



New American Women (Immigrants and Refugees) in Utah

Setting the Stage

Year after year, the topic of immigration features centrally in US public policy discussions and debates. This focus is not surprising, given that the US is home to more immigrants than any other country in the world. While policy discussions often focus on immigrants who lack legal authorization to be in the US, most immigrants are legal residents (77.0%).¹ An immigrant is any person who lives in a country that is not their country of usual residence or nationality.² The US immigrant population includes naturalized citizens (i.e., those who entered the US legally and became citizens), lawful permanent residents (i.e., green card holders), refugees and asylees, individuals on temporary visas such as employment and student visas, and foreign-born residents who lack legal authorization. According to the Governor's Office of Economic Opportunity in 2023, Utah was home to 304,918 immigrants.³ This research snapshot describes the immigrant population in Utah and sheds light on the challenges they face, especially those faced by immigrant women.

In this report, we discuss three broad categories of immigrants: humanitarian immigrants, immigrants with legal authorization, and immigrants without legal authorization. Humanitarian immigrants include refugees and asylum seekers—individuals who have experienced extreme hardship, such as war or persecution, and who have legal pathways for seeking safe harbor in the US. Immigrants with legal authorization include those who hold temporary, seasonal, or long-term work visas; student visas; or family reunification visas. Immigrants without legal authorization are those who reside in the US without a current legal immigration status. Throughout this report, we use the term *New Americans* to refer to all three groups.⁴ This research snapshot focuses on three key areas:

- 1) An overview of New Americans in the nation;
- 2) A synopsis of immigrants and refugees in Utah, including demographics and trends; and
- 3) A discussion of what Utahns can do to support immigrants and refugees in the state.

National Overview

As of mid-2025, there were 51.9 million immigrants living in the US, making up 15.4% of the nation's population. Of

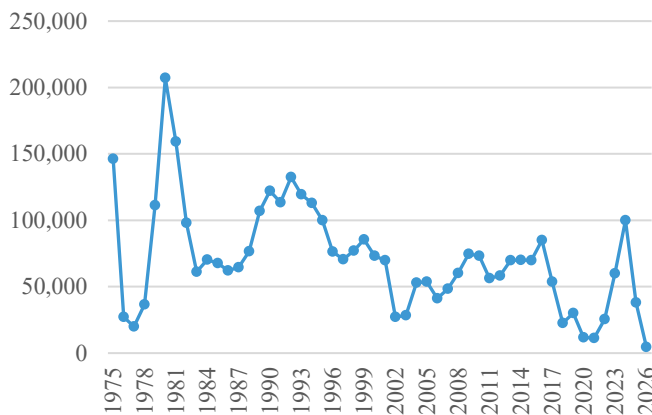
these immigrants, 46.0% were naturalized US citizens, 23.0% were legal permanent residents, and 4.0% were lawful temporary residents. Immigrants without legal authorization comprised 27.0% of the immigrant population. People immigrate to the US from nearly every country in the world. The most recent data from the US Census Bureau indicate that the top five countries of origin for US immigrants are Mexico, India, China, the Philippines, and Cuba, with more than half originating in Latin America.⁵ The reasons people migrate to the US are as varied as the migrants themselves, but most relocate to the US for school, work, family reunification, or humanitarian reasons. The US immigration system permits entry under two categories of visas: permanent and temporary. Permanent visas provide recipients with a pathway to citizenship. The categories of permanent visas include family, employment-based, humanitarian, and other visa types.⁶ The latter category includes diversity visas (a lottery system), special immigrant visas, T visas (for victims of human trafficking), and U visas (for victims of crime). U and T visas offer a critical lifeline to women who have experienced domestic or intimate partner violence, sexual assault, or trafficking.⁷ Annual caps on the number of permanent visas issued in each category vary according to the policies of the US presidential administration. Temporary visas, such as student visas and temporary worker visas, provide legal protection but do not necessarily lead to legal permanent resident status.⁸

Understanding the complex landscape of US visa categories—and the systems immigrants must navigate before and after arrival—helps clarify the distinct challenges they encounter in Utah and across the country.

Humanitarian Immigrants: Humanitarian migrants are people in urgent need of protection. Refugees, for example, leave their home country to escape war, persecution, or political upheaval. Refugees typically flee to a neighboring country, where they apply for refugee status through the United Nations (UN) with the hope of eventually being permanently resettled in a new location, such as the US.⁹ Worldwide, 30.5 million people are displaced and awaiting resettlement. However, less than 2.0% of refugees are permanently resettled, and many wait years in regions near their home country—often in temporary camps—before being resettled.¹⁰ In the US, refugees are vetted by both the UN and the US Department of Homeland Security before

arrival. The US also sets an annual ceiling on the number of refugees it will admit. Since 1980, the target level has averaged approximately 92,000 refugees per year.¹¹ Actual admissions fluctuate greatly (see Figure 1), but on average, 71,062 refugees have been admitted each year. In 2025, the refugee admissions ceiling was 125,000, while only 38,102 refugees were admitted. For 2026, the Trump administration has set the refugee admissions ceiling at 7,500.¹²

