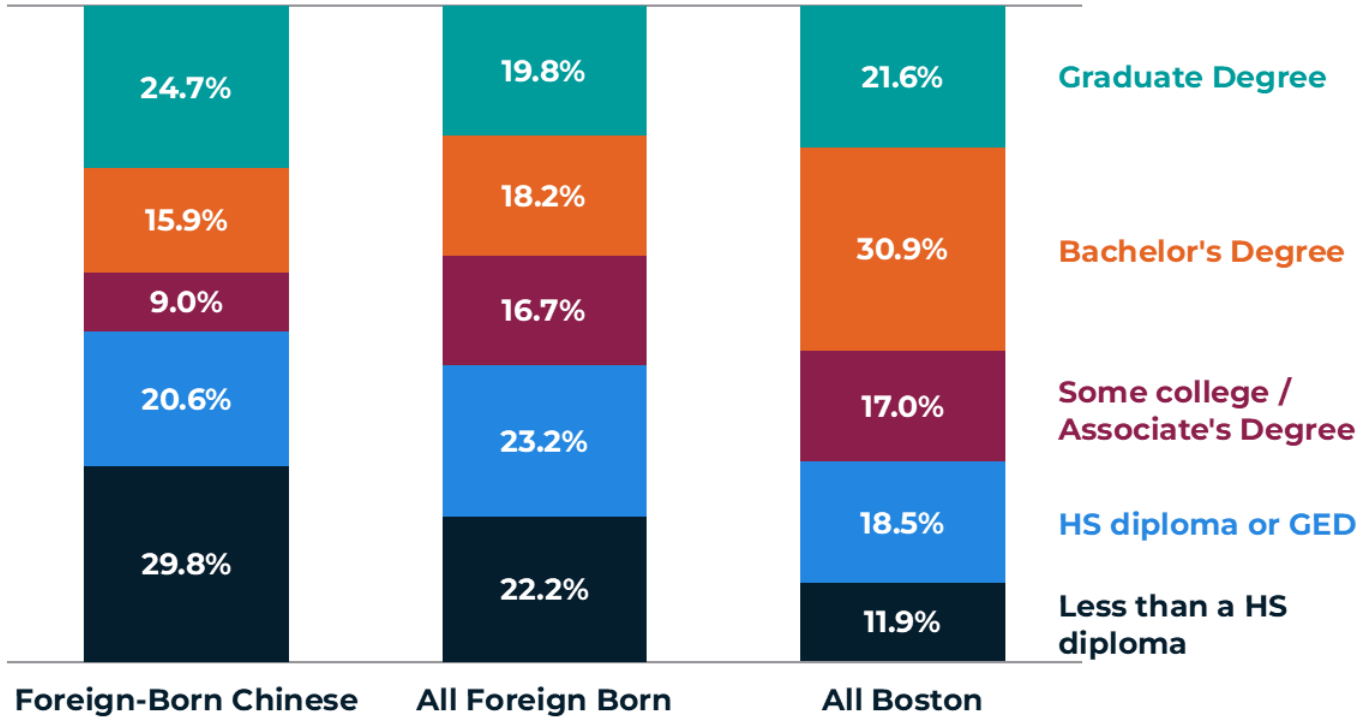
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

[6] 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates

The foreign-born Chinese population aged 25 and older has two clusters based on educational attainment. A higher share of the adult Chinese foreign born population has less than a high school diploma (30 percent) and a graduate degree (25 percent). The share of foreign-born Chinese with less than a high school diploma (30 percent) is higher than for all foreign-born adults (22 percent) and all Boston adults (12 percent).

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Share of population aged 25 years and over

