MPI MIGRATION POLICY INSTITUTE

SMU. | Mission Foods Texas-Mexico Center
DEDMAN COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES & SCIENCES
In partnership with the Cox School of Business

Fact Sheet

May 2019

A Profile of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and the United States

By Ariel G. Ruiz Soto and Andrew Selee

Executive Summary

Much of the U.S. debate on Mexican immigration has focused on low-skilled immigrants, who have long composed the largest share of Mexicans in the United States. Recent data, however, show notable skill-level increases in this population. The share of college-educated immigrants[1] among recent Mexican arrivals[2] is rising nationwide and in Texas, which has long been a gateway for Mexican immigration because of its proximity and deep economic ties to Mexico.

This fact sheet provides an overview of educational-attainment trends among Mexicans in the United States and Texas, and key socioeconomic characteristics of Mexican immigrant adults (ages 25 and older) who have a bachelor's degree or higher. It also analyzes the legal-status composition of this population using a unique Migration Policy Institute methodology for assigning legal status to noncitizens in data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. Among the key findings are:

- Of the 678,000 Mexican immigrant adults with college degrees in the United States, more than one-quarter lived in Texas as of 2017.

- Recent Mexican immigrants in Texas (those who entered the United States in the five years before data were collected) are much more likely to have a college degree today than they were in the past; 18 percent had one in 2017, compared to 7 percent in 2000.

- Two-thirds of all highly skilled Mexicans in Texas were either naturalized citizens or legal permanent residents (also known as green-card holders) in the 2012–16 period, with a similar share nationwide. Among all Mexican immigrants in Texas and the United States, temporary-visa holders were the most likely to have a college degree, while green-card holders and unauthorized immigrants were the least likely to have one.

- Among the Texas metropolitan areas with the most college-educated Mexican immigrants, educational attainment increased faster in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio than in Dallas and Houston, potentially indicating a movement of Mexican professionals to cities on and near the U.S.-Mexico border.

- The top industries of employment for college-educated Mexican immigrants in Texas are a mix of more and less skilled work, ranging from primary/secondary education and legal services to construction and food service. For those underemployed in fields that may not allow them to make the most of their college degrees, barriers to higher-skilled work may include limited English proficiency, lack of legal status, or difficulties getting recognition for professional credentials earned abroad.

As more Mexican immigrants settle in Texas, especially in its metropolitan areas, local economies and communities stand to gain from this increasingly well-educated workforce. Knowing the profile of highly skilled Mexican immigrants can inform policy decisions and service provision to reduce underemployment and make the most of their potential contributions.

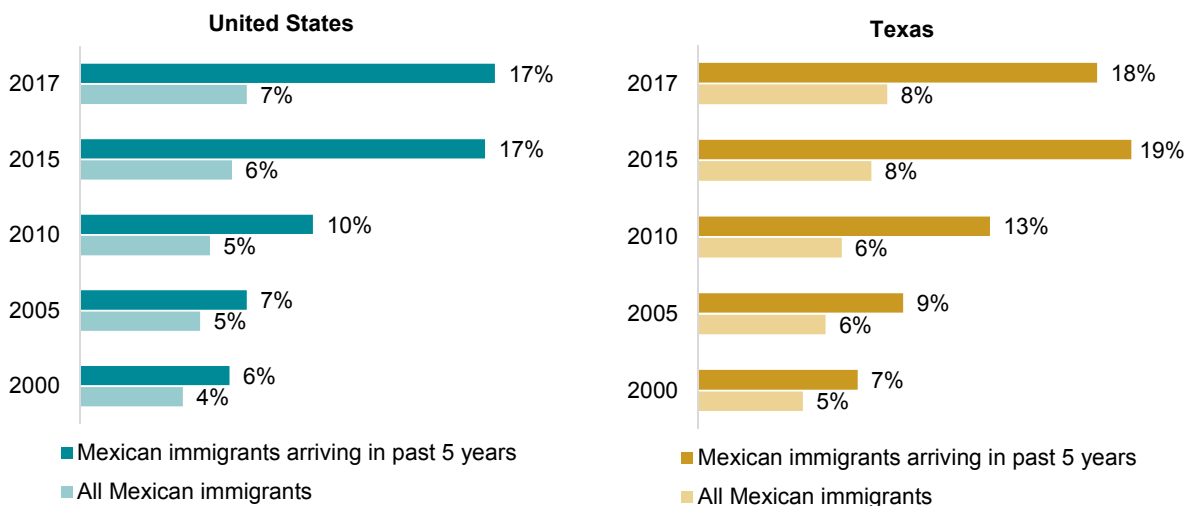## I. Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and Nationwide

