



# State of Immigrants in the District of Columbia

## Data Profiles of Immigrants from Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean

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**This brief focuses on immigrants in Washington, DC, to help the Executive Office of Mayor Muriel Bowser and its partners better understand and serve DC's immigrant community.<sup>1</sup> It highlights immigrants from Latin America, Asia and the Pacific Islands, Africa, and the Caribbean, who collectively represent 3 out of 4 immigrants living in DC (figure 1). The Mayor's Office of Community Affairs (MOCA) in the Executive Office of the Mayor has dedicated offices to serve immigrant communities to achieve its mandate of "helping to improve the quality of life for residents of the District of Columbia by collaborating with neighborhood organizations and other city agencies to address community issues."<sup>2</sup>**

Three of the four immigrant communities addressed in this brief are represented by separate offices within the Executive Office of the Mayor, which provide support and work to improve the quality of life for their respective communities (box 1). In preparing this brief, we compiled data from national sources, reviewed reports and documents, and interviewed the staff from each of these offices and from nonprofit service providers serving these communities to gain insights into the supports available to and challenges facing immigrants in DC.

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## BOX 1

### District of Columbia Supporting Offices for Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander, and African Immigrants

Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs (MOLA), <https://ola.dc.gov>

Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs (MOAPIA), <https://apia.dc.gov/>

Mayor's Office on African Affairs (MOAA), <https://oaa.dc.gov/>

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## DC's Immigrant Population Today

Though Washington, DC, has not historically been a center for immigration to the US, since the 1980s our region has emerged as one of the country's largest new gateway destinations for immigrant communities (Singer 2004). The total immigrant population in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area has increased tenfold since the 1970 Census, from 130,000 to 1.3 million immigrants today, according to the 2012–16 American Community Survey. Most of that growth has been in the suburbs outside of the District of Columbia. Nevertheless, the city's immigrant population has grown steadily, from 33,600 to 95,400 people between 1970 and 2012–16 estimates. Though immigrants represented only 4 percent of the city in 1970, today immigrants make up 15 percent of DC's population and have contributed to the demographic, economic, and cultural growth of our nation's capital.

In this section, we use data aligned with four of the Mayor Bowser's priority areas—education, jobs and economic opportunity, housing, and health and human services—to discuss the current status of DC's immigrant population. More information on Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander (AAPI), African, and Caribbean immigrants in DC are in a series of [data profiles](#).<sup>3</sup> All data sources (box 2) were compiled and tabulated by Urban–Greater DC.

After experiencing several decades of decline, DC's population has grown substantially since the 2000 Decennial Census.<sup>4</sup> According to the Census Bureau, DC's population surpassed 681,000 in 2016, up 19 percent since 2000. DC's rising immigrant population has contributed significantly to the city's growth. The makeup of DC's immigrant community has changed notably as well, in part because it has welcomed immigrants from different countries and regions of origin and has become home to immigrants with a longer tenure in the US. Figure 1 shows the top regions of origin for DC immigrants in 2000 and 2012–16. Though Central Americans remain the largest single immigrant group by region, the share of immigrants from Africa, Europe, and South America has increased since 2000.

## BOX 2

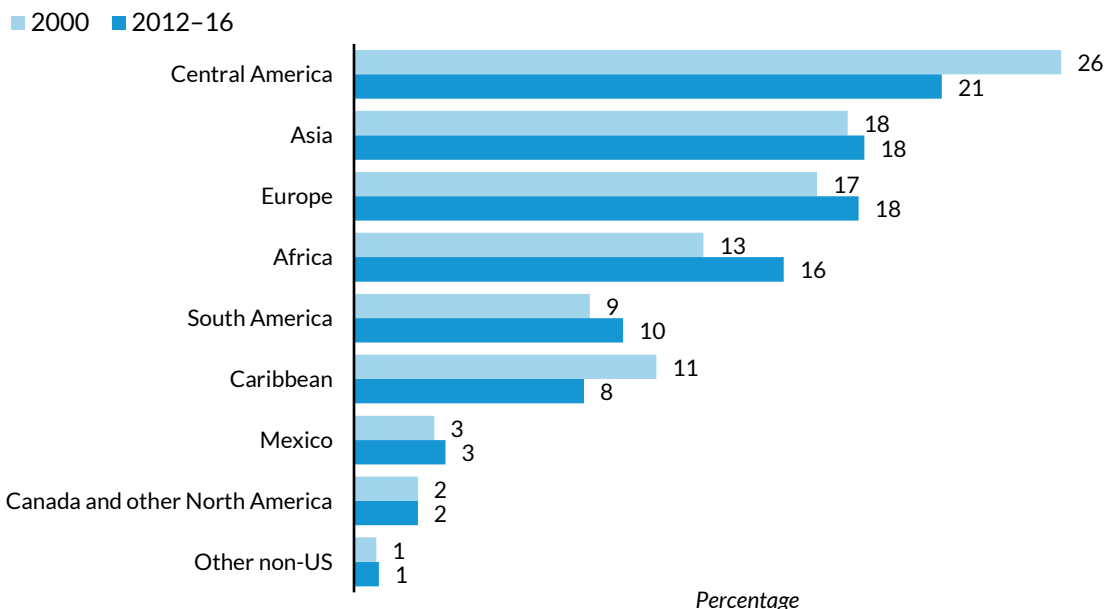
### Data Sources

The main sources of data used in this brief were microdata from the 2000 Decennial Census long form and 2012–16 American Community Survey, obtained from IPUMS-USA.<sup>a</sup> Immigrants are defined as people who were born outside of the US, excluding people born overseas to parents who were US citizens and people born in US territories. Members of the four immigrant groups who are the focus of this report were determined by the offices according to places of origin that the offices felt aligned best with the populations they served. For this brief, Latino immigrants include individuals born abroad in Mexico, Central America, and South America as well as Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean, including Cuba and Dominican Republic. Because Puerto Ricans in the District share many of the needs and characteristics of their Latino immigrant counterparts, Puerto Ricans have also been included in this analysis despite not being foreign born. African immigrants refer to foreign-born individuals from the continent of Africa. Asian and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) include immigrants from countries in east, southeast, and south Asia. Caribbean immigrants refer to foreign-born individuals from the Caribbean islands, except for people from Spanish-speaking countries and territories who are included in the analysis of Latino immigrants because of shared culture and characteristics, as well as people born in the US Virgin Islands. Summary data on all immigrants presented in this brief include people from Europe and other regions, in addition to the focus Latino, AAPI, African, and Caribbean immigrant populations.

<sup>a</sup> Steven Ruggles, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 7.0 [dataset]* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V7.0>.

FIGURE 1

### Region of Origin for DC's Immigrant Population



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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

Note: Asia includes immigrants from the Middle East, who are not included in the AAPI focus on immigrants from countries in east, southeast, and south Asia.