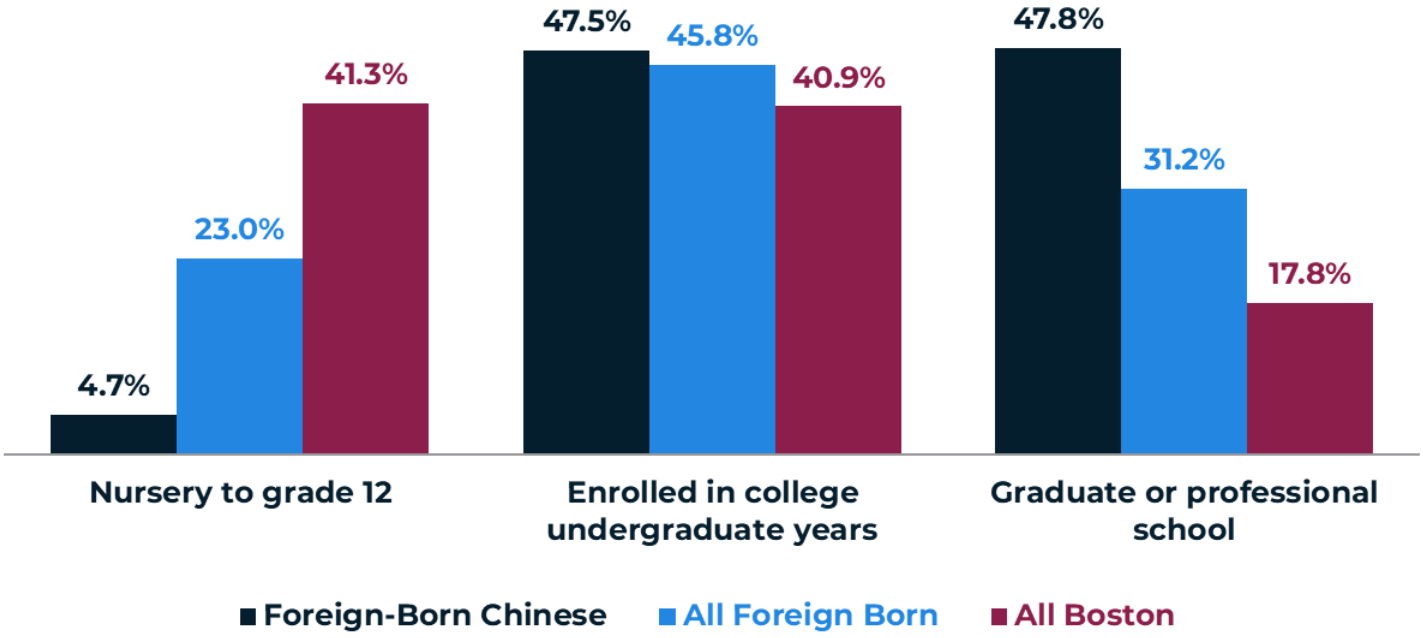


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

In 2024, 48 percent of the Chinese foreign-born population are enrolled in college or graduate/professional school. These rates are higher than the city as a whole and all foreign born and show that a significant portion of the population migrated for educational purposes. Comparatively, only 5 percent are enrolled in nursery to grade 12, which may indicate a low share of foreign-born Chinese children.

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Share of population enrolled in school aged 3 years and over

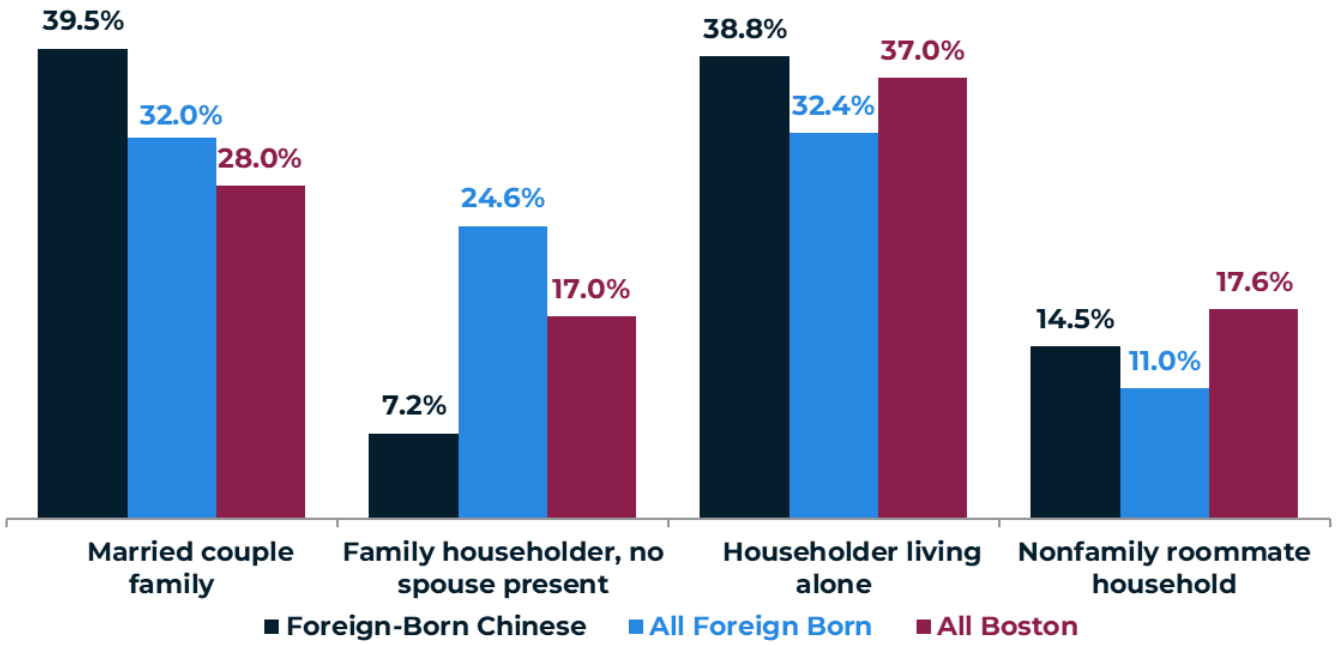


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Households headed by foreign-born Chinese are most likely either married-couple families (40 percent) or single-person households (39 percent). Only 7 percent are family householders without a spouse present and 15 percent are households with a non-family roommate present. Comparatively, the share is 25 percent for all foreign born and 17 percent for all Boston resident householders. This distribution may be due to most foreign-born Chinese migrating to the United States as a family unit and for college.