Education levels are on the rise among Mexicans in the United States. The highly skilled Mexican immigrant population (those with a bachelor's degree or higher) increased in size from 269,000 in 2000 to 678,000 in 2017. As a result, Mexicans make up the fourth largest group of college-educated immigrants in the United States, after those from India (1.8 million), China (995,000), and the Philippines (906,000).[3] Increasing educational attainment

among U.S. immigrant populations is primarily explained by rising college attainment rates among recent arrivals.

This shift is plain to see in Texas, which has long been a gateway state for Mexican newcomers. The college-educated Mexican immigrant population in the state increased more sharply than in the United States overall, rising from 61,000 in 2000 to 185,000 in 2017. Home to 27 percent of all highly skilled Mexicans in the United States, Texas is second only to California (215,000).

Recent Mexican immigrants in Texas are more likely to have a college degree than those who arrived in past decades, following the national trend. While 7 percent of Mexicans in Texas who entered the United States between 1996 and 2000 had a college degree, approximately 18 percent of those who immigrated between 2013 and 2017 had one (see Figure 1). The largest increase in education attainment among recent arrivals, both in Texas and nationwide, occurred between 2010 and 2015.

Figure 1. College-Educated Share of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) in the United States and Texas, by Years of U.S. Residence, 2000–17

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) calculations of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2000 Decennial Census and the American Community Survey (ACS) for 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017.

A Profile of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and the United States

At the same time, Mexican migration to the United States has slowed due to factors including the improving Mexican economy, stepped-up U.S. immigration enforcement, and the long-term drop in Mexico's birth rates. Thus, despite increases in educational attainment among recent arrivals, the overall college-graduate share of Mexican immigrants remains relatively low nationwide (7 percent) and in Texas (8 percent) because of the size of less well-educated prior immigrant cohorts.

Skill-Level Differences among Texas Metropolitan Areas

As of 2017, highly skilled Mexican immigrants were not concentrated in any one region within Texas. While the metropolitan areas of Houston and Dallas had the largest populations of Mexican college graduates, significant numbers also resided in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio (see Table 1).[4] These five metropolitan areas combined accounted for 73 percent of all college-educated Mexican immigrants in the state.

Proportionally, college graduates represented larger shares among the Mexican immigrant populations in El Paso (13 percent), McAllen (12 percent), and San Antonio (11 percent)—cities close to the U.S.-Mexico border—than in Houston (7 percent) and Dallas (6 percent).

The educational attainment of Mexican immigrants has increased more in some metropolitan areas than others. Approximately 4 percent of Mexican immigrants in both Houston and Dallas had a college degree as of 2000; their educational attainment grew at about the same pace until 2010, when Mexicans in Houston experienced a slightly larger increase in attainment compared to those in Dallas (see Figure 2).

