

A Demographic Profile of Long Island's Low Income Immigrant Community

**National Center for Children in Poverty,
Columbia University School of Public Health**

**Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) Year 1
Report**

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June 2018



National Center for Children in Poverty

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Introduction

New York's Suffolk and Nassau Counties, commonly referred to as Long Island, have large and diverse immigrant populations. Outside of New York City, Long Island has the fastest growing immigrant population in the state of New York, with a net increase in the immigrant population of 50,000 between 2010 and 2015.¹ The top sending countries to Long Island include El Salvador (66,000), India (30,000), Dominican Republic (26,000), China (23,000), Italy (23,000), Haiti (22,000), Jamaica (20,000), Ecuador (18,000), and Columbia (17,000).² The Pew Research Center estimated that 1 in 6 immigrants on Long Island is undocumented.³ Long Island has also received over 8,500 unaccompanied minors (UAM), children and teenager immigrants who arrived in the United States without their parents, primarily from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, 2014.⁴

This report is the first of three that describes the social and economic needs of low-income immigrants on Long Island. It is supported by a grant from the New York State Office of New Americans (ONA) Community Navigator Program, through a subcontract with the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN). Each of the three reports will look at the needs of low-income immigrants using different data sources and approaches, to develop a full picture of low-income immigrants in Long Island. The second report will use qualitative data, collected through interviews with community leaders, immigrant advocates, and CARECEN staff and partners, to flesh out the details of the profile of low-income immigrants provided in this first report. The qualitative data will also identify additional social and economic needs not covered through this initial analysis. The third report will use data collected from CARECEN clients to identify services they access or would like to access.

This report explores the social and economic characteristics of low-income immigrants in both counties, Suffolk and Nassau, on Long Island. Immigrant communities play a significant role in the economy of Long Island and are likely to be broadly impacted by upcoming and potential federal policy changes. For example, 23 percent of small business owners on Long Island are immigrants.⁵ Many of these, as well as other immigrants on Long Island, are legally present in the United States due to the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) program, which the federal government recently ended for El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Haiti. An analysis by Suffolk County's Department of Economic Development and Planning estimated that \$373 million in spending per year will be lost as the TPS program ends.⁶ Suffolk County alone estimates that it has 11,534 immigrants who are TPS holders from these countries, with a

median income of \$77,600 and average spending of \$53,567 per household annually.⁷

Additionally, recent national immigration debates have referenced MS-13 gang activity on Long Island. Some policymakers have called for greater crackdowns on immigrants who they believe are involved in gangs,⁸ while others believe that increased immigration enforcement has stoked fear among immigrants, preventing them from reporting gang activity.⁹

Overview of the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN)

CARECEN was founded thirty-five years ago and primarily provides legal services to immigrants on Long Island. Services include naturalization, family petitions, and deportation defense for unaccompanied minors. CARECEN's work has included assisting immigrants in applying for TPS since the program began more than 20 years ago; however, with recent changes to TPS, this part of their legal services is likely to shrink. CARECEN also helps eligible immigrants to apply for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which also faces an uncertain future.

Since 2016, CARECEN has provided adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses in Hempstead in Nassau County and Brentwood in Suffolk County. The organization also participates in advocacy efforts within Long Island to reach out to law enforcement and local judges to educate them about the needs of the immigrant community and to advocate for disentangling federal immigration enforcement efforts from local law enforcement. Additional advocacy efforts focus on unaccompanied minors and refugee youth who escaped violence in their home country, as well as LGBT immigrants. The primary use of the ONA Community Navigator Program grant, which funds this report and the aforementioned subsequent reports, will be used to expand CARECEN's partnerships and outreach to the immigrant community. This work has already begun, as CARECEN has hired a community navigator and organized and led several roundtables this past year with community leaders across Long Island to identify the social and economic needs of immigrants.