TYPE OF HOUSEHOLD

Share of households

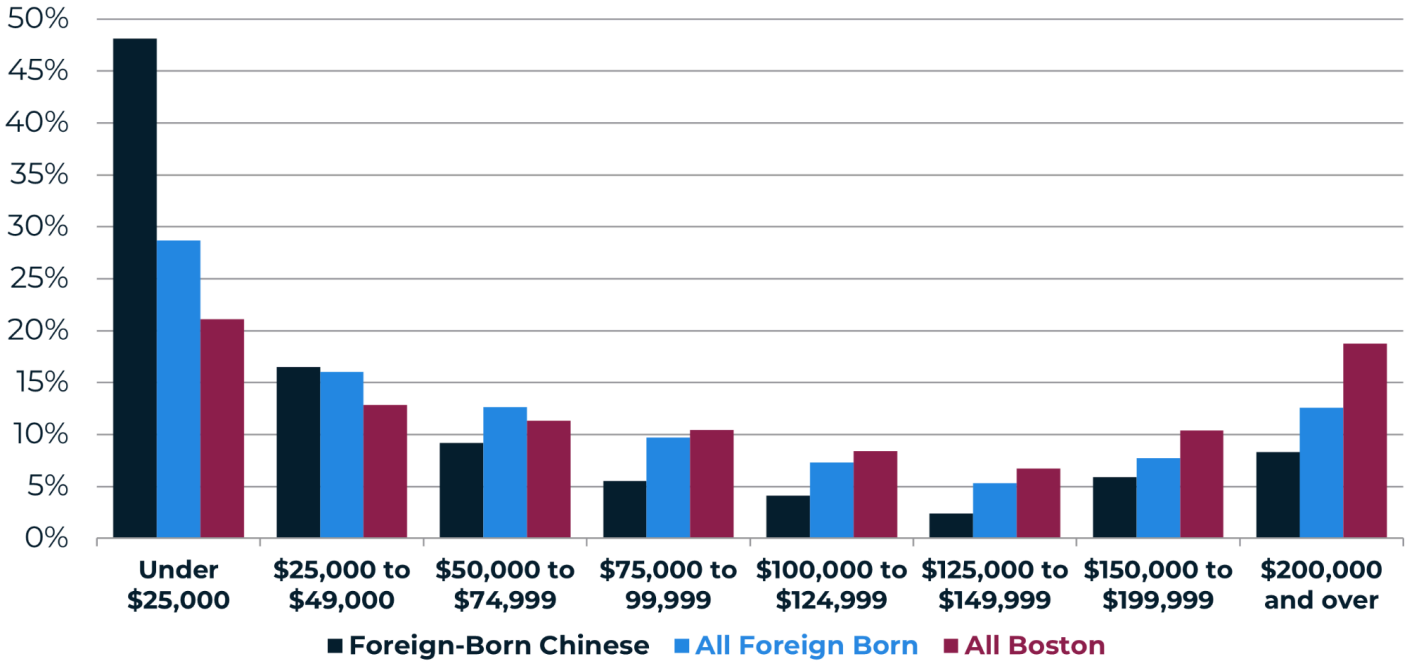


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Chinese foreign-born households tend to have lower income, with 48 percent earning less than $25,000. Of those households earning less than $25,000, 27 percent are students and 42 percent are over 65. Only 26 percent of foreign-born Chinese households earn more than $75,000.

