

# Older Immigrants in the United States

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After declining steadily between 1960 and 1990, the number of older immigrants (those age 65 and over) in the United States nearly doubled between 1990 and 2007, from 2.7 million to 4.5 million. Immigrants now account for one of every nine older persons in the United States.

In 1970, many immigrants from the early 20th-century wave of immigration comprised most older immigrants. During the past 40 years, the vast majority of immigrants have been working-age adults, so the proportion of older immigrants declined substantially as the new wave of immigration began.

There are two basic reasons why the size of the older immigrant population has begun to rebound.

The first is demographic: an increasing number of working-age adults who arrived during the 1980s and the 1990s are beginning to age into the group. Their numbers are still small but are projected to increase over time following overall immigration patterns.

The second reason is that once immigrants become citizens, they can apply for their parents to immigrate legally. As the number of working-age immigrants who naturalize increases, the number of older parents eligible to immigrate will also increase.

This Spotlight focuses on older immigrants residing in the United States, examining the population's size, geographic distribution, socioeconomic characteristics, labor force participation and income, health and disability levels, and admission categories using data from the US Census Bureau's 2007 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2000 Decennial Census, and the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS) for 2008.

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**An older Hispanic man in San Francisco. In 2007, more than half of all older immigrants resided in California, New York, and Florida.**

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## Definitions

The US Census Bureau defines the foreign born as individuals who had no US citizenship at birth. The foreign-born population includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylees,

## Size and Distribution

- There were 4.5 million older immigrants residing in the United States in 2007.
- Older immigrants made up about 12 percent of all immigrants in 2007.
- The number of older immigrants in the United States declined between 1960 and 1990 but nearly doubled between 1990 and 2007.
- One of every five older immigrants in the United States in 2007 was born in Mexico or Cuba.
- Over one-quarter of the foreign born from Europe and the former Soviet Union are older.
- More than half of all older immigrants resided in California, New York, and Florida.

legal nonimmigrants (including those on student, work, or other temporary visas), and persons residing in the country without authorization.

The terms "foreign born" and "immigrant" are used interchangeably.

## Demographic and Socioeconomic Overview

- About half of the older foreign born in the United States entered before 1970.
- Nine of every 10 older immigrants in the United States immigrated before the age of 65.
- Older immigrant women outnumbered men in 2007.
- Nearly three-quarters of older immigrants were naturalized US citizens in 2007.
- Over half of older immigrants in 2007 were limited English proficient.
- More than 40 percent of limited English proficient older immigrants in 2007 spoke Spanish.
- About one-third of older immigrants lived in linguistically isolated households in 2007.
- Two of every five older immigrants had less than a high school education.
- Older immigrants were more likely than older natives to be living in the same household as a grandchild.

## Work and Income

- Older immigrant men were more likely to participate in the civilian labor force than older native-born men.
- Compared to older natives, older immigrants were more likely to have low incomes.
- The share of older immigrants with low incomes has stayed relatively constant since 1990.
- On average, the total personal incomes of older immigrants were about 20 percent lower than those of older natives.
- Older immigrants were more dependent on wage and salary income and on Supplemental Security Income than natives.

## Health and Disability

- Over one of every five older immigrants had limited mobility.
- About one of every six older immigrants reported having memory problems.
- Older immigrants were less likely than natives to report having vision or hearing problems.

## Admissions of Older Immigrants

- About 61,000 older immigrants obtained lawful permanent residence in the United States in 2008.

- Over the past decade, the number of older LPRs admitted per year has nearly doubled.
- Almost 80,000 older immigrants naturalized as US citizens in 2008.

## **Size and Distribution**

### **There were 4.5 million older immigrants residing in the United States in 2007.**

About 4,456,000 older immigrants were residing in the United States in 2007, accounting for 11.8 percent of the total US older population. By contrast, the foreign born of all ages accounted for 12.6 percent of the total US population.

