

# Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States

<http://migrationpolicy.org/article/vietnamese-immigrants-united-states>

August 25, 2014

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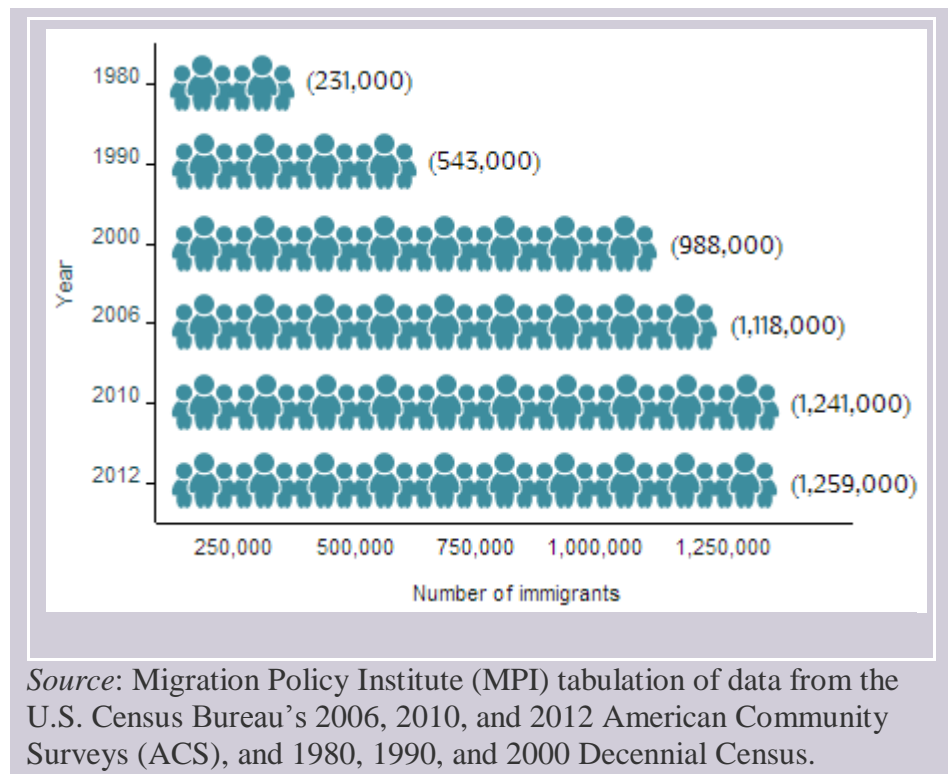


Vietnamese shopping center in Virginia (mj\*laflaca/Flickr)

Within the past four decades, the once-tiny population of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States has grown into one of the country's largest foreign-born groups. Vietnamese migration to the United States has occurred in three waves, the first beginning in 1975 at the end of the Vietnam War, when the fall of Saigon led to the U.S.-sponsored evacuation of approximately 125,000 Vietnamese refugees. This first wave consisted mainly of military personnel and urban, educated professionals whose association with the U.S. military or the South Vietnamese government made them targets of the communist forces. In the late 1970s, a second wave of Vietnamese refugees entered the United States in what became known as the "boat people" refugee crisis. This group came from mainly rural areas and was often less educated than earlier arrivals; many were ethnic Chinese immigrants fleeing persecution in Vietnam. The third wave entered the United States throughout the 1980s and 1990s; unlike earlier arrivals, this group contained fewer refugees and included thousands of Vietnamese Amerasians (children of U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese mothers) as well as political prisoners.

Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the Vietnamese immigrant population in the United States has risen significantly, increasing from about 231,000 in 1980 to nearly 1.3 million in 2012, making it the sixth largest foreign-born population in the United States. This growth occurred most rapidly during the 1980s and 1990s, when the Vietnamese immigrant population roughly doubled within each decade. Although refugees comprised the first two waves of Vietnamese immigration, subsequent migration has mainly consisted of immigrants reunifying with relatives in the United States. As of 2012, Vietnamese immigrants comprised about 3 percent of the total foreign-born population, which stood at 40.8 million.

**Figure 1. Vietnamese Immigrant Population in the United States, 1980-2012**



The Vietnamese immigrant population is the fourth largest foreign-born population from Asia, after India, the Philippines, and China. [Click here](#) to view how the number of immigrants from Vietnam and other countries has changed over time.

Although the vast majority of Vietnamese migrants settle in the United States, others reside in Australia (226,000), Canada (185,000), and France (128,000). [Click here](#) to see where migrants from Vietnam have settled worldwide.