Figure 1: US Refugee Admissions by Year¹³



Another group of humanitarian immigrants pursues permanent relocation to the US through the asylum system. Like refugees, asylees require protection because they have a credible fear of persecution.¹⁴ Unlike refugees, asylees apply for asylum at the US border or from within the country and must petition the US Citizenship and Immigration Services or the immigration court to have their humanitarian need and status recognized. Both refugees and asylees are lawful immigrants with authorization to be in the US. After residing in the US for one year, all refugees and some asylees can apply for Lawful Permanent Resident Status (LPR), also known as a green card. For asylees, the application process is complex and drawn out, often lasting several years. After five years with LPR status, refugees and asylees are eligible to apply for US citizenship.¹⁵

Roughly 8.0% of immigrants in the US are refugees or asylees, half of whom are women.¹⁶ In 2024, 43.3% of arriving refugees were children under 18. The US received more refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) than any other country in 2024. In 2025, Afghanistan was the top country of origin for refugees, followed closely by the DRC.¹⁷

Other Authorized Immigrants: In addition to providing pathways to residency for people in need of protection, the US immigration system offers channels for migration based on family ties and connections to employers. US citizens can sponsor family members for permanent residence. Family reunification accounts for roughly two-thirds of all permanent immigration.¹⁸ Employment-based immigrants comprise 14.0% of permanent immigrants entering the US. Employment-based migration accounts for the largest part

of temporary immigration, while international student migration makes up a much smaller share.

Attitudes toward New Americans: Attitudes about immigrants and US immigration policies are deeply polarized along partisan lines. In mid-2025, 30.0% of Americans polled by Gallup thought immigration, both authorized and unauthorized, should be decreased. That number is down from 2024, when 55.0% of Americans believed immigration should be decreased.¹⁹ People with negative attitudes toward immigrants or immigration tend to be more politically conservative. They view immigrants as threats to the US economy, America’s culture, or public safety.²⁰ Specifically, they believe that immigrants cause an increase in violent crime in the US, that they take jobs from and create work shortages for American workers, and that they drain federal benefit programs.

The media reiterates many of these false claims, and, unfortunately, research shows that exposure to media stories portraying immigrants as a threat increases negative attitudes toward immigrants, especially when such stories are repeated across different news and social media platforms.²¹ Yet the data show that foreign-born individuals commit fewer violent crimes than US-born individuals, that immigrants do not take jobs but complement the economy by filling needed roles, and that immigrants are more likely than US-born individuals to start a business, thereby creating jobs and paying taxes. This pattern also holds for many unauthorized immigrants, who pay taxes that support public systems they are not eligible to access.²²

Challenges for New Americans: The ease with which immigrants integrate into American society, achieve financial security, access needed services such as health care and education, and thrive in their communities varies. Many have difficulty finding work if they did not immigrate with an employment-related visa, and 34.0% have difficulty paying for food or housing. Nearly half have limited English-language proficiency, which can make it hard for them to get and keep jobs, access health care, communicate with their child’s school, receive services at a store, apply for government services, or get help from the police.²³ Immigrants may also experience difficulties having their education or professional qualifications recognized in the US, and 27.0% of immigrants surveyed in 2023 reported being overqualified for their jobs. Discrimination, social isolation, and stress related to immigration enforcement activities are also persistent challenges for US immigrants.²⁴

Negative attitudes toward immigrants can exacerbate prejudice and discrimination, make integration and resource access more challenging, create support for policies that make lawful migration more difficult, and reduce the safety of migrants lacking authorization. Perceived discrimination is also a source of stress for immigrants that can negatively impact both physical and mental health.²⁵

Immigrant women face additional challenges in the US relative to male immigrants. Immigrant women often had less education and employment experience in their countries of origin, putting them at higher risk of poverty after migration.²⁶ In addition, the patriarchal norms present in some origin countries contribute to women’s lower labor market participation in the US, higher burden of child and familial care, and social isolation, all of which reinforce immigrant women’s economic dependency and vulnerability to exploitation.²⁷ Although immigrants have higher labor force participation rates than US-born residents, immigrant women have lower rates than both immigrant men and US-born women.²⁸ Moreover, immigrant women earn less than US-born women who have similar levels of education and experience. Immigrant women may also have a limited understanding of their rights in the US and experience gender-based discrimination.²⁹ Lacking information about their rights, these women are unlikely to contest discrimination when they encounter it.³⁰