### **Older immigrants made up about 12 percent of all immigrants in 2007.**

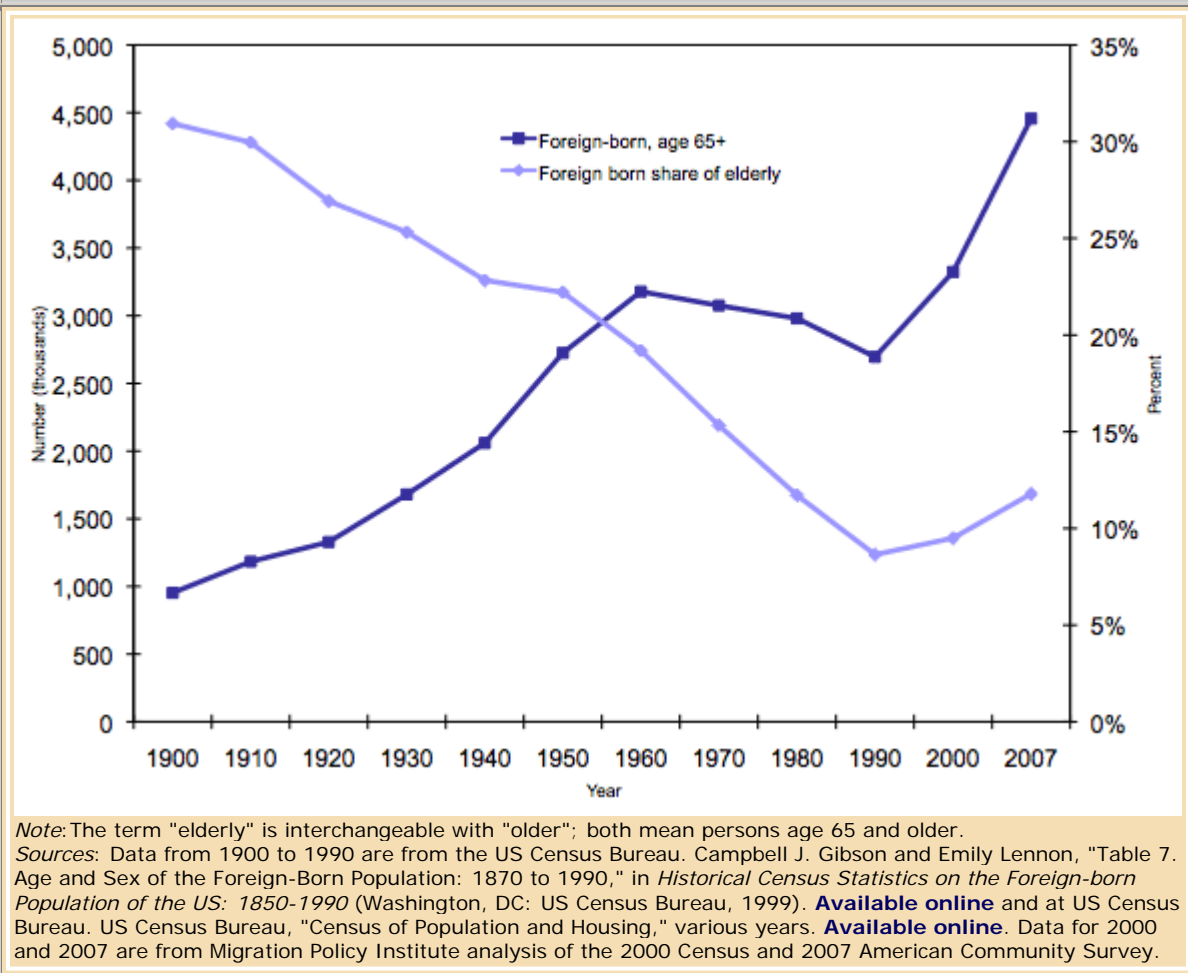
Older persons accounted for 11.7 percent of all immigrants in the United States in 2007 — slightly lower than their share in 1990 (13.6 percent), but higher than their share in 2000 (10.7 percent).

