The State of New American Citizenship

A report by Boundless Immigration

Executive Summary

New American citizens attend their Oath of Allegiance ceremony in Washington, D.C.

Nearly 9 million immigrants in the United States are lawful permanent residents (green card holders) currently eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship.

Naturalization (/immigration-resources/naturalization-explained/)—the process by which an immigrant becomes a U.S. citizen—brings considerable economic benefits at the individual, regional, and national levels. Naturalized immigrants earn 8-11% more (https://dornsife.usc.edu/csii/citizen-gain/) in annual income than non-naturalized immigrants (controlling for variables such as skills, education, and fluency in English), suggesting that naturalization leads to better-paying jobs by signaling to employers that a given immigrant has strong English language skills and a long-term commitment to live and work in the United States.

One study (https://www.urban.org/research/publication/economic-impact-naturalization-immigrants-and-cities) of 21 U.S. cities found that if all eligible immigrant residents were to naturalize, their aggregate income would increase by $5.7 billion, yielding an increase in homeownership by over 45,000 people and an increase in tax revenue of $2 billion. Nationally, if half of the eligible immigrant population of the United States naturalized, the increased earnings and demand could boost GDP by $37-52 billion per year.

But barriers (/immigration-resources/u-s-citizenship-requirements/) to becoming a U.S. citizen have gotten worse over time, and are not evenly distributed across the country. This report uses a novel integration of public data sets to understand national trends in the government's handling of citizenship applications, as well as barriers at the local level.

Key findings of this report include:

The national trends are worrisome.

- The processing time (/immigration-resources/how-long-does-it-take-to-get-citizenship-after-applying/) for a citizenship application has surged over the past

2 years to over 10 months—double the processing time between 2012 and 2016. These processing times continue to keep rising, because the government has not kept pace with the volume of incoming applications. After a 2-year spike in 2016–2017, the volume of citizenship applications returned to a typical level in 2018—but the government's backlog processing efficiency remains at the lowest level in a decade.

- The likelihood that a citizenship application will be denied has risen slightly over the past few years.

And becoming a U.S. citizen is much harder in some places than others.

- Immigrants in some cities face citizenship application wait times more than four times higher than in other cities.
- Immigrants in some cities experience a citizenship application denial rate two times higher than the national average.
- Some cities have four or five government field offices where immigrants can attend their citizenship interviews; other cities have none and make immigrants travel over 150 miles to the nearest field office.

New rankings reveal the best and worst places to become a U.S. citizen.

- The top 3 best overall metro areas for immigrants to become U.S. citizens are Cleveland, Ohio; Riverside, California; and Louisville, Kentucky.
- The worst 3 metro areas for immigrants to become U.S. citizens are all in Texas: Austin, Houston, and Dallas.
- The top 3 government offices handling citizenship applications most efficiently are in Cleveland, Ohio; Providence, Rhode Island; and Raleigh, North Carolina.
- The worst 3 government offices handling citizenship applications least efficiently are in St. Paul, Minnesota; Miami, Florida; and Houston, Texas. The maximum wait time in the St. Paul office is now almost 2 years.
- The top 3 metro areas with the highest naturalization rate of eligible immigrants are Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- The worst 3 metro areas with the lowest naturalization rate are Fresno, California; Phoenix, Arizona; and Dallas, Texas.

The data suggest some structural barriers based on region of origin.

- There is a negative correlation between a metro area's naturalization rate and the percentage of the eligible immigrant population from Mexico.
- There is a positive correlation between a metro area's naturalization rate and the percentage of the eligible immigrant population from Africa, Asia, or Europe.
- These correlations probably arise from structural barriers to naturalization that affect different populations in different ways. In terms of individual motivation, other studies show that the overwhelming majority of immigrants to the United States, from any region of origin, express the desire to become U.S. citizens.

What this report covers:

Note: A condensed version (/blog/best-worst-cities-immigrants-seeking-american-citizenship/) of this report includes only the rankings of the best cities and field offices.

National Trends

Nationwide, is it getting easier or harder to become a naturalized U.S. citizen?

First, consider the baseline: There are nearly 9 million immigrants (https://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship) in the United States who are eligible for U.S. citizenship, but fewer than 1 million typically apply in any given year. Many barriers to citizenship are more or less fixed: given high application fees (/immigration-resources/how-much-does-it-cost-to-apply-for-us-citizenship/) and the required civics and English tests (/immigration-resources/u-s-citizenship-test-explained/), it's simply less costly and time-intensive up-front for most people to renew their green card (/immigration-resources/the-green-card-explained/) every 10 years than to go through the naturalization process (/immigration-resources/naturalization-explained/).

The volume of citizenship applications does fluctuate from year to year, typically spiking during election years—or in advance of an application fee increase—and then decreasing sharply the following year. In 2016 and 2017, something unusual happened: Volume spiked at nearly 1 million applications for 2 years in a row.

Has the government's response been adequate? The following data analysis seeks to answer the question.

Surging Backlog

Citizenship applications filed and processed nationwide (2011-2018)
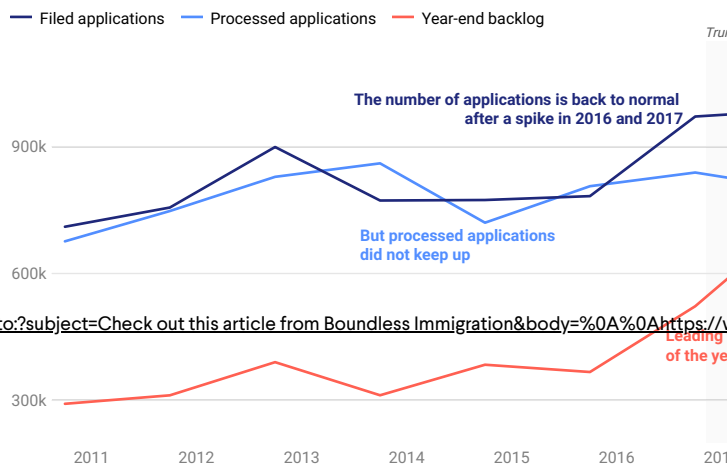
— Filed applications — Processed applications — Year-end backlog

Data shown by federal fiscal year, ending on September 30.