Today, most Vietnamese immigrants in the United States obtain lawful permanent residence (LPR status)—also known as receiving a “green card”—through family reunification channels, either as immediate relatives of U.S. citizens or as other family-sponsored immigrants; few do so through employment-based channels. As of January 2012, Vietnamese immigrants were the tenth largest unauthorized immigrant population in the United States. An estimated 160,000 Vietnamese are unauthorized, representing 1 percent of the approximately 11.4 million unauthorized immigrants residing in the United States.

Compared to the total foreign-born population in the United States, Vietnamese immigrants were more likely to have limited English proficiency and less likely to be college educated. On the other hand, they were more likely than the overall immigrant population to be naturalized U.S. citizens and to have higher income and lower poverty rate, and were less likely to be uninsured.

Using the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, and the World Bank's Annual Remittance Data, this Spotlight provides information on the Vietnamese immigrant population in the United States, focusing on the size, geographic distribution, and socioeconomic characteristics of the population.

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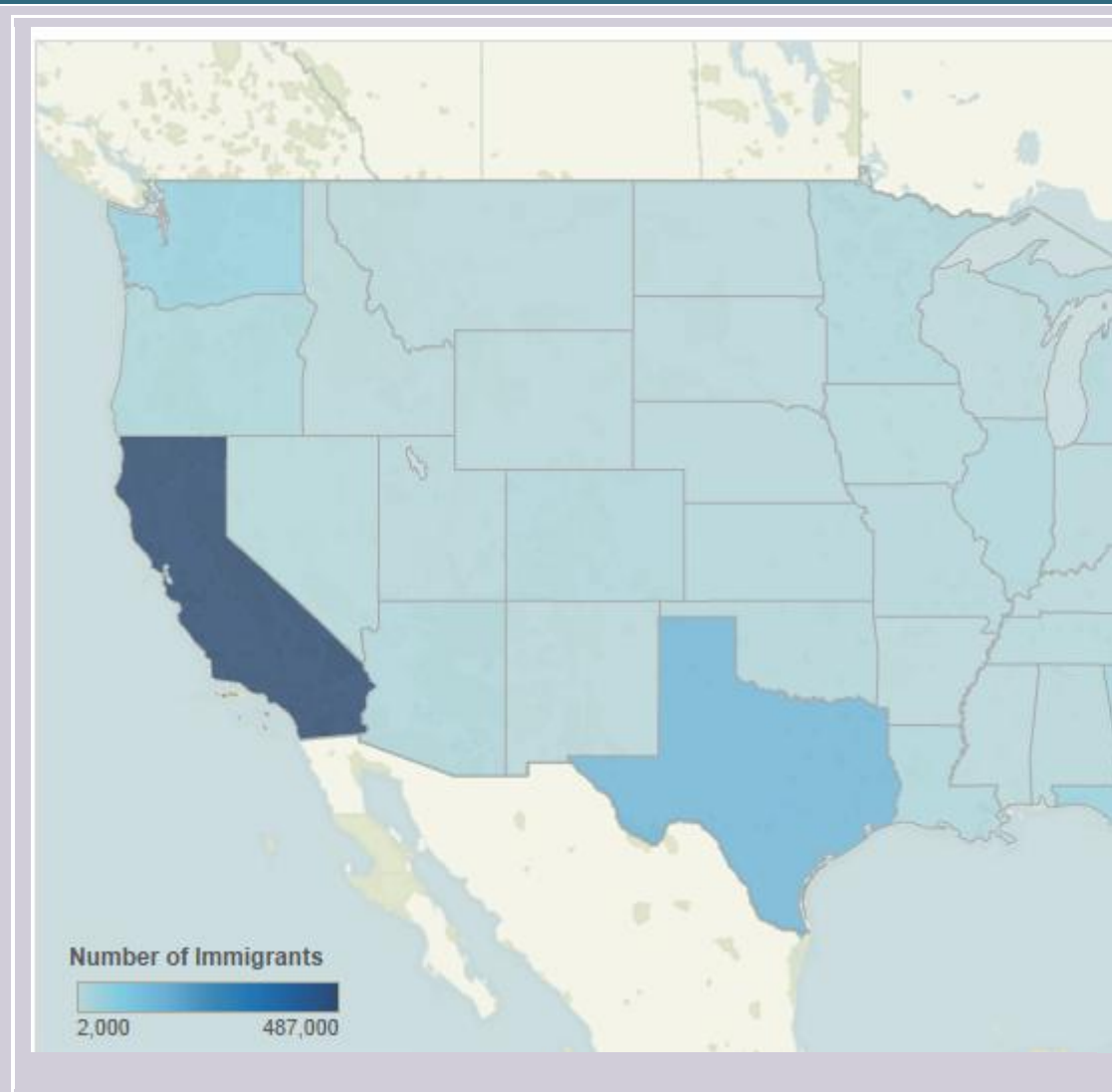
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### Distribution by State and Key Cities

Most Vietnamese immigrants settled in California (40 percent) and Texas (12 percent), followed by Washington State (4 percent), Florida (4 percent), and Virginia (3 percent) pooled 2008-12 ACS data show. The three counties with the most Vietnamese immigrants were all in California: Orange County, Los Angeles County, and Santa Clara County.