HOUSEHOLD INCOME DISTRIBUTION

Share of households

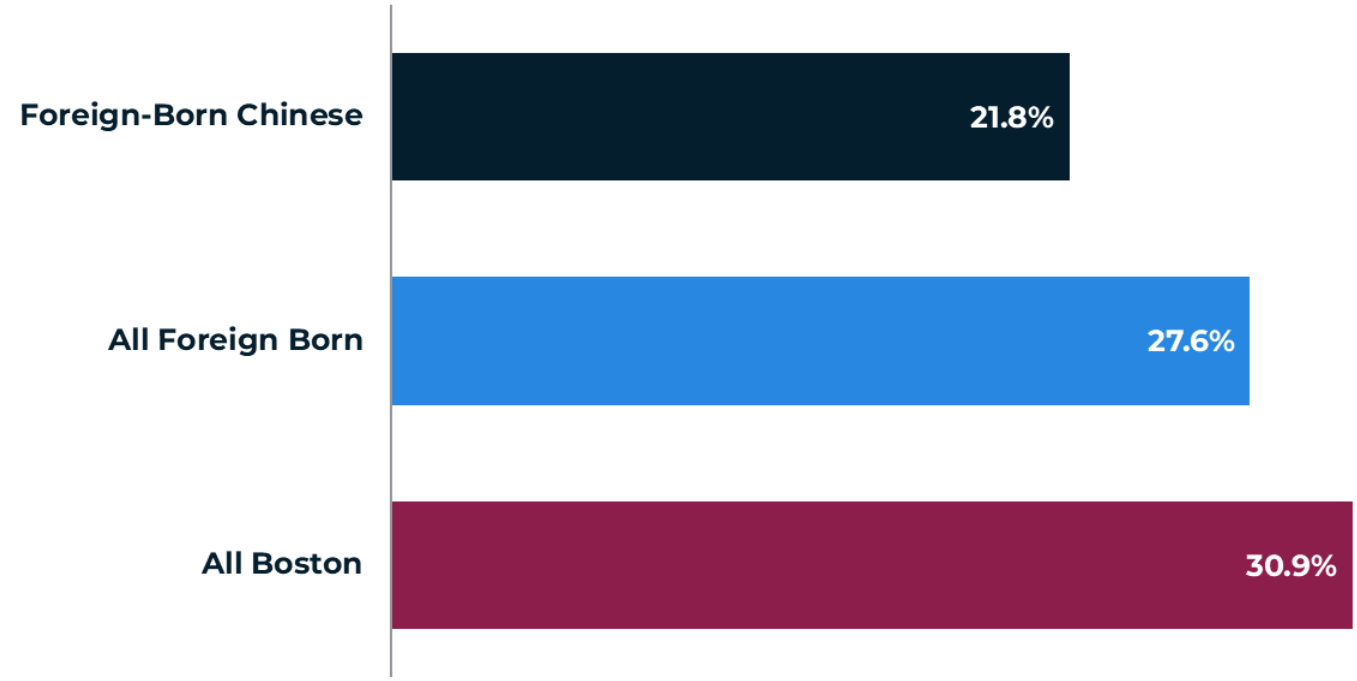


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Nearly 22 percent of Chinese foreign-born householders live in owner-occupied housing. This is a lower share than all foreign born (28 percent) and the overall population (31 percent). The foreign-born Chinese mobility is related to their lower homeownership as higher shares of noncitizens and higher shares of college students may be a contributing factor to their lower homeownership rates.

OWNER-OCCUPIED HOUSEHOLDS

Share of householder that own their residence

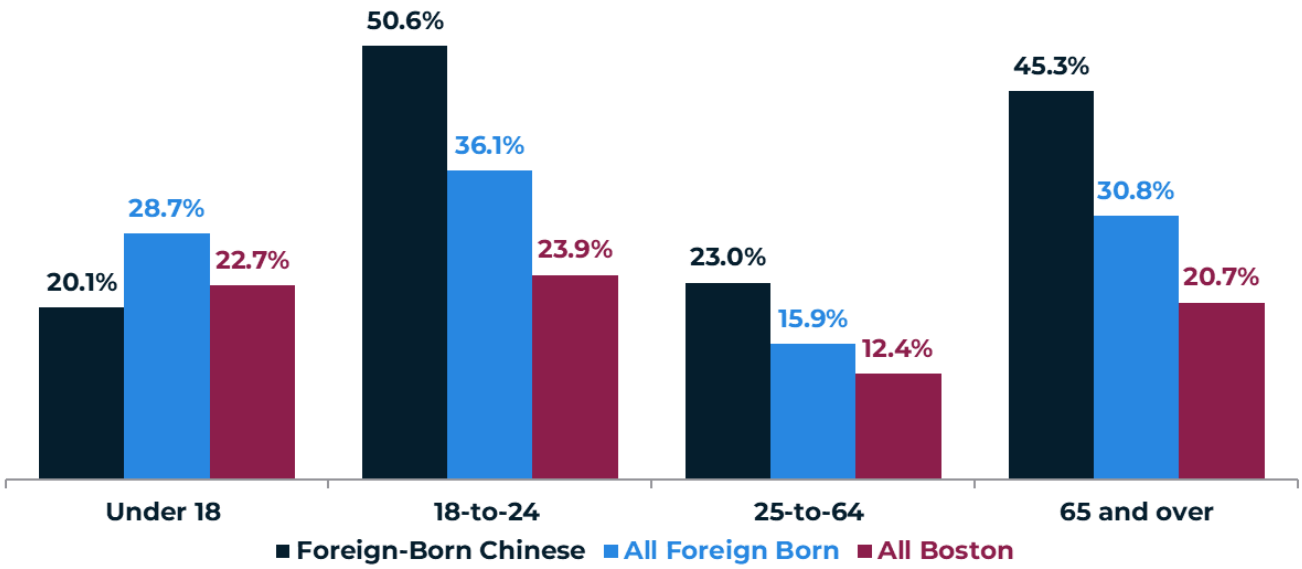


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division

Overall, the poverty rate among foreign-born Chinese is 35 percent, compared to 22 percent for all foreign born and 17 percent for all Boston residents. Poverty rates are highest among young adults and seniors: 51 percent of those between 18-and-24 and 45 percent of those aged 65 and older live below the poverty line. Half of 18-to-24 year olds living under the poverty line may be due to limitations on employment due to F-1 visa requirements. They are unable to work but supported by their parents abroad. As a result, they report no income, which places them below the poverty line.