Methods

In this report, we use the American Community Survey (ACS) individual-level microdata to analyze the characteristics of Long Island's low-income immigrants. ACS is a nationwide survey collected annually by the U.S. Census Bureau to track the changing demographics of the U.S. population; it replaced the U.S. Census long form in 2010. It is the largest, most comprehensive

data about the entire U.S. population. To achieve accurate estimates at smaller, sub-state geographic levels for the most current year, such as counties, we follow the example of the U.S. Census Bureau and combine five years of ACS data. In this analysis, we use the 2012-2016 ACS data, which are the most recently available microdata for Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

Importantly, for this report, we are defining "immigrants" as individuals who reside in the United States but are not U.S. citizens. We are unable to differentiate between undocumented and documented immigrants because the ACS, like most data sets, does not collect immigration status. We provide comparison data for naturalized citizens, who are defined as individuals born outside the United States who have become citizens, and for native-born citizens, who are individuals who are born in the United States. We only include adults, 18 years and older, in the analyses.

We define low-income as individuals living in a household with income below 125 percent of the poverty line. We use this definition to align with the requirements of the federal grant that funds the ONA's Community Navigator Project. Table 1 provides the family income at the 125 percent of the federal poverty line (FPL) in 2017 for a range of family sizes.

Table 1. 125 percent of the poverty line by family size

Family Size	125 Percent of the FPL
1	\$15,075
2	\$20,300
3	\$25,525
4	\$30,750
5	\$35,975

All analyses are weighted, using the sampling weights provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, to account for nonresponse, missing data, and oversampling of certain populations. Weighting the ACS data ensures that the results are representative of the true population of Nassau and Suffolk Counties.

Contributions of this research and research questions

This report explores how characteristics of immigrants on Long Island may contribute to lower income levels relative to native-born and naturalized citizens, and which hardships low-income

immigrants are more likely to face compared to immigrants at higher income levels. We also look at change over time in characteristics of immigrants and these hardships. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What percent of immigrants are low-income in Long Island? How does this compare to native-born and naturalized citizens?
2. What characteristics of immigrants may contribute to their higher likelihood of being low-income?
3. What hardships do low-income immigrants face? How does this compare to immigrants who are not low-income?
4. How does the rate of receipt of support services differ between low-income immigrants and low-income naturalized and native-born citizens?
5. How have the hardships faced by immigrants changed in the past decade?

Research Question 1: What percent of immigrants are low-income in Long Island? How does this compare to native-born and naturalized citizens?

Nassau County

Immigrants who are not naturalized citizens (henceforth referred to as immigrants) make up 10 percent (106,000 immigrants) of the population of Nassau County, while naturalized citizens make up 17 percent (179,000 naturalized citizens), and the remainder of the population are U.S.-born citizens (770,000 U.S.-born citizens). The incomes of immigrants are lower than the other two groups; 20 percent live below 125 percent of the poverty line, compared to 7 percent of naturalized citizens, and 6 percent of native-born citizens (Table 2).

Suffolk County

In Suffolk County, immigrants make up 9 percent of the population (106,000 immigrants), naturalized citizens make up 10 percent (115,000 naturalized citizens), and the remainder of the population (942,000) are U.S.-born citizens. Like Nassau County, the incomes of immigrants are lower than the other two groups; 18 percent live below 125 percent of the poverty line, compared to 9 percent of naturalized citizens and 8 percent of native-born citizens (Table 2).

Table 2. Characteristics of immigrants, relative to naturalized and native-born citizens in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, New York (all numbers represent percentages)

Variable	Nassau County			Suffolk County		
	Immigrants	Naturalized	Native-born	Immigrants	Naturalized	Native-born
< 125% poverty	20	7	6	18	9	8
Completed High School	64	86	95	65	82	94
Speak English well	57	89	100	58	89	100
Employed (full or part-time)	71	69	68	72	68	67
Has a disability	5	10	12	6	11	13
Lived in U.S. for > 5 years	91	99.6	100	92	99.7	100

In both counties, similar factors likely contribute to immigrants' lower income levels. Immigrants have lower education levels and are less likely to speak English well (based on respondents' self-report), relative to the other two groups, limiting their employment opportunities. However, immigrants are more likely to be employed, less likely to have a disability, and over 90 percent of immigrants in both counties have lived in the United States for at least five years (see Table 2).

