



FOREIGN BORN IN BOSTON: ALL FOREIGN BORN

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 a part of an ongoing effort to celebrate Boston’s foreign-born populations and gain insight into how they shape our city.

OVERVIEW OF FOREIGN BORN IN THE UNITED STATES

Boston has a long history of being a destination for the foreign-born population in the United States. In fact, ever since the U. S. Census Bureau identified the foreign-born population in the 1850 Census, Boston has had a larger share of foreign-born residents than the country’s share.

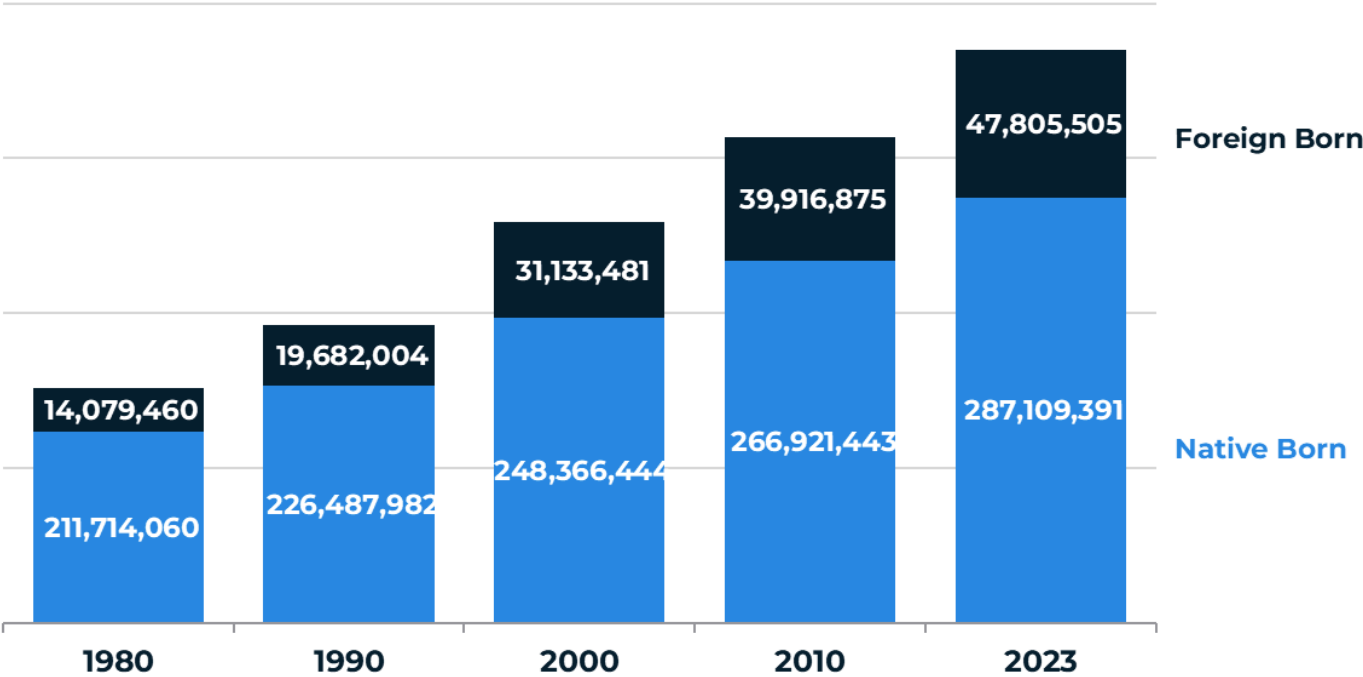
Because Boston is a popular destination for immigrants, federal immigration laws can shape Boston’s population. The two most significant immigration laws during the last century highlight this relationship. The passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, often called the National Origins Act, limited immigration visas to 2 percent of the total number of people of each nationality in the United States as of the 1890 Census. The yearly quota for all immigrants could not exceed



165,000, and it completely excluded immigrants from Asia.¹ Over the next forty years, the share of the foreign-born population declined from 13 percent in 1920 to 5 percent in 1970 for the country and declined from 32 percent to 13 percent in Boston. However, the 1965 Hart-Celler Act abolished the restrictive national quotas, and the foreign-born population increased nationally from 5 percent in 1970 to 7 percent in 1980.² In 2023 the U.S. population was over 14 percent foreign born and Boston’s was nearly 28 percent foreign born.

NATIVE BORN AND FOREIGN BORN

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



Source: 1980–2000 Census (PUMS), 2010 American Community Survey, 2023 American Community Survey, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

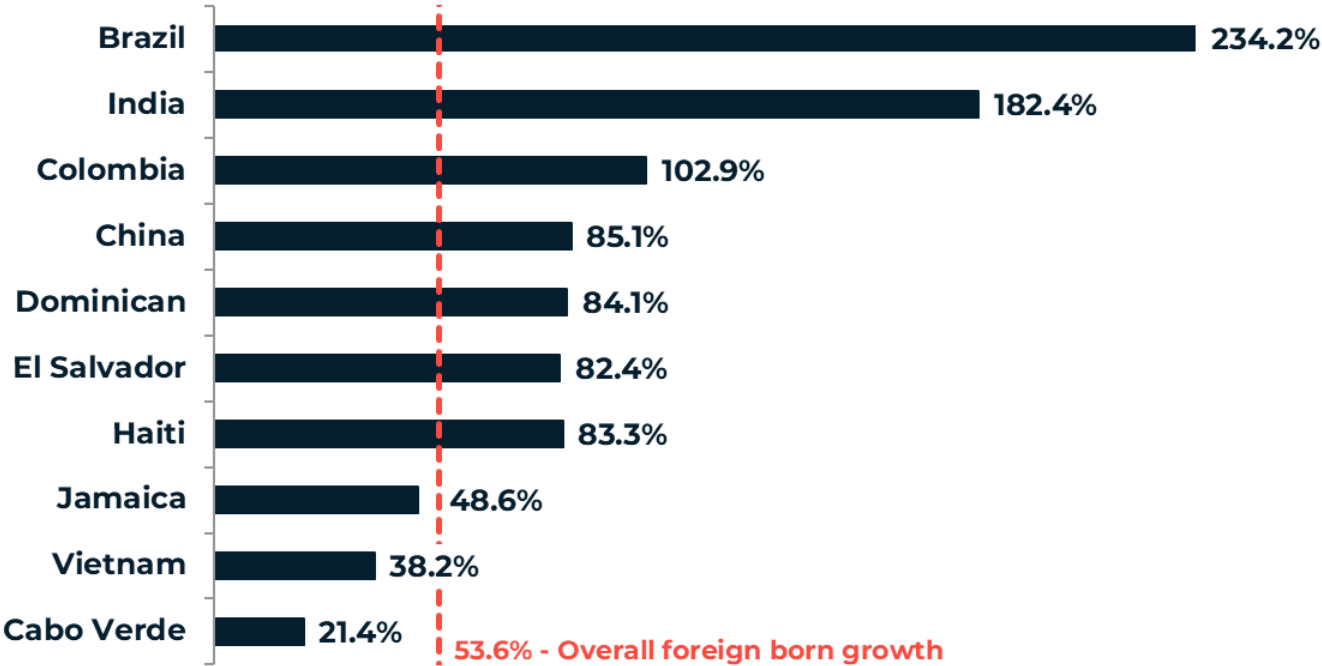
¹ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/1924-us-immigration-act-history#:~:text=The%201924%20Act%3A%20A%20Permanent%20New%20Approach%20to%20Immigration&text=At%20first%2C%20it%20set%20a,each%20country%20as%20of%201890>

² <https://www.lbjlibrary.org/news-and-press/media-kits/immigration-and-nationality-act>

The effect of these two immigration laws during the last century also influenced the composition of the foreign-born population. Before the 1965 immigration law, the foreign-born population predominately emigrated from European countries. After the implementation of the 1965 law, European migration was far outpaced by migration from Caribbean, Central and South American, Asian, and African countries. From 2000 to 2023, foreign-born population increased by 53.6 percent for the country.