POVERTY RATES

Share of age group that is living below the poverty line



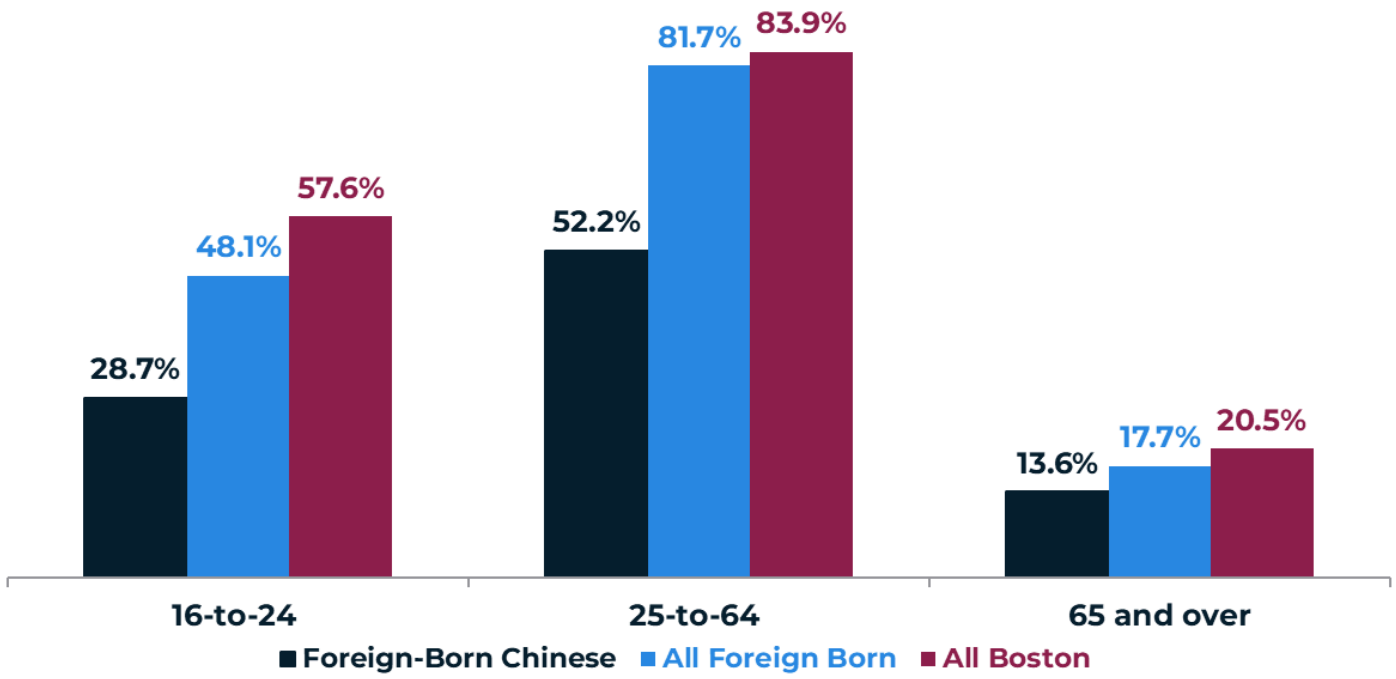
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

EMPLOYMENT

Approximately 53 percent of the foreign-born Chinese population is not in the labor force, which is higher than all foreign born (35 percent) and the city as a whole (32 percent). The lower participation rate is reflected in each age bracket as well. Only 29 percent of 16-to-24 year olds and 52 percent of 25-to-64 year olds participate in the labor force. The lower participation rates of 16-to-24 year olds may be due to the larger student population (around 60 percent). International students on F-1 student visas can only work off campus after their first academic year on CPT or OPT, but are limited to jobs that are related to their major.[7]