Chart: Boundless • Source: USCIS N-400 quarterly data • Created with Datawrapper

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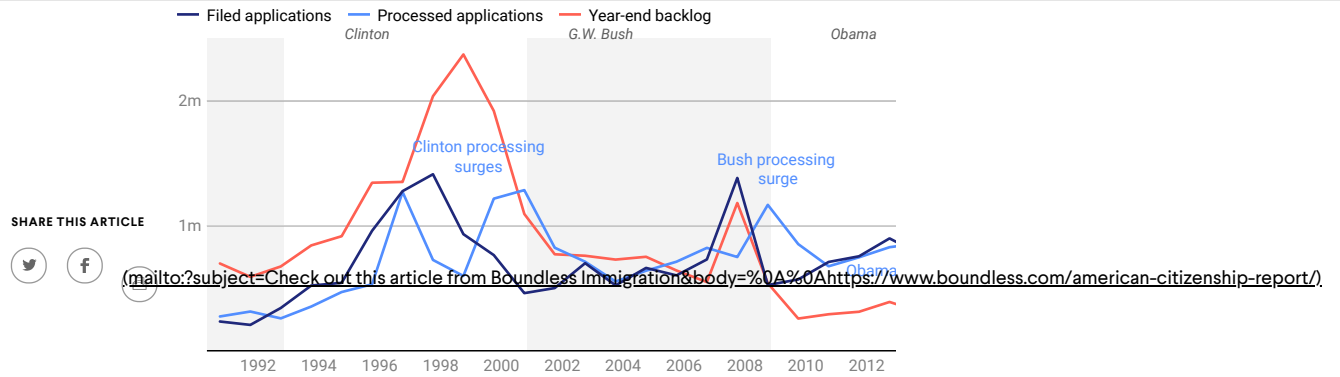
A look at the past decade indicates a worrying trend.

Although application volume was on track to reach a more normal level in 2018, processing volume has been more or less flat for the past 3 years, leading to a surge in the backlog of pending applications.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the federal agency responsible for processing citizenship applications (/immigration-resources/form-n-400-explained/), has defended itself by noting that the backlog more than doubled during the Obama administration. This is true: the backlog rose from nearly 292,000 in September 2010 to over 636,000 by the time Donald Trump assumed office in January 2017.

But USCIS has also claimed (https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/immigration/trump-administration-after-decline-us-citizenship-numbers-are-rising/2018/10/03/015bd9d2-c5a6-11e8-b2b5-79270f9cce17_story.html?utm_term=.273c3e71034c) that the surge in applications during 2016 and 2017 created a "record and unprecedented" workload, and a look at the past 3 decades shows that this is likely not true.

Backlogs in Context

Citizenship applications filed and processed nationwide (1990–2018)

Filed applications · Processed applications · Year-end backlog

Clinton   *G.W. Bush*   *Obama*

Clinton processing surges

Bush processing surge

Obama

2m

1m

1992 1994 1996 1998 2000 2002 2004 2006 2008 2010 2012

Data shown by federal fiscal year, ending on September 30. (2018 projected based on Q1-Q3.)

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In 2007, citizenship applications surged to nearly 1.4 million, far higher than the recent uptick. This was driven in part by a looming 80% application fee hike that year, and in part by an increase in newly eligible immigrants who had obtained their green cards 5 years earlier under the Legal Immigration Family Equity (LIFE) Act of 2000.

USCIS responded with a surge in processing volume the following year, and the backlog plunged to a 30-year low of about 257,000 in 2009.

In the mid-1990s, there was a truly "record and unprecedented" surge in citizenship applications, driven in part by a corresponding increase in newly eligible immigrants who had received green cards under the Immigration Reform and Control Act 1986 (IRCA, also known as the "Reagan Amnesty"). Between 1995 and 1998, application volume stayed well above 900,000, peaking at over 1.4 million in 1997. Although the backlog initially shot past 2 million in 1997-1998, USCIS responded with a comparable surge in processing volume appears to have tamed the backlog by 1999-2000.

The data indicate that when USCIS devotes sufficient resources to a citizenship application surge, it's possible to dramatically reduce a backlog within one year. That's what happened in 2012, 2007, and 2000.

On the other hand, when USCIS fails to devote sufficient resources, backlogs can get way out of hand. That's what happened in the mid-1990s, and it appears to be happening now, as well.

Backlog completion rate (the percentage of citizenship applications processed, as a share of pending plus filed applications)

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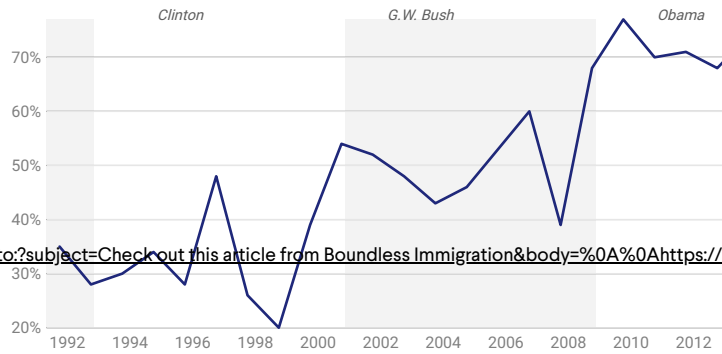
Data shown by federal fiscal year, ending on September 30. (2018 projected based on Q1-Q3.)
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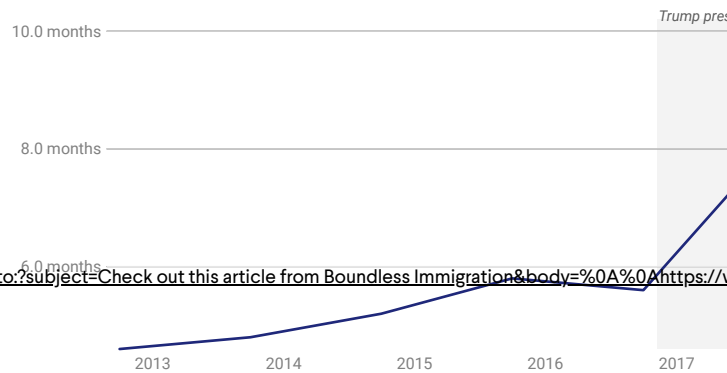
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Another way to evaluate this problem is to measure how efficiently USCIS beats back its backlogs. If USCIS processed every citizenship application it received in a given year, plus the applications that were pending from the previous year, that would yield a "backlog completion" of 100%.

In reality, USCIS achieved a backlog completion rate of 77% in 2009—a 30-year high —and this number has been trending downward ever since. There was a 10-point drop in backlog completion between 2016 and 2017 (from 63% to 53%), and 2018 isn't likely to show dramatic improvement. This is the opposite trend of what's necessary to reduce the current backlog of citizenship applications.