The three of the four groups who are the focus of this brief—Latino, AAPI, and African immigrants—all experienced population growth from 2000 and 2012–16. Latinos are the largest of the three groups. Between 2000 and 2012–16, the Latino immigrant population grew from 31,400 to 37,100, an increase of 18 percent. Latinos have had a growing presence in DC since the 1970s. Columbia Heights and Mt. Pleasant neighborhoods have been the center of the Latino community in DC for several decades. More recently, however, Latinos have moved into other parts of the city in increasing numbers.<sup>5</sup>

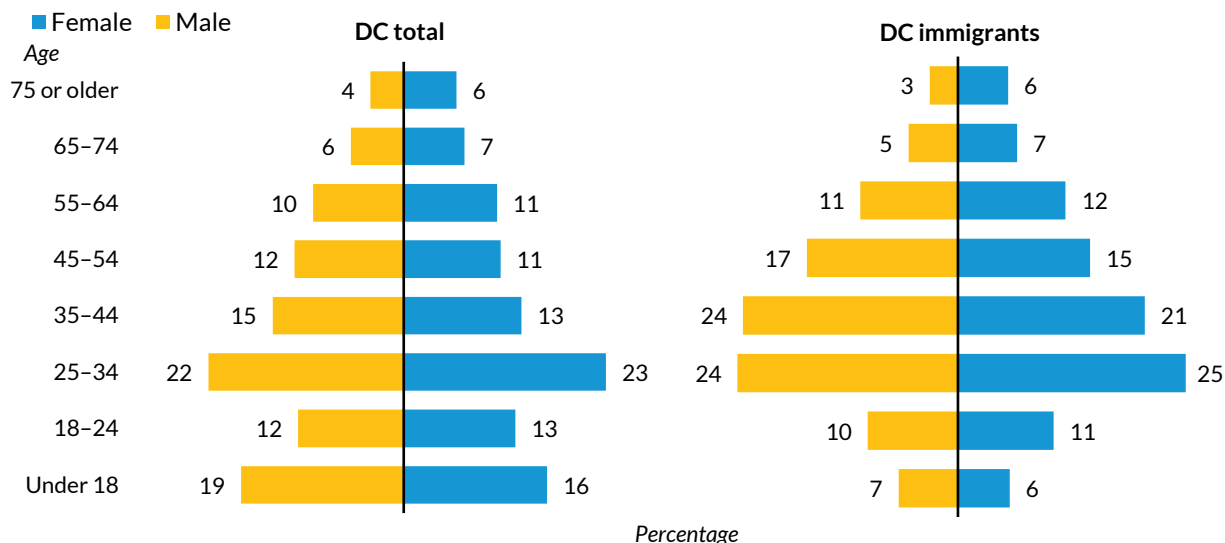
DC's historic Chinatown was once the home to thousands of Chinese immigrants and the center of the city's Asian community. Today, few Chinese are left in this part of the city, having been displaced by the riots in the 1960s and recent redevelopment of the neighborhood.<sup>6</sup> In recent decades, however, DC's AAPI population has begun growing again and is part of a booming and diverse AAPI community in the Washington region. AAPI immigrants in DC grew from 11,800 to 14,400 between 2000 and 2012–16, an increase of 22 percent. The biggest increases in the number of AAPI immigrants since 2000 were from China, India, and Korea.

Immigrants from Africa have been a growing share of migrants to the US since 2010, and the Washington region has emerged as one of the top destinations for African immigrants, particularly those from Ethiopia (Connor 2018; Macharia 2011). Africans represent one of the fastest-growing immigrant groups in the city. Between 2000 and 2012–16, the African immigrant population has grown from 9,500 to 14,800, an increase of 56 percent. The number of immigrants from Ethiopia more than doubled since 2000.

Between 2000 and 2012–16, the size of DC's Caribbean population stayed relatively stable, with around 6,000 immigrants from Caribbean islands residing in DC. Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Haiti are the most-represented countries among DC's Caribbean immigrants. DC's immigrant community overall has a slightly longer tenure in the US than it did a decade and a half ago. In 2000, 51 percent of the immigrants to DC came to the US within the previous 10 years. More recent data from 2012–16, however, indicates this group is now 41 percent of the District's immigrant population. In particular, Caribbean immigrants in DC have a long tenure in the US, only 14 percent of whom in DC arrived in the past 10 years. Additionally, more immigrants are pursuing and achieving pathways to citizenship in DC. The share of naturalized US citizens has increased from 29 to 40 percent between 2000 and 2012–16.

Consistent with the city's total population, the largest share of DC immigrants (25 percent) were between 25 and 34 years old in 2012–16 (figure 2). This age group increased in number since 2000, from 20,800 to 23,400 people. In contrast, the share of immigrant children younger than 18 declined since 2000, both in percentages (from 8 to 6 percent) and in numbers of children (from 6,200 to 5,800). Seniors age 65 and older represented a growing share of DC's immigrant population, having risen from 9 to 10 percent, or from 6,700 to 9,700 people.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Age and Gender Distribution**



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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

Similar to DC residents overall, immigrant households are formed in many ways. For all immigrants, the share of households made up of married couples with related children (30 percent) is higher than 22 percent for the total population. Latino and African immigrants are more likely than AAPI immigrants to live with related children. For single-headed immigrant households, these were more likely to be headed by a woman, consistent with trends for the overall DC population. Notably, 29 percent of Caribbean and 23 percent of AAPI immigrant households were single people living alone, a higher share than the overall DC rate of 20 percent.

The top languages spoken by immigrants in DC included Spanish, English, Amharic, French, and Chinese in 2011–15 (table 1).<sup>7</sup> Since 2000, the use of English, Amharic, and Hindi languages have increased most dramatically. Though not captured in the data collected by the Census Bureau, some immigrants also speak indigenous languages, such as Mam, a Mayan language from Guatemala. Nonprofit service providers interviewed noted this is a small but present minority of immigrants in DC with unique language access needs.

English proficiency among DC immigrants is higher today than it was in 2000 (figure 3). For all DC immigrants, the share who report being proficient in English has increased from 58 to 69 percent. English proficiency varies among the four focus immigrant groups. About 52 percent of Latino immigrants, 73 percent of AAPI immigrants, 65 percent of African immigrants, and 98 percent of Caribbean immigrants report speaking English very well or that they speak only English.

TABLE 1

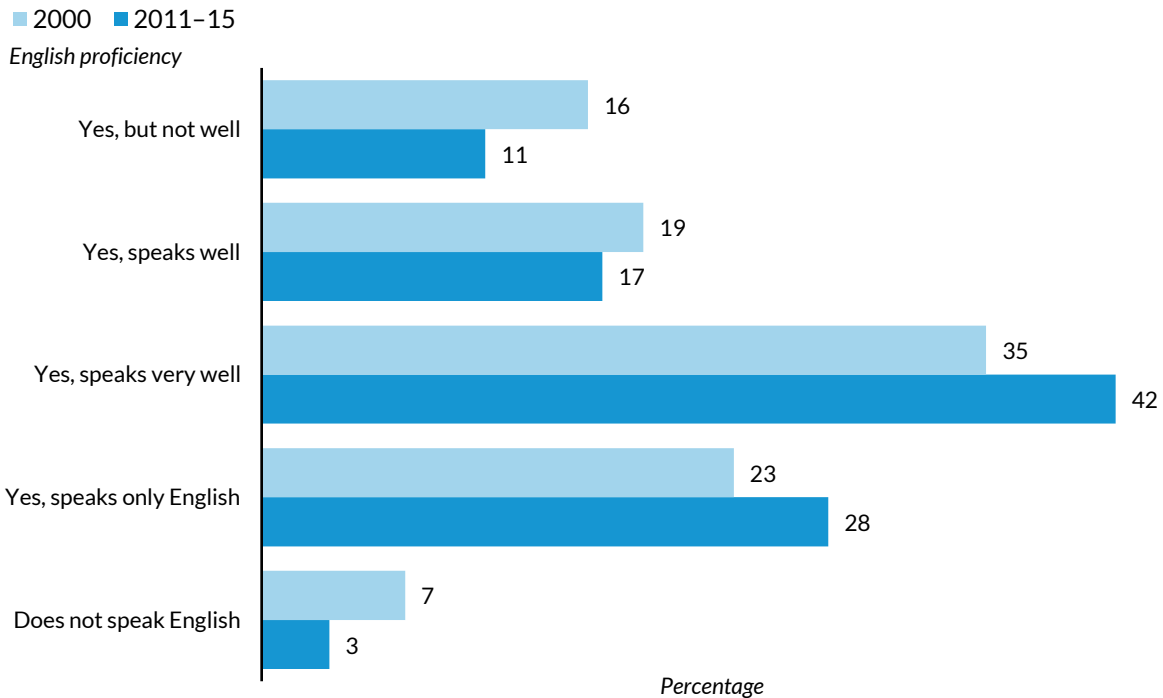
Top Languages Spoken by DC’s Immigrant Population