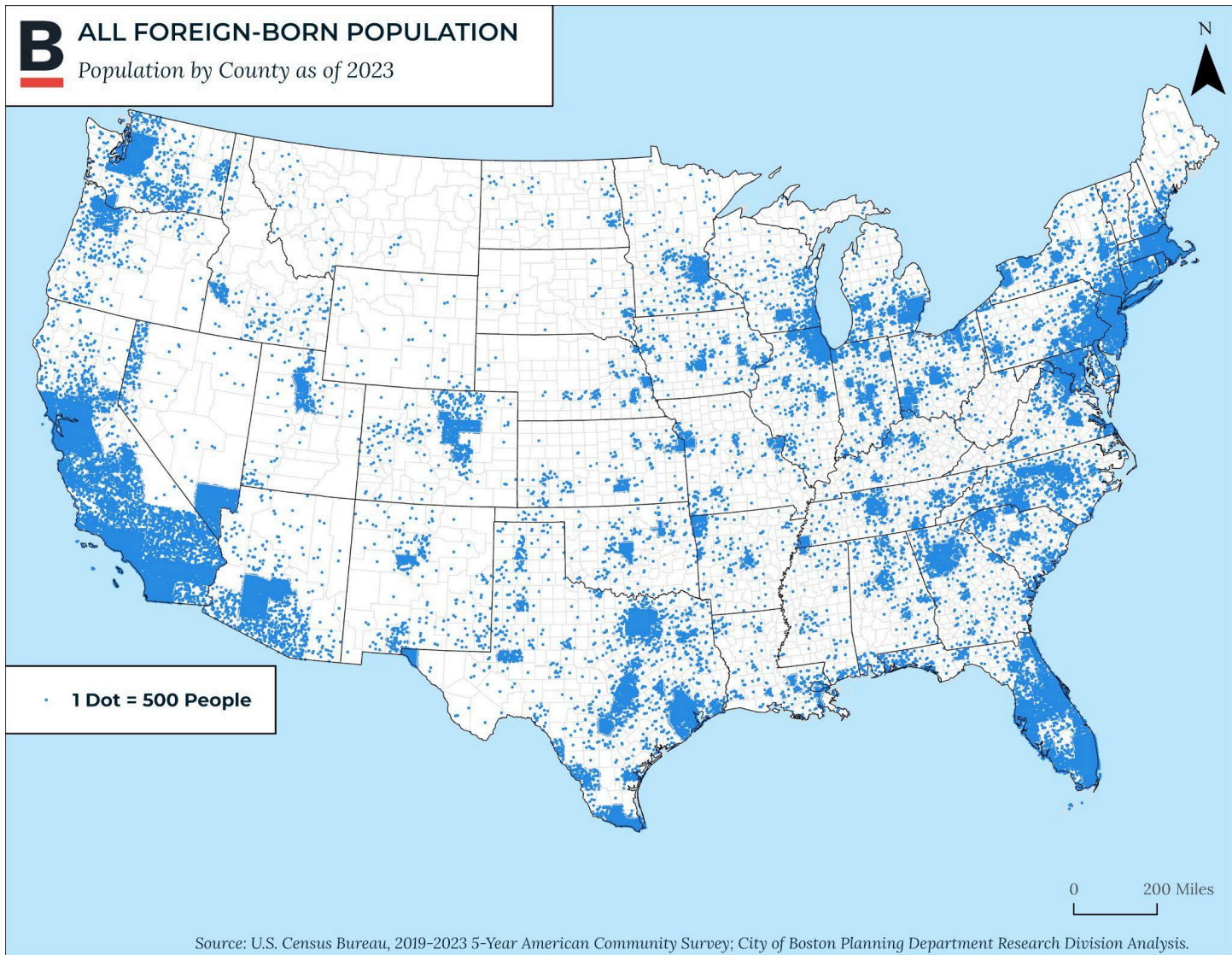
INCREASE IN FOREIGN BORN POPULATION

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

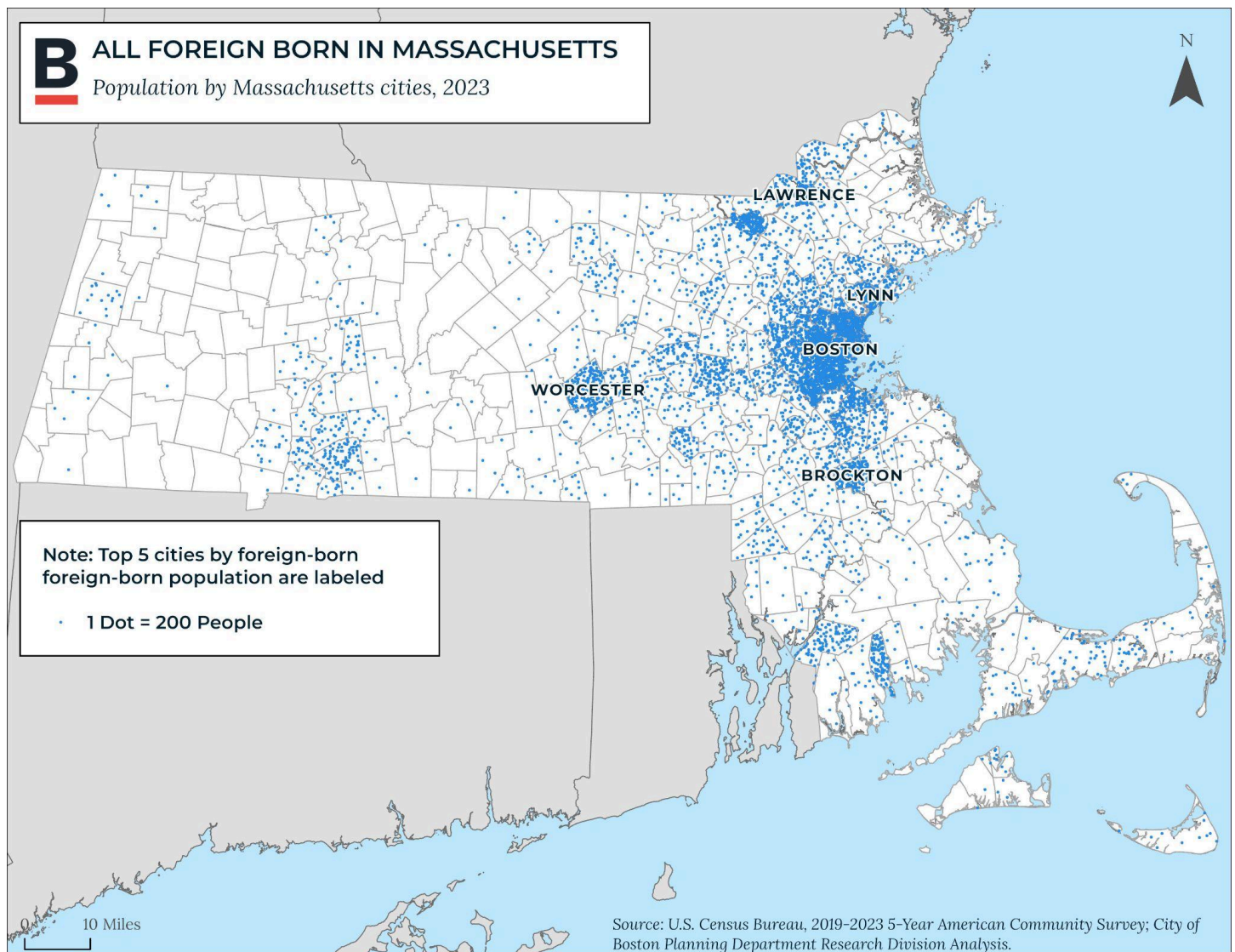


Source: 1980-2000 Census (IPUMS), 2023 1-Year American Community Survey, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

Massachusetts has the 7th largest foreign-born population in the United States behind California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois.



In Massachusetts, Boston (15 percent) has the largest share of the state's foreign-born population followed by Worcester (4 percent), Lawrence (3 percent), Lynn (3 percent), and Brockton (3 percent).



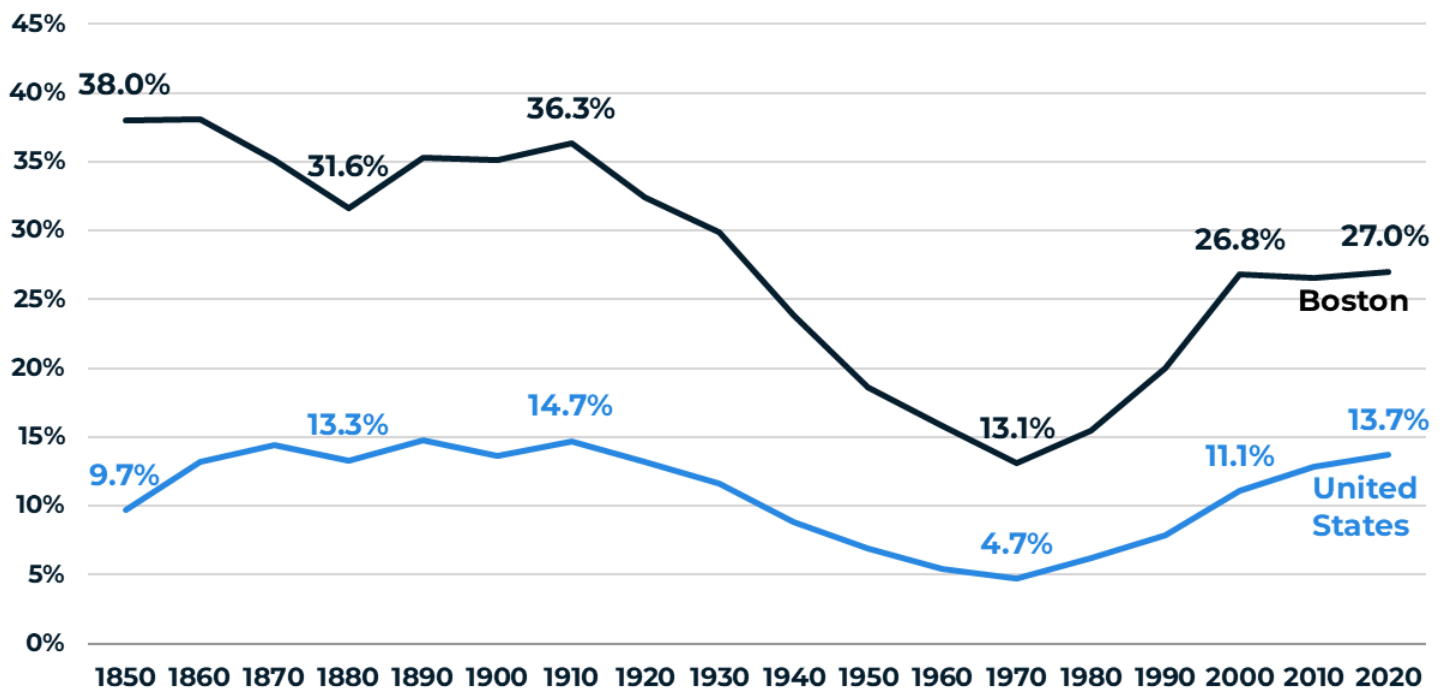
FOREIGN-BORN INDIVIDUALS IN BOSTON

DEMOGRAPHICS

Boston's foreign-born shares of the population were at least 30 percent until the 1930s, but by 1970 it declined to 13 percent. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, not only abolished the existing national quotas that increased Boston's population, but it also developed a preference system focusing on job skills and family reunification.³ Now, foreign-born residents make up a significant portion of Boston's population. In every decade, Boston's foreign-born share of the population is at least double that of the country. As such, in 2020, 27 percent of Boston and 14 percent of the United State's population were made up of foreign-born residents. By 2023, Boston's share of foreign-born population was 28 percent, and the country's share was 14 percent.

FOREIGN-BORN SHARE COMPARISON

1850 to 2020 foreign-born share of the U.S. and Boston's population



Source: 1850–2000 Census, 2010 & 2018 American Community Surveys 2020 Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

³<https://immigrationhistory.org/item/hart-cellar-act/>

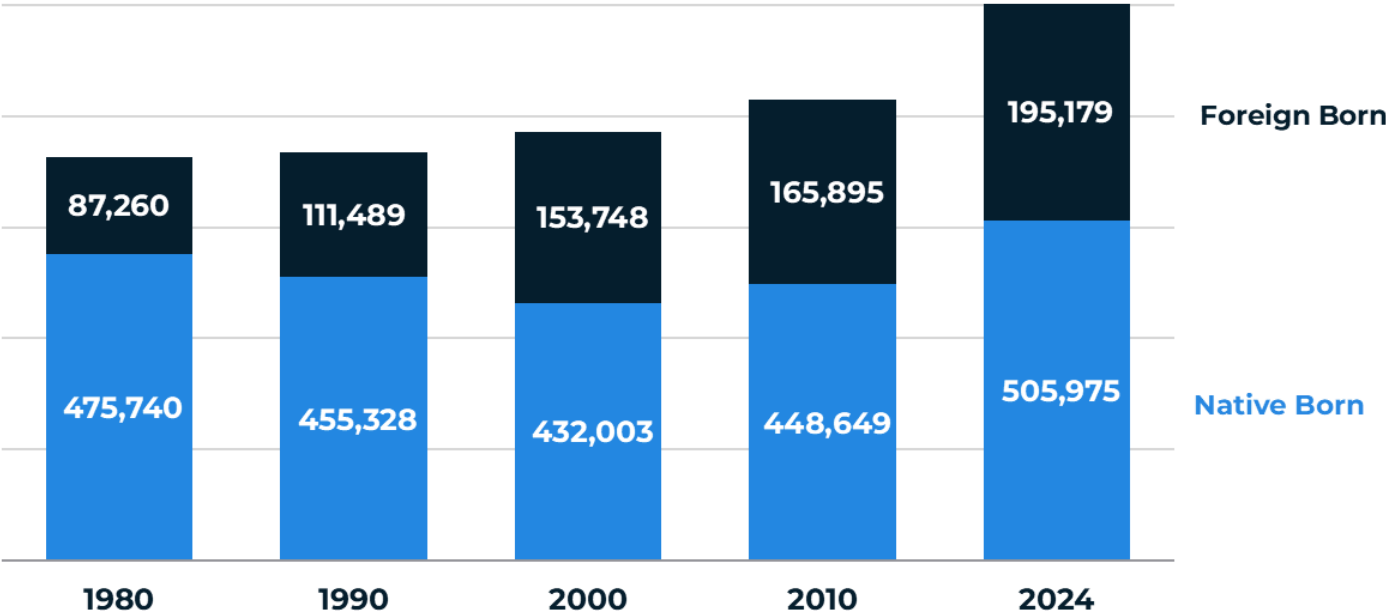


This increased international migration played a significant role in Boston’s population growth and changing racial and ethnic composition. Between 1950 and 1980, Boston lost 30 percent of its population. The increasing foreign-born population after 1980 accounted for the 10 percent population growth that Boston experienced from 1980 to 2010. Without this foreign-born population, Boston’s population decline would have continued. Also, with the foreign-born population coming from different regions in the world, by 2000, the racial and ethnic composition of Boston changed so that the White alone population no longer composed a majority of the population. Today, Boston is 45 percent White alone, but its foreign-born population is only 16 percent White alone.