Meanwhile, the above-state-average shares of Mexican immigrants with a college degree in El Paso, San Antonio, and McAllen were between 5 percent and 6 percent in 2000, increasing to about 8 percent by 2010. These shares showed more growth in El Paso and San Antonio in 2015 than in McAllen, but the three metropolitan areas have again converged somewhat since then.
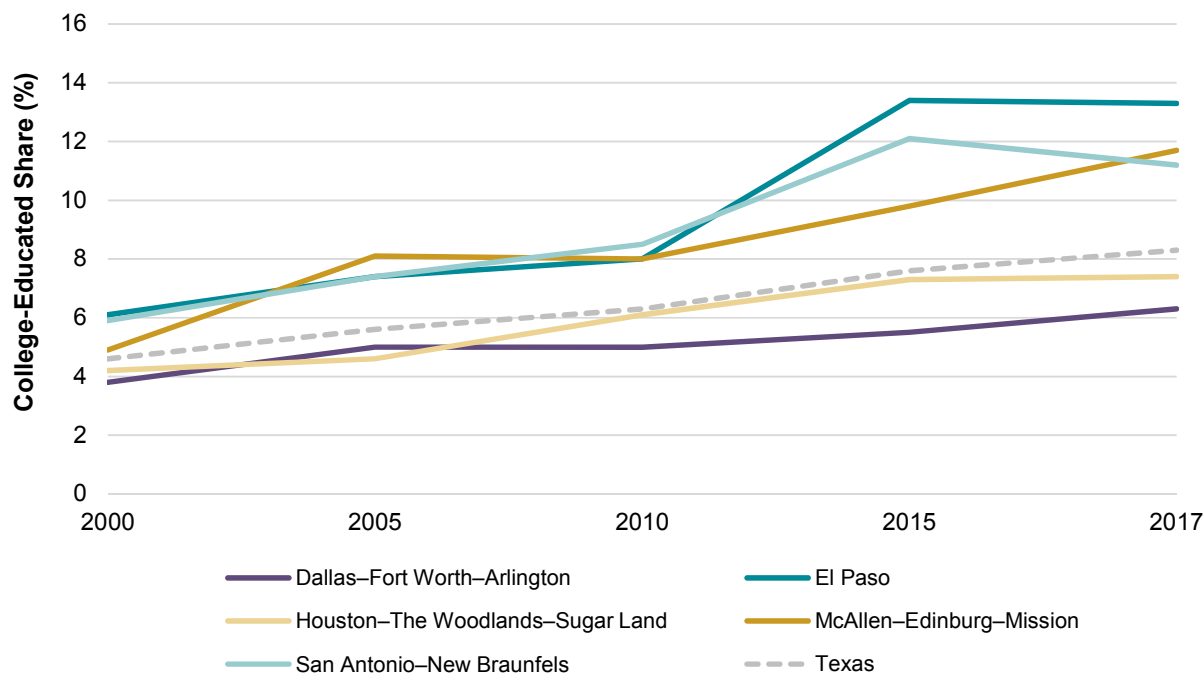
Table 1. Estimated Number and Share of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in Texas and Select Metropolitan Areas, 2017

	College-Educated Mexican Immigrant Population	Mexican Immigrant Population	College-Educated Share (%)
Texas	**185,000**	**2,225,000**	**8**
Houston–The Woodlands–Sugar Land	39,000	531,000	7
Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington	33,000	524,000	6
El Paso	24,000	180,000	13
McAllen–Edinburg–Mission	21,000	178,000	12
San Antonio–New Braunfels	18,000	156,000	11
Other	50,000	655,000	8

Notes: Population estimates are rounded and may not add up to totals. College-educated shares were calculated from unrounded estimates. Metropolitan areas are defined using 2013 boundaries, which are used in the latest U.S. Census Bureau data.
Source: MPI calculations of data from the 2017 ACS.

Figure 2. College-Educated Share of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) in Texas and Select Metropolitan Areas, 2000–17

Notes: Metropolitan areas are defined using 2013 boundaries, which are used in the latest U.S. Census Bureau data, across all years for comparability.
Source: MPI calculations of data from the 2000 Decennial Census and 2005, 2010, 2015, and 2017 ACS.
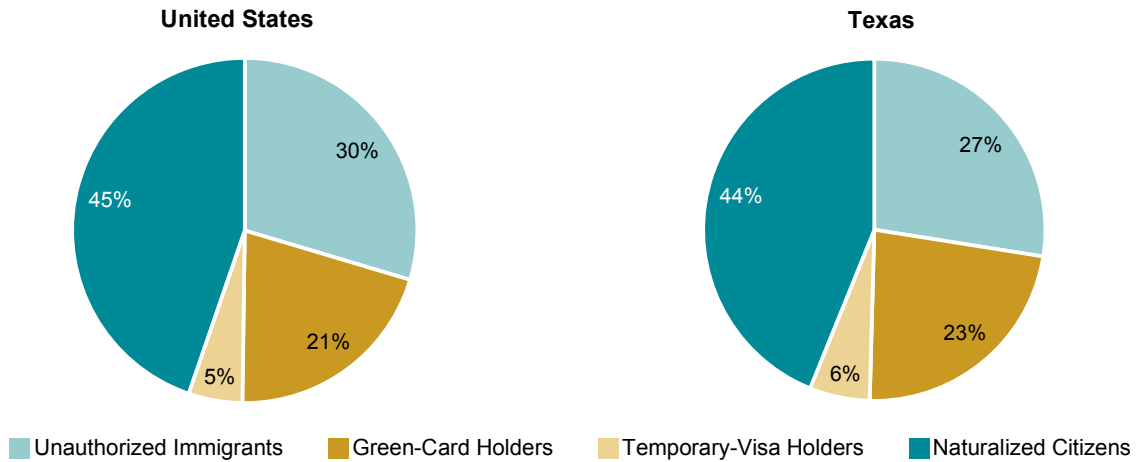
II.   Educational Levels by Legal Status

