

Young children of immigrants in Massachusetts

Children of immigrants make up 32% of Massachusetts' population ages 0–5 – and will play a significant role in the future of our Commonwealth.¹ **Their numbers have grown by 40% since 2000, compared with 24% nationally.** Understanding the diverse backgrounds and experiences of these children and their families is key to crafting policies and practices to help them achieve their full potential in early childhood and beyond.

Who are Massachusetts' young children of immigrants?

- **138,000** young children across the state have at least one immigrant parent.
- **92%** were born in the U.S. and are therefore **U.S. citizens.**
- **87% are dual language learners** (DLLs) – meaning they live with at least one parent who speaks a language other than English at home.

What countries do these children's families come from?

Massachusetts has one of the most diverse immigrant populations in the nation, with no country accounting for more than 10% of foreign-born people. Families with small children are similarly diverse. The top countries of origin of immigrant families with small children are **India** (9%), **Brazil** (9%), the **Dominican Republic** (8%), **China/Hong Kong** (7%), and **El Salvador** (5%) – but 62% these families come from countries with much smaller representation in the state. The country makeup varies across Massachusetts, and even within individual cities.



Photo by Philip Boakye / Pexels

What languages do these children's families speak?

Massachusetts' immigrant families with young children speak a wide range of languages at home. The home languages spoken are **Spanish** (25%), **English** (13%), **Portuguese** (12%), **Chinese** (7%) and **Haitian Creole** (5%) – but 38% of families speak another, less-common language.

Notably, a quarter of young children in immigrant families live in **linguistically isolated households**, where no one over the age of 14 speaks English very well. However, more than half (58%) of immigrant parents report speaking English very well – higher than the national average (50%).

Still, many parents face language barriers:

- 42% of immigrant parents are limited English proficient (LEP), meaning that they speak English “less than very well.”
- 17% of immigrant parents are low LEP, meaning that they reported speaking English “not well” or “not at all.”

How are these families doing economically?

Second-generation immigrants in Massachusetts do better than their counterparts in most of the U.S., according to a recent analysis of Census data – a sign that more recent arrivals are more economically mobile than previous generations.² However, although immigrant families with young children do better in our Commonwealth than the national average, they still face significant obstacles:

- **38%** of immigrant parents in Massachusetts with children ages 0–5 have incomes under **200% of the federal poverty line**, compared with 28% of U.S.-born parents.
- **18%** of immigrant parents in Massachusetts with children ages 0–5 have incomes **under 100% of the federal poverty line**, compared with 16% of U.S.-born parents.

Education is a key factor in economic well-being, and **44%** of immigrant parents in Massachusetts have a **bachelor's degree or higher**, well above the national average of 33%. (Notably, an analysis of Boston data found immigrants at all educational levels earn less than their native-born counterparts; for those with bachelor's degrees, the median wage is \$45,000 vs. \$60,000 for native-born workers).³

On the other end of the spectrum, **14%** of immigrant parents of small children **lack a high school diploma**, and 80% of those parents are also limited English proficient, so they face particularly large challenges.



While Massachusetts children overall are enrolled in preschool at a higher rate than their peers nationwide, the enrollment gap between children of immigrants and children of U.S.-born parents is larger than the national average:

52% of children in immigrant families **attend preschool**, compared with 60% of children of U.S.-born parents (the national averages are 44% and 47%, respectively).

How can Massachusetts better support immigrant families with small children?

- Leverage funding sources such as Child Care Development Funds to support access to adult education and English classes (ESOL) for immigrant and/or LEP parents. ESOL and adult education should be recognized as viable service needs for parents of children served by child care subsidies.
- Fund programs such as the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative and Preschool Expansion Grants that increase availability of high-quality preschool programs in communities with immigrant families, including Gateway Cities.
- Expand access to Head Start and Early Head Start through contract extensions and grants. Comprehensive services provided by Head Start are important for families living in poverty, and support for home language development can help dual language learners succeed.
- Create grant opportunities through Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies that help immigrant family-child care providers open or maintain their businesses. Family child care providers increase availability of infant and toddler childcare as well as childcare with flexible hours for working parents.
- Provide dedicated funding for translation, interpretation, and outreach for informational materials, applications, subsidy materials, and resources on the benefits of quality early education and care. This includes materials accessed online through the Department of Early Education and Care website.
- Increase investment in home-visiting models that are proven to be effective with immigrant and DLL families, such as Parent Child +.

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¹ Data compiled for this factsheet by the Migration Policy Institute, using the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2013–2017 American Community Survey (ACS) data.

² Mattos, T., 2019. Second generation immigrants in Massachusetts have among the highest incomes in the country. *Boston Indicators*. https://www.bostonindicators.org/article-pages/2019/october/immigrant_generational_differences

³ Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA), 2018. *Boston's Immigrant Labor Force*. <http://www.bostonplans.org/getattachment/73239d8c07de-48ac-9f9c-a150282b8a4b>.