Today, Boston is home to 195,179 foreign-born residents. They come from over 120 countries and speak over 90 different languages. Their presence has helped contribute to the economic growth and cultural vitality that Boston has experienced over the last 50 years.

NATIVE BORN AND FOREIGN BORN

Population growth in Boston from 1980 to 2024

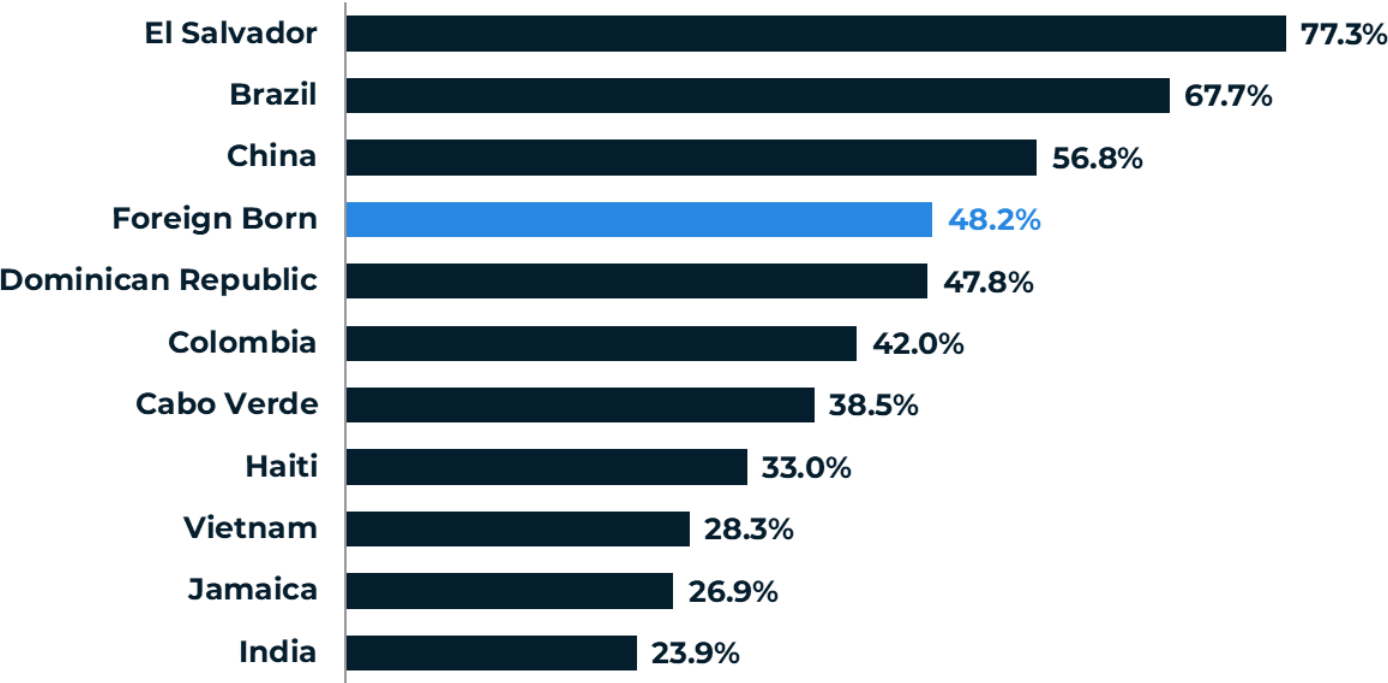


Source: 1980–2000 Census (IPUMS), 2010 American Community Survey, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division 2024 Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

Around 48 percent of all foreign born are not U.S. citizens, a higher share compared to Boston residents (13 percent).

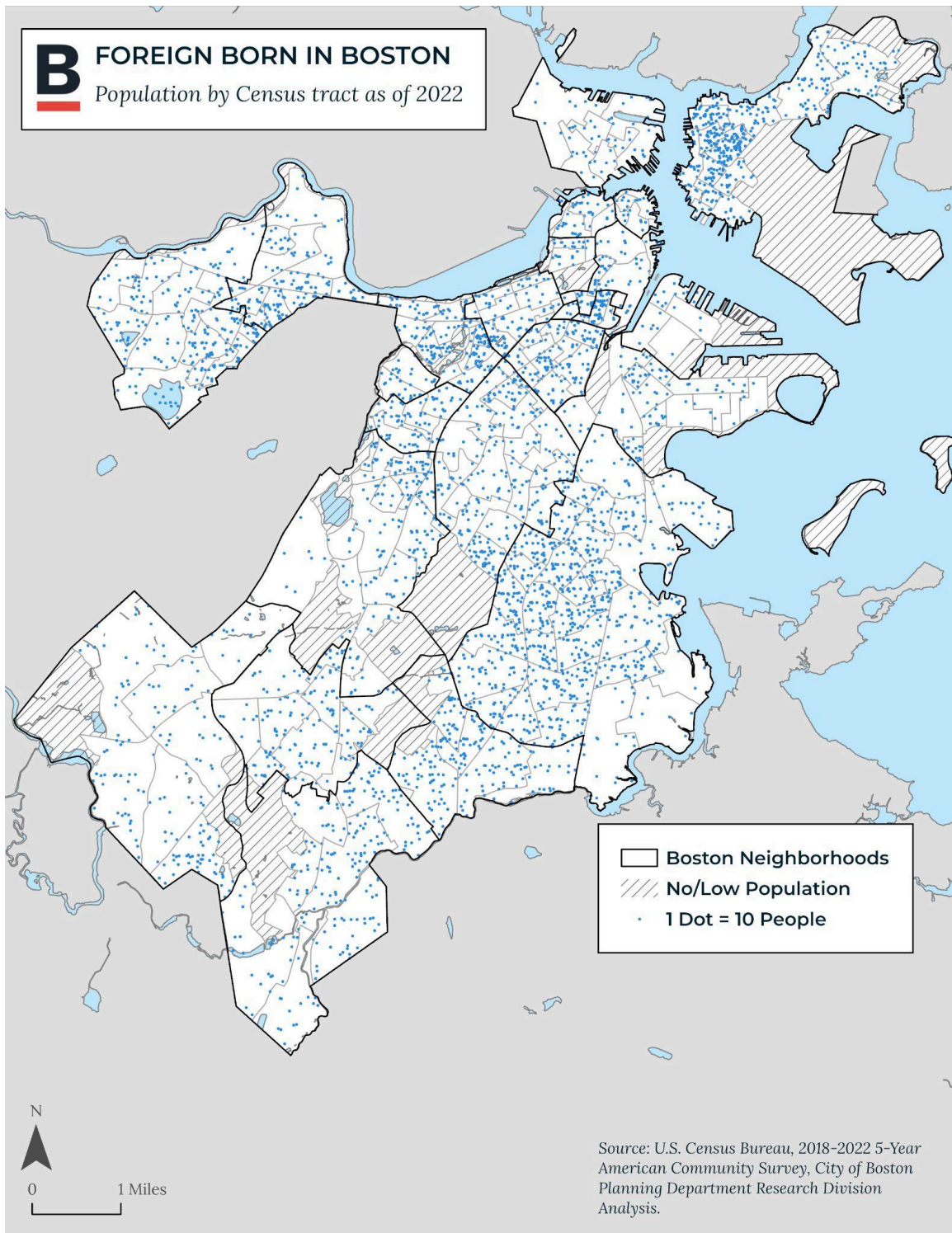
NON-U.S. CITIZENS

Share of non-U.S. citizens



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

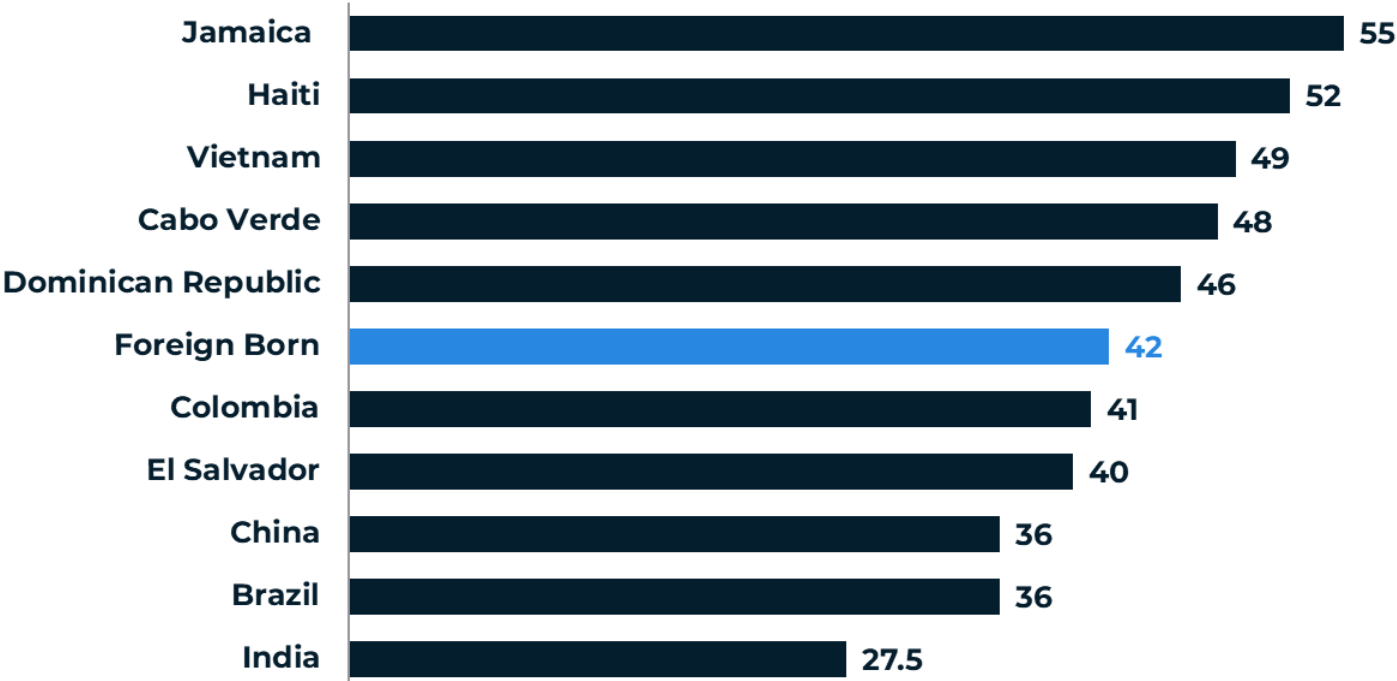
Boston's foreign-born population is scattered throughout the city, but their largest populations are in Dorchester (22 percent), East Boston (10 percent), Brighton (7 percent), Roxbury (7 percent), and Hyde Park (6 percent).