Legal status can be an important factor in shaping an immigrant's access to higher education and stable, well-paid work, as well as long-term employment and professional outcomes. College-educated Mexican immigrant adults (ages 25 or older) are diverse in terms of their legal statuses, but the breakdown is roughly similar in Texas and at the national level (see Figure 3).

Naturalized U.S. citizens represented the largest shares of Mexican immigrant college graduates: 45 percent nationwide and 44 percent in Texas

in 2012–16. Legal permanent residents (also known as green-card holders) made up about one-fifth of highly skilled Mexicans in the United States and in Texas, and temporary-visa holders (i.e., legal nonimmigrants) represented much smaller shares, with 5 percent and 6 percent respectively. In Texas, a slightly smaller share of college-educated Mexicans were unauthorized immigrants than in the nation overall (27 percent versus 30 percent); some of these immigrants were participants in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides protection from deportation and work authorization to qualifying unauthorized immigrants who were brought to the country as children.[5]

A Profile of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and the United States

Figure 3. Legal Status of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree in the United States and Texas, 2012–16

United States

Texas

- Unauthorized Immigrants
- Green-Card Holders
- Temporary-Visa Holders
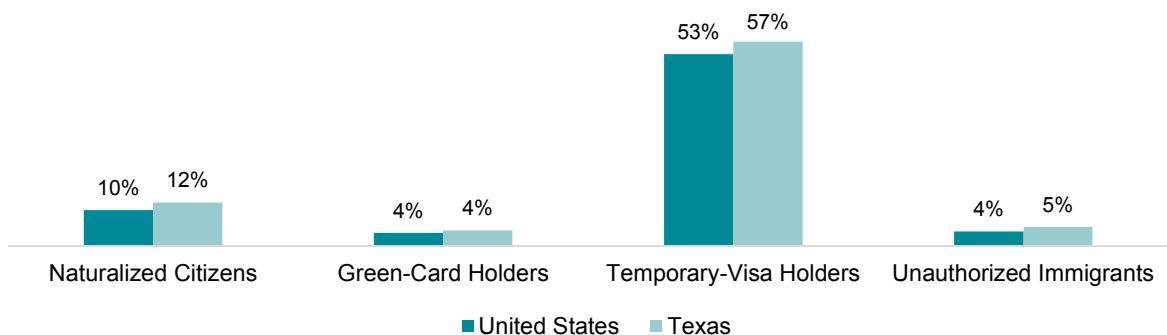- Naturalized Citizens

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2012–16 ACS and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), drawing on a methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

At the same time, among all Mexican immigrant adults, the likelihood of having a college degree varied according to legal status. As shown in Figure 4, more than half of Mexican temporary-visa holders had a college degree, with a slightly higher share in Texas (57 percent) than the national average (53 percent). These relatively high shares are explained by the nature of this category, with most temporary-visa hold-ers admitted to perform high–skilled work or to study in the U.S. higher education system, though some are lower-skilled agricultural workers.[6] About one in ten Mexicans who were naturalized U.S. citizens had a college degree, as did nearly identical shares (about 5 percent) of those who were legal permanent residents and unauthorized immigrants.

Figure 4. College-Educated Share of Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) in the United States and Texas, by Legal Status, 2012–16

- United States
- Texas

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2012–16 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, drawing on a methodology developed in consultation with Bachmeier and Van Hook.

III. Key Socioeconomic Characteristics of Highly Skilled Mexicans in Texas

More than one-third of highly skilled Mexicans in Texas lived in Houston and Dallas, and their demographic profiles in these metropolitan areas were similar (see Table 2). In both, more than half of these immigrants were between the ages of 25 and 44. Perhaps surprisingly, 40 percent of Mexican college graduates were Limited English Proficient (LEP), meaning they reported speaking English less than very well. There were two small but notable differences between these metropolitan areas: a slightly larger share of highly skilled Mexicans in Dallas were women (58 percent versus 52 percent in Houston), and a slightly smaller share were in poverty (6 percent in Dallas versus 9 percent in Houston).