Immigrant and refugee women and girls are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV). The challenges women and girls experience before, during, and after migration increase their vulnerability, especially because a primary risk factor for GBV is unequal power.³¹ Refugee and immigrant women experience power imbalances between themselves and male migrants, border authorities, and police and service providers in transit and after arriving in the US. Rates of victimization are higher among migrants than the US-born population, and they are highest among vulnerable migrant groups.³²

Refugee women and girls typically face more challenges than other immigrants. On average, refugee women have lower levels of education, fewer formal qualifications, and lower English-language proficiency than other immigrant women, increasing their social and economic vulnerability in the US.³³

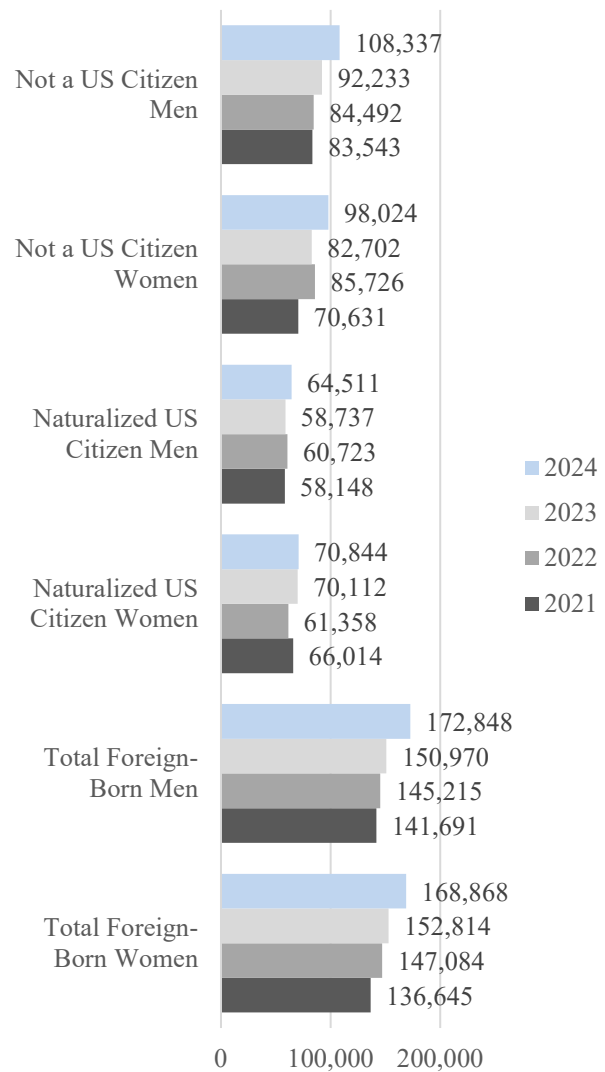
Utah Overview

Immigrant and refugee women and girls in Utah—including permanent and temporary residents with legal authorization as well as those without—accounted for 9.8% (341,716 individuals) of the state’s population in 2024.³⁴ This reflects steady growth from 7.1% in 2000 and 3.4% in 1990.³⁵ In 2024, 39.6% (135,355) of these individuals were naturalized US citizens, while 60.4% (206,361) were not US citizens.³⁶

Between 2021 and 2024, women and girls accounted for 49.0–50.0% of Utah’s foreign-born population. There were 168,868 foreign-born women and girls in Utah in 2024, making up 4.8% of the state’s total population. Among women aged 18 and older, foreign-born women made up 12.3% of the total.¹⁹ Figure 2 presents the distribution of Utah’s foreign-born men and women by citizenship status

from 2021 to 2024. The state’s immigrant population has expanded rapidly in recent decades: 43.9% of Utah’s foreign-born residents entered the US in 2010 or later, while 56.1% arrived before 2010.³⁷

Figure 2: Utah’s Foreign-Born Population by Sex from 2021-2024³⁸

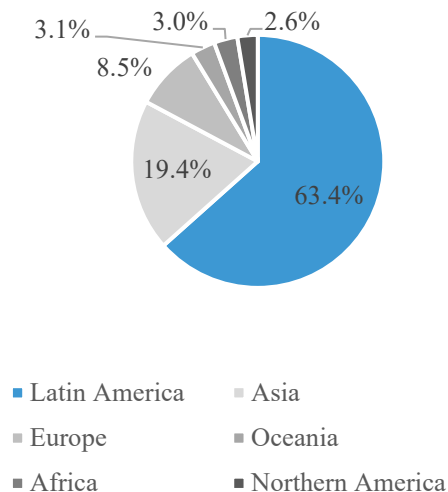


Utah’s foreign-born population originates from regions across the globe, bringing a wide range of cultural backgrounds and languages to the state. Figure 3 shows the distribution of Utah’s foreign-born residents by world region of origin.