The median age of all foreign born is 42 years, higher than Boston's median age of 32. Their age profile is shaped by fewer children migrating and the children of the foreign-born are U.S. citizens. Foreign-born Indians are the only group with a lower median age than the city as a whole, reflecting their higher college enrollment and other young adult populations.

MEDIAN AGE

Median age of foreign-born population

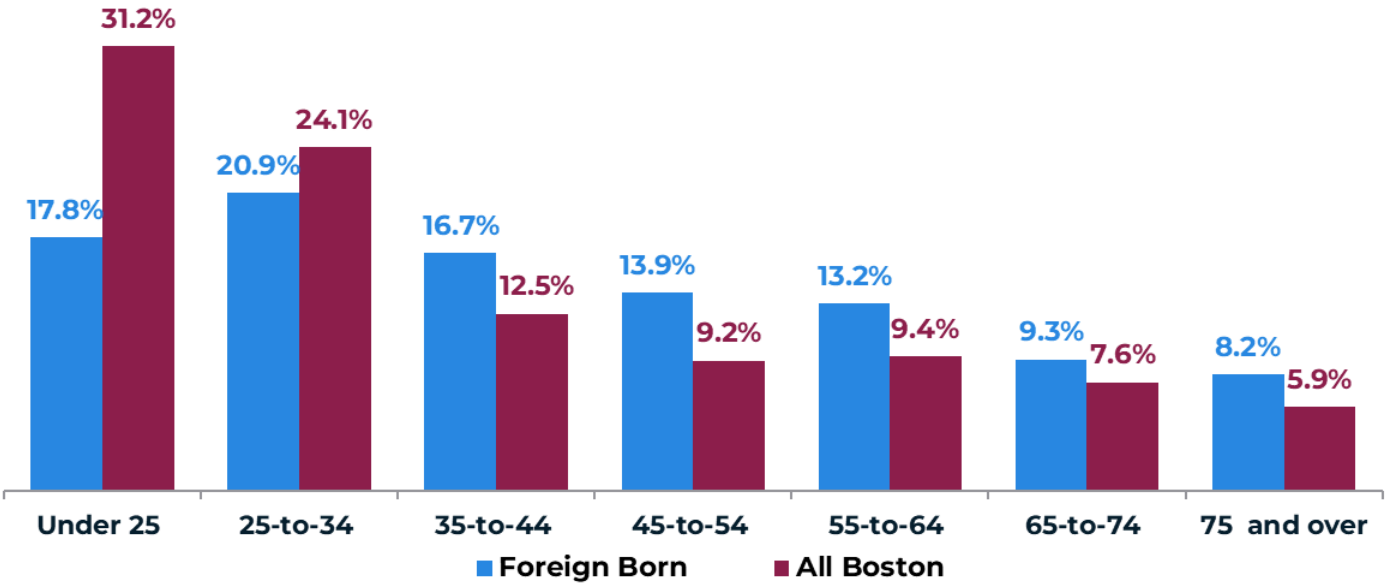


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

The foreign-born population's age in Boston tends to be well distributed compared to the city as a whole. The highest share consisted of those aged 25-to-34 with 21 percent. Foreign-born residents had a much lower share of individuals under 25 (18 percent) compared to the city as a whole.

AGE DISTRIBUTION

Share of population by age groups



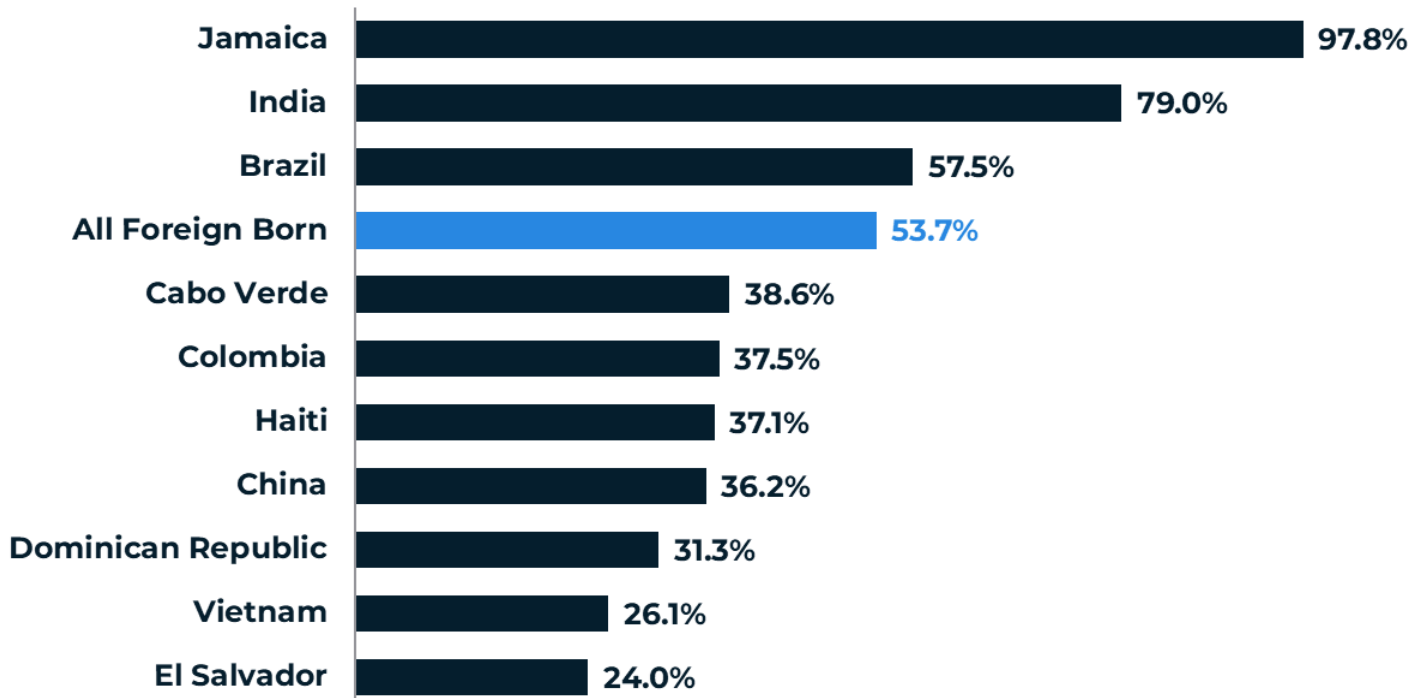
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

More than half of foreign-born residents in Boston speak English only or very well (54 percent). In Boston, 20 percent speak English at home, 28 percent only speak Spanish at home, 10 percent speak Haitian at home, 8 percent only speak Chinese at home, and 3 percent only speak Cantonese at home.⁴

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Share of population who speak English "Very Well" or only English, 5 years and over



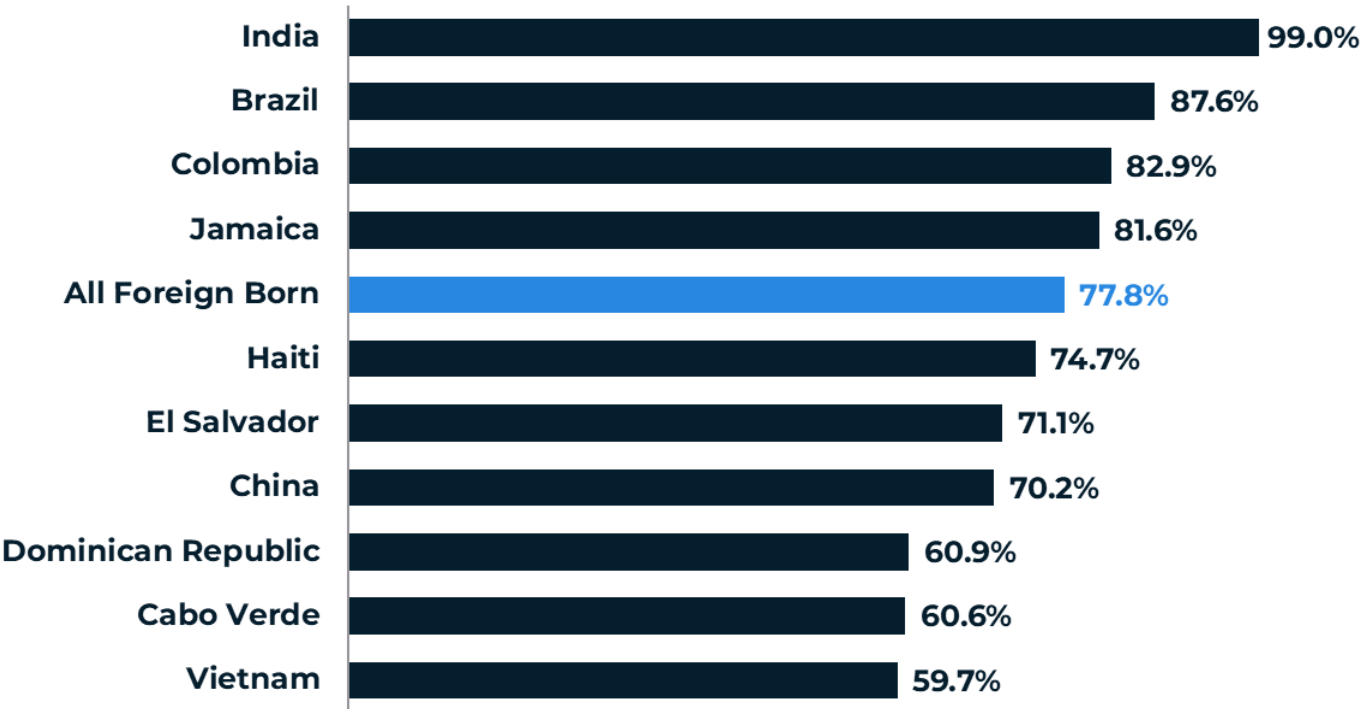
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