Research Question 2: What characteristics of immigrants may contribute to their higher likelihood of being low-income?

In both counties, when we compare low-income immigrants (incomes < 125% FPL) with immigrants who are not low-income (henceforth referred to as higher-income immigrants), we see that, not surprisingly, low-income immigrants have multiple characteristics that are associated with lower earnings. Across both counties, low-income immigrants are younger (i.e., more likely to be under age 30), more likely to be female, less likely to speak English well, have lower education levels, are more likely to have children, and less likely to be employed relative to higher-income immigrants (Table 3). However, low-income immigrants are only slightly more likely to have a disability and slightly more likely to be recent immigrants, relative to higher-income immigrants. Recent immigrants are defined as having moved to the United States in the past five years.

For the most part, the characteristics of low-income immigrants are similar across Nassau and Suffolk Counties. However, low-income immigrants in Suffolk County have higher education

levels and are more likely to speak English well compared to low-income immigrants in Nassau County.

Table 3. Characteristics of Immigrants, by Income Status, in Nassau and Suffolk Counties (all numbers represent percentages)

Variable	Nassau County Immigrants		Suffolk County Immigrants	
	Low-Income	Higher-Income	Low-Income	Higher-Income
Age 18-30	34	22	37	22
Female	58	48	53	48
Speaks English well	40	61	55	59
Completed High School	46	69	56	67
Has at least one child	66	50	67	47
Employed	61	74	55	76
Has a disability	6	5	6	6
Recently moved to U.S.	13	8	12	7

It is important to note that the differences in employment between low-income and higher-income immigrants are modest. Sixty-one percent and 55 percent of low-income immigrants in Nassau and Suffolk, respectively, are employed (Table 3). Low-income immigrants are substantially more likely to be employed, compared to low-income naturalized and native-born citizens (Table 4).

Table 4. Employment rates of low-income immigrants, relative to low-income naturalized and low-income native-born citizens in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, New York (all numbers represent percentages)

Variable	Nassau County Low-Income Residents			Suffolk County Low-Income Residents		
	<u>Immigrants</u>	<u>Naturalized</u>	<u>Native</u>	<u>Immigrants</u>	<u>Naturalized</u>	<u>Native</u>
Not Employed	39	58	63	45	62	67
Employed Part-time	40	29	30	35	26	27
Employed Full-time	21	13	6	20	13	6

Research Question 3: What hardships do low-income immigrants face? How does this compare to immigrants who are not low-income?

Low-income immigrants face a range of hardships related to their lack of financial security. They are more likely to experience housing cost burdens, energy cost burdens, and lack of health

insurance (Table 5). Housing cost burden is defined as spending more than one-third of income on housing, and energy cost burden is defined as spending more than 10 percent of income on utilities. Though low-income immigrants face these hardships at much higher levels than higher-income immigrants, even among higher-income immigrants close to one in three spend at least one-third of their income on housing and have no health insurance. As described in more detail below, immigrants' restricted eligibility for public benefits, such as Medicaid, may exacerbate these hardships.

Table 5. Hardships Experienced by Immigrants, by Income Status, in Nassau and Suffolk Counties (all numbers represent percentages)

Variable	Nassau County Immigrants		Suffolk County Immigrants	
	Low-Income	Higher-Income	Low-Income	Higher-Income
Housing Burden	76	32	72	27
Energy Burden	40	9	56	10
No health insurance	49	32	43	37

Research Question 4: How does receipt of support services compare between immigrants and naturalized and native-born citizens?

The public benefits that are available for many low-income immigrants are limited. Legal immigrants (excluding refugees or asylees) who have lived here for fewer than five years and undocumented immigrant adults, regardless of their length of residence in the United States, are ineligible for most federal public benefits that support low-income families, including Medicaid, which provides the public health insurance, Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Programs (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), which provides supports for purchasing food, Social Security Insurance (SSI), which provides cash assistance for individuals with disabilities, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which provides cash assistance for poor families.