Together, the three counties accounted for 26 percent of the Vietnamese immigrant population in the United States.

**Figure 2. Top Destination States for Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States, 2008-12**



*Note:* Pooled 2008-12 ACS data were used to get statistically valid estimates at the state and metropolitan statistical area levels, for smaller-population geographies.

*Source:* Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2008-12 ACS.

**Click [here](#)** for an interactive map that shows the geographic distribution of immigrants by state and county. Select Vietnam from the dropdown menu to see which states and counties have the highest distributions of Vietnamese immigrants. The major metropolitan areas with

high concentrations of Vietnamese immigrants were the greater Los Angeles, San Jose, Houston, San Francisco, and Dallas metropolitan areas. Together, these five metropolitan areas were home to approximately 41 percent of the Vietnamese immigrant population in the 2008-12 period.

**Figure 3. Top Metropolitan Area Destinations for Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States, 2008-12**



*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2008-12 ACS.

**Table 1. Top Concentrations by Metropolitan Area for the Foreign Born from Vietnam**

Metropolitan Area	Immigrant Popu from Vietnam
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	230
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	95
Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX	74
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA	58
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	53
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	47
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	42
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos, CA	39
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA	28
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta, GA	27

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2008-12 ACS.

[Click here](#) for an interactive map that highlights the metropolitan areas with the highest distributions of immigrants. Select Vietnam from the dropdown menu.

### English Proficiency

In 2012, approximately 68 percent of Vietnamese immigrants (ages 5 and over) were Limited English Proficient (LEP), compared to 47 percent of the foreign born from South Eastern Asia, and 50 percent of the total U.S. foreign-born population. In addition, the proportion of Vietnamese immigrants who spoke only English at home was 7 percent, compared to 11 percent of the foreign born from South Eastern Asia and 15 percent of the total U.S. foreign-born population.

*(Note: The term Limited English Proficient refers to any person age 5 and older who reported speaking English “not at all,” “not well,” or “well” on their survey questionnaire.*

*Individuals who reported speaking only English or speaking English “very well” are considered proficient in English).*

### Educational and Professional Attainment

In 2012, approximately 23 percent of Vietnamese immigrants ages 25 and over had a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to 37 percent of the foreign born from South Eastern Asia and 28 percent of the total U.S. foreign-born population. (The rate for the U.S.-born population was 29 percent.)

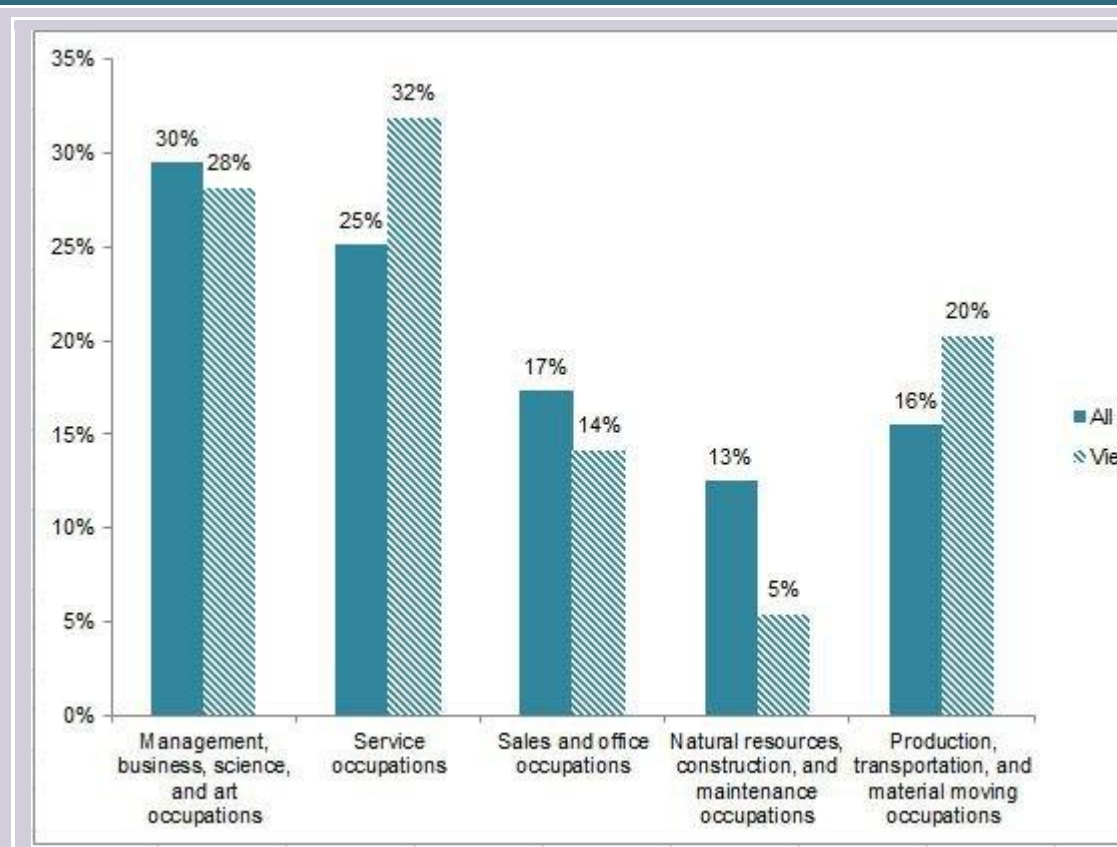
About 83 percent of Vietnamese immigrants were of working age (18-64), while 13 percent were ages 65 or older. The median age for Vietnamese immigrants was 46, consistent with the median age for other immigrants from South Eastern Asia, but higher than the overall U.S. foreign-born population (43), and the U.S.-born population (36).