Refugees make up an estimated 19.0–24.0% of Utah’s foreign-born population. Overall, between 65,000 and 75,000 refugees reside in the state.³⁹ In 2020, women and girls accounted for 43.7% of refugee arrivals to Utah.⁴⁰ Over the past 10 years, Utah has welcomed 7,031 refugees, ranking 11th in the US for refugee arrivals per capita.⁴¹ 1,203 newly settled refugees came into Utah in 2024. Utah’s refugees come from more than 40 countries and speak more than 120 languages. The top countries of origin for refugees in Utah

in 2024 were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Venezuela, Afghanistan, Syria, and Sudan.⁴²

Figure 3: Utah’s Foreign-Born Population by Region of Origin in 2024¹⁹



Utah’s Refugee Services Office (RSO), housed at the Utah Department of Workforce Services, provided services to 7,730 arriving refugees in the last five years.⁴³ Of these, 33.5% were under the age of 18, 22.9% were aged 18–29, 20.2% were 30–39, 12.9% were 40–49, 8.1% were 50–64, and 2.4% were over the age of 64. This means that 64.1% of these refugees were working-age adults. Only 40.0% reported their highest educational attainment to the RSO. Of the 3,112 refugees who provided information on educational attainment, 11.3% had partially or fully completed primary education, 58.9% had partially or fully completed secondary education, and 29.9% had partially or fully completed post-secondary education.

Utah ranks 11th in the US for the number of refugee arrivals per capita.

Contributions: New Americans are major contributors to Utah’s economy; in 2023, they paid \$3.1 billion in state and local taxes.⁴⁴ In Salt Lake City alone, New Americans contributed \$3.4 billion to the local economy and paid \$1.1 billion in taxes.⁴⁵ Unauthorized immigrants in Utah paid \$235.1 million in state and local taxes, which would grow by an estimated \$57.4 million if these individuals were granted legal status.⁴⁶

New Americans keep Utah’s economy growing at a sustainable rate as the state ages. They also help meet the caregiving needs of older Utahns.⁴⁷ Immigrants and refugees also contribute to the state economy by starting businesses and creating new jobs. In 2019, the New American Economy report noted that Salt Lake City alone had 6,822 immigrant entrepreneurs.⁴⁸

Challenges: The challenges faced by New American women in Utah parallel those faced by immigrants throughout the US, including language and cultural barriers, issues accessing health care and other services, social isolation, lack of

transportation, and obstacles to accessing educational and occupational opportunities.⁴⁹ In refugee families, for instance, men’s jobs and children’s education are prioritized, but the needs and contributions of refugee women can be forgotten.⁵⁰ Refugee women in Utah seeking to increase their skills (such as English fluency or educational and job skills) often come up against barriers such as transportation, lack of support from family, and childcare needs.

Refugee women are often responsible for supporting the health and well-being of their families, many of whom arrive in Utah with existing health challenges.⁵¹ Common concerns reported by refugee women include vitamin D deficiency, diabetes, health conditions related to environmental exposures in their countries of origin, and a range of mental health needs.

Many New American women in Utah face discrimination due to racial or cultural differences, especially for hijab-wearing women and those with accents.⁵² Refugee women were disproportionately affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the recent economic recession and government funding cuts, more Utah refugee women are looking for work. At Women of the World, for instance, 50 refugee women were seeking employment in 2025, compared with 30 in 2024.

Foreign-born Utahns are more economically vulnerable and thus more affected by statewide economic downturns and austerity measures than US-born Utahns.⁵³

Foreign-born Utahns are less likely to be homeowners (59.5% of foreign-born Utahns versus 70.9% of US-born individuals), are more than twice as likely to experience poverty in their families (9.4% versus 4.8%), and have a lower median income (\$81,899 versus \$99,250).⁵⁴

What Utahns Can Do

Support for local and state organizations that serve refugees and immigrants is imperative for securing resources and providing opportunities for New American women in our state. Among these are [Cache Valley Refugee & Immigrant Connection](#), [Catholic Community Services](#), [Holy Cross Ministries](#), [International Rescue Committee–Salt Lake City](#), [Utah Valley Refugees](#), and [Women of the World](#). These organizations, along with many others, provide pathways to intensive English instruction, further education, healthcare navigation, job skills development, and additional supports that promote the well-being, success, and self-reliance of New American women and girls. Reliable childcare remains a critical factor in enabling New American women to pursue these opportunities.

Policies that enhance access to supports such as SNAP benefits, affordable housing, and Medicare for all Utahns also benefit New Americans. Employers can leverage the skills and experiences of this diverse population by expanding

employment opportunities for New American women. At the community level, civic and faith leaders can promote opportunities for meaningful interaction among neighbors to strengthen social ties.

New Americans in Utah, including women and girls, contribute to the state's economic vitality and cultural diversity. While immigrant and refugee women encounter various challenges as they settle in Utah, their resilience and ongoing contributions play an important role in the state's present and future success.

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