Surging Wait Times

National average time to process a citizenship application

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Data shown by federal fiscal year, ending on September 30.
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Growing backlogs have direct and negative consequences for immigrants seeking to become U.S. citizens: They have to wait longer for their applications to be processed by the government.

Here the trend is unmistakable: Between 2012 and 2016, median application processing times hovered between about 4.5 to 6 months, before shooting past 8 months in 2017 and 10 months in 2018.

This trend is even more worrisome than it first appears, since the actual wait time (/immigration-resources/how-long-does-it-take-to-get-citizenship-after-applying/) for a would-be citizen is considerably longer than just the processing time, as it includes an English and civics test (/immigration-resources/u-s-citizenship-test-explained/) among other steps leading up to the oath-taking ceremony (/immigration-resources/us-citizenship-oath-of-allegiance-ceremony/), typically adding another 4–10 months to the process.

Processing times are rising across the board within USCIS, not just for citizenship applications.

Here is a summary of the government's own data on processing times (https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/historic-pt) for some the most common legal immigration applications:

### The Steady Rise of USCIS Processing Times (fiscal year average, in months)

Form	FY2014	FY2015	FY2016	FY2017	FY2018
Fiancé(e) visa (/immigration-resources/how-is-a-fiance-visa-different-from-a-marriage-based-green-card/) (I-129F)	3.5	3.8	2.9	4.1	6.7
Family-based green card sponsorship (/immigration-resources/form-i-130-explained/) (I-130)	6.8	6.1	6.0	7.7	9.7
Employment-based green card sponsorship (I-140)	2.9	5.1	5.7	6.9	7.8
Family-based green card application (/immigration-resources/form-i-485-explained/) (I-485)	5.7	6.6	6.8	8.4	11.1
Employment-based green card application (I-485)	4.5	6.5	6.8	8.1	11.0
U.S. citizenship (/immigration-resources/form-n-400-explained/) (N-400)	5.2	5.8	5.6	8.1	10.2
Travel permit (/immigration-resources/the-advance-parole-travel-document-explained/) (I-131)	2.1	2.3	2.3	3.0	3.9
Work permit (/immigration-resources/the-work-permit-explained/) (I-765)	2.1	2.4	2.6	3.1	4.1

Shift from conditional to permanent spousal green card (/immigration-resources/conditional-permanent-residency/) (I-751)	5.7	7.4	9.1	11.8	16.1
Shift from conditional to permanent investor green card (I-829)	9	13.1	19.1	27.7	27.1
T visa for trafficking victims (I-914)	5.8	6.4	7.9	9.0	11.4
U visa for crime victims (I-918)	5.0	11.4	22.1	32.1	40.5
Various waivers	6.8	10.0	16.9	23.6	29.1

It is unclear how USCIS plans to dig out of these many deepening holes, since reallocating resources from one form to another would presumably make wait times even longer for applicants on the losing end.

Denial Rates on the Rise

Denied citizenship applications as a share of filed applications
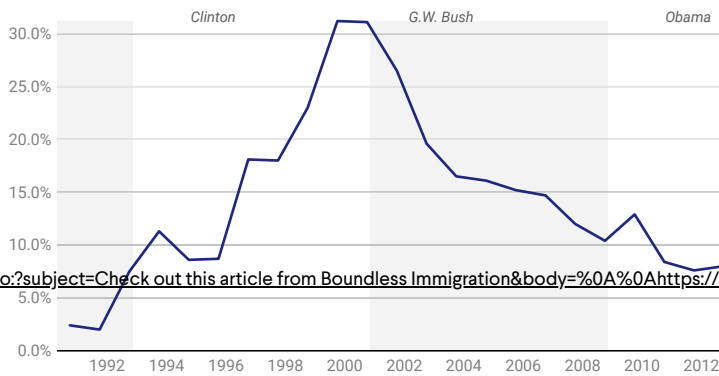
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Data shown by federal fiscal year, ending on September 30. (2018: Projected based on Q1-Q3.)
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Another factor that directly affects immigrants is the share of naturalization applications that are denied, potentially closing off the opportunity to become a U.S. citizen. (Denials can be appealed (/immigration-resources/how-long-does-it-take-to-get-citizenship-after-applying/#step-4), but this process is expensive and uncertain.)

On the one hand, denial rates have inched up in recent years, from 10.3% in 2016 to an anticipated 10.9% in 2018.

But looking at the past 3 decades, denial rates used to be quite a bit higher. Although beyond the scope of this report, it's fair to ask why citizenship application denial rates were well below 3% since the early 1950s, then suddenly jumped to 7.5% in 1992, and have never gone lower since then. Meanwhile, nearly one third of all citizenship applications were denied in 1999 and 2000, before dropping back down to a "new normal" in this decade.

Time will tell whether denial rates continue to rise in the years to come.

While the national trends tell one story about U.S. citizenship, there is immense variation by location. Immigrants in some cities are encountering minimal backlogs, short wait times, and convenient locations for the citizenship interview, while immigrants in other cities face large backlogs, long (even outrageous) wait times, and an interview location over 100 miles away.

The following table ranks over 100 U.S. metro areas using a novel index that measures relative ease of naturalization.

The Best Cities for Becoming a New American

Index scores based on a weighted average of three barriers to U.S. citizenship.

OVERALL RANK	METRO AREA	▼ OVERALL INDEX	BACKLOG COMPLETION	MEDIAN WAIT TIME (MONTHS)	DISTANCE TO FIELD OFFICE (MI)
1	Cleveland-Elyria, OH	95	71.3%	4.0	0
2	Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	89	68.4%	5.0	0
3	Louisville/Jefferson County, KY-IN	88	64.0%	5.0	0
4	Providence-Warwick, RI-MA	88	81.4%	5.7	0
5	Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara Falls, NY	88	68.7%	5.3	0
6		86		5.1	0
7	Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, IN	86	66.3%	5.5	0
8	Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN	86	68.3%	5.6	0
9	Raleigh, NC	86	65.1%	5.5	0
10	Charleston-North Charleston, SC	86	46.7%	4.9	0

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For example, immigrants in the Cleveland area enjoy the shortest application processing time in the nation (4 months), among the highest backlog completion rates (over 71%), and a USCIS field office in town. Relative to other metro areas, Cleveland—at 95 points—is as good as it gets across all of these weighted factors, and it earns the No. 1 spot on the index.

Meanwhile, the Houston area is near the bottom of the index. Immigrants here are up against the longest wait times in the nation (17.3 months), and that number is probably going to rise in future years, since backlog completion rate is a leading indicator of wait time and Houston is nearly the worst (only 35%).