Sixty-nine percent of Vietnamese immigrants (ages 16 and over) were in the civilian labor force in 2012, similar to the workforce participation rates for the foreign born from South



Eastern Asia (68 percent), and slightly higher than the overall U.S. immigrant population (67 percent) and the U.S.-born population (63 percent). Vietnamese immigrants were more likely to be employed in service occupations (32 percent) compared to the foreign born from South Eastern Asia (26 percent), the total U.S. foreign-born population (25 percent), and the U.S.-born population (17 percent).

**Figure 4. Employed Immigrant Workers in the Civilian Labor Force (Ages 16 and Older) by Occupation and Origin, 2012**



Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2012 ACS.

### Income and Poverty

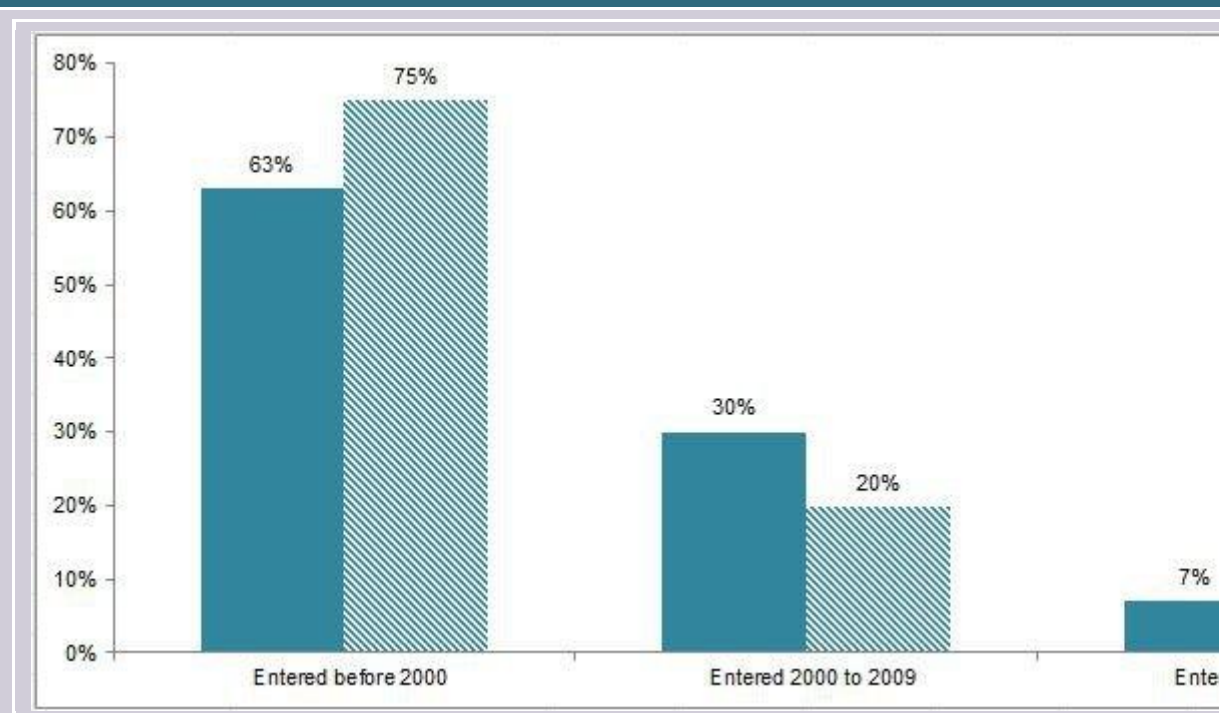
In 2012, the median household income among Vietnamese immigrants was \$55,736—significantly lower than for immigrants from South Eastern Asia (\$65,488), but higher than for the total immigrant population (\$46,983) and the U.S.-born population (\$51,975). Fifteen percent of Vietnamese immigrants lived in poverty in 2012, slightly higher than the poverty rate for the foreign born from South Eastern Asia (12 percent), but equivalent to the poverty rate for the native-born population (15 percent) and lower than the 19 percent for the overall foreign-born population.