Table 2. Key Sociodemographic Characteristics of College-Educated Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) in Texas and Select Metropolitan Areas, 2017

	Texas	Houston–The Woodlands–Sugar Land	Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington	El Paso	McAllen–Edinburg–Mission	San Antonio–New Braunfels
Mexican Immigrants with a College Degree	**185,000**	**39,000**	**33,000**	**24,000**	**21,000**	**18,000**
Age						
25-34	22%	19%	21%	17%	21%	26%
35-44	31%	35%	31%	30%	19%	31%
45-54	27%	27%	31%	26%	28%	27%
55+	20%	18%	17%	27%	33%	16%
Sex						
Female	53%	52%	58%	52%	54%	52%
English Proficiency						
Limited English Proficient	43%	40%	41%	46%	58%	29%
Poverty						
Below 100% of Federal Poverty Level	8%	9%	6%	7%	13%	7%
Labor Force (LF)						
Population in LF	143,000	29,000	27,000	18,000	16,000	14,000
Share of Total Population in LF	77%	73%	83%	77%	76%	79%
Unemployed Share of Population in LF	3%	4%	1%	2%	2%	1%

Notes: In the ACS, respondents who report speaking a language other than English at home are asked how well they speak English. Persons who reported speaking English "not at all," "not well," or "well" are considered to be Limited English Proficient. Metropolitan areas are defined using 2013 boundaries, which are used in the latest U.S. Census Bureau data.
Source: MPI calculations of data from the 2017 ACS.

Mexican college graduates in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio resembled the state average in most indicators, but each population had some unique characteristics. College-educated Mexicans in El Paso most closely resembled the characteristics at the state level: a young population, slightly more likely to be female, with moderate levels of limited English proficiency and a poverty rate of less than 10 percent. In McAllen, the highly skilled Mexican population was older, with one-third age 55 or over; it also had a significantly higher share of LEP individuals (58 percent) and an above-average poverty rate of 13 percent. The population in San Antonio, almost 60 percent of which was between the ages of 25 and 44, was the youngest and had the smallest LEP share of the areas studied.

As for employment characteristics, a similar number of highly skilled Mexican immigrants were in the labor force in Houston and Dallas, but proportionally those in Dallas made up a larger share of the total college-educated Mexican population in the area (83 percent)

than those in Houston (73 percent). In Dallas, Mexican college graduates were also less likely to be unemployed than those in Houston. The employment profiles of Mexican immigrants with college degrees in El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio were similar both to each other and to the state average, with slightly more than three-fourths in the labor force and low unemployment.

Turning to the industries in which highly skilled Mexicans were employed, these vary somewhat across the five metropolitan areas. Elementary and secondary schools were the largest industry of employment in all metropolitan areas but Houston, where construction was the top industry (see Table 3). The subsequent categories were more diverse: construction and hospitals were prominent industries in several of the studied regions, but Houston was the only one in which legal services made the top five, as were restaurants and other food services in Dallas, colleges and other higher education institutions in El Paso, and wholesale grocery in McAllen.

Table 3. Top Five Industries among Employed Mexican Immigrant Adults (ages 25 or older) with a College Degree, in Texas and Select Metropolitan Areas, 2017

Rank	Texas	Houston–The–Woodlands–Sugar Land	Dallas–Fort Worth–Arlington	El Paso	McAllen–Edinburg–Mission	San Antonio–New Braunfels
1	Elementary and secondary schools	Construction	Elementary and secondary schools	Elementary and secondary schools	Elementary and secondary schools	Elementary and secondary schools
2	Construction	Elementary and secondary schools	Construction	Construction	Wholesale Grocery	-
3	Restaurants and other food services	Hospitals	Restaurants and other food services	Colleges, universities, and professional schools*	-	-
4	Hospitals	Legal Services	Hospitals	Hospitals	-	-
5	Colleges, universities, and professional schools*	-	-	-	-	-

Notes: The category "colleges, universities, and professional schools" also includes junior colleges. Categories marked "-" had a sample size too small to generate result. Metropolitan areas are defined using 2013 boundaries, which are used in the latest U.S. Census Bureau data.
Source: MPI calculations of data from the 2017 ACS.