Top languages	2000 (%)	Top languages	2011–15 (%)
Spanish	38	Spanish	33
English	23	English	28
French	6	Amharic	6
Chinese	4	French	6
Amharic	3	Chinese	4
Russian, other Slavic	3	Russian, other Slavic	3
Filipino, Tagalog	2	Hindi and related	3
Vietnamese	2	Kru	2
Kru	2	Filipino, Tagalog	2
Arabic	2	Arabic	1

Sources: Decennial Census Microdata, 2000; ACS Microdata, 2011–15.

FIGURE 3

English Proficiency of DC’s Immigrants



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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2011–15.

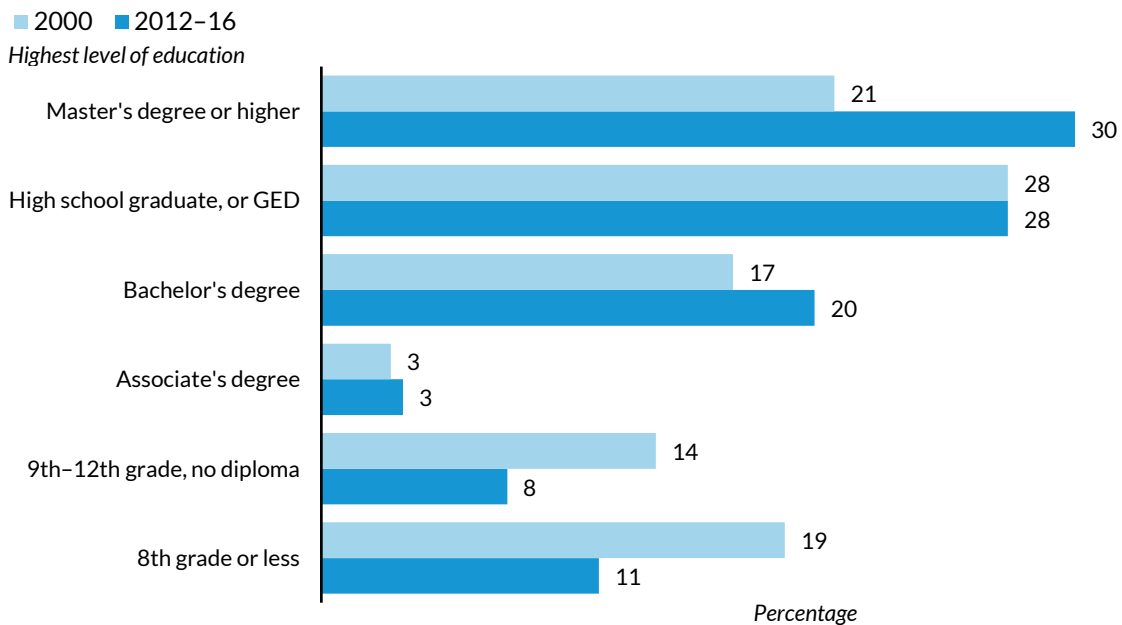
Despite gains in English proficiency, almost one-fifth immigrant households in DC live in what the US Census Bureau terms “linguistically isolated households.” These are households in which no one age 14 or older speaks English at least very well at home.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the share of DC’s immigrants living in linguistically isolated households decreased 10 percentage points between 2000 and 2011–15. The

share of Latino immigrants in linguistically isolated households (29 percent) is higher than for African (20 percent) and AAPI immigrants (14 percent). Only a small fraction (less than 2 percent) of Caribbean immigrants are in linguistically isolated households. People in linguistically isolated households may face significant challenges accessing essential services and resources in their communities without additional language support. The DC Language Access Act of 2004, described in the following section, is designed to address the needs of these households.

## Education

The Washington region is one of the most highly educated in the country, and many well-paying jobs with good benefits require a level of education beyond a high school diploma. Educational attainment is crucial to obtaining quality employment, as many well-paying jobs with good benefits now require education beyond a high school diploma. Particularly in growing areas, such as technology and health care, postsecondary training is needed (Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl 2013). Similar to trends in the overall population, 80 percent of adult immigrants have a high school education or higher, up from 68 percent in 2000. The share of immigrants with a bachelor’s degree or above has increased 13 percent. Nevertheless, nearly one in five adult immigrants lacked even a high school diploma in 2012–16. A further challenge for immigrant adults is the transferring of foreign credentials to US job markets, including validating technical degrees. For this reason, despite levels of education, some immigrants are employed in lower- or middle-skilled jobs rather than in a profession previously held in their country of origin (Bernstein and Vilter 2018).

**FIGURE 4**  
**Educational Attainment of DC’s Immigrants**



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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

There are approximately 5,000 immigrant youth attending school in the district, evenly distributed across grade levels. A small minority (7 percent) of immigrant youth ages 3 through 17 are not currently in school. Half of these are young children (ages 3 and 4), eligible for DC's universal pre-K offerings but not currently in school. Nationally, preschool attendance for children of immigrants is below peers with US-born parents (Greenberg, Michie, and Adams 2018). The other half are children who should be in middle and high school grades. Compared with overall DC population of youth not enrolled in school, unenrolled immigrant youth are older.

## **Jobs and Economic Opportunity**

Immigrants made up 90,300 of the 381,500 members of DC's civilian labor force, or about 24 percent of the total, in 2012–16. The labor force participation rate for immigrants ages 16 and older was 75 percent, up from 69 percent in 2000. Consistent with that trend, the labor force participation rate increased for immigrants from Asian and Pacific Islands, Latin American and Africa, but fell for immigrants from the Caribbean.

Of immigrants in the labor force, 6.3 percent were unemployed in 2012–16, which was below the overall DC unemployment rate of 8.7 percent. However, unemployment for African immigrants in the labor force was 9.9 percent in 2012–16 estimates, higher than the overall DC unemployment rate, as well as for AAPI (3.3 percent), Latino (6.9 percent), and Caribbean immigrants (8.0 percent).

Top job categories for immigrant workers include management, business, science, and arts; building and grounds cleaning and maintenance; and food preparation and serving (table 2). For all civilian workers living in DC, jobs in management, business, science, and arts and jobs in office and administrative support were the two most common occupational categories.

Occupations varied widely among the four immigrant groups. The top occupational category for AAPI and Caribbean immigrants, management, business, science, and arts, was the same as for DC workers overall, representing 17 percent of AAPI workers and 13 percent of Caribbean workers. For Latino immigrants, the most frequently held jobs (23 percent) were in building and grounds cleaning and maintenance, followed by food preparation and serving (17 percent), and construction and extraction work (12 percent). African immigrants were most likely to work in transportation and material moving (14 percent), sales and sales related jobs (12 percent), followed by office and administrative support jobs and management, business, science, and arts jobs (8 percent each).