### Immigration Pathways and Naturalization

In 2012, approximately 1,259,000 Vietnamese immigrants resided in the United States, comprising 31 percent of the 4 million foreign-born from South Eastern Asia, 11 percent of the 11.9 million foreign-born from Asia, and 3 percent of the 40.8 million overall foreign-born population. Vietnamese immigrants were much more likely to be naturalized citizens (76 percent), compared to 67 percent of the foreign-born from South Eastern Asia and 46 percent of the total U.S. foreign-born population.

Most Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the United States before 2000 (75 percent), 20 percent between 2000 and 2009, and 5 percent in 2010 and thereafter.

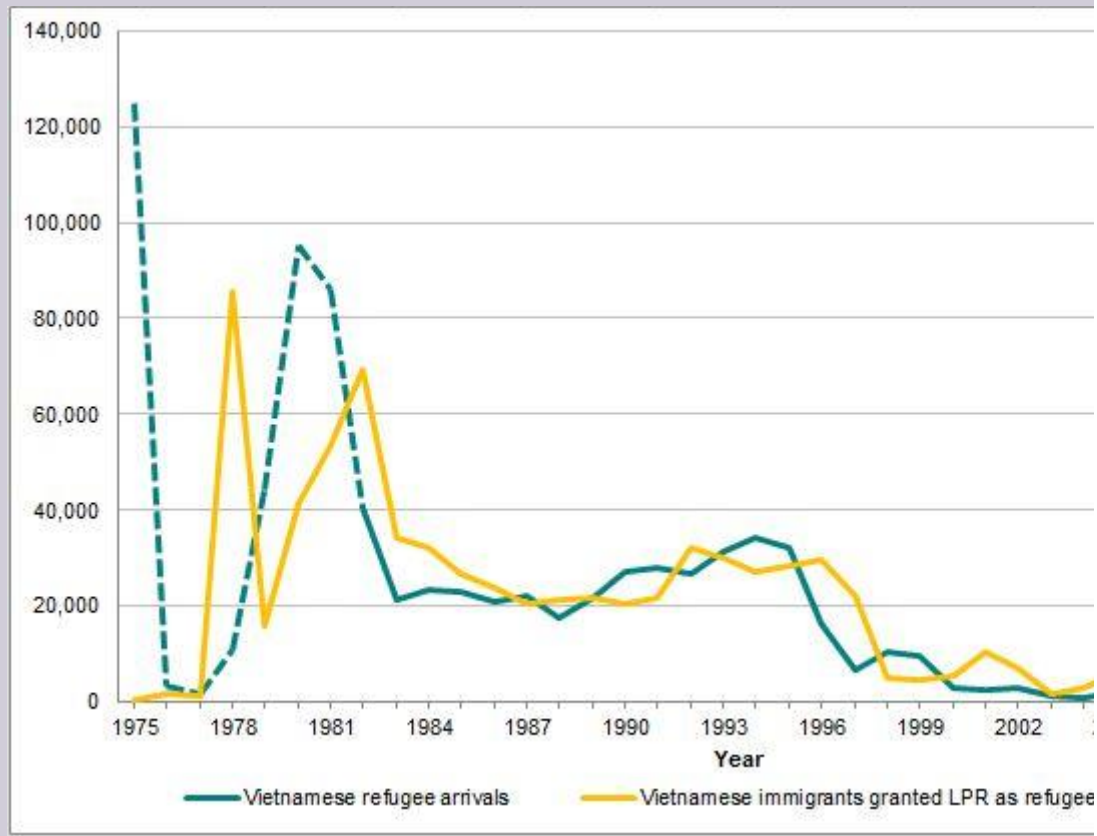
**Figure 5. Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States by Period of Arrival, 2012**



*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2012 ACS.

Vietnamese migration to the United States began as a refugee flow, over time transforming into one of family reunification. Since 1980, there has been a general downward trend of Vietnamese refugees who arrived or were granted LPR status in the United States.