These labor-force and industry profiles combined suggest that highly skilled Mexican immigrants in Texas overall and in these five metropolitan areas experience significant underemployment. While some of these industries (such as legal services and primary/secondary or higher education) may allow these immigrants to utilize the skills they acquired in college, this may not be the case in construction and food services.

IV. Conclusions

The share of Mexican immigrants with a college degree has increased in Texas and across the five metropolitan areas studied in recent years. Today, almost one in five recent Mexican immigrants living in the state has a college degree, versus 7 percent in 2000. This mirrors a nationwide trend that is increasing the level of educational attainment in the overall Mexican immigrant population.

While the largest number of highly skilled Mexican immigrants resided in the Houston and Dallas areas, college graduates made up larger shares of Mexicans in the metropolitan areas nearest the U.S.-Mexico border—El Paso, McAllen, and San Antonio.

There appear to be several factors driving these trends. First, educational attainment in Mexico has increased significantly over the past two decades. Students in Mexico are now three times more likely to attend college than they were 20 or 25 years ago, and average educational attainment has improved from roughly six years of study (elementary school) to almost nine years (secondary school) between 1995 and 2015.[7]

More Mexicans are also taking advantage of high-skilled U.S. visa categories, including the TN visa,[8] which was implemented in the 1990s as a result of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) but expanded significantly after 2010.

Another likely factor is rising violence in Mexico, which reached historic homicides rates in 2017 that appear to be unabating.[9] This may be driving Mexican professionals to move to the United States, mostly living in border cities such as McAllen and El Paso, as well as in nearby cities such as San Antonio.

Finally, many Mexican companies have made major investments in their U.S. presence in the past decade, bringing senior executives and key personnel with them. Texas has led the way as a major destination for Mexican business investment, with Dallas as a center for much of that presence.[10]

Once in the United States, the overall picture of labor-market insertion for highly skilled Mexican immigrants in Texas is mixed, as it is across the United States. Comparing the labor-force and employment characteristics of this population indicates that many experience underemployment, working in industries that do not require a college degree and may not fully utilize their skills.

Legal-status limitations can create barriers in higher education and employment, especially for unauthorized immigrants, but this alone does not explain underemployment among highly skilled Mexicans. Limited English skills and difficulties navigating complex credential-recognition processes (for those with degrees and professional experience earned abroad) are other common barriers.[11]

As the profile of Mexican immigrants to the United States continues to change and U.S. policymakers seek to attract talent to be competitive on a global scale, addressing these barriers will be important. In this, Texas can lead the way. Policies that make language training more accessible and that streamline the requirements for having professional degrees and skill certifications recognized would enable highly skilled immigrants, including those from Mexico, to join the ranks of qualified professionals and contribute more fully to the state and U.S. economies.

Endnotes

1 The term "college educated" refers to adults ages 25 or older who have at least a bachelor's degree. It is used interchangeably in this fact sheet with "college graduate" and "highly skilled."

2 Recent immigrants (or recent arrivals) are immigrants who arrived in the United States within the five years prior to the collection of the data at hand. For example, recent immigrants in 2017 data are those who arrived in 2013 or after.

3 Estimates of Chinese highly skilled immigrants include those from Hong Kong but exclude those from Taiwan. For more on the skill levels of recent immigrants by origin, see Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *New Brain Gain: Rising Human Capital among Recent Immigrants to the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/new-brain-gain-rising-human-capital-among-recent-immigrants-united-states.

4 Metropolitan areas are abbreviated in this fact sheet and include other cities and outlying areas as designated by the U.S. Census Bureau. Houston includes the Woodlands and Sugar Land; Dallas includes Fort Worth and Arlington; El Paso includes El Paso County and Hudspeth County; McAllen includes Edinburg and Mission; and San Antonio includes the principal city of New Braunfels and is composed of eight counties: Atascosa, Bandera, Bexar, Comal, Guadalupe, Kendall, Medina, and Wilson. While the Austin-Round Rock area is the state's fourth largest metropolitan area, its population of college-educated Mexican immigrants was smaller than that of the five other metropolitan areas profiled in this fact sheet.

5 Implemented by the Obama administration in June 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program provides qualifying unauthorized immigrant youth protection from removal and employment authorization, renewable every two years. The Trump administration announced the program's termination in September 2017, but due to federal court orders in January and February 2018, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) continues to accept renewal requests. For more information see USCIS, "Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals: Response to January 2018 Preliminary Injunction," updated February 22, 2018, www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-response-january-2018-preliminary-injunction.