### **The number of older immigrants in the United States declined between 1960 and 1990 but nearly doubled between 1990 and 2007.**

The foreign-born older population grew for much of the 20th century before declining between 1960 and 1990. Between 1990 and 2007, this trend reversed, and the number of foreign-born immigrants in the United States nearly doubled from 2.7 million to 4.5 million.

The foreign-born share of the total older population in the United States declined between 1900 and 1990 before reversing this long-term trend and increasing from 1990 to 2007 (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Foreign-Born Population Age 65 and Older in the United States, 1900 to 2007**



### **One of every five older immigrants in the United States in 2007 was born in Mexico or Cuba.**

The top 10 countries of origin of the 4.5 million older immigrants in the United States are Mexico (615,000, or 13.8 percent), Cuba (280,000, or 6.3 percent), the Philippines (259,000, or 5.8 percent), China (236,000, or 5.3 percent), Germany (232,000, or 5.2 percent), Canada (215,000, or 4.8 percent), Italy (195,000, or 4.4 percent), India (122,000, or 2.7 percent), Vietnam (120,000, or 2.7 percent), and Korea (116,000, or 2.6 percent).

The top 10 countries of the 38.1 million foreign born in the United States are Mexico (11.7 million, or 30.8 percent), China (1.9 million, or 5.1 percent), the Philippines (1.7 million, or 4.5 percent), India (1.5 million, or 3.9 percent), El Salvador (1.1 million, or 2.9 percent), Vietnam (1.1 million, or 2.9 percent), Korea (1.0 million, or 2.7 percent), Cuba (983,454, or 2.6 percent), Canada (830,388, or 2.2 percent), and the Dominican Republic (755,539, or 2.0 percent).

### **Over one-quarter of the foreign born from Europe and the former Soviet Union are older.**

In 2007, 27.0 percent of immigrants from Europe and the former Soviet Union were age 65

and older. Older persons also accounted for 25.8 percent of immigrants from North America (including Canada and the North Atlantic islands).

By contrast, just 11.9 percent of the foreign born from Asia, 7.7 percent of the foreign born from Latin America and the Caribbean, and 4.7 percent of the foreign born from Africa were older.

Specifically, nearly half (48.1 percent) of immigrants from Hungary were older in 2007, as were 46.4 percent of immigrants from Italy, 45.8 percent from Latvia, 42.4 percent from Austria, 37.1 percent from Germany, 36.3 percent from Ireland, 35.1 percent from Greece, 33.7 percent from Belgium, and 32.9 percent from Norway.

The countries of origin with the lowest share of older persons among the total immigrant population in the United States were Guatemala (3.2 percent), Honduras (4.1 percent), Brazil (4.2 percent), Pakistan (4.9 percent), El Salvador (5.1 percent), Mexico (5.2 percent), Israel/Palestine (7.2 percent), Taiwan (8.0 percent), and India (8.1 percent).

(Note: Countries with less than 100 unweighted observations in the data sample are excluded.)

**More than half of all older immigrants resided in California, New York, and Florida.**

California had the largest number of older immigrants (1,190,000, or 26.7 percent) in 2007, followed by New York (612,000, or 13.7 percent) and Florida (603,000, or 13.5 percent).

Together, these three states accounted for 54.0 percent (2,405,000) of all older immigrants compared to 46.4 percent (17,655,000) of all immigrants.