**Figure 6. Vietnamese Refugee Arrivals and Vietnamese Immigrants Granted Lawful Permanent Residence as Refugees and Asylees, 1975-2012**



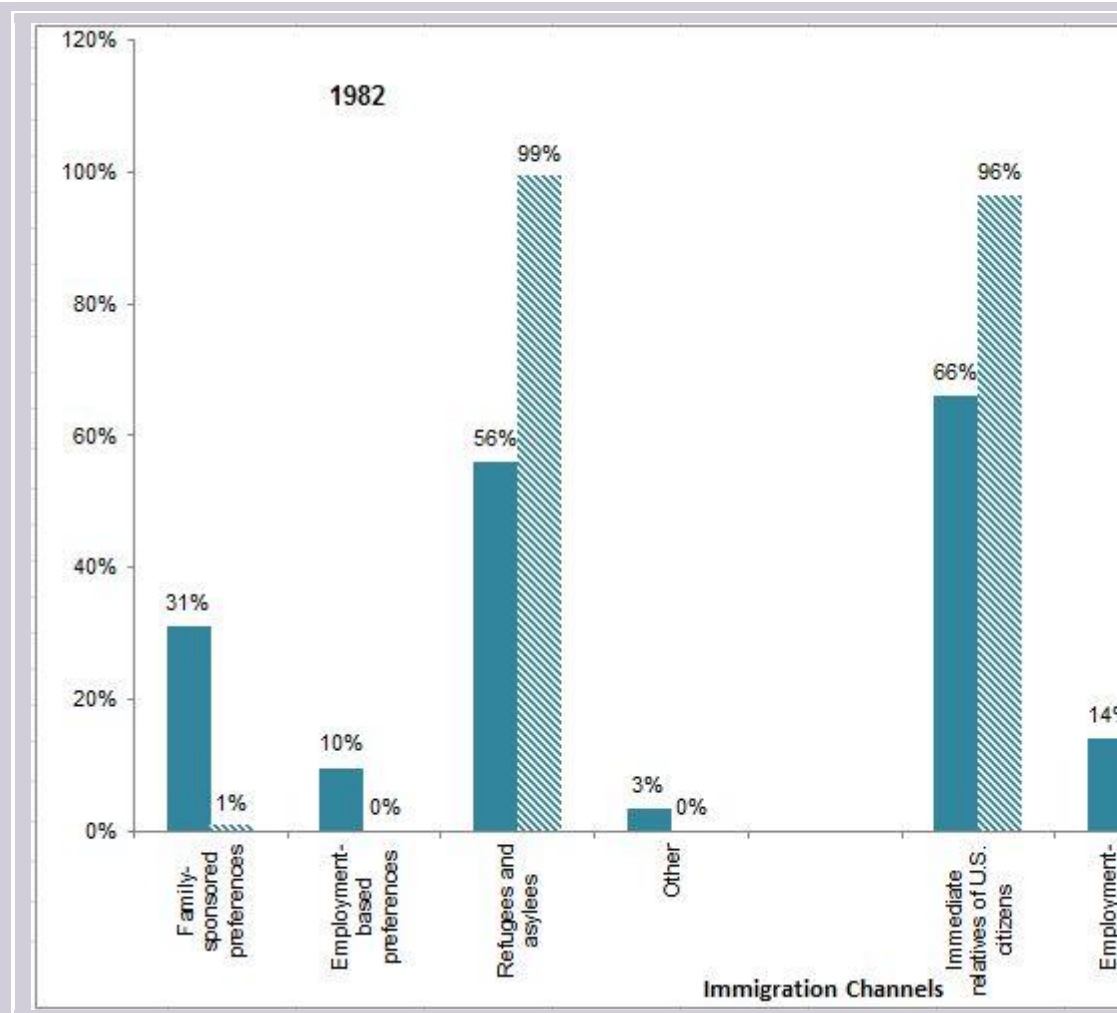
*Notes:* The dotted portion of the line for refugee arrivals from Vietnam prior to 1982 indicates that these numbers are estimates obtained from Table 7.2 in “Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States” by Linda W. Gordon. In 1975, about 125,000 Vietnamese refugees arrived in the United States as the result of a U.S.-sponsored evacuation program following the end of the Vietnam War. From 1976 to 1977, the number of refugee arrivals dropped significantly for the most part because the United States denied admission to Vietnamese individuals except for family reunification. As a result of continuing political and ethnic conflicts within Southeast Asia, the number of refugees from Vietnam and its neighboring countries rose dramatically beginning in 1978. In response to this humanitarian crisis, Western countries, including the United States, began admitting greater numbers of refugees from the region, many of whom were living in refugee camps.