⁴ 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates

Almost 78 percent of Boston’s foreign-born adults have attained a high school diploma or higher. Indians (99 percent) and Brazilians (88 percent) are two groups with the highest shares of adults who attained a high school diploma or higher.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Share of individuals over 25 years old with a High School diploma or higher

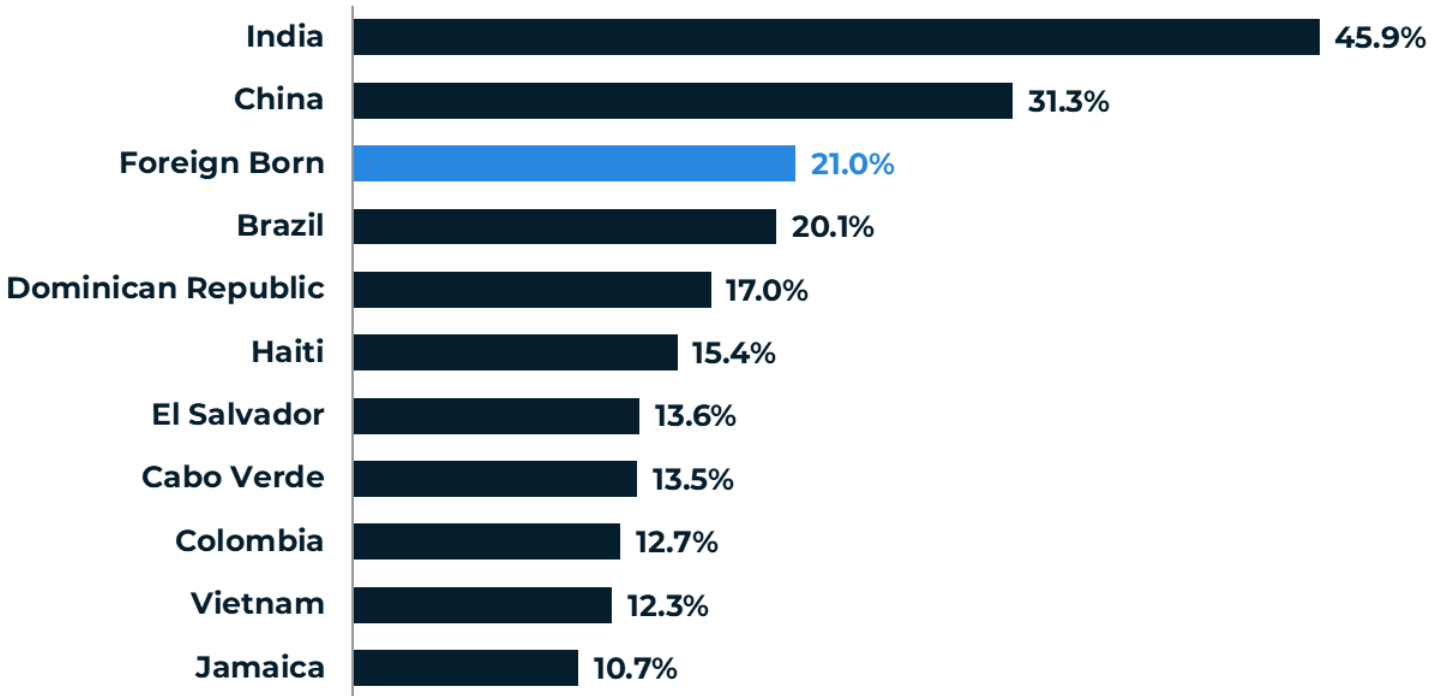


Source: City of Boston Planning Department Research Division 2024 Population Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

The foreign-born population has a lower share of residents who are enrolled in school (21 percent) than Boston residents (29 percent). While the Indians (46 percent) and the Chinese (31 percent) have higher school enrollment rates than foreign-born residents as a whole.

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

School enrolled population, aged 3 years and over

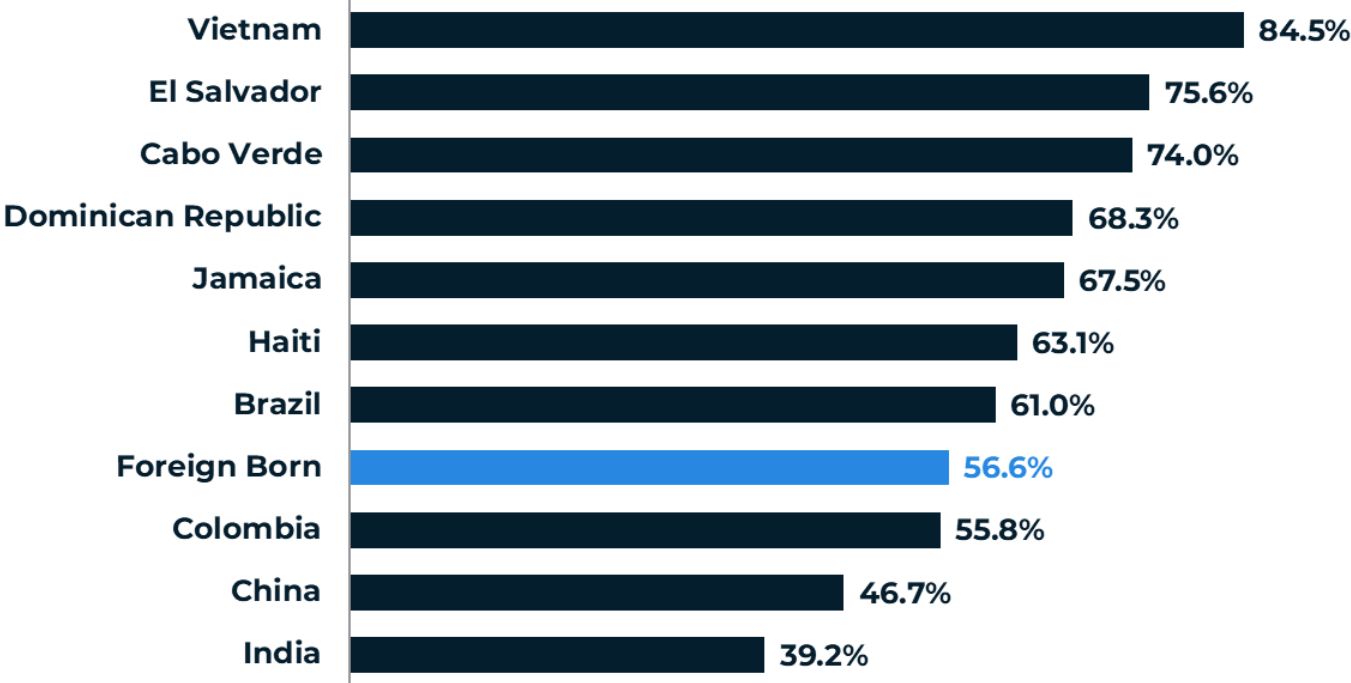


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.

A majority of all foreign-born residents are in family households (57 percent) while 45 percent of Boston residents are in family households.

HOUSEHOLD TYPE

Share of population who are in family households

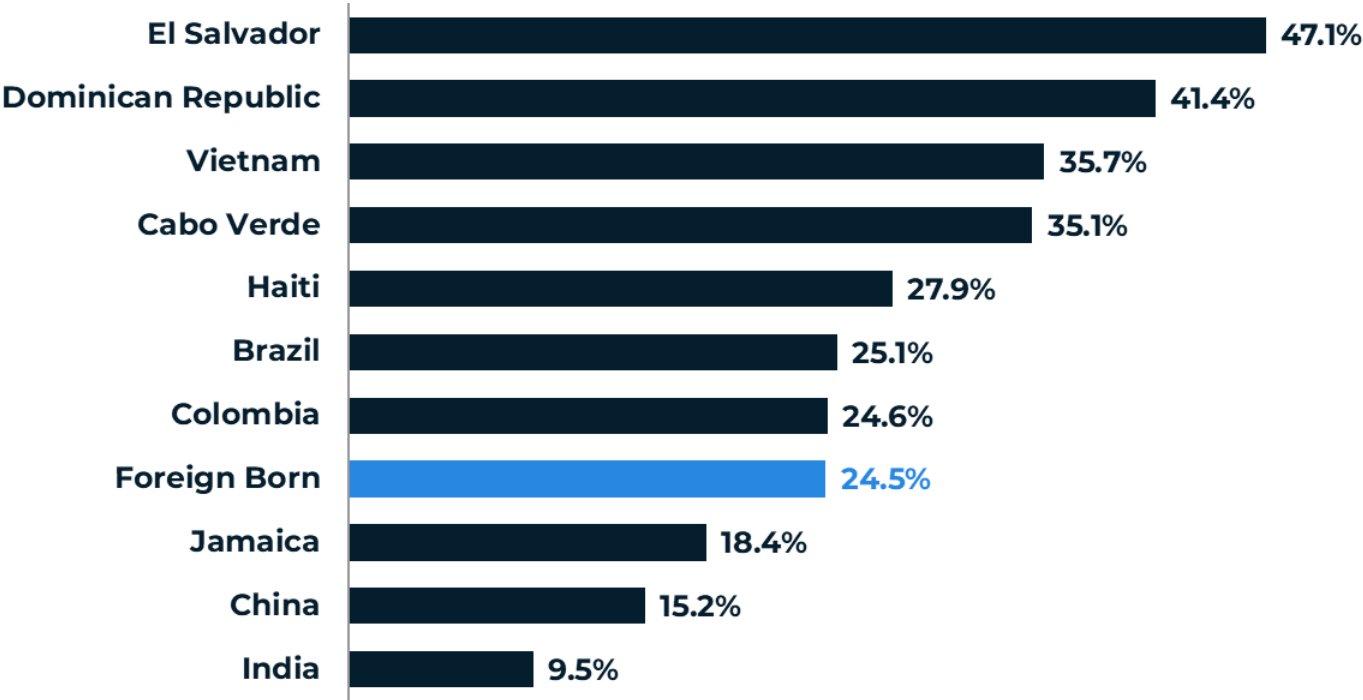


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

Almost a quarter of foreign-born householders have children. Salvadorans have the highest proportion of householders with children (47 percent) while Indians have the lowest share (10 percent).