Wages tended to be slightly more modest for immigrant workers compared with DC workers overall (figure 5). The share of workers earning under \$10,000 per year was similar for immigrants and all DC workers (13 to 14 percent). And though immigrant workers were more likely to have annual earnings between \$10,000 and \$49,999 than all DC workers, they were also less likely to earn \$100,000 or more a year than all DC workers. However, the share of immigrant workers earning \$100,000 or more increased 10 percent since 2000.



TABLE 2

Top Occupation Categories by DC Workers, 2012–16

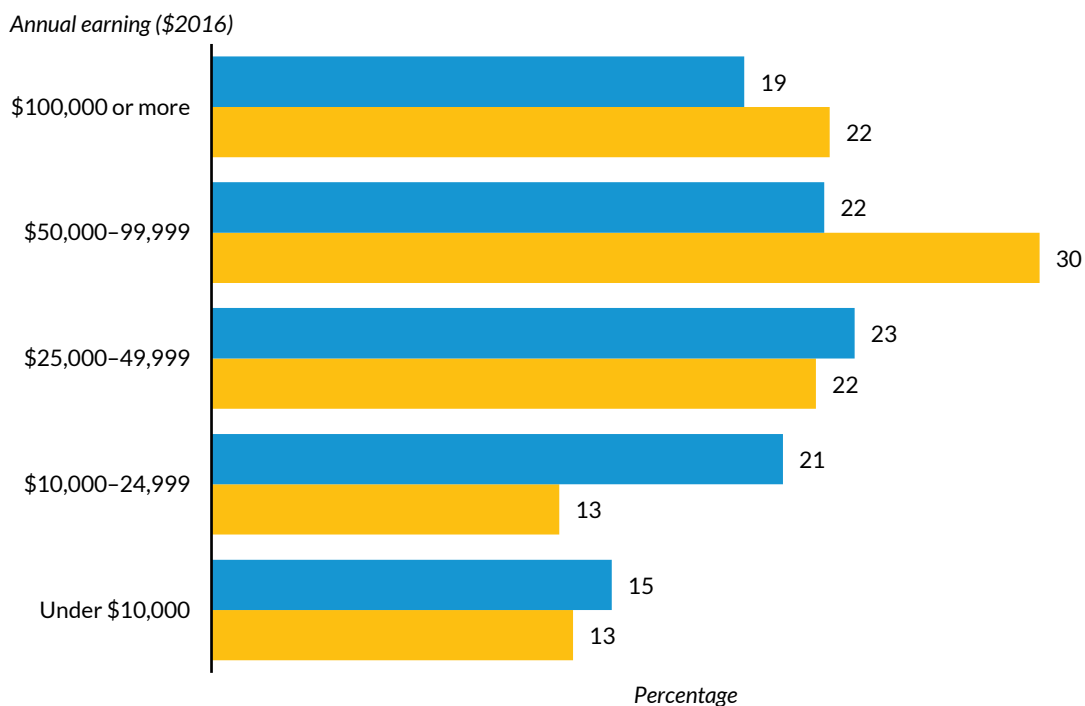
Immigrant workers	Percent	All DC workers	Percent
Management, business, science, and arts	13	Management, business, science, and arts	16
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	11	Office and administrative support	11
Food preparation and serving	9	Business operations specialists	7
Office and administrative support	6	Legal	7
Education, training, and library	6	Education, training, and library	7
Life, physical, and social science	6	Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media	6
Sales and sales related	5	Computer and mathematical	6
Business operations specialists	5	Sales and sales related	6
Computer and mathematical	4	Food preparation and serving	5
Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media	5	Life, physical, and social science	4
Legal	4	Healthcare practitioners and technical	3

Source: ACS Microdata, 2012–16 estimates.

FIGURE 5

Average Annual Wages for DC Workers

■ DC immigrants ■ DC total



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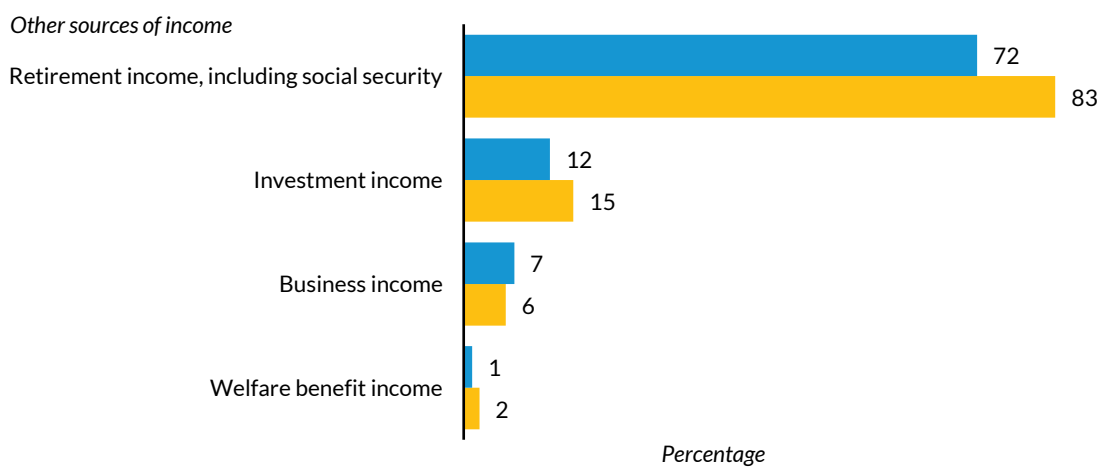
Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

Like occupations, wages vary for the four immigrant groups. For AAPI immigrant workers in 2012–16, annual earnings tended to be similar to DC workers overall, but they had larger shares at the bottom and top ends of the wage scale. Wages for Latino and African immigrant workers were generally lower than city averages. These workers are less than half as likely to earn \$100,000 or more a year (10–11 percent) than all DC workers (22 percent). Wages for DC’s Caribbean population tended to be clustered in the middle of the income range, with over 50 percent of Caribbean workers earning between \$25,000 and \$99,999.

Wage income can also be supplemented by other income streams, such as business income, investment income, or retirement incomes (figure 6). About 7 percent of immigrants (6,300 people) reported having self-employment income from a business or professional practice in 2012–16, similar to the overall DC population. African immigrants were more likely than their AAPI and Latino counterparts to report this type of income. For immigrants with self-employment income, one-third reported that their net annual business income was under \$10,000. Ten percent of immigrants with self-employment income had net annual takings of \$75,000 or more, lower than the percentage of DC proprietors overall (15 percent).

Additionally, 12 percent of immigrants reported having investment income (from an estate or trust, interest, dividends, royalties, or rents received) in 2012–16, slightly less than rate of DC’s overall population (15 percent). For most immigrants who had investment income (56 percent), the amount was under \$5,000 per year, including about 1 percent who suffered losses. One quarter of immigrants with investment income reported profits of \$15,000 or more. These levels of investment income were similar to those for DC investors overall.

**FIGURE 6**  
**People with Nonwage Income**  
 ■ DC immigrants ■ DC total



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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

Notes: Business, investment, and welfare benefit income data are reported for people age 16 and older. Retirement income included all adults age 65 and older.