New York State fills some gaps in federal funding for public benefits by providing state funding for Medicaid to legal immigrant adults during their first five years in the United States and to undocumented immigrant women who are pregnant. However, New York does not extend SNAP, SSI, or TANF eligibility to immigrants barred through federal rules. (The eligibility of U.S. citizen children of recent, documented immigrants and undocumented immigrants is not affected by their parents' immigration status.) The lower rates of receipt of Medicaid and SNAP among

low-income immigrants relative to naturalized and native-born immigrants may reflect eligibility restrictions for recent, legal immigrants and undocumented immigrants (Table 6). However, as shown in Table 2, most immigrants who live in Long Island have lived in the United States for at least five years. Thus, the lower receipt of public benefits could reflect lack of knowledge of public benefits or fear of accessing them among eligible immigrants.

Table 6. Enrollment in Medicaid and SNAP among low-income immigrants, relative to low-income naturalized and native-born citizens in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, New York (all numbers represent percentages)

Variable	Nassau County Low-Income Resident			Suffolk County Low-Income Residents		
	Immigrants	Naturalized	Native	Immigrants	Naturalized	Native
Received Medicaid	28	61	56	28	66	64
Received SNAP	17	21	23	18	22	27

Research Question 5: How have the characteristics of and hardships faced by immigrants changed since in the past decade?

Across both counties, the percent of immigrants who speak English well declined in the past decade; however, at the same time the percent of immigrants who are recent immigrants declined, as well. This suggests that a growing portion of the immigrant population in Long Island has lived in the United States for a long time but has not yet learned English.

In 2005, the percent of immigrants who are low-income in Suffolk County (12 percent) was substantially lower than in Nassau County (18 percent). However, over the past decade the percent of immigrants who are low-income has grown, such that the percent is nearly equal across the two counties (18 percent in Suffolk versus 20 percent in Nassau). Similarly, the percent of immigrants who under age 30 declined in Suffolk County (39 percent in 2005, 25 percent in 2016). This percentage of immigrants who are under age 30 is now similar across the two counties. This suggests that the profile of immigrants in Suffolk County is now more similar to Nassau County today than a decade ago. In Suffolk County the immigrant population has shifted toward longer-term residents, who are older, lower-income, and speak English less well than a decade ago.

Table 7. Characteristics of Immigrants, 2005 and 2012-2016, in Nassau and Suffolk Counties (all numbers represent percentages)

Characteristics	Nassau County		Suffolk County	
	2005	2012-2016	2005	2012-2016
Immigrant	10	10	8	9
Naturalized citizen	15	17	8	10
IMMIGRANTS				
Low-Income (<125% FPL)	18	20	12	18
Age 18-30	28	24	39	25
Female	48	50	47	49
Speaks English well	69	57	64	58
Recent immigrants	16	9	23	8
Completed High School	68	64	66	65
Have at least one child	56	53	57	51
Have a disability	5	5	9	6
Employed	76	71	77	72
Hardships				
Housing Burden	43	41	43	35
Energy Burden	15	15	14	18
Public Benefits				
Received SNAP	5	9	3	12

Conclusions and avenues for potential research

This analysis provides initial insights into the characteristics of and hardships faced by low-income immigrants. The analyses suggest some areas that would benefit from further exploration through the qualitative study that will be undertaken in the second year of this project.

The qualitative study will explore potential explanations for the results of the ACS data analysis and possible policy prescriptions to help address these issues. Through conversation with CARCEN in the upcoming year, we will narrow down and shape the research questions that are suggested by this first-year report. The following reflects questions we could potentially seek to answer that are informed by the above analysis:

- The data suggest that immigrants in Nassau and Suffolk currently have similar rates of low-income and face many of the same hardships. However, in Suffolk County, the percentage of immigrants who are low-income has increased. In the qualitative study,

we will explore whether Suffolk County has the same level of services as Nassau County for its low-income immigrant community to meet growing demand.