The only city where immigrants would fare worse is Austin—because they'll have to go through the same struggling field office in Houston, but travel 80 miles to get there as there is no office in Austin.

What Are the Best (and Worst) Field Offices for Becoming a U.S. Citizen?

In 2017, USCIS ran 86 field offices that both handled citizenship applications and had been in business for more than a year.

These field offices are not distributed evenly by immigrant population—for example, while the New York, Los Angeles, and Miami metro areas each have four to five field offices, some states (such as Illinois and Colorado) have only one field office to serve all of their cities. And some cities with a sizable citizenship-eligible population, such as McAllen, Texas or Bakersfield, California, have no field office at all.

Therefore, the efficiency of a single USCIS field office doesn't tell the whole story about the ease of naturalization for a given metro area's immigrant population. For that, see the table in the section above.

The following table ranks all of the USCIS field offices using a novel index that measures relative ease of naturalization for those immigrants compelled to use it. (USCIS assigns a field office based on the ZIP code of the applicant.) Instead of including "distance to field office" as a factor (which would always be zero), this index uses both the median and maximum processing times for each site.

The Best Field Offices for Becoming a New American

Index scores based on a weighted average of three barriers to U.S. citizenship.

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OVERALL RANK	FIELD OFFICE	▼ OVERALL INDEX	MEDIAN WAITING TIME (MONTHS)	MAX. WAITING TIME (MONTHS)	BACKLOG COMPLETION	FILED APPLICATIONS
1	Cleveland, OH	91	4.0	12.3	71.3%	4,828
2	Providence, RI	86	5.7	13.6	81.4%	3,599
3	Raleigh, NC	84	5.5	12.4	65.1%	7,677
4	San Bernardino, CA	83	5.0	13.5	68.4%	22,633
5	Columbus, OH	82	5.7	12.6	63.8%	6,019
6	Lawrence, MA	81	5.6	13.8	69.8%	9,027
7	Indianapolis, IN	80	5.5	13.7	66.3%	6,600
8	Tucson, AZ	78	6.0	14.0	68.3%	3,639
9	Buffalo, NY	77	5.3	14.9	68.7%	5,755

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The field office in Cleveland tops the index, with a typical (median) citizenship application processing time of 4 months, and almost nobody waiting longer than 12.3 months. These are the fastest times in the nation, though they could grow in future years given that the Cleveland field office doesn't exhibit quite the highest backlog completion rate. (That honor goes to Portland, Maine, which ended the year with almost no applications left to process.)

On the bottom of the index is the field office in St. Paul, Minnesota, with a typical processing time of 15.1 months and some immigrants waiting nearly 2 years (23.5 months). The field office in Miami isn't much better, though, with a typical processing time of 16.2 months and a maximum of 21.2 months. Given the Miami field office's worst-in-the-nation backlog completion rate (30.1%), its processing times could grow to clinch the bottom spot next year.

Of course, relatively few immigrants filed citizenship applications in Cleveland (4,828) and Portland, Maine (1,089), while there was considerably more volume in Miami (16,609) and St. Paul (15,422).

But the correlation between field office index and application volume is fairly weak (r = -0.30). Plenty of high-volume field offices are near the top of the rankings, like Boston and San Bernardino, California, while low-volume field offices like Harlingen, Texas are near the bottom.

Perhaps even more perplexing is the variation within some large cities. As mentioned above, immigrants compelled to apply for citizenship through the downtown Miami field office (ranked No. 85) are in for a long wait, while it's relatively smooth sailing just 12 miles up the road in the Hialeah field office (ranked No. 18).

Some field offices are outliers in other ways, as well. The field offices in Fort Myers, Orlando, and West Palm Beach, Florida; Imperial, California; and Omaha, Nebraska, all denied citizenship applications at nearly twice the national average rate. Why this would be is beyond the scope of this report.

Which Cities Are Producing the Most New American Citizens?

For a subset of metro areas, it's possible to examine not only the *difficulty* of obtaining U.S. citizenship (which is largely a matter federal government activities), but also the *likelihood*. Many state and city government leaders, along with local nonprofit organizations, are hard at work to increase both the number of eligible immigrants applying for citizenship and their ability to clear the various hurdles (application fee, application quality, citizenship test readiness, etc.).

Some metro areas had far more success in naturalizing their eligible immigrant populations than others in 2017, as the following table shows:

Where Is Citizenship Surging?

Cities ranked by the share of their citizenship-eligible immigrant population that was approved for naturalization in 2017.

▲ RANKING	METRO AREA	ELIGIBLE POPULATION	% OF ELIGIBLE POPULATION APPROVED	MEXICO	CENTRAL AMERICA	SOUTH AMERICA	ASIA	AFRICA	EURO
1	Columbus, OH	23,456	20.6%	12.4%	3.6%	8.7%	38.2%	19.2%	13.4%
2	Cincinnati, OH-KY-IN	15,011	16.8%	11.7%	5.3%	8.9%	34.3%	9.9%	23.2%
3	Pittsburgh, PA	15,028	14.5%	4.0%	1.1%	10.1%	39.3%	6.4%	32.7%
4	Worcester, MA-CT	20,034	14.4%	2.6%	5.1%	27.1%	25.2%	12.2%	16.7%
5	Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH	158,516	13.9%	1.1%	9.3%	30.5%	26.1%	4.3%	20.5%
6	Indianapolis-Carmel-Anderson, IN	24,485	13.8%	32.4%	8.5%	8.3%	27.7%	6.8%	12.5%
7	Richmond, VA	15,977	13.8%	8.8%	15.4%	14.0%	32.5%	5.4%	20.1%
8	Detroit-Warren-Dearborn, MI	68,439	13.4%	12.2%	1.7%	4.1%	41.0%	3.3%	26.7%
9	Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	222,279	13.4%	4.1%	25.5%	17.5%	28.7%	11.9%	10.1%
10	Cleveland-Elyria, OH	18,908	13.3%	9.0%	2.3%	8.4%	32.5%	5.3%	36.4%

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Regions of origin reflect total citizenship-eligible population.