Additionally, immigrants age 65 and older were much less likely to have personal retirement income (e.g., retirement, survivor, or disability pension income) other than Social Security, than the total DC senior population. One quarter of immigrant seniors reported having personal retirement income in 2012–16, compared with 43 percent of all DC seniors. Further, for 27 percent of immigrants with retirement income, the amount was under \$10,000 per year, similar to 24 percent of all DC seniors who have annual retirement income under \$10,000. Combining Social Security income and personal retirement incomes, 72 percent of immigrant seniors had annual incomes less than \$25,000, compared with 61 percent of all seniors in DC.

## Housing

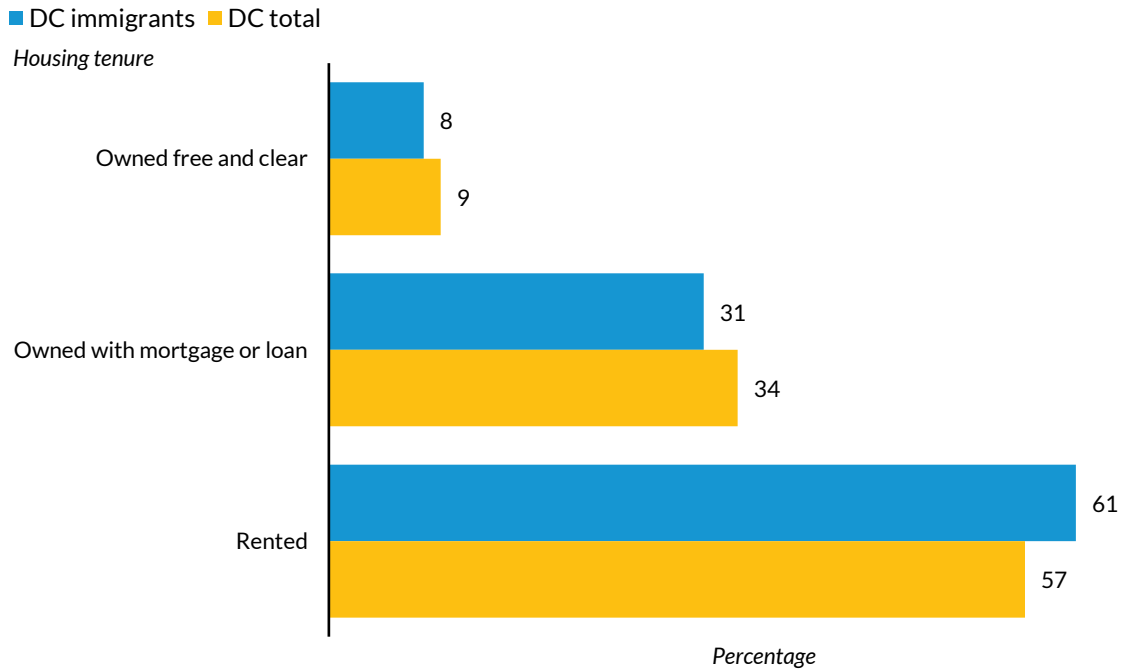
Consistent with citywide trends, immigrant households have become smaller in recent years. Household sizes of immigrant households are similar to DC household sizes overall, with 47 percent of immigrants living in households of 1 or 2 people, 34 percent with 3 or 4 people, and 18 percent in households of 5 or more. AAPI immigrant households are increasingly likely to be smaller than households in DC overall, with the share of one- or two-person households growing from 48 percent to 60 percent from 2000 to 2012–16.

With rents and home prices increasing sharply in recent years, finding suitable and affordable housing is a challenge for many in DC whose incomes have not kept pace with rising costs. Household incomes for immigrants grew only modestly over the past 10 to 15 years. Fewer immigrants were living in households that had annual incomes under \$10,000 (in inflation-adjusted 2016 dollars) in 2000 than in 2012–16, while the share in households with incomes between \$10,000 and \$49,999 stayed relatively stable. At the higher end, immigrants with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$99,999 fell from 30 to 26 percent, but the share with incomes of \$100,000 or more increased from 35 to 42 percent.

Housing tenure, meaning residing in a rental property versus a home one owns, is similar between DC's immigrants and the overall city average, although immigrants are slightly more likely to rent than own (figure 7). The share of immigrants living in owner-occupied housing was four percentage points lower than rate for all DC. However, since 2000, homeownership has increased four percentage points for immigrants. Caribbean immigrants were more likely to own rather than rent their homes with almost 60 percent living in homes that they owned.

FIGURE 7

Housing Occupancy by Residence Type



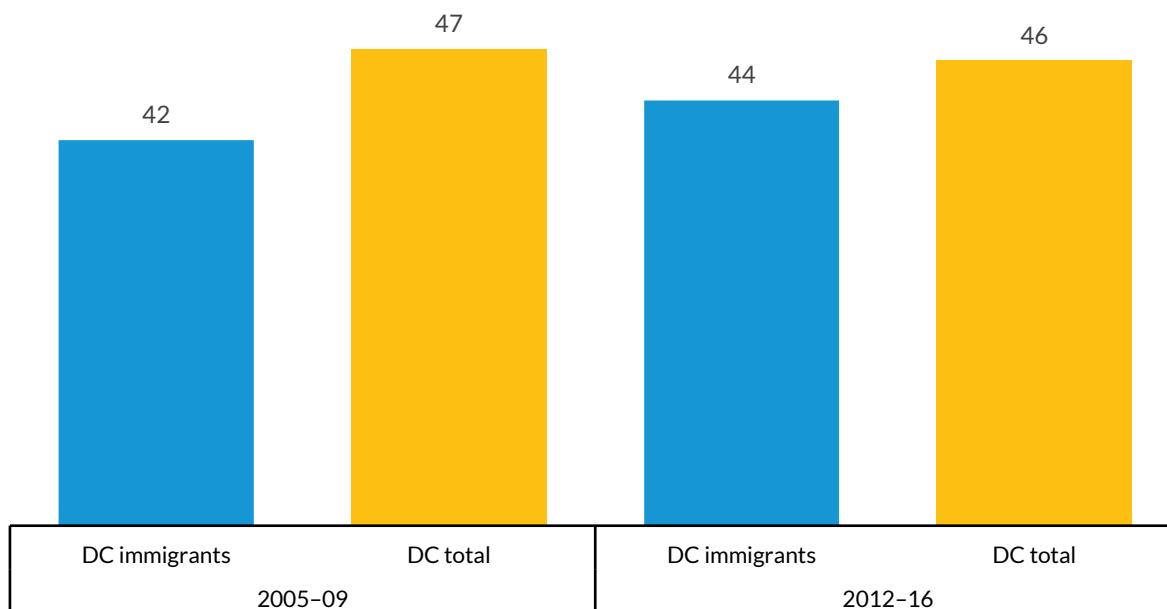
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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

The high costs of housing in DC has hit many households, renters in particular, hard, forcing people to spend a large portion of their income on housing. About 44 percent of immigrant renters spent more than 30 percent of their income on rent, utilities, and other housing costs in 2012–16, a share that is considered unaffordable by the guidelines from US Department of Housing and Urban Development. Among immigrant renters, one in five spent more than half their income on housing, which is considered “extremely cost burdened” according to the guidelines. The shares of immigrant renters living in unaffordable housing have increased slightly since 2005–09, almost on par with the rate of DC overall in 2012–16 (figure 8).