*Sources:* MPI tabulation of data from DHS, *2012 and 2002 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics), [www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics](http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics); U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service for 1978-1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office); INS, 1977, 1976, and 1975 Annual Reports (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office); Linda W. Gordon, “Southeast Asian Refugee Migration to the United States,” Center for Migration Studies special issues, 5 (3) (1987): 153-73; Rubén G. Rumbaut, “A Legacy of War: Refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia,” in *Origins and Destinies: Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America*, eds. Silvia Pedranza and Rubén G. Rumbaut (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996); Gail P. Kelly, “Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 487 (1996): 138-49.



Nearly all Vietnamese immigrants (99 percent) who received a green card in 1982 were refugees. In contrast, just 2 percent of Vietnamese immigrants getting a green card in 2012 had been refugees, while 96 percent did so as a result of family ties. For the most part, more recent arrivals are family members of earlier refugees and Amerasians from Vietnam.

**Figure 7. Immigrants Granted Lawful Permanent Residence, 1982 and 2012**



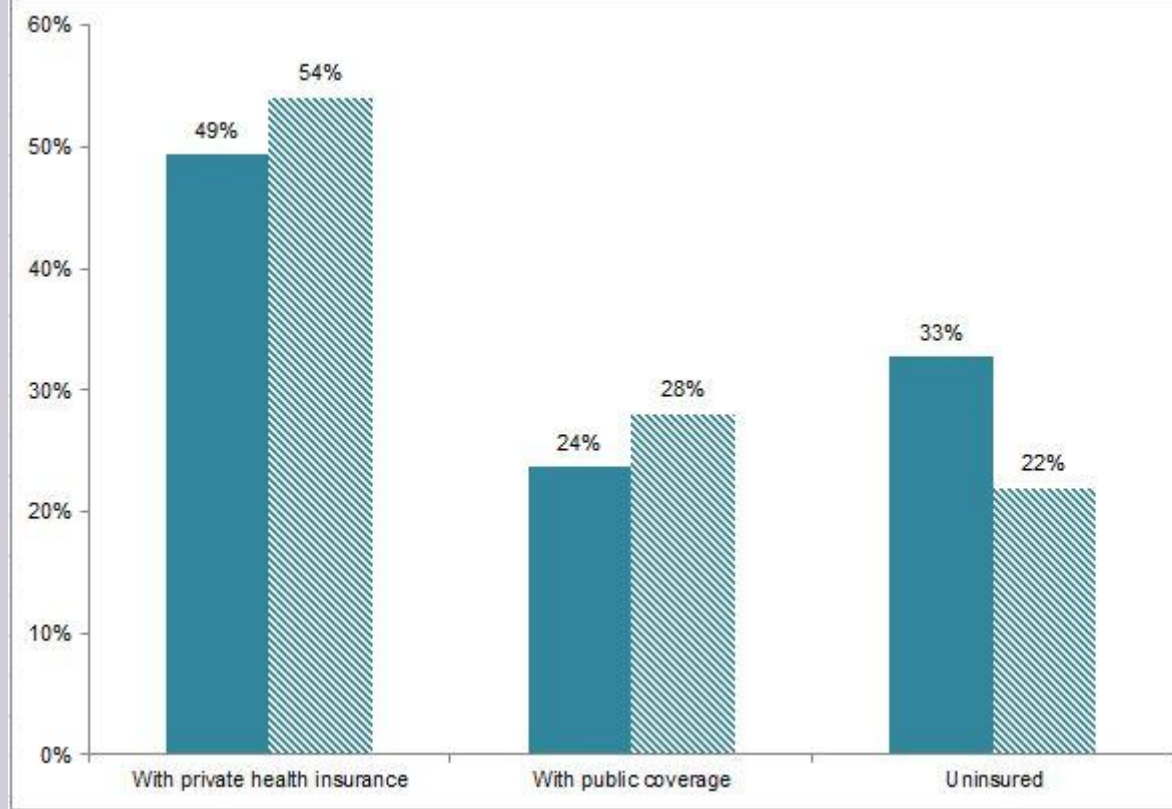
*Notes:* *Family-sponsored* refers to immediate relatives of U.S. citizens and other family-sponsored immigrants; *Employment-based* refers to those entering the United States for employment or investment; *Other* refers to those entering the United States through the Diversity Visa Lottery program and other miscellaneous classes of admission.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from DHS, *2012 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS Office of Immigration Statistics, 2013), [www.dhs.gov/publication/yearbook-2012](http://www.dhs.gov/publication/yearbook-2012).

## Health Coverage

Vietnamese immigrants were more likely to have health insurance coverage than the total foreign-born population, but less likely than immigrants from South Eastern Asia and the U.S.-born population. About 22 percent of Vietnamese immigrants were uninsured in 2012, compared to 17 percent of the foreign born from South Eastern Asia, 33 percent of the total foreign-born population, and 12 percent of the native-born population.