Chart: Boundless • Source: USCIS, DHS, and University of Southern California • Get the data

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Leading the pack are Columbus and Cincinnati, where the local share of immigrants approved for U.S. citizenship was unusually high (21% and 17%, respectively). The Boston and Washington metro areas also performed relatively well (13% and 14%, respectively), suggesting that large cities can make such gains as well as smaller ones. (The correlation between immigrant population size and naturalization rate is relatively weak: r = -0.26)

At the bottom of the ranking are Fresno, California and Houston, Dallas, and McAllen, Texas, where less than 5% of the eligible immigrant population naturalized in 2017. It is particularly remarkable to see Fresno in this position, since its USCIS

field office has relatively positive metrics for wait time and backlog completion. Conversely, the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area saw a respectable 12% of its eligible immigrant population approved for naturalization in 2017, despite having to contend with the slowest and least efficient field office in the country.

The University of Southern California Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration has a detailed map (https://dornsife.usc.edu/csii/eligible-to-naturalize-map/) with more information about the naturalization-eligible populations of most metro areas across the country. Unfortunately, the government does not currently provide enough data to assess the naturalization rate in every metro area, only those in the table above.

Naturalization and Region of Origin

Thanks to the University of Southern California data set mentioned above, it is possible to examine not only the size of the naturalization-eligible immigrant population in any given metro area, but also where in the world this population comes from. This data set provides seven categories of immigrant origin:

- Mexico
- Central America
- South America and the Caribbean
- Asia
- Africa
- Europe
- Canada and Oceania

Before presenting any findings about the relationship between region of origin and rate of naturalization, it's important to provide several caveats:

1. None of the correlations below represent a test of statistical significance; they are merely measurements of the strength of a linear relationship between two variables.
2. Correlation is not causality; the existence of a linear relationship between two variables does not establish that one causes the other, in part because there may well be other variables at play.
3. There is no moderate-to-strong correlation (r › 0.50) between region of origin and any of the factors contributing to the metro index (backlog completion, processing time, and field office distance). In other words, the federal government's quality of local service delivery does not appear to be correlated with (much less targeted toward) an immigrant population's particular region of origin.
4. The data below represent only one year (2017), and cannot on their own reveal a longstanding trend.

Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from Mexico

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from Mexico. The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months
Median wait over a year

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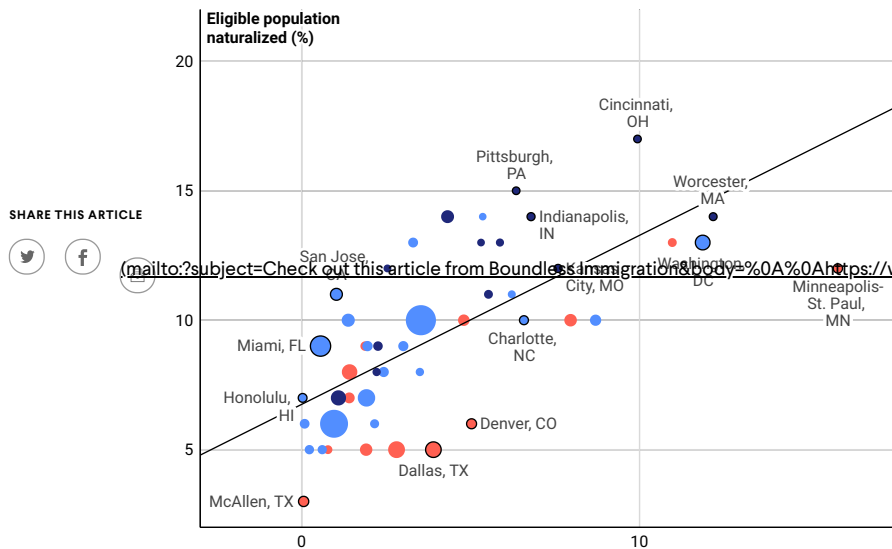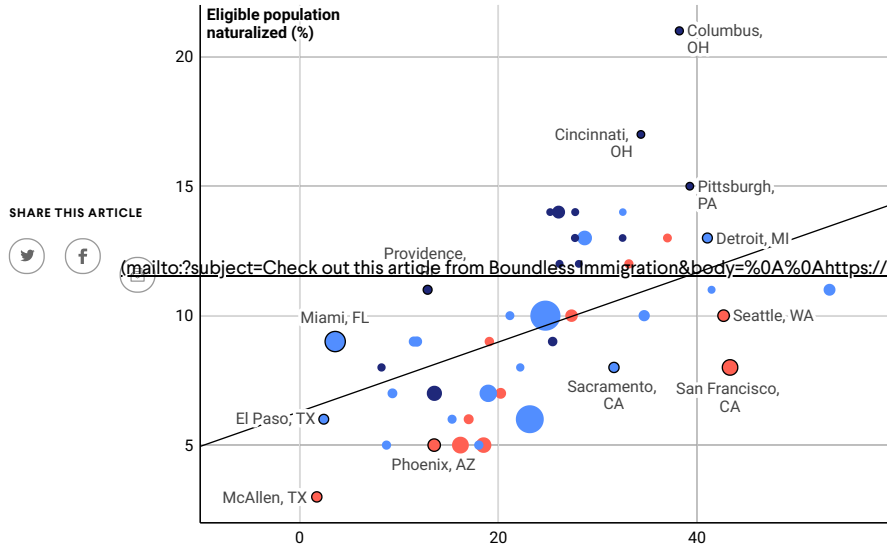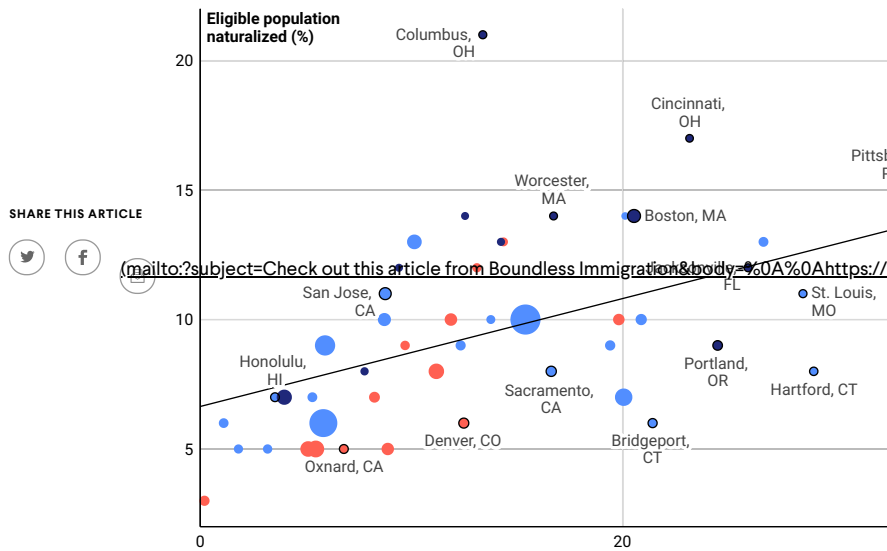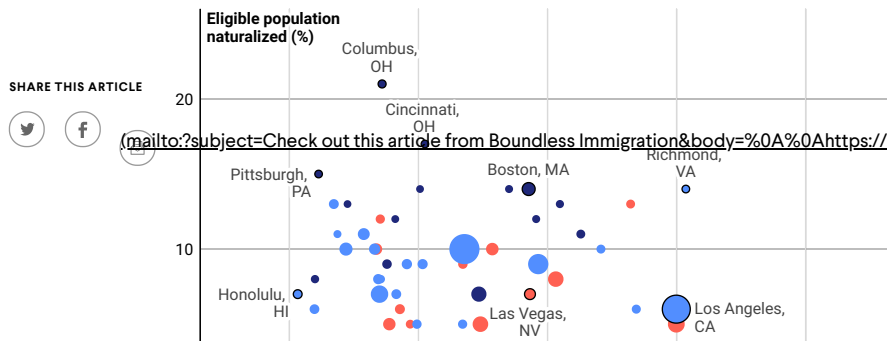
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There is a relatively strong negative correlation between a naturalization-eligible population's percentage of Mexican immigrants and its naturalization rate (r = –0.66).

Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from Africa

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from Africa. The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months
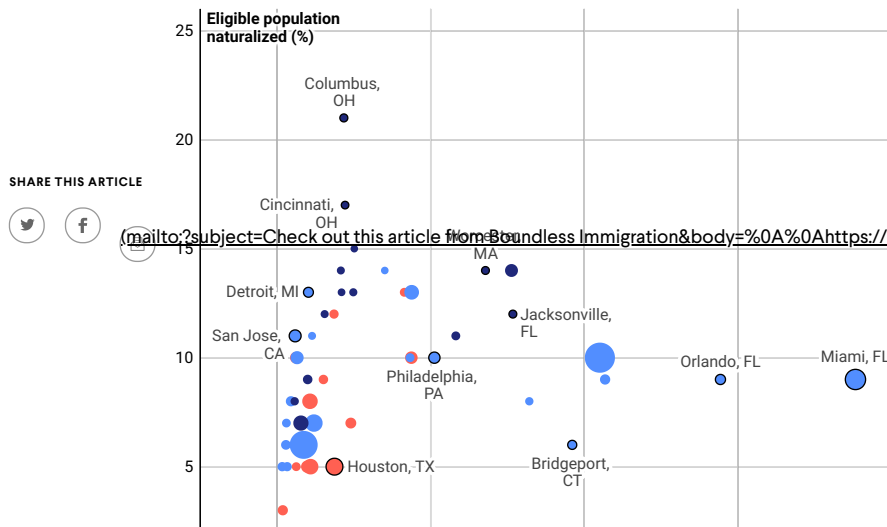Median wait over a year

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Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from Asia

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from Asia. The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months
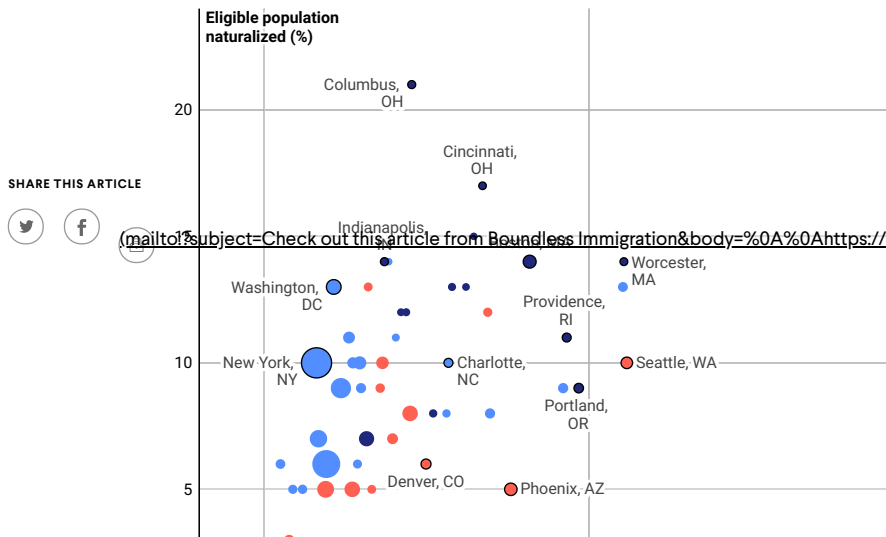Median wait over a year

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Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from Europe

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from Europe. The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months
Median wait over a year

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There is a relatively strong positive correlation between a naturalization-eligible population's percentage of African immigrants and its naturalization rate (r = 0.75).

This positive correlation with naturalization rate is not as strong for metro areas with a relatively high percentage of Asian immigrants (r = 0.50) or European immigrants (r = 0.52).

Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from Central America

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from Central America (excluding Mexico). The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months

Median wait over a year

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Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from South America and the Caribbean

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from South America and the Caribbean. The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months

Median wait over a year

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Naturalization Rate and Immigrants from Canada and Oceania

Share of the citizenship-eligible population naturalized in 2017 vs. that population's share of immigrants from Canada and Oceania. The size of a dot shows the total eligible population of a metro area.

(mailto:?subject=Check out this article from Boundless Immigration&body=%0A%0Ahttps://www.boundless.com/american-citizenship-report/)

Median wait between 7 and 12 months   Median wait under 7 months
Median wait over a year

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The correlation between naturalization rate and region of origin is too weak to establish a linear relationship for populations from Central America (r = 0.09), South America and the Caribbean (r = 0.15), and Canada and Oceania (r = 0.22).

Possible Drivers

The purpose of this report is to spot possible trends based on data, not to explain the cause or motivation behind those trends.

That said, it's important to note one factor that does *not* explain the above patterns: The desire to become a U.S. citizen.