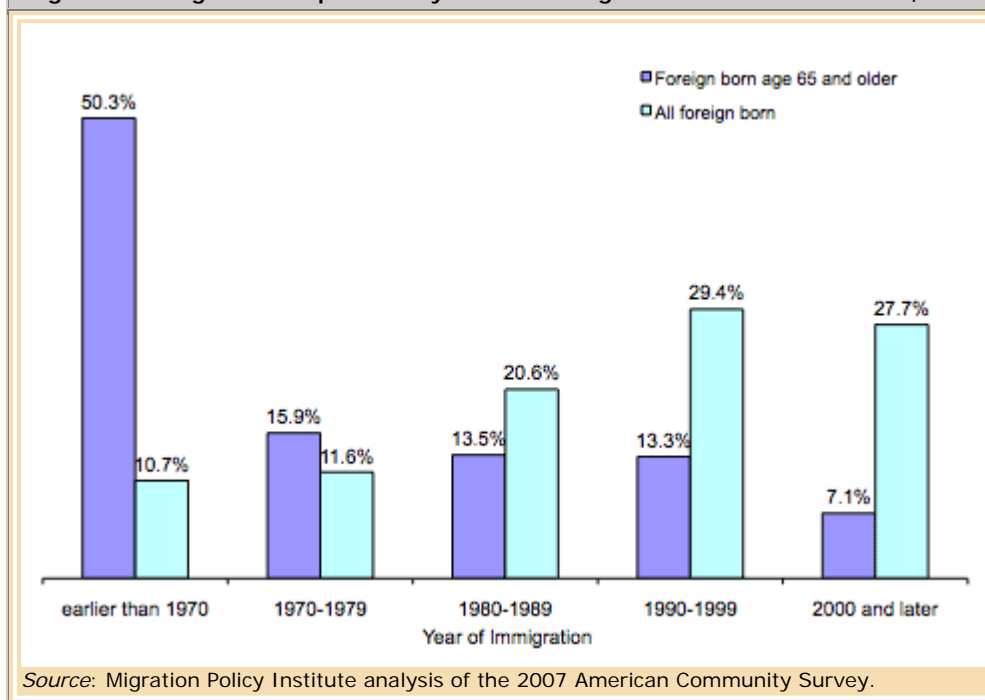
## **Demographic and Socioeconomic Overview**

**About half of the older foreign born in the United States entered before 1970.**

As of 2007, 50.3 percent of the 4.5 million older foreign born entered the country before 1970, and 15.9 percent entered between 1970 and 1979. An additional 13.5 percent entered between 1980 and 1989, 13.3 percent between 1990 and 1999, and the remaining 7.1 percent in 2000 or later (see Figure 2).

Among all immigrants in the United States in 2007, 10.7 percent entered the country before 1970, and 11.6 percent entered between 1970 and 1979. An additional 20.6 percent entered between 1980 and 1989, 29.4 percent between 1990 and 1999, and the remaining 27.7 percent in 2000 or later.

**Figure 2. Foreign-Born Population by Year of Immigration to the United States, 2007**



**Nine of every 10 older immigrants in the United States immigrated before the age of 65.**

Of the 4.5 million older foreign born in the United States in 2007, 90.2 percent aged into that category while in the United States. The remaining 9.8 percent arrived in the United States at age 65 or older.

**Older immigrant women outnumbered men in 2007.**

Of all older immigrants residing in the country in 2007, 59.4 percent were women and 40.6 percent were men. Among all immigrants, 49.7 percent were women and 50.3 percent were men.

**Nearly three-quarters of older immigrants were naturalized US citizens in 2007.**

Among the older foreign born, 72.7 percent were naturalized US citizens in 2007 compared to 42.6 percent among the overall foreign-born population.

The share of older foreign born who are naturalized US citizens has increased slightly over time, from 71.5 percent in 1990 to 72.2 percent in 2000 to 72.7 percent in 2007.

**Over half of older immigrants in 2007 were limited English proficient.**

About 23.9 percent of the 4.5 million older immigrants in 2007 reported speaking "English only" while 20.4 percent reported speaking English "very well." In contrast, 55.7 percent reported speaking English less than "very well," higher than the 52.4 percent reported among all foreign born age 5 and older.