HOUSEHOLDER WITH CHILDREN

Share of households with children

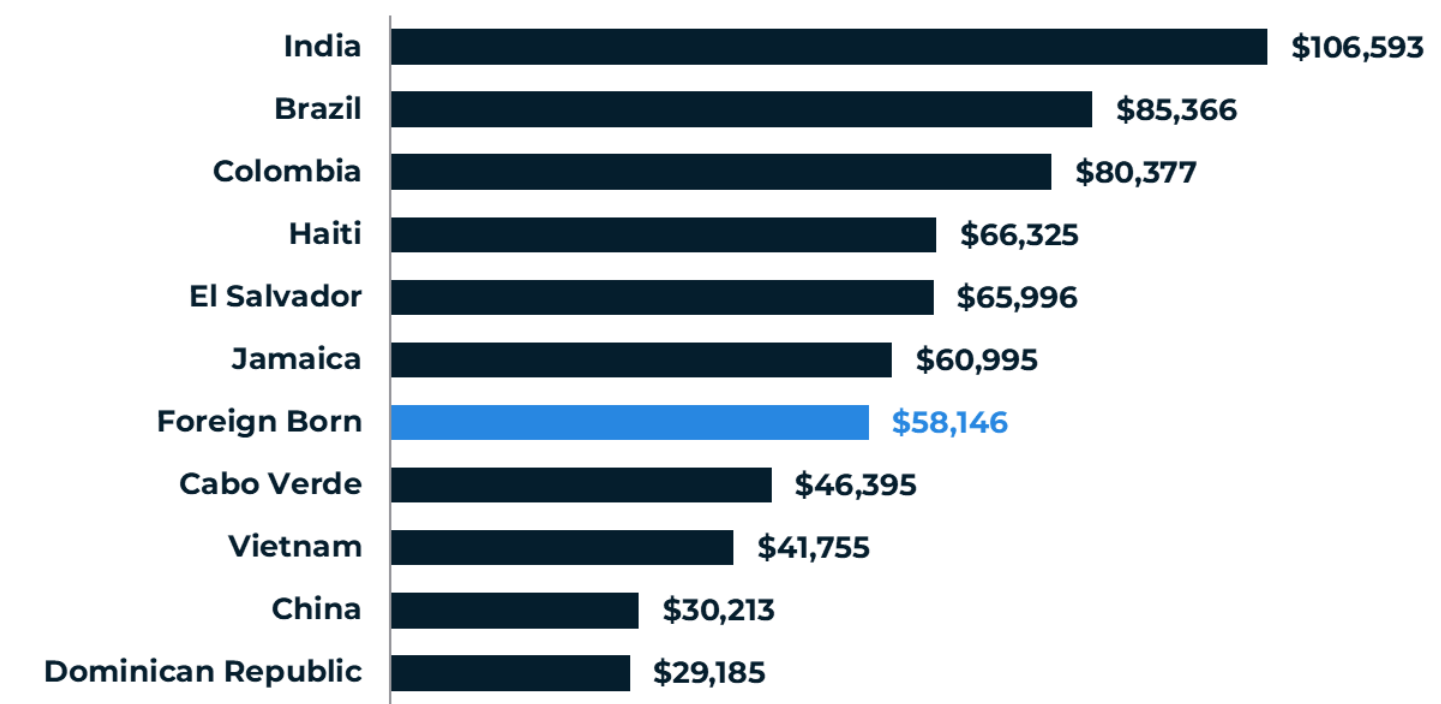


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

Median foreign-born household income is \$58,145, lower than median household income of Boston (\$89,212). Foreign-born Indians have the highest median household income among foreign-born residents and a higher median income than the city as a whole (\$106,593). Moreover, Brazilians, Colombians, Haitians, El Salvadorians, and Jamaicans earn higher median income than foreign-born residents as a whole.

MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Median income of foreign-born households

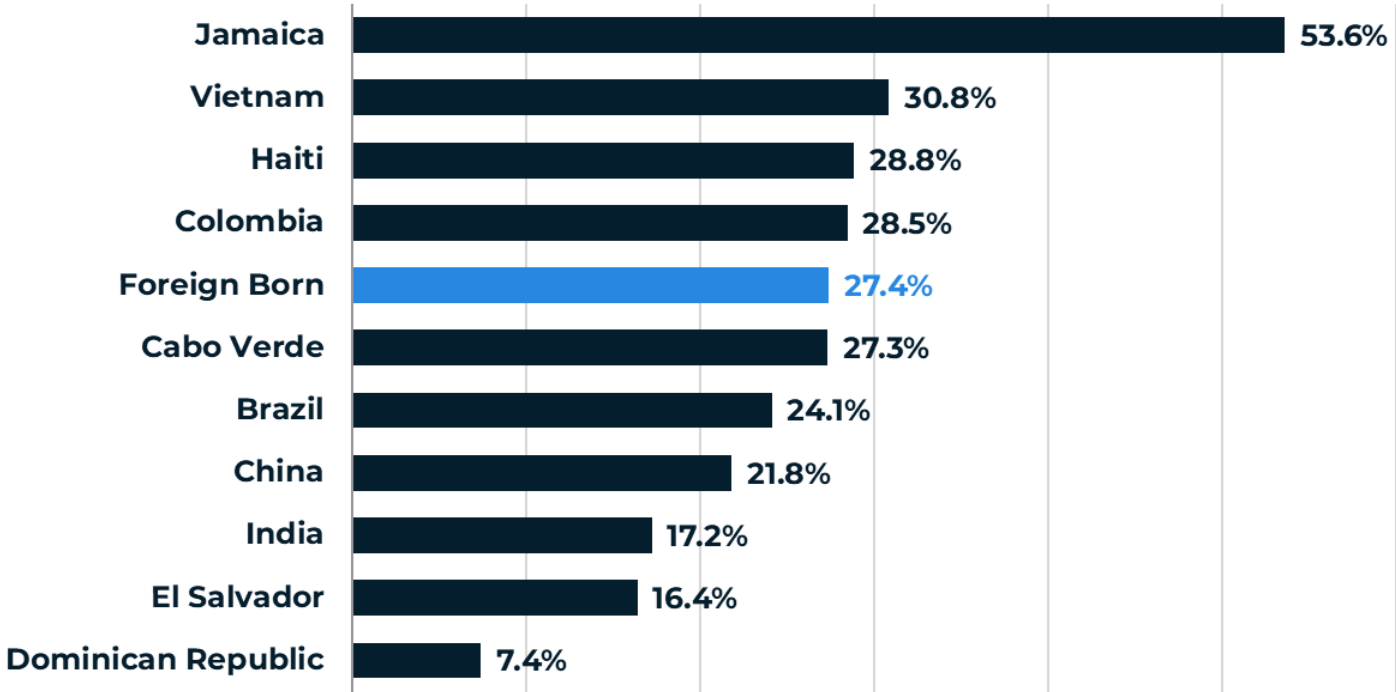


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

Approximately 27 percent foreign-born households are owner-occupied, a slightly lower share than the city as a whole (31 percent). Jamaicans have the highest ownership rate (54 percent) while Dominicans have the lowest (7 percent).

OWNER-OCCUPIED HOUSEHOLDS

Share of householder population that are owners of their residence

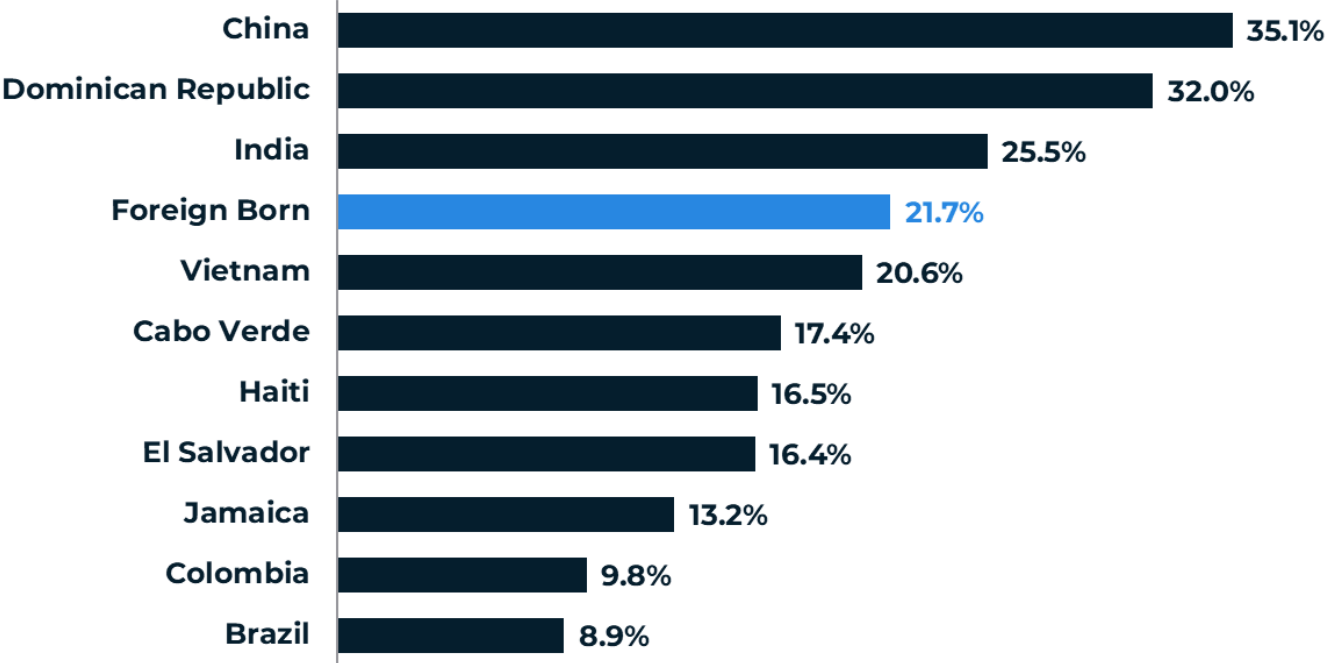


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

A higher share of all foreign born in Boston live under the poverty line (22 percent) compared to the city as a whole (17 percent). Among the foreign-born groups, 7 out of 10 have lower poverty rates. Higher shares of Chinese (35 percent), Dominicans (32 percent), and Indians (26 percent) live under the poverty line. Both Chinese and Indian poverty rates could be influenced by their international student populations whose visas do not permit work off campus.