**FIGURE 8**  
**Housing Cost Burden for DC's Renters**

*Share cost burdened*



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**Source:** American Community Survey microdata, 2005-09 and 2012-16.

**Note:** Share cost burdened is defined as the share of renters who spend more than 30 percent of income on rent.

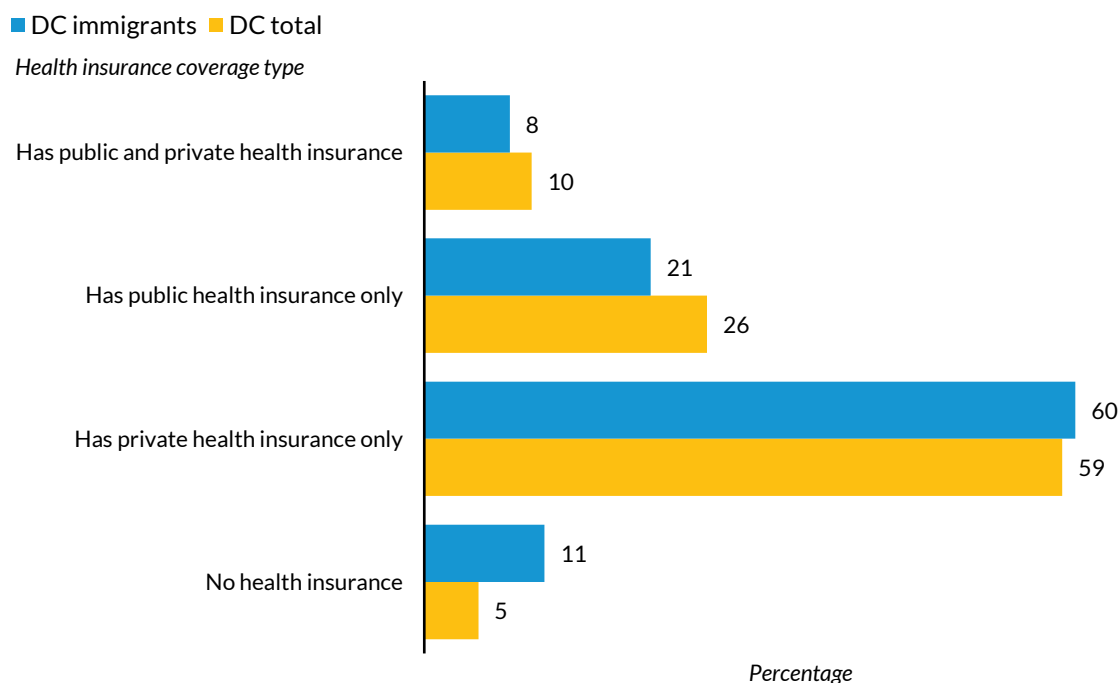
To alleviate housing-cost burdens, DC provides several locally and federally supported assisted housing programs. Most housing assistance programs use income thresholds set by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development or the DC Department of Housing and Community Development, which are based on household size and the median income for the Washington area. Using these standards, 17 percent of immigrants (15,500 persons) lived in households with incomes below 30 percent of area median in 2012-16, which would make them eligible for public housing, housing choice vouchers, and the DC local rent supplement program. Another 14 percent (13,100 persons) lived in households between 31 and 50 percent area median income, which would make them eligible for housing created through subsidy programs like low-income housing tax credits and inclusionary zoning. As is true nationally, however, the supply of units available through these programs is insufficient to meet demand and many households who need it cannot get assistance. According to recent national estimates, only 24 percent of low-income renters with housing needs receive assistance (Kingsley 2017).

## Health and Human Services

Access to quality, affordable health care is essential for the well-being of DC residents. DC’s health insurance marketplace, DC Health Link, has helped increase the rates of health insurance coverage for the city’s residents to near universal levels. Nearly 90 percent of DC immigrants had some form of health insurance in 2012–16 (figure 10). The most common source was private insurance, which includes coverage provided through employers and through the health insurance marketplace. Nevertheless, 11 percent of immigrants had no health insurance at all, a rate two times higher than in DC overall. The uninsured rates were also higher for the four immigrant groups, with 17 percent of Latino immigrants lacking any form of health insurance, followed by 12 percent of African immigrants, 10 percent of Caribbean immigrants, and 8 percent of AAPI immigrants.

FIGURE 9

### Health Insurance Coverage by Type for DC Immigrants Compared with City Total



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Source: American Community Survey microdata, 2012–16.

The federal poverty level provides a national standard for many public assistance programs intended to help low-income individuals and families meet basic needs. Given DC’s high cost of living, however, even people above the official poverty level may have significant difficulty affording necessities. The federal poverty level in 2016 was \$12,486 for a single person and \$24,339 for a four-person household with two children. In contrast, DC’s living wage, the amount someone must earn to support their family, was three to four times the poverty level wage for most types of households.<sup>9</sup> In 2012–16, 18 percent of immigrants (17,200 people) were below the federal poverty level, lower than

both the poverty rate of 20 percent for immigrants in 2000 as well as the 2012–16 DC poverty rate of 22 percent. Another 18 percent of immigrants were over 100 percent but less than 200 percent of poverty, a level which still indicates financial hardship. This share was higher than that for DC overall, which was 13 percent.

Various types of public assistance programs exist to provide support to low-income people and families. Although the poverty rates for DC immigrants do not differ substantially from the total population, immigrants receive fewer public benefits than nonimmigrants. In 2012–16, only 1.2 percent of immigrants reported having income from one or more public assistance programs, including Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and General Assistance, a rate lower than the 2.2 percent for all DC residents. For 67 percent of immigrants receiving public assistance, the annual amount received was under \$5,000.

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is one of the largest in the US's social safety net and helps low-income individuals and families purchase food. In 2012–16, 12 percent of DC immigrants reported receiving these benefits, significantly lower than the overall city rate of 21 percent. From the data available, it is not possible to tell whether immigrants are less likely to receive public assistance because they are ineligible, they do not apply for assistance, or for some other reason.

Overall, the outlook for DC's immigrants across education, health, housing and jobs and economic opportunity has increased since 2000, however, disparity still exists between foreign-born individuals and families and the US-born population. The next section discusses some of the efforts the DC government is making to narrow and close these gaps.

## Supporting DC's Immigrant Community

The Executive Office of the Mayor, through the supporting offices for three of the immigrant populations (box 1), plays several crucial roles within the communities they serve. First, they amplify the work done in the administration, translating information back to communities in meaningful ways, and liaise between those communities and their elected and appointed officials. They also support and build capacity within local nonprofits that serve immigrant communities. Finally, they host multicultural events to raise awareness of the diversity of cultures within DC. Though there is not a supporting office dedicated to immigrants from the Caribbean, a Mayor's Advisory Commission on Caribbean Community Affairs was established in 2012 to advise on issues for concern for DC's Caribbean population.<sup>10</sup> This section describes several of these activities.

### Community Engagement and Outreach

As the data in the previous section showed, DC's immigrant population makes many contributions to the city, but many immigrants still face challenges. DC provides a myriad of services and programs accessible to immigrant populations. Despite the availability of programs and services, however, residents often may not be aware of services or face barriers to accessing them. The Executive Office of

the Mayor helps bridge the information divide between communities and available programs and resources through focused community engagement and outreach.