The share of older immigrants who reported speaking English less than "very well" has increased from 41.7 percent in 1990 to 51.1 percent in 2000 to 55.7 percent in 2007.

(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).

**More than 40 percent of limited English proficient older immigrants in 2007 spoke Spanish.**

Among older immigrants who reported speaking English less than "very well," the most common language spoken was Spanish (1.1 million, or 43.9 percent), followed by Chinese (144,000, or 5.8 percent), Russian (127,000, or 5.1 percent), Filipino or Tagalog (110,000 or 4.4 percent), Italian (105,000, or 4.2 percent), and Korean (96,000, or 3.8 percent).

Spanish was also the largest single language spoken by all limited English proficient immigrants, but it was a much larger share (12.7 million, or 64.4 percent) than among older immigrants.

After Spanish, the most common languages among all immigrants who reported speaking English less than "very well" were Chinese (758,000, or 3.8 percent), Vietnamese (664,000, or 3.4 percent), Korean (595,000, or 3.0 percent), Filipino or Tagalog (434,000, or 2.2 percent), and Russian (412,000, or 2.1 percent).

**About one-third of older immigrants lived in linguistically isolated households in 2007.**

About 30.7 percent (1,369,000) of older immigrants resided in linguistically isolated households in 2007 (meaning a household in which all members of the household age 14 and older are limited English proficient). Overall, about 30.0 percent (11.4 million) of immigrants resided in linguistically isolated households in 2007.

The share of older immigrants residing in linguistically isolated households increased from 24.2 percent in 1990 to 28.1 percent in 2000 and 30.7 percent in 2007.

**Two of every five older immigrants had less than a high school education.**

In 2007, 42.9 percent of the 4.5 million older immigrants had less than a high school degree, compared to 31.9 percent among the 31.6 million foreign-born adults age 25 and older and 23.8 percent of the native-born older population.

On the other end of the education continuum, about 20.0 percent of older immigrants had a bachelor's degree or higher, slightly higher than the older native born (19.2 percent). In comparison, 26.9 percent of all foreign-born adults had a bachelor's degree or higher.

About 37.2 percent of older immigrants and 41.1 percent of all immigrants age 25 and older had a high school degree or some college education. Both were lower than the rate for native-born older persons (57.0 percent).

**Older immigrants were more likely than older natives to be living in the same household as a grandchild.**

About 14.4 percent of older immigrants lived in the same household as at least one grandchild under age 18 compared to 3.6 percent of older natives. However, older immigrants were about equally as likely as natives to be responsible for the basic needs of their minor grandchild/children.

## **Work and Income**

**Older immigrant men were more likely to participate in the civilian labor force than older native-born men.**

In 2007, older foreign-born men were slightly more likely to be in the civilian labor force (21.5 percent) than older native-born men (20.0 percent). However, older foreign-born women were

slightly less likely to be in the civilian labor force than older native-born women (10.2 percent versus 11.2 percent).

**Compared to older natives, older immigrants were more likely to have low incomes.**

About 37.6 percent of older immigrants in 2007 had low incomes, defined as incomes of 200 percent of the poverty threshold or less, compared to 29.3 percent of older natives.

(Note: The poverty threshold in 2007 for adults age 65 years or older was \$9,944 for older persons residing alone and \$12,550 for older persons residing in two-person households.)

**The share of older immigrants with low incomes has stayed relatively constant since 1990.**

The share of older immigrants with low incomes declined slightly from 37.6 percent in 1990 to 37.0 percent in 2000 before rising to 38.9 percent in 2007. By contrast, the share of older natives with low incomes has declined from 35.8 percent in 1990 to 29.1 percent in 2000 before rising slightly to 30.8 percent in 2007.

**On average, the total personal incomes of older immigrants were about 20 percent lower than those of older natives.**

Older immigrants had an average total personal income of about \$24,700 in 2007, 19.4 percent less than the average of \$30,700 for older natives.