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

Share of those participating in the labor force



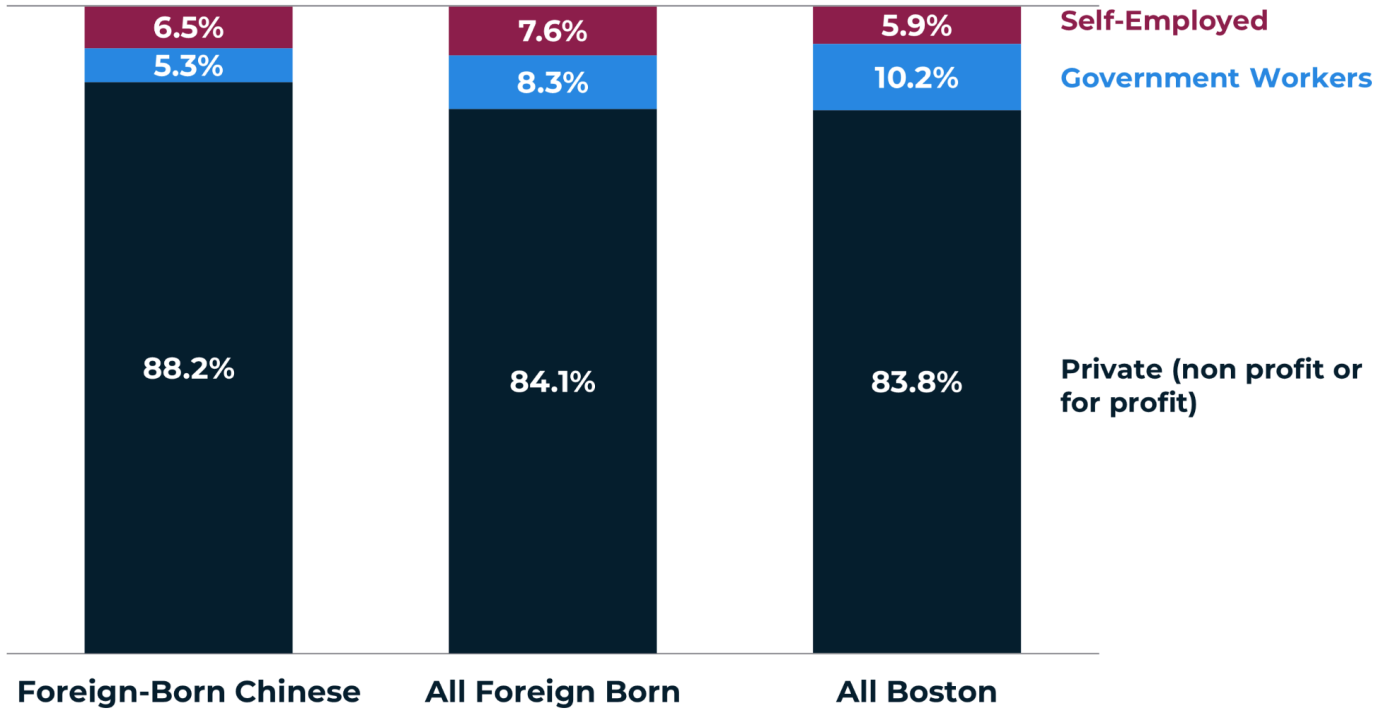
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

[7] https://www.uscis.gov/working-in-the-united-states/students-and-exchange-visitors/students-and-employment

The Chinese foreign-born population has a higher share of workers who are working in the private sector (88 percent) and a lower share of those working in government (5 percent) compared to the city as a whole.