POVERTY RATES

Share of population below the poverty line



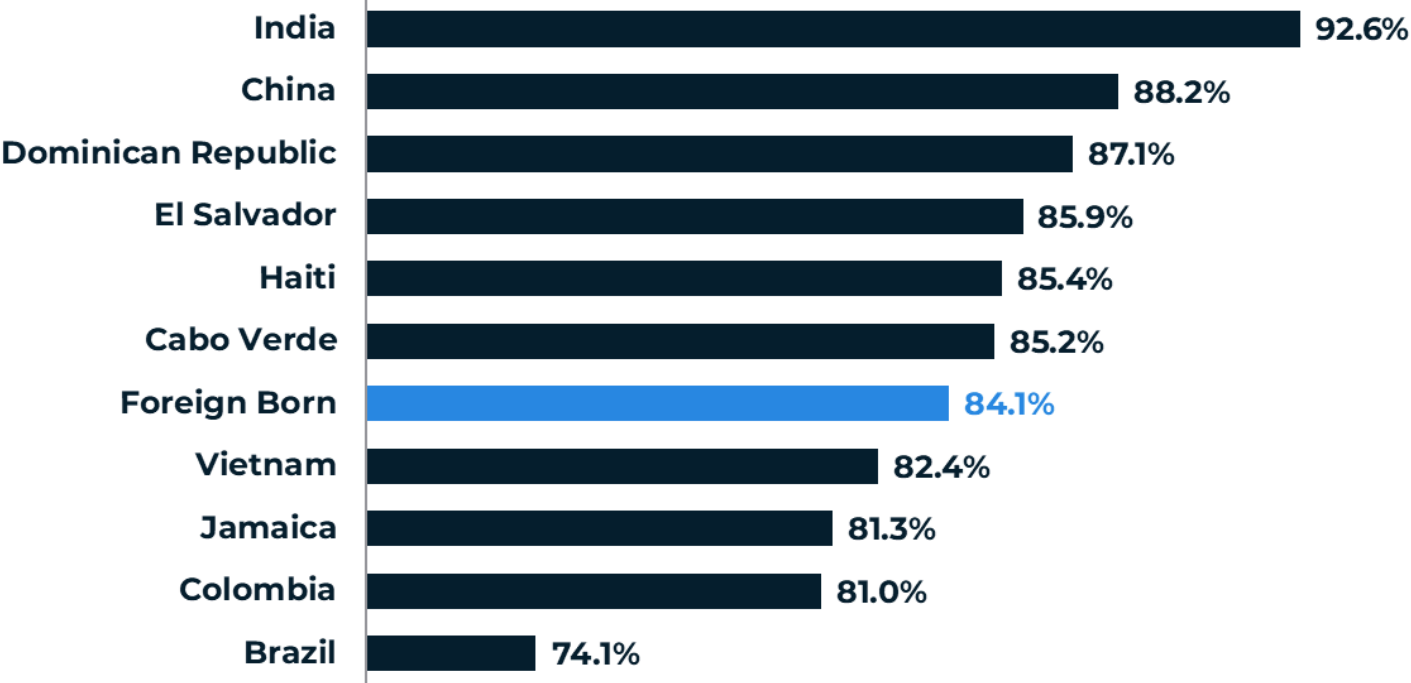
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

EMPLOYMENT

Of the foreign-born workers, 84 percent work in the private sector. The groups of foreign-born population with lower shares of private sector workers tend to have higher shares of workers who are self-employed.

WORKERS IN PRIVATE SECTOR

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

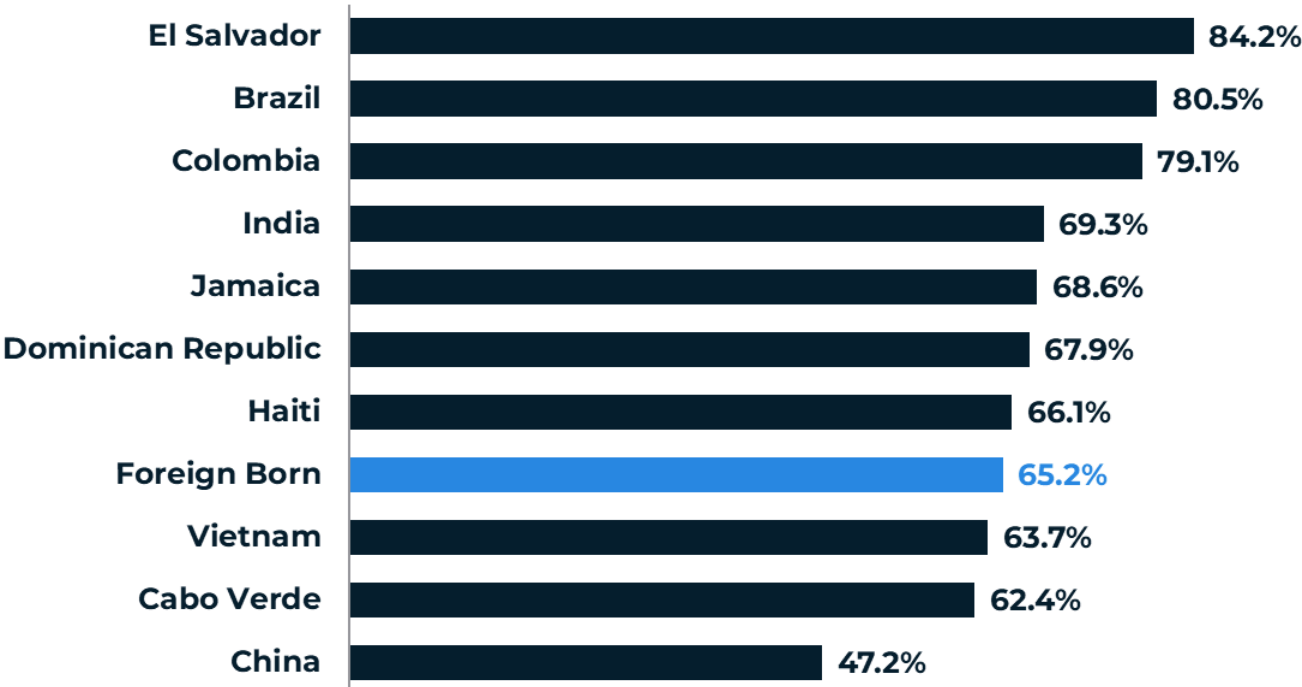


Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Research Division Analysis

Around 65 percent of all foreign-born residents are part of the labor force. Salvadorans (84 percent) are the highest participants, followed by Brazilians (81 percent), Colombians (79 percent), and Indians (69 percent). Comparatively, only 47 percent of Chinese foreign-born residents participate in the labor force.

LABOR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATES

Share of those participating in the labor force



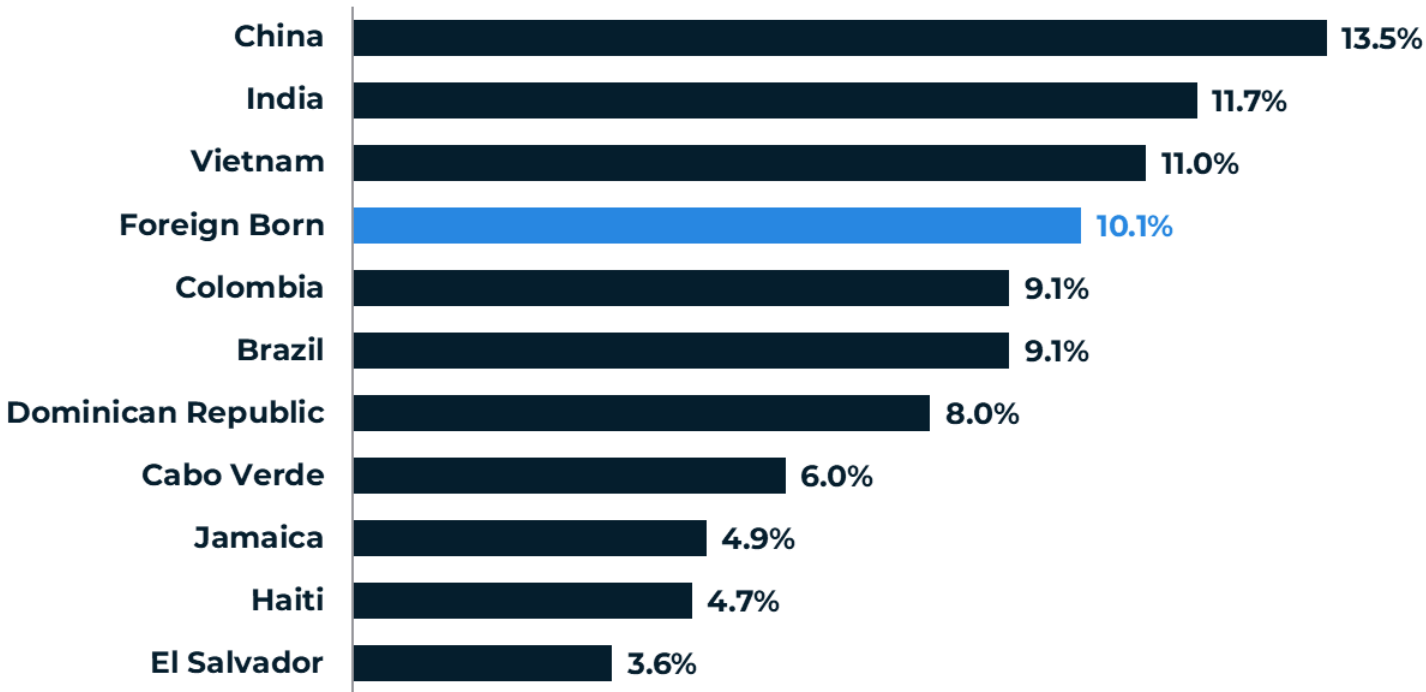
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.



Foreign-born Chinese workers (14 percent) and foreign-born Indian workers (12 percent) tend to work from home. They have the highest shares compared to other foreign-born workers. Approximately 10 percent of all foreign-born workers work from home which is lower when compared to all Boston workers who are working from home (17 percent).

WORKED FROM HOME

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



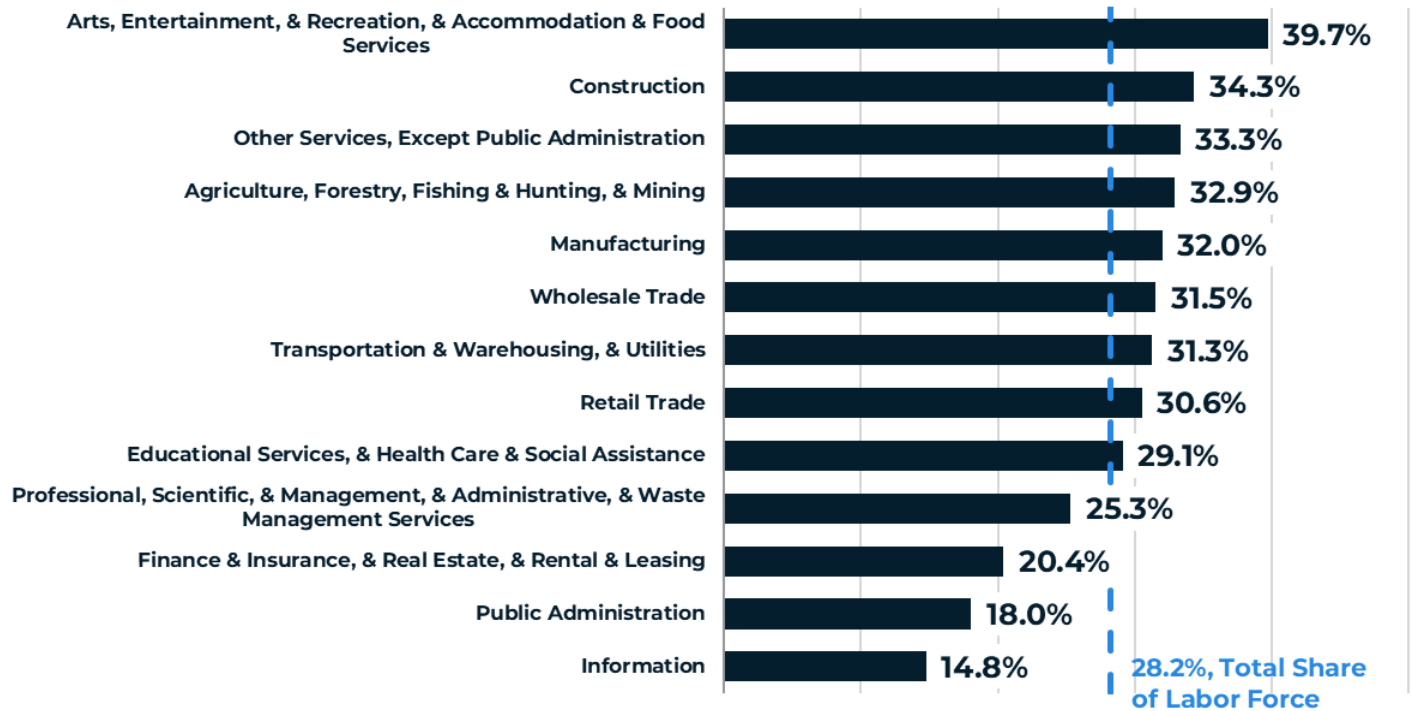
Source: 2024 City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Estimates, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.