- In both counties, immigrants are increasingly long-term residents and do not speak English well. In the qualitative study, we could examine the barriers to adults improving their English language skills.
- Low-income immigrants on Long Island are more likely to be female and to have a child, compared to immigrants who are not low-income. This suggests that families with immigrant mothers may be at higher risk for being or becoming low-income. The qualitative study could explore the usefulness and feasibility of various ways to provide accessible and affordable child care to allow more immigrant mothers to work full time or otherwise increase their earning potential.
- A large percentage of low-income immigrants are employed, and their low incomes likely reflect low pay, rather than low employment levels. Assisting legal immigrants with increasing their educational attainment, English language skills, or helping them achieve certifications for marketable skills could increase their incomes. Even with more education, however, undocumented immigrants will face difficulty entering higher-skilled, higher-paid employment that require work authorization dependent on legal immigration status. In the qualitative study, we could discuss this potential need for certification and educational courses in more detail with community leaders.
- Policies that bar undocumented immigrants from obtaining driver's licenses in New York may reduce their income by restricting undocumented immigrants' ability to seek out higher paid employment that is not accessible through public transportation. Exploring the avenues for expanding the employment opportunities for undocumented immigrants and for low-income documented immigrants could be an important focus for the qualitative study.
- The cost of housing and lack of health insurance are two of the most substantial hardships faced by low-income immigrants. Three out of four low-income immigrants spend more than one-third of their income on housing and one in two lacks any health insurance. However, it is important to also note that higher-income immigrants face these hardships at lower levels, but still high levels compared to U.S. citizens. Understanding the accessibility of health care and access to housing on Long Island could be an important component of the qualitative study.
- Another issue faced by low-income immigrants is their low levels of receipt of public benefits, like Medicaid and SNAP. We cannot tell from this analysis whether low-income

immigrants who do not receive these benefits are ineligible, whether they are unaware of their eligibility, or whether they know of the programs, but are afraid to access them.

Teasing apart the causes of low public benefit receipt levels could be an additional focus explored further in the coming year.

Future Analyses

As indicated above, in the second year of the project we will first narrow down the research questions, suggested above, based on conversations with CARECEN and other community members. To address the second-year research questions, we will conduct an analysis of qualitative data, collected through notes taken during the community roundtables hosted by CARECEN, as well as during interviews with CARECEN staff. To date, CARECEN has hosted three such roundtables in various locations across Long Island. The attendees include service providers, advocates who work with Long Island immigrants, and leaders within Long Island's immigrant communities. Based on this study, we will include questions to ask during roundtables about issues such as affordable housing, access to health care, access to affordable child care, employment opportunities, and knowledge of available public benefits. We will use qualitative methods to identify common themes across the roundtable discussions, as well as variations by locations. The qualitative findings will provide additional perspective on the social and economic needs of immigrants in Long Island. We will contrast the qualitative findings with the results shown in this report to provide a comprehensive picture of the social and economic needs of low-income immigrants in Long Island.

In the third year of the project, we will work with CARECEN to develop an electronic data collection method to be implemented at service intake, which will collect demographic information about the clients who request services through CARECEN. We will develop a short survey of clients to assess additional needs they may have outside of the specific services they request from CARECEN. We will also analyze the demographic characteristics of those who come to CARECEN for services, as well as their expressed social and economic needs. The goal of this analysis will be to assess the characteristics of immigrants who receive services from CARECEN and the needs of those immigrants. Placing this information within the broader context of the analysis of the ACS and the qualitative data will provide insight into the unmet needs of CARECEN's clientele, as well as the immigrants in Long Island who do not seek services from CARECEN. The goal of the three reports will be to highlight the unmet service

needs of immigrants in Long Island so that CARECEN and ONA can develop services and allocate resources to maximize efficiency.

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