(Note: Total personal income reports an individual's total pretax personal income or losses from all sources for the previous 12 months.)

**Older immigrants were more dependent on wage and salary income and on Supplemental Security Income than natives.**

When the income sources of older immigrants and natives are disaggregated, older immigrants appear more dependent on wage and salary income and on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) than natives. (SSI is a federal income supplement program designed to help aged, blind, and disabled people who have little or no income.)

By contrast, older natives appear to rely more on social security income and on retirement, survivor, and disability pension income other than social security (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Income Sources of Older Native and Foreign Born, 2007**

|   | Native born | Foreign born |
|---|-------------|--------------|
| Average total personal income           | \$30,684    | \$24,734     |
|   |             |              |
| Average share of total personal income: | 100         | 100          |
| Wage and salary income                  | 8           | 11           |
| Business and farm income                | -3          | 2            |
| Social security income                  | 63          | 55           |
| Welfare and public assistance           | 0.3         | 1            |
| Interest, dividends, and rental income  | 9           | 7            |
| Retirement income                       | 18          | 11           |

|                                    |   |    |
|------------------------------------|---|----|
| Supplemental Security Income (SSI) | 2 | 10 |
| Other income                       | 3 | 3  |

*Notes:* A negative share of income indicates an average loss. See sidebar for a complete description of income sources. Individuals reporting a negative or zero total personal income are excluded.

*Source:* Migration Policy Institute analysis of 2007 American Community Survey data.

### Income Definitions

*Total income* reports an individual's total pretax personal income or losses from all sources during the previous 12 months. It is the sum of wage and salary income; business and farm income; social security income; welfare and public assistance income; interest, dividend, and rental income; retirement income; Supplemental Security Income (SSI); and other income.

*Wage and salary income* reports an individual's total pretax income received as an employee during the previous 12 months.

*Business and farm income* reports an individual's net pre-income-tax self-employment income from a business, professional practice, or farm for the previous 12 months. The figure is the amount earned after subtracting business expenses from gross receipts. It includes any money earned working for one's own concern(s). No distinction is made between incorporated and unincorporated businesses.

*Social Security income* reports an individual's pretax income (if any) from Social Security pensions, survivor benefits, or permanent disability insurance, as well as any US government Railroad Retirement insurance payments, during the previous 12 months. It does not include Medicare reimbursements.

*Welfare and public assistance income* reports an individual's pretax income (if any) during the previous 12 months from the various public assistance programs commonly referred to as "welfare," including Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and General Assistance. Assistance from private charities is not included.

*Supplemental Security Income (SSI)* reports an individual's pretax income (if any) from federal or state SSI payments to older, blind, or disabled persons with low incomes during the previous 12 months.

*Interest, dividend, and rental income* reports an individual's pretax income or losses in the form of an estate or trust, interest, dividends, royalties, and rents during the previous 12 months.

*Retirement income* reports an individual's pretax retirement, survivor, and disability pension income other than social security during the previous 12 months.

*Other income* is a residual variable reporting an individual's total pretax income or losses during the previous 12 months that are not accounted for elsewhere.

## Health and Disability

### Over one of every five older immigrants had limited mobility.

About 22.9 percent of older immigrants and 20.3 percent of older natives in 2007 reported having a physical or mental health condition that lasted more than six months and that made it difficult or impossible for them to go outside of their home alone. (This does not include temporary problems such as broken bones.)

### About one of every six older immigrants reported having memory problems.

Among older immigrants in 2007, 16.5 percent reported having difficulty learning, remembering, or concentrating because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition that lasted six months or longer. The share among older natives was 14.4 percent.

**Older immigrants were less likely than natives to report having vision or hearing problems.**

In 2007, 15.4 percent of older immigrants and 17.4 percent of older natives reported having a long-lasting condition of blindness, deafness, or a severe vision or hearing impairment.