The foreign-born working in Suffolk County make up 39.7 percent of arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation, and food services, 34.3 percent of construction, and 33.3 percent of other services. They are underrepresented in certain industries such as finance, insurance, real estate, rental, and leasing (20.4 percent), public administration (18 percent), and information (14.8 percent).

EMPLOYMENT BY INDUSTRY

Share of workers in Suffolk County by industry, 2022



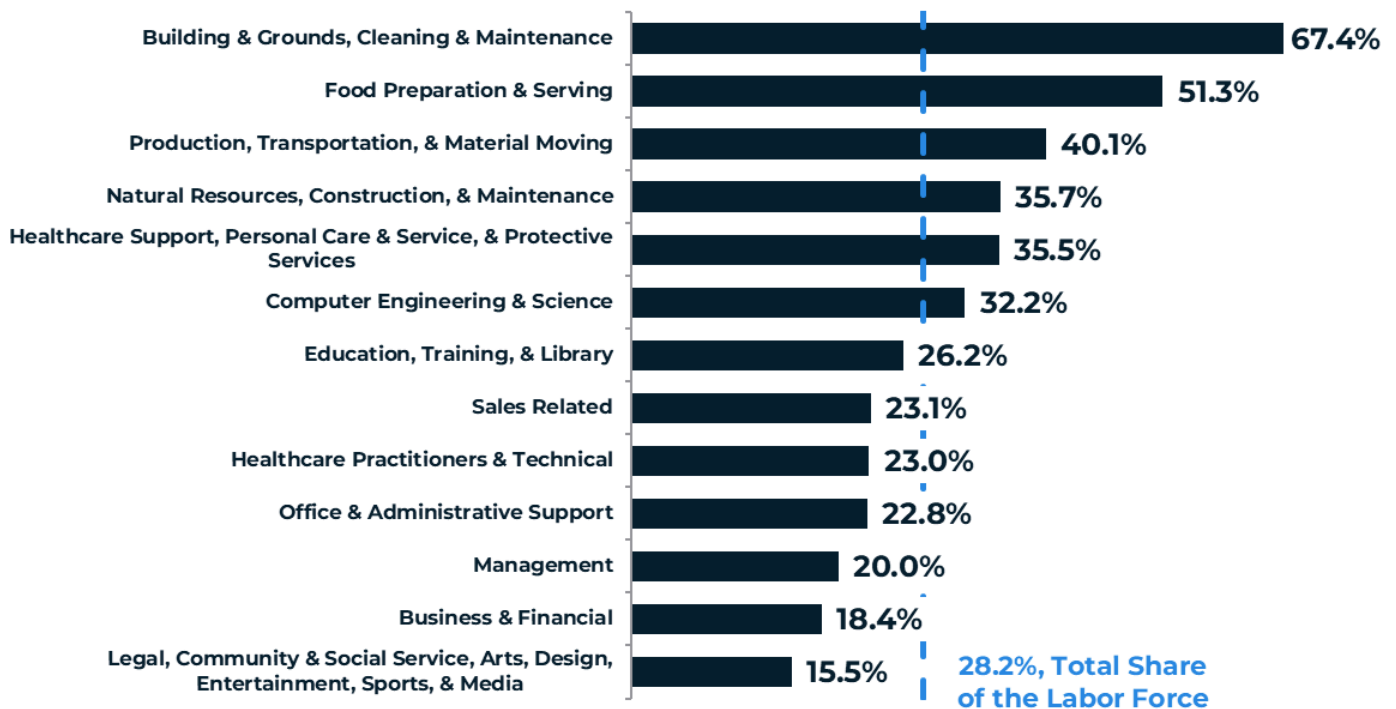
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2018-2022 5-Year American Community Survey (IPUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.



Foreign-born workers in Boston make up 28.2 percent of Suffolk County's work force, but they are overrepresented in certain occupations. Around two-thirds of building and grounds, cleaning and maintenance, 51.3 percent of food preparation and serving, and 40.1 percent of production, transportation, and material moving occupations are made up of foreign-born workers. They are underrepresented in other occupations such as management (20 percent), business and financial (18.4 percent), and legal, community, social service, arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media (15.5 percent).

FOREIGN BORN OCCUPATIONS

Share of workers in Suffolk County by industry, 2022



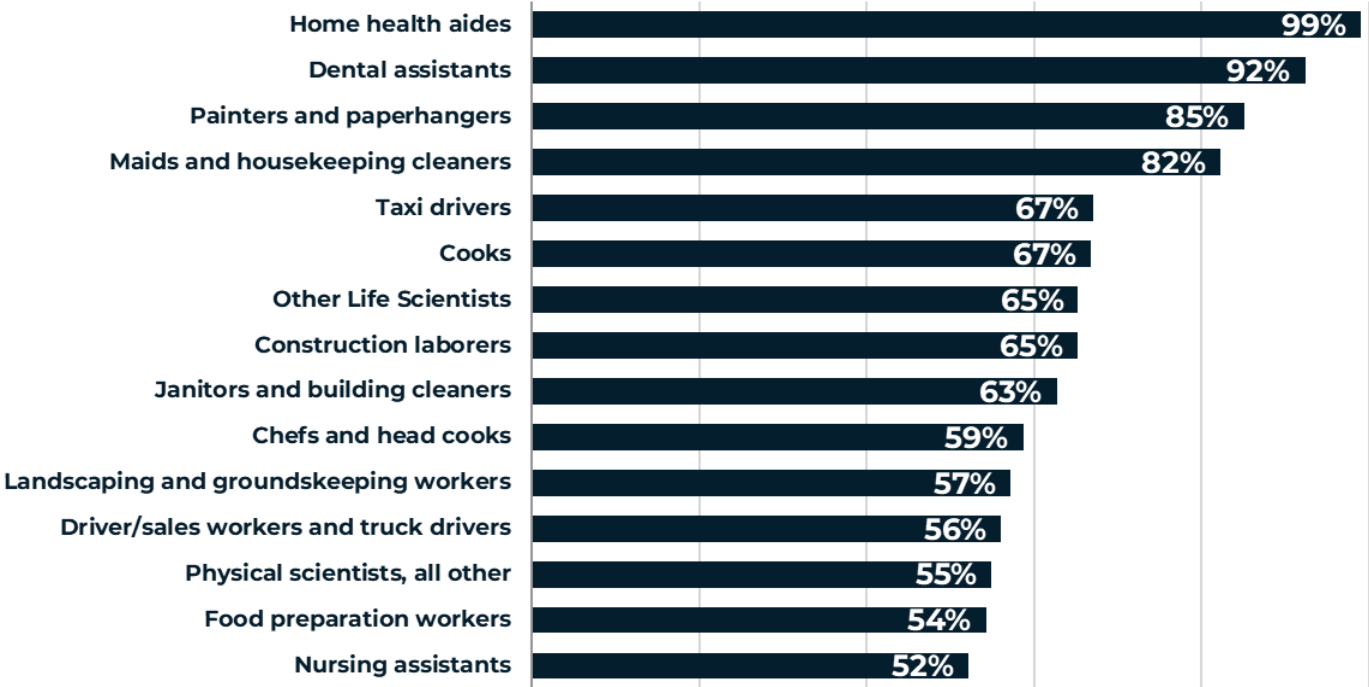
Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2018–2022 5-Year American Community Survey (IPUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis.



Of the occupations with at least 1,500 foreign-born workers in Suffolk County, almost the entire home and health aides occupation is made up of foreign-born workers (99 percent) and over 80 percent of dental assistants, painters and paperhangers, and maids and housekeeping cleaners are occupied by foreign-born workers.

DETAILED OCCUPATIONS

Occupation with a Majority of Foreign-Born Suffolk County Workers, 2023



Source: U.S. census Bureau, 2023 1-Year American Community Survey (PUMS), City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis. Includes only occupations with at least 1,500 foreign-born workers in Suffolk County

STANDARD OF LIVING

Approximately 34 percent of all foreign-born residents in Boston have achieved a middle-class standard of living, compared with 43.5 percent of Boston’s overall population. 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

Foreign-born workers contribute to Boston's economy. Their labor generates an additional 87,348 indirect and induced jobs in Suffolk County. Their work increases Boston's GCP by 42.2 billion dollars. Foreign-born workers working in Suffolk County pay \$7.7 billion in federal income and \$753 million in state income tax.⁵

CONCLUSION

Massachusetts has the 7th largest foreign-born population in the country, and 195,175 foreign-born residents live in Boston. Boston has been increasingly diverse in recent years, with the foreign-born population making up more than a quarter of Boston's population. Boston's foreign-born population represents a record number of countries. Immigrants are coming from a much greater array of countries than ever before, with strong representation from the Caribbean, Asia, Central America, South America, and Africa. This demographic shift in Boston's population will be important to consider in the years ahead as the impact of the city's foreign-born residents expands. Immigrants have accounted for an increasing share of growth in the state and region. Depending on the U.S. Immigration policy, they can also constitute a significant part of the city's workforce in the future, as they fill jobs in specific occupations. As such, Boston could lose 60 percent of its building, grounds cleaning, and maintenance and 46 percent of food preparation and serving occupations with restrictive immigration policies.

⁵Research Division estimates using Regional Economic Model, Inc., (REMI), PI+ Massachusetts Regions, City of Boston Planning Department Research Division Analysis



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