"When asked, the vast majority of immigrant respondents to surveys say that they want to naturalize. Two national surveys of Hispanic immigrants found that more than 9 in 10 noncitizen Latinos would want to naturalize if they could. A survey of immigrant women born in Latin American, Asian, African, and Arab countries found that 84 percent of respondents wanted to be a U.S. citizen rather than remaining a citizen of their home country."
—*The Integration of Immigrants into American Society (https://www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society),* National Academy of Science (2015)

At the same time, there are well-established barriers to U.S. citizens that affect some communities more than others. For example, immigrants who came to the United States as refugees are more likely to naturalize (https://www.pnas.org/content/115/37/9175), and far more refugees arrived from Asia, Africa, and Europe over the past few decades (http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-

the-u-s/) than from Latin America. On the other hand, immigrants in "mixed-status" families, where at least one family member lacks immigration status, are less likely to naturalize. These are just two structural reasons why metro areas with a more predominant Mexican population might see lower naturalization rates than metro areas with more immigrants from Africa, Asia, or Europe.

Conclusion

It should be uncontroversial that in America, every immigrant who seeks U.S. citizenship and is eligible under the law should experience a fair and speedy naturalization process. Barriers to citizenship should certainly not depend on where in America an individual happens to live.

By illuminating national and local trends in new American citizenship, we hope that this report is useful to immigrants, advocates, and state and local government leaders seeking to make the naturalization process more navigable and equitable.

Going forward, Boundless will continue to watch for new trends in the data on U.S. citizenship:

- Will naturalization rates rise or fall, both nationally and locally?
- Will backlogs and wait times continue to rise?
- Will disparities among metro areas and USCIS field offices persist over time?

In addition, there are several federal government policy changes that could have a major impact on the ease or difficulty of obtaining U.S. citizenship.

- USCIS has announced plans to eliminate one of the most common eligibility factors for naturalization fee waivers (https://www.upi.com/US-seeks-to-reduce-waivers-for-immigration-fees/3231538595416/), which could significantly reduce applications by lower-income immigrants.
- USCIS has also proposed to change the naturalization application form (https://www.regulations.gov/document?D=USCIS-2008-0025-0136) in 2019, asking much more expansive questions and requiring many applicants to provide 10 years of detailed prior international travel records (rather than the longstanding status quo of 5 years). This change could have an effect on both application volume and field office efficiency.
- Also expected in 2019 is an overhaul of USCIS user fees (https://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/eAgendaViewRule?pubId=201810&RIN=1615-AC18) across the board. If the fee for naturalization goes up significantly, will this have the short-term effect of boosting citizenship applications as it has in years past? Will it have longer-term inequitable effects on who can afford to become a U.S. citizen?
- Many policy changes that are not directly targeted at U.S. citizenship can still slow down the naturalization process. After all, the USCIS field officers who conduct citizenship interviews (/immigration-resources/us-citizenship-interview/) have many other duties. Beginning in 2017, USCIS started requiring an in-person interview (https://www.uscis.gov/news/news-releases/uscis-to-expand-in-person-interview-requirements-for-certain-permanent-residency-applicants) for anyone applying for an employment-based green card (about 122,000 people each year) or family members of refugees and asylees applying for a green card from within the United States (about 46,000 people each year). At the end of 2018, USCIS effectively expanded the green card interview requirement (/blog/new-interview-requirement-for-many-spouses-of-u-s-citizens-green-card-holders/) for another 166,000 married couples (/immigration-resources/marriage-based-green-cards-explained/) each year. Absent a new hiring surge within USCIS, these policies seem likely to further exacerbate backlogs and wait times for U.S. citizenship applications.

If you have feedback on this report, or suggestions for what Boundless should include in future reports, please contact us at press@boundless.com (mailto:press@boundless.com).

Methodology

Data Sources

The following data sources were used in this report as the sources for each bulleted data type. Unless otherwise noted, each of these data sources was accessed on or around December 15, 2018.

Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2017. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics. "Table 20. Petitions for Naturalization Filed, Persons Naturalized, and Petitions for Naturalization Denied: Fiscal Years 1907 to 2017." https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2017/table20 (https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2017/table20)

- Number of citizenship applications filed and processed, FY1990-FY2009
- Denial rate, FY1990-FY2009

Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2017. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics. "Table 23. Persons Naturalized by Core Based Statistical Area (CBSA) of Residence: Fiscal Years 2015 to 2017." https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2017/table23 (https://www.dhs.gov/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2017/table23)

- Number of immigrants naturalized in FY2017, by metro area

Immigration and Citizenship Data. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. "Form N-400, Application for Naturalization, by Category of Naturalization, Case Status, and USCIS Field Office Location" [several quarters]. https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-studies/immigration-forms-data (https://www.uscis.gov/tools/reports-studies/immigration-forms-data)

- Number of citizenship applications filed, denied, approved, and pending at year-end, for each USCIS field office, FY2010-FY2018 (missing Q4 FY 2018)

Historical National Average Processing Time for All USCIS Offices. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/historic-pt (https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/historic-pt)

- National average processing times for N-400 and other forms, FY2014-FY2018

Archive Data Set: Form N-400 Naturalization Average Cycle Time. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
https://www.uscis.gov/archive/archive-reports/archive-data-set-form-n-400-naturalization-average-cycle-time (https://www.uscis.gov/archive/archive-reports/archive-data-set-form-n-400-naturalization-average-cycle-time)

- National monthly processing times (also called "cycle times"), FY2012-FY2013 (partial)

Check Case Processing Times. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/ (https://egov.uscis.gov/processing-times/)

- Median and maximum processing times for each field office, recorded each month between July and December 2018

Field Offices. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.
https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/find-uscis-office/field-offices (https://www.uscis.gov/about-us/find-uscis-office/field-offices)

- Required USCIS field office location based on applicant ZIP code

Interactive Map: Eligible-To-Naturalize Populations in the U.S. (2016). University of Southern California, Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration.
https://dornsife.usc.edu/csii/eligible-to-naturalize-map/ (https://dornsife.usc.edu/csii/eligible-to-naturalize-map/)

- Naturalization-eligible population size by metropolitan statistical area (MSA)
- Percentage of naturalization-eligible population by region of origin

Definition of Terms

Backlog completion: The number of citizenship applications processed within a fiscal year, divided by the sum of (a) the number of citizenship applications filed within the same fiscal year and (b) the year-end backlog as of the prior fiscal year (expressed as a percentage)

Citizenship application: Form N-400 (/immigration-resources/form-n-400-explained/), the application for naturalization administered by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

Denial rate: Within a given time period, the number of citizenship applications denied, divided by the number of citizenship applications processed

DHS: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Distance to field office: Number of miles between the largest city within a given metro area and the location of the field office required by USCIS for residents of that metro area, as estimated using Google Maps (if the required field office is within the metro area, the "distance to field office" is listed as zero)

Field office: The local office of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) where immigration officials conduct the citizenship interview; applicants for citizenship are assigned to a field office based on the ZIP code of their residence.