6 Bryan Baker, *Nonimmigrants Residing in the United States: Fiscal Year 2016* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2016), www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Nonimmigrant_Population%20Estimates_2016_0.pdf.

7 Mexican Ministry of Public Education, "Estadísticas Educativas—Estadísticas históricas 1893–2015," accessed April 30, 2019, http://snie.sep.gob.mx/Estadistica.html; Andrew Selee, *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2018), 66. Among Mexican young adults (ages 25 to 34), 26 percent had completed high school and 23 percent had obtained a college degree in 2017, representing an increase of 8 percentage points and 7 percentage points, respectively, compared to 2007. Notably, educational attainment levels were very similar between men and women in Mexico. See Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), "Country Note: Mexico," in *Education at a Glance 2018: OECD Indicators* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2018), www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/eag-2018-58-en.pdf.

8 U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Nonimmigrant Visa Issuances by Visa Class and by Nationality, FY1997–2018," accessed April 11, 2019, https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/legal/visa-law0/visa-statistics/nonimmigrant-visa-statistics.html.

9 Migration Policy Institute analysis of data from Mexico's National Institute of Statistics, Geography, and Informatics (INEGI) shows the homicide rate for 2017 reached 25 per 100,000 people, the highest rate since 1990. See also, Arturo Angel, "2018, El Año Más Violento con Más de 34 Mil Homicidios; en Diciembre Aumentaron 9%," Animal Político, January 21, 2019, www.animalpolitico.com/2019/01/2018-violencia-homicidios-delitos-mexico/.

10 See Alfredo Corchado and Obed Manuel, "It's Destination Dallas for Upwardly Mobile Mexicans Who Are Strengthening Their Homeland's Economic Ties with the U.S.," *Dallas Morning News*, August 17, 2018, www.dallasnews.com/news/immigration/2018/08/17/destination-dallas-upwardly-mobile-mexicans-strengthening-economic-ties-us-mexico. On growing Mexican investment in Texas and across the United States, see also Selee, *Vanishing Frontiers*, Chapter 3.

11 Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Tapping the Talents of Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States: Takeaways from Experts Summit* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/tapping-talents-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states-takeaways-experts-summit.

About the Authors

Ariel G. Ruiz Soto is an Associate Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), where he analyzes migration policies in the United States, Mexico, and Central America and provides quantitative research support for the U.S. Immigration Program. He also manages MPI's internship program.

His research focuses on the impact of U.S. immigration policies on immigrants' experiences of socioeconomic integration across varying geographical and political contexts. More recently, Mr. Ruiz Soto has analyzed methodological approaches to estimate sociodemographic trends of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States. His research has been published in *Latino Studies* and in *Crossing the United States-Mexico Border: Policies, Dynamics, and Consequences of Mexican Migration to the United States* (University of Texas Press).

Mr. Ruiz Soto holds a master's degree from the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration with an emphasis on immigration policy and service provision, and a bachelor's degree in sociology from Whitman College.

Andrew Selee is President of MPI. He joined the Institute in 2017 after 17 years at the Woodrow Wilson International Center where he served as Executive Vice President and founded and directed the Center's Mexico Institute. Selee is the author and editor of several books, including *Vanishing Frontiers: The Forces Driving Mexico and the United States Together* (PublicAffairs, 2018) and *What Should Think Tanks Do?: A Strategic Guide to Policy Impact* (Stanford University Press, 2013). His research focuses on immigration policy in Latin America and the United States.

Dr. Selee has taught courses at Johns Hopkins University and George Washington University, and has been a visiting fellow at El Colegio de México. His opinion articles have appeared in *Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy,* Axios, *Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, Washington Post,* and *Wall Street Journal*. He writes a regular column in the Mexican newspaper *El Universal*.

Dr. Selee received his PhD in policy studies from the University of Maryland; his MA in Latin American studies from the University of California, San Diego; and his BA from Washington University in St. Louis.

Acknowledgments

Suggested citation: Ruiz Soto, Ariel G. and Andrew Selee. 2019. *A Profile of Highly Skilled Mexican Immigrants in Texas and the United States.* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. The Institute provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic responses to the challenges and opportunities that migration presents in an ever more integrated world.

WWW.MIGRATIONPOLICY.ORG