CLASS OF WORKERS

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

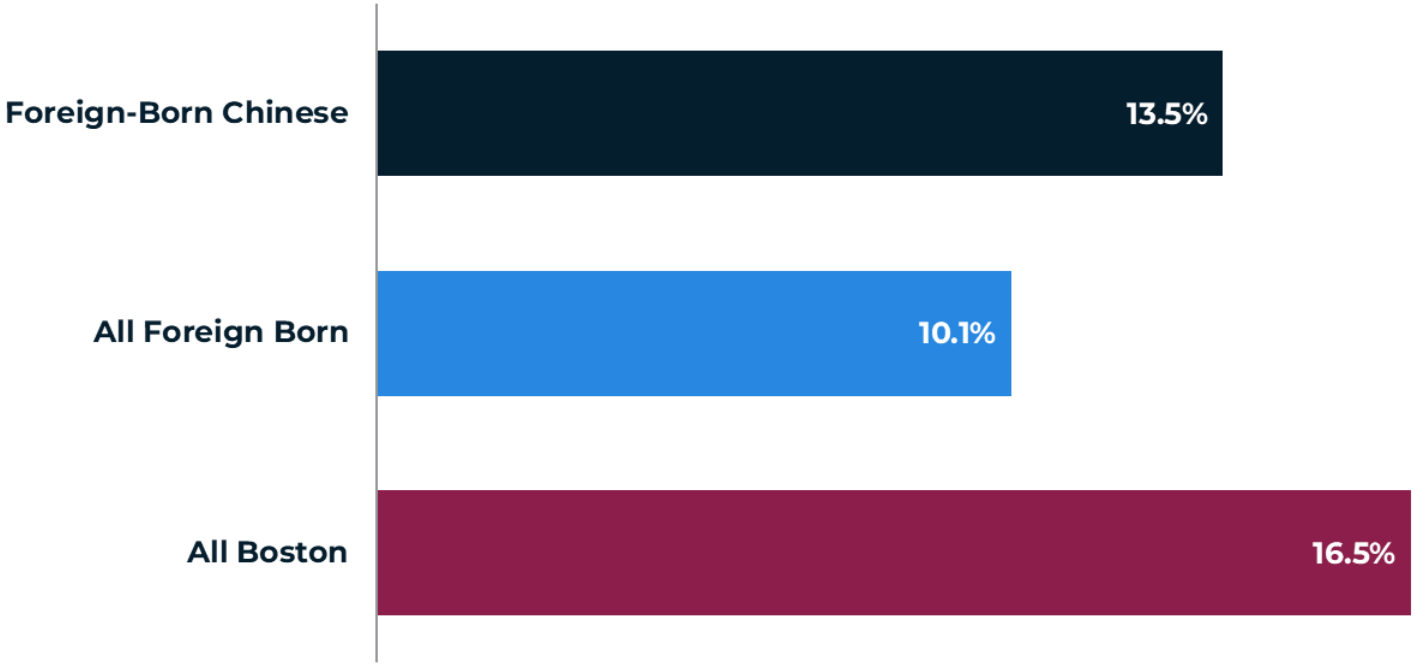


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Approximately 14 percent of the foreign-born Chinese resident workers worked from home. This is a higher share than all foreign-born workers but lower than all Boston resident workers.

WORKED FROM HOME

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

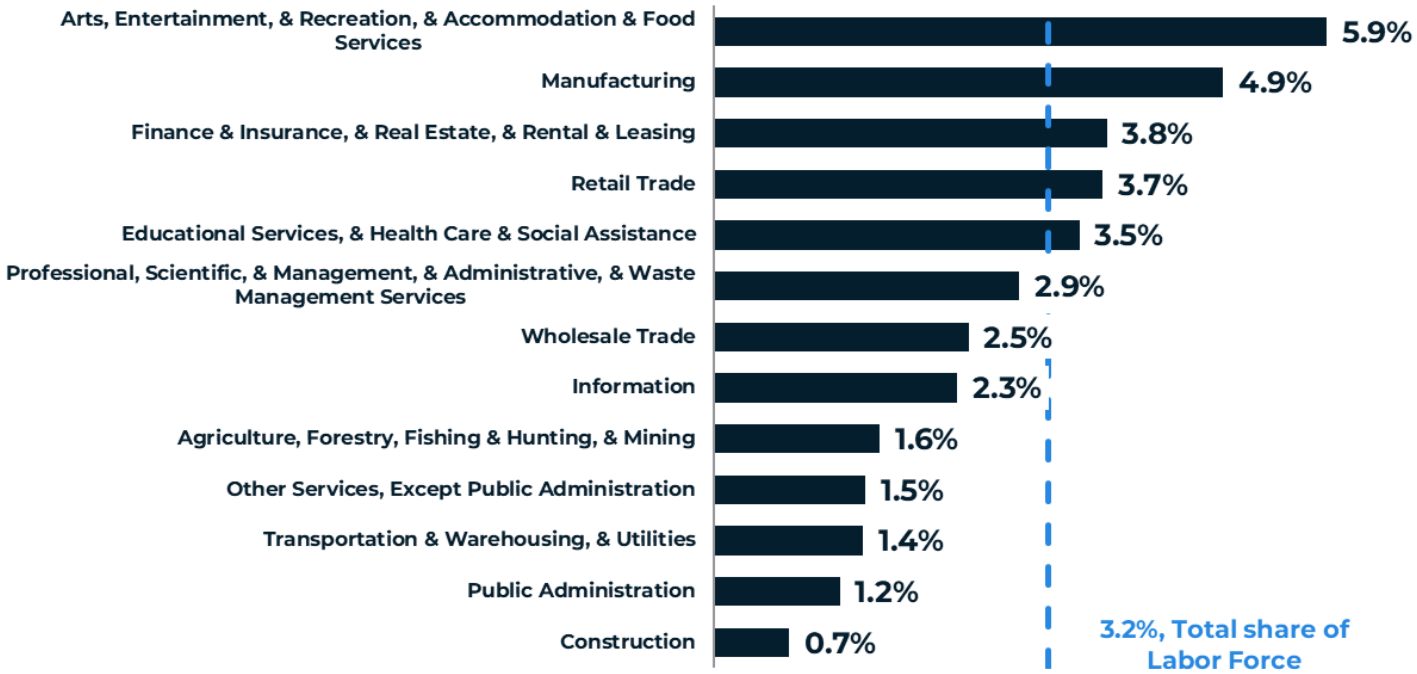


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

There are 28,566 foreign-born Chinese employed in Suffolk County, making up 3.2 percent of Suffolk County's workforce. Chinese foreign-born workers working in Suffolk County make up 5.9 percent of arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services, 4.9 percent of manufacturing, 3.8 percent of finance, insurance, real estate, rental, and leasing, 3.7 percent of retail trade, and 3.5 percent of educational services, health care, and social assistance. They are underrepresented in industries such as transportation, warehousing, and utilities (1.4 percent), public administration (1.2 percent), and construction (0.7 percent).