**Admissions of Older Immigrants**

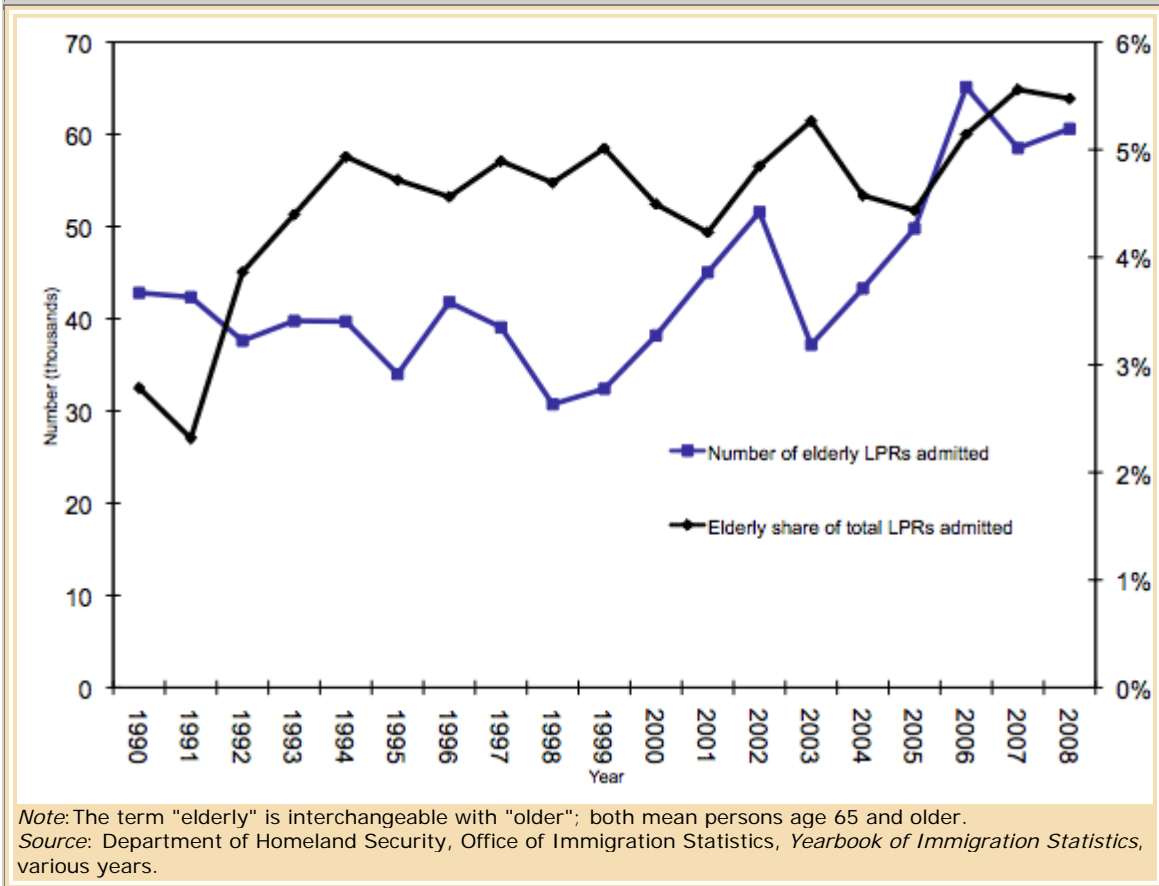
**About 61,000 older immigrants obtained lawful permanent residence in the United States in 2008.**

In 2008, 60,604 older immigrants received lawful permanent residence (LPR) in the United States, about 5.5 percent of the 1.1 million lawful permanent residents admitted.

**Over the past decade, the number of older LPRs admitted per year has nearly doubled.**

The number of older immigrants admitted as lawful permanent residents nearly doubled from 32,407 in 1999 to 60,604 in 2008. The share of all LPR admissions that were older persons increased less dramatically from 5.0 percent in 1999 to 5.5 percent in 2008 (see Figure 3).