**Figure 8. Vietnamese Immigrants in the United States by Type of Health Coverage, 2012**



*Note:* The sum of shares by type of insurance is likely to be greater than 100 because people may have more than one type of insurance.

*Source:* MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2012 ACS.

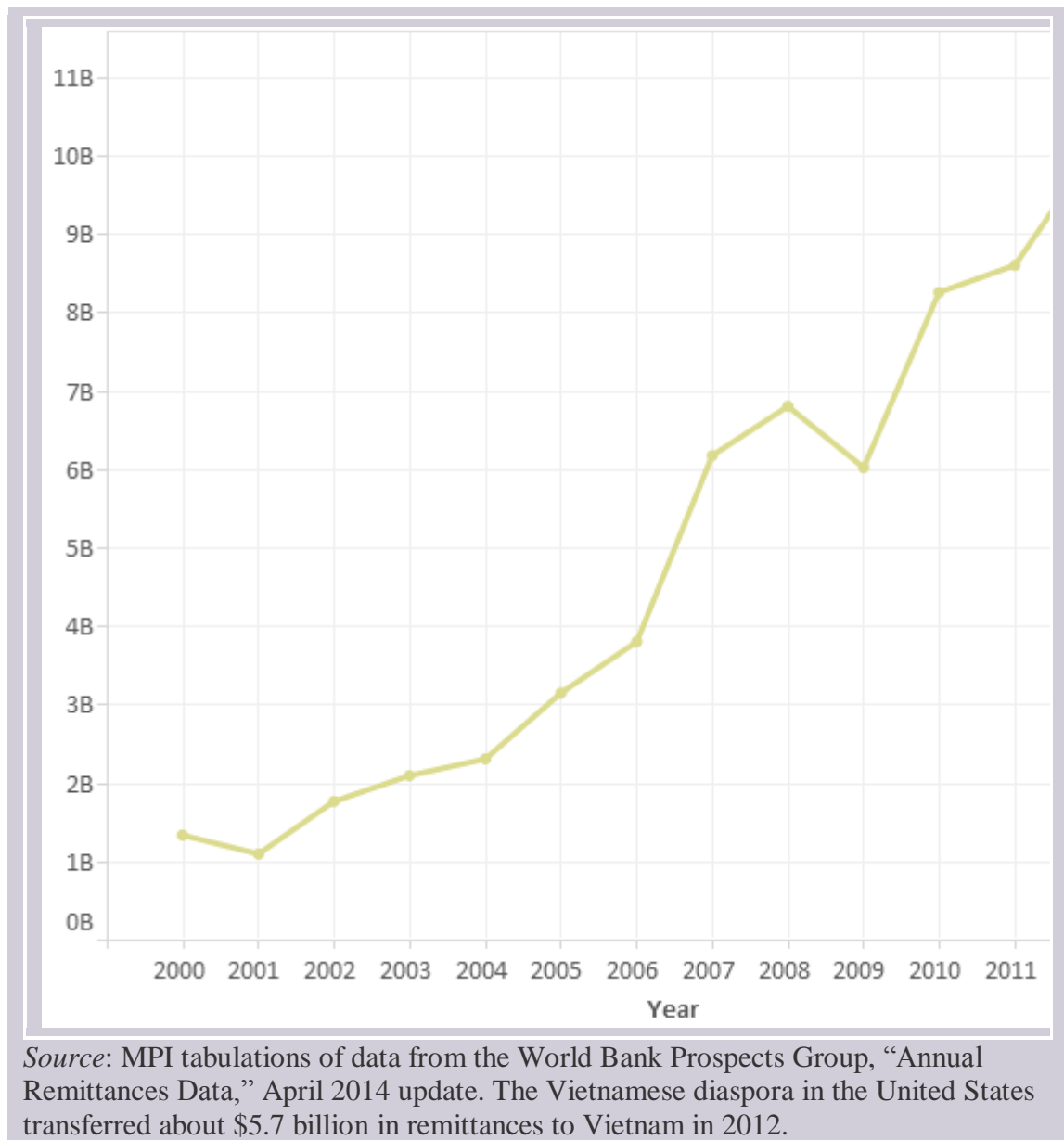
## Diaspora

The Vietnamese diaspora population in the United States is comprised of approximately 2 million individuals who were either born in Vietnam or reported Vietnamese ancestry, according to tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's pooled 2008-12 ACS.

## Remittances

Total remittances sent to Vietnam via formal channels equaled \$11 billion in 2013, representing about 6 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), according to data from the World Bank. The amount of remittances received by Vietnam has increased tenfold since the late 1990s.

**Figure 9. Annual Remittance Flows to Vietnam, 2000-13**



**Visit the Data Hub's collection of interactive remittances tools**, which track remittances by inflow and outflow, between countries, and over time.

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