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY

Share of workers in Suffolk County by industry, 2022

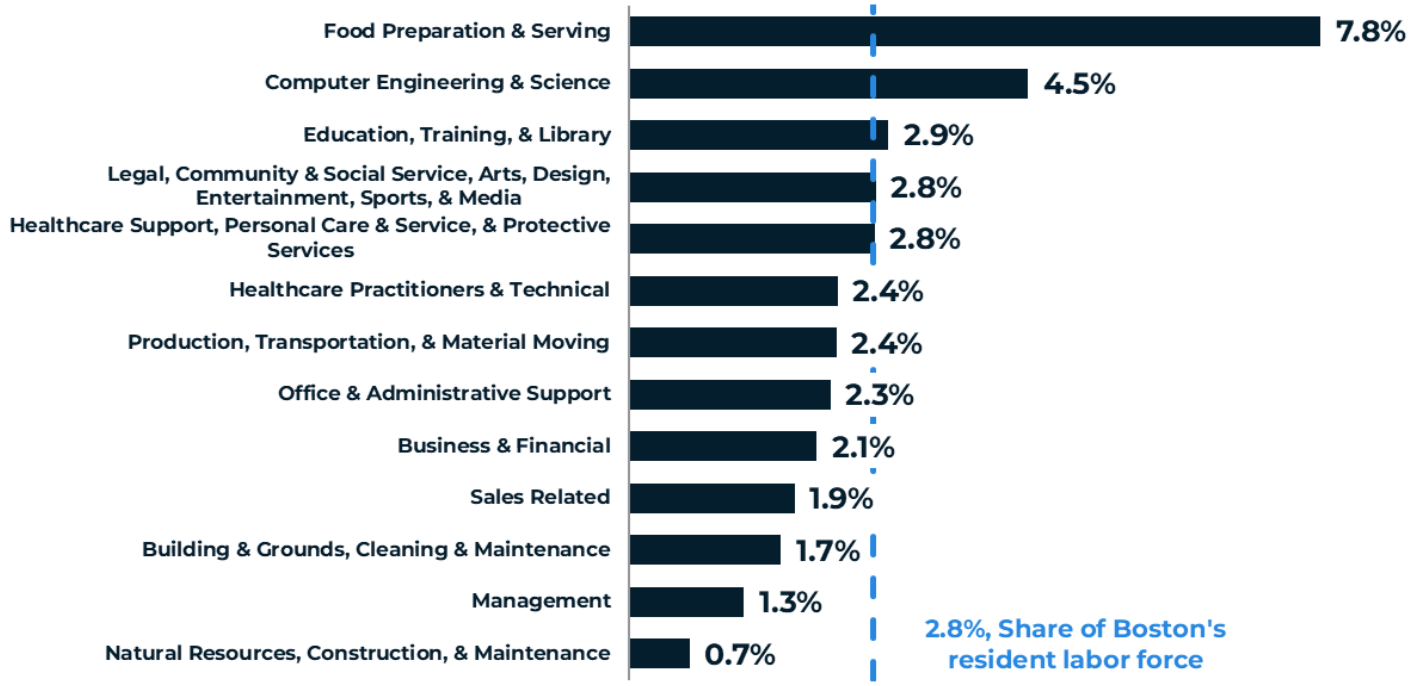


Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2018-2022 5-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis

Chinese foreign-born workers make up 2.8 percent of Boston's resident labor force. They are overrepresented in certain occupations. Chinese foreign-born workers make up 7.8 percent of food preparation and serving, 4.5 percent of computer engineering and science, and 2.9 percent of education, training, and library occupations. They are underrepresented in other occupations such as management (1.3 percent) and natural resources, construction, and maintenance (0.7 percent).

FOREIGN-BORN CHINESE 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 25 percent of foreign-born Chinese have achieved a middle-class standard of living, compared with 44 percent of Boston's overall population, and 34 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

Chinese foreign-born workers contribute to Boston's economy. Their labor generates an additional 10,565 indirect and induced jobs in Suffolk County. They contribute 4.8 billion dollars to Boston's GCP. Chinese foreign-born workers employed in Suffolk County pay $191 million in federal income tax and $83 million in state income tax.[8]

CONCLUSION

Massachusetts is a leading destination of Chinese who migrate to the United States. The second largest foreign-born population in Boston are the foreign-born Chinese, with 22,519 residents. Foreign-born Chinese in Boston actively contribute to the economy, culture, and civic life of their new home. Foreign-born Chinese are equally likely to work in lower wage service occupations as in higher wage occupations. Without the Chinese foreign-born workers, Boston will lose 2.8 percent of its total labor force, 7.8 percent of its food and preparation, and 4.5 percent of its computer engineering and science workforce.

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

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