Staff interviewed from the Mayor's Office on Latino Affairs (MOLA), Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs (MOAPIA), and Mayor's Office on African Affairs (MOAA) for this brief noted that city agencies need to meet residents “where they are” to promote uptake of government programs and services. They highlighted the importance of understanding cultural norms, placing materials in points of meeting or gathering, and addressing linguistic barriers to access. Differences within individual ethnic groups must be recognized and addressed to effectively serve those groups. The Mayor's Offices have the unique charge of cultivating trust with communities and acting as a bridge between the city and residents. Nonprofit service providers interviewed noted that in many immigrant communities, residents are more receptive to information received from a trusted source in person rather than receiving a digital newsletter or email.

Further, engaging different immigrant groups requires diverse and specialized communication strategies. City offices specialize in understanding the complexity of immigrant communities—occupations and job sites, literacy, places of worship and trusted gathering places—and tailoring engagement for their specific experiences and needs. For example, the MOAPIA director holds community office hours, complete with interpretation services, to connect with constituents.

## **Funding and Capacity Building**

Mayor's Offices have dedicated funding for supporting organizations and initiatives aimed at serving their respective populations. For example, MOAPIA administered \$247,750 of funding through the AAPI Grant Program, including grants to health and social service, education, language access, housing service, and employment organizations, reaching nearly 6,500 residents in fiscal year 2018.<sup>11</sup> MOLA provided \$1.5 million in grants in fiscal year 2018 to support organizations serving the Latino community in DC.<sup>12</sup> The African Community Grant benefits organizations providing “culturally and linguistically targeted services and resources” to DC's African population. In fiscal year 2018, MOAA awarded \$100,000 to support organizations serving the African community in DC, including African Women's Cancer Awareness Association, Asylum Seekers Assistance Project, Congress Heights Community Training and Development Corporation, Life Assets, Multicultural Community Service, Washington English Center, the Person Center, and KanKouran West African Dance Company.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, in line with the mayor's priorities on health and wellness, MOAA funded four organizations through the Hepatitis Outreach Grant.<sup>14</sup>

## **Legal Support and Services**

In interviews, nonprofit service providers noted that many immigrant residents are deterred from seeking services because of the perception of legal consequences based on their legal status. Immigrants who lack documentation may be unlikely to report crimes or seek services if they feel their immigration status may be compromised or revealed. DC has adopted policies in line with other sanctuary cities that aim to include all DC residents, regardless of legal status. A Metropolitan Police



Department policy forbids asking citizenship or residency status, and the Department has established a Special Liaison Branch with Latino and Asian Liaison Units and African Affairs Affiliates.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, services, including access to the city’s health care, enrollment in public schools, and ability to secure a Limited Purpose driver’s license, are not restricted to residents based on legal status.<sup>16</sup>

In 2017, Mayor Muriel Bowser announced the establishment of the Immigrant Justice Legal Service Grant Program, intended to give \$500,000 to organizations conducting legal work for DC residents.<sup>17</sup> In the time since, the Bowser administration has invested nearly two million dollars (2017–19 dedicated funding), hosted 67 Know Your Rights sessions, engaged 2,740 individuals, and trained 333 attorneys, resulting in 572 ongoing cases serviced.<sup>18</sup> Know Your Rights workshops provide information on issue areas such as housing, workforce treatment, public services, and law and were cited by interviewees as important tools to increase immigrant awareness and use of various programs. Mayor Bowser has partnered with CARECEN (Central American Resource Center) and other organizations to host Know Your Rights workshops for the DC immigrant community, conducted in partnership with the Mayor’s Office.

## Cultural Events

Agencies also host cultural events to raise awareness of the multicultural and diverse nature of immigrant populations in the District. The MOAPIA hosts an annual Lunar New Year celebration, weekly Tai Chi, and Chinatown Park Series throughout the summer that encourage the celebration of Asian culture and connect residents with government agencies and programs.<sup>19</sup> According to MOAPIA’s 2017 Annual Report, attendance at such events increased to 3,843 total participants.<sup>20</sup> MOAA hosts an annual DC Africa Celebration during African Heritage month and a Young African ConneXions Summit and Mandela Day of Service.<sup>21</sup> MOLA hosts annual events to celebrate Hispanic Heritage month every September. More recently, in recognition of the large Salvadoran population in the District, Mayor Bowser made San Salvador a Sister City to DC. A signed agreement between the two mayors solidified a collaborative effort to promote commercial and cultural exchange on energy, trade, youth development, public safety, and other cross-cultural initiatives.<sup>22</sup> In June 2017, the city established a “DC Caribbean-American Heritage Month” in recognition of the contributions of Caribbean-Americans to the economic and social fabric of the city.<sup>23</sup>

## Education and Economic Opportunity

Though many city departments host workshops related to job readiness and career fairs, agencies serving immigrants have focused on the challenge of credentialing. Many immigrants face employment challenges or are underemployed because the professional or educational credentials they may have received in their home countries are not recognized in the US. MOAA, in collaboration with the University of the District of Columbia, is working to establish a Credentialing Task Force to make it easier for professionals educated abroad to get the credentials needed to practice or work in DC. Additionally, Mayor’s Offices publicize information on small business programs and policies that govern employment challenges like wage theft. Nonprofit service providers pointed to wage theft as a major

challenge in immigrant communities, despite the Wage Theft Prevention and Amendment Act passed in 2014. Further efforts include a job newsletter MOLA sends, informing residents of open positions.

Service providers expressed the importance of connecting small business owners with programs and services designed to support their companies. MOAPIA supports the AAPI Small Business Technical Assistance (SBTA) project, which includes holding small business outreach sessions and providing information on DC government initiatives that could benefit AAPI-led small businesses (e.g., the private security camera initiative program, wage theft prevention legislation, and the Great Streets and Façade Programs).<sup>24</sup> Further, through funding, Mayor's Offices support education and workforce program organizations, like the Washington English Center.<sup>25</sup> MOLA participated in the Summer Youth Employment Program, supporting career readiness.<sup>26</sup>

## Language Access

In interviews, nonprofit service providers emphasized language as a barrier for all immigrant groups. Though English proficiency has increased among DC's immigrant populations, many immigrants need access to services, such as health or legal assistance, in their native languages. DC government agencies have made progress accommodating those needs under the Language Access Act, but additional consideration to cultural elements of language and communication are needed.

Working to remove barriers and increase linguistic and culturally appropriate communication, the Office of Human Rights collaborates with the Mayor's Offices to support the implementation of the Language Access Act of 2004, which requires that all DC government agencies, programs, contractors, and vendors provide language services to constituents with limited or non-English proficiency (LEP/NEP).<sup>27</sup> Entities covered by the law are required to identify a language point of contact, offer interpretation services, provide written translation of vital documents, and submit plans to train staff and develop agency capacity. An achievement noted by the Bowser administration is the Bilingual Navigator Program at the Department of Motor Vehicles, which served nearly 5,000 LEP/NEP customers (DCOHR 2016).

The Office of Human Rights established a Language Access Program team to guide the implementation of language programs, monitor compliance with the Act, and provide technical assistance for required entities. According to 2016 figures, 32 language access policies were adopted by DC agencies with major public contact and, when tested, 92 percent of in-person field tests conducted at nine agencies provided language assistance. Nevertheless, telephone tests yielded a much lower response rate, with only 43 percent of phone testers receiving language assistance (DCOHR 2016).