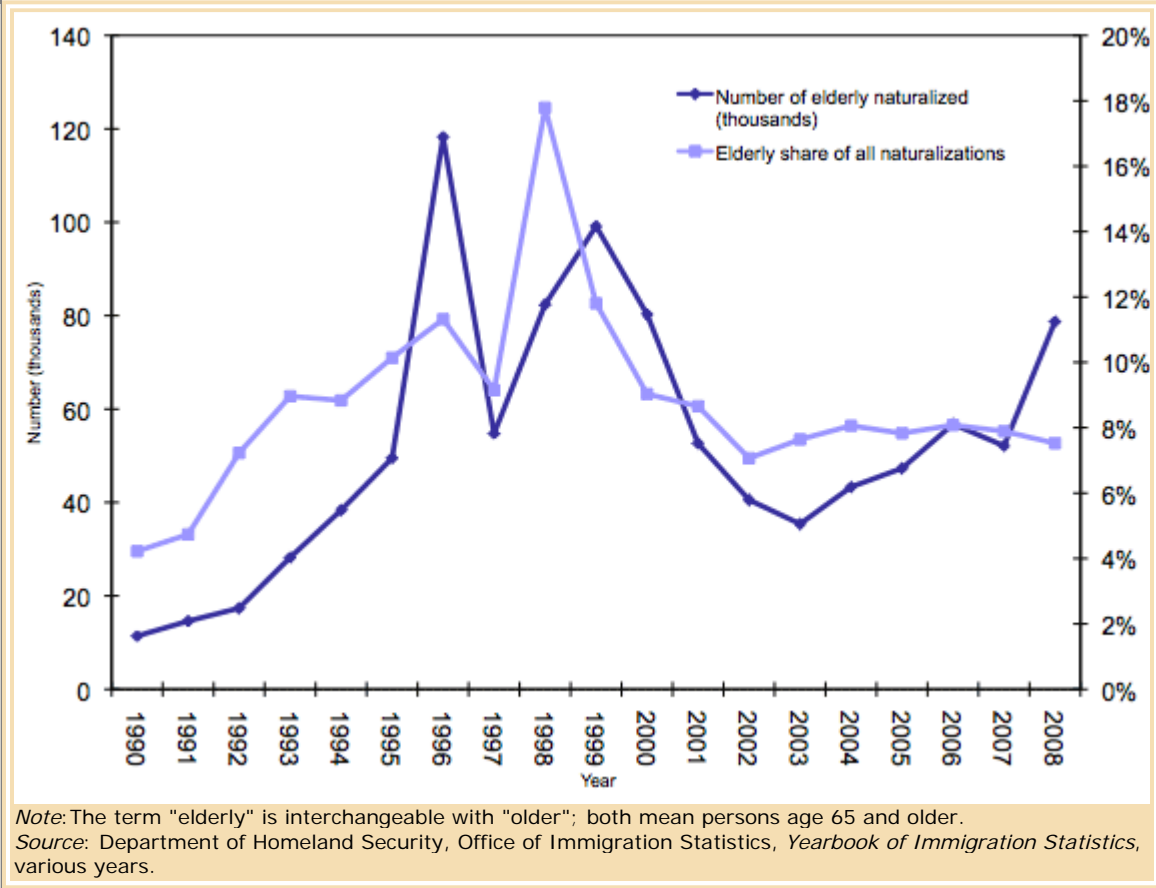
**Figure 3. Older Lawful Permanent Residents Admitted to the United States, 1990 to 2008**



**Almost 80,000 older immigrants became US citizens in 2008.**

In 2008, 78,744 older immigrants naturalized, about 7.5 percent of the 1.0 million immigrants who naturalized (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Naturalizations of Older Immigrants, 1990 to 2008



For information about ACS methodology, sampling error, and nonsampling error, click [here](#).

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