Mayor's Offices help provide the technical support necessary for departments to ensure that all residents are able to access services. For example, the Mayor's Office of Latino Affairs' Language Access and Advocacy Program provides technical support to agencies providing services to Spanish-speaking residents. Similarly, MOAPIA has developed a Language Access Program focused on recruiting a diverse and bilingual workforce, increasing community awareness of language access rights, supporting cultural competency trainings, monitoring compliance and providing technical assistance for language

expansion in DC agencies, and collecting data to better understand the AAPI community.<sup>28</sup> This five-pronged approach to advocacy and engagement builds capacity and facilitates two-way engagement between DC agencies and AAPI residents. In 2017, MOAPIA conducted language access compliance testing in health care facilities frequented by community members, launched a Bilingual Bank to support other agencies in language assistance, and quality tested DC government materials.<sup>29</sup> The nonprofit sector, through organizations such as Ayuda, also plays an important role in bridging the linguistic and cultural gap for DC's immigrant communities.

## Conclusion

The information in this brief is intended to provide a basic overview of conditions facing immigrants in DC today. It is our hope that this information will help the Mayor's Office and its partners better understand and serve the needs of DC's immigrant community and to make further strides toward helping individuals, families, and business owners find their pathway to economic prosperity in Washington, DC.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This brief was commissioned by the Executive Office of the Mayor of the District of Columbia. A separate report to this one includes data on DC's African American population (Tatian, McTarnaghan, and Arena 2018).

<sup>2</sup> "About MOAAA," Mayor's Office on African American Affairs, accessed August 24, 2018, <https://moaaa.dc.gov/page/about-moaaa>.

<sup>3</sup> "State of DC," Urban Institute, forthcoming, <https://greaterdc.urban.org/blog/state-dc-2018>.

<sup>4</sup> Peter A. Tatian and Serena Lei, "Our Changing City: Chapter 1: Demographics," Urban Institute, 2013, <http://apps.urban.org/features/OurChangingCity/demographics/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Peter A. Tatian and Serena Lei, "Our Changing City: Chapter 1: Demographics."

<sup>6</sup> Shaobin Zheng, "The Rise and Fall of DC's Chinatown," American Historical Association (blog), December 29, 2017, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2017/the-rise-and-fall-of-dcs-chinatown>.

<sup>7</sup> The Census Bureau had problems tabulating data on language spoken for the 2016 ACS and so these data were not available for this brief. For that reason, we have used ACS 2011–15 five-year data for all language-related tables and charts in this brief and the infographics.

<sup>8</sup> All members of such a household are considered linguistically isolated, even if children younger than 14 who speak only English or speak English very well may live there as well.

<sup>9</sup> "Living Wage Calculation for District of Columbia, District of Columbia," Living Wage Calculator, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, accessed August 28, 2018, <http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/11001>.

<sup>10</sup> "2018 Agendas and Minutes (Commission on Caribbean Community Affairs)," Mayor's Office of Community Affairs, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://moca.dc.gov/page/2018-agendas-and-minutes-commission-caribbean-community-affairs>.

<sup>11</sup> "Mayor Bowser Announces FY2018 Asian and Pacific Islander Community Grant Awards," Mayor's Office on Asian and Pacific Island Affairs, news release, accessed September 11, 2018, <https://apia.dc.gov/page/fy18-moapia-grants-webpage>.

- <sup>12</sup> “Latino Community Grants,” Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs, accessed September 11, 2018, <https://ola.dc.gov/service/latino-community-grants>.
- <sup>13</sup> “African Community Grant,” Mayor’s Office on African Affairs, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://oaa.dc.gov/service/african-community-grant>.
- <sup>14</sup> “Notice of Funding Availability: FY 2018 Mayor’s Office on African Affairs Hepatitis Outreach Grant,” Government of the District of Columbia, <https://oaa.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/oaa/publication/attachments/MOAA%20FY18%20HEP%20%20NOFA%20.pdf>.
- <sup>15</sup> “Work with the Metropolitan Police Department to Build Safer and Stronger Communities,” Government of the District of Columbia, [https://mpdc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mpdc/page\\_content/attachments/Sanctuary%20City%20Flier\\_ENG.pdf](https://mpdc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mpdc/page_content/attachments/Sanctuary%20City%20Flier_ENG.pdf); “Special Liaison Branch,” Metropolitan Police Department, accessed August 28, 2018, <https://mpdc.dc.gov/sld>.
- <sup>16</sup> “Ensuring the Safety and Security of DC’s Immigrant Community,” Mayor’s Office of Community Affairs, <https://mayor.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mayormb/publication/attachments/ImmigrantActions.pdf>.
- <sup>17</sup> “Mayor Bowser Announces Immigrant Justice Legal Services Grant Program,” Executive Office of the Mayor, news release, January 9, 2017, <https://mayor.dc.gov/release/mayor-bowser-announces-immigrant-justice-legal-services-grant-program>.
- <sup>18</sup> “Mayor Muriel Bowser’s Support of Immigrants,” Executive Office of the Mayor, accessed September 20, 2018, <https://dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/DC/publication/attachments/ILJS-one-pager-combined.pdf>.
- <sup>19</sup> “Annual Events,” Mayor’s Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://apia.dc.gov/service/annual-events>; MOAPIA’s 2017 Annual Report.
- <sup>20</sup> MOAPIA’s 2017 Annual Report.
- <sup>21</sup> “Multicultural Awareness and Development,” Mayor’s Office on African Affairs, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://oaa.dc.gov/service/multicultural-awareness-and-development>.
- <sup>22</sup> Cordilia James, “DC Mayor Makes San Salvador a Sister City,” *NBC Washington*, August 15, 2018, <https://www.nbcwashington.com/blogs/first-read-dmv/Mayor-Bowser-Signs-Sister-City-Agreement-Between-and-San-Salvador--490932871.html>.
- <sup>23</sup> “Proclamation: Caribbean-American Heritage Month,” District of Columbia, June 2017, [https://moca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/moca/page\\_content/attachments/CAHM%20Proclamation%202017.pdf](https://moca.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/moca/page_content/attachments/CAHM%20Proclamation%202017.pdf).
- <sup>24</sup> MOAPIA’s 2017 Annual Report.
- <sup>25</sup> MOAPIA’s 2017 Annual Report.
- <sup>26</sup> “Summer Youth Employment,” Mayor’s Office on Latino Affairs, accessed September 11, 2018, <https://ola.dc.gov/service/summer-youth-employment>.
- <sup>27</sup> For more details on the Language Access Act, see Bernstein et al. (2014) and “What is the DC Language Access Act?” DC Office of Human Rights, July 2007, [https://www.lep.gov/resources/2008\\_Conference\\_Materials/DCLAAFactSheetEnglish.pdf](https://www.lep.gov/resources/2008_Conference_Materials/DCLAAFactSheetEnglish.pdf).
- <sup>28</sup> “Language Access Program,” DC Mayor’s Office on Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs, accessed August 30, 2018, [https://apia.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/apia/publication/attachments/Language%20Access%20One%20Pager\\_2017.pdf](https://apia.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/apia/publication/attachments/Language%20Access%20One%20Pager_2017.pdf).
- <sup>29</sup> MOAPIA’s 2017 Annual Report.

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Mayor Bowser took office in 2015 and leads an administration focused on building pathways to the middle class and giving more Washingtonians a fair shot. Washington, DC, is a growing city, with more than 700,000 residents living across eight wards. As the city grows and prospers, the Bowser administration is investing in affordable housing, education, workforce development, and other programs and initiatives that are designed to give more residents access to the city’s prosperity. This Mayor’s Office of Community Affairs funded this brief.



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