Filed: The number of citizenship applications received by USCIS within a given time period

Naturalization rate: The number of immigrants who naturalized in a given metro area (based on DHS data for FY2017) divided by the total estimated number of immigrants eligible for naturalization within that metro area (based on a methodology developed at the University of Southern California, published in 2016, and based on prior Census data)

Processed: The number of citizenship applications approved plus the number of citizenship applications denied by USCIS within a given time period

USCIS: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, a component agency of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Wait time / processing time (average): The national average processing time for a given form based on all field offices within a period of time, as estimated by USCIS

Wait time / processing time (max): The time it takes to complete 93% of cases for a given form within a given field office, as estimated by USCIS; for purposes of this report, this number is the 6-month average between July and December 2018.

Wait time / processing time (median): The time it takes to complete 50% of cases for a given form within a given field office, as estimated by USCIS; for purposes of this report, this number is the 6-month average between July and December 2018.

Year-end backlog: The number of citizenship applications listed "pending" (i.e. not processed) by USCIS at the end of a given fiscal year

Calculation of Rankings

Best Cities for Becoming a New American

The overall index is derived from three objective criteria for each metro area:

1. Backlog completion (as of FY2017)
2. Median wait time (6-month average between July and December 2018, when data was collected for this report)
3. Distance to field office

For a metro area with more than one field office (New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Boston, and Philadelphia), backlog completion is calculated based on the total number of applications filed, processed, and backlogged across all field offices within that metro area. Median wait time is averaged across all field offices within the metro area, weighted by the percentage of applications filed with each individual field office. Distance to field office is zero.

For a metro area with only one field office, backlog completion and median wait time reflect the values from that field office. Distance to field office is zero.

For a metro area with no field office, backlog completion and median wait time reflect the values from the field office required by USCIS for applicants from that metro area. Distance to field office is the number of miles between the largest city within the metro area and the location of the required field office, as estimated using Google Maps.

Each criterion was normalized as a percentage between the maximum/best (100%) and the minimum/worst (0%) value that appeared across all metro areas. For example, the normalized numbers for Jacksonville, Florida were 35% for backlog completion (relatively poor), 88% for wait time (relatively good), and 100% for field office distance (since there is a field office in Jacksonville).

The overall index value is the weighted average of these normalized numbers:

- Backlog completion: Weighted as 12.5%
- Median wait time: Weighted as 75.0%
- Distance to field office: Weighted as 12.5%

Wait time is deliberately upweighted, since this criterion is likely to be most salient for a citizenship applicant. Backlog completion, by comparison, is more of a warning signal of future wait times, and field office distance represents a potential one-time hassle to travel to the citizenship interview. In the event of a missing criterion, the overall index was reweighted accordingly.

The overall index value represents how close a given metro area is to the best observed values across all criteria. For example, Cleveland has an overall index of 95 points because this is the weighted average of its normalized backlog completion (62.8% as good as the best metro area, which happens to be Portland, Maine), wait time (100%, the best of all the metro areas), and distance to field office (100%, as is true for all metro areas that have their own field office).

Us(/what-you-get-with-boundless/plicible immigrants population of less than 10,000, and they have no USCIS field(/about/)   Log In(https://apply.boundless.com/users/sign_in)

Note that metro areas are not included if they have an estimated naturalization-
eligible immigrants (immigration-resources) Success stories USCIS field
office.

Where backlog completion is noted "n/a," USCIS provides data only for FY2017.

Best Field Offices for Becoming a New American

The overall index is derived from three objective criteria for each field office:

1. Backlog completion (as of FY2017)
2. Median wait time (6-month average between July and December 2018, when data was collected for this report)
3. Maximum wait time (6-month average between July and December 2018, when data was collected for this report)

Each criterion was normalized as a percentage between the maximum/best (100%) and the minimum/worst (0%) value that appeared across all field offices. For example, the normalized numbers for Sacramento, California were 29% for backlog completion (relatively poor), 64% for median wait time (better than average), and 83% for maximum wait time (relatively good).

The overall index value is the weighted average of these normalized numbers:

- Backlog completion: Weighted as 25.0%
- Median wait time: Weighted as 37.5%
- Maximum wait time: Weighted as 37.5%

Wait times are deliberately upweighted, since they are likely to be most salient for a citizenship applicant. Backlog completion, by comparison, is more of a warning signal of future wait times. In the event of a missing criterion, the overall index was reweighted accordingly.

The overall index value represents how close a field office is to the best observed values across all criteria. For example, the Cleveland field office has an overall index of 91% because this is the weighted average of its normalized backlog completion (63% as good as the best field office, which happens to be in Portland, Maine), median wait time (100%, the best of all the field offices), and maximum wait time (100%, the best of all the field offices).

Note that certain field offices were not included if USCIS provides no data on their operations for all or most years prior to FY2018. Where backlog completion is noted "n/a," USCIS provides data only for FY2017.

Cities Producing the Most New American Citizens

This ranking is not based on a derived index, but rather on one objective criterion:

Naturalization rate: The number of immigrants who naturalized in a given metro area (based on DHS data for FY2017) divided by the total estimated number of immigrants eligible for naturalization within that metro area (based on a methodology developed at the University of Southern California, published in 2016, and based on prior Census data).

Although the denominator may not represent the size of the naturalization-eligible population for each metro area in FY2017 precisely, it is a reasonable proxy.

The numerator is only available for the 50 metro areas where DHS provides naturalization data in its Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. It would not be accurate to derive this number from the USCIS field office data, since many field offices process applicants from more than one metro area. For example, in the Seattle metro area, DHS records 11,042 actual approved naturalizations for FY2017, while the number derived from USCIS data would have been 12,038. This is because the Seattle field office processes citizenship applications from immigrants in the surrounding metro areas as well.

Puerto Rico is listed in the DHS data but not the University of Southern California data, so this metro area could not be included in this index.

- Data points line up with the end of each fiscal year on the x-axis, because each year-end backlog represents a snapshot in time as of that moment.
- Data points for FY2018 are projections based on the only available data from USCIS as of this writing (Q1, Q2, and Q3 of FY2018).
- The year-end backlog for FY2018 was not estimated, because the actual number may turn out to be significantly different from a projection.
- The year-end backlogs for FY1990-2009 are estimated from DHS data on filing and processing volume. This means that the backlog completion values for FY1991-2010 are based in part on that estimated backlog value for each prior year.
- There are apparently no government processing time data publicly available for years prior to FY2012.

Scatterplots

- The correlation coefficient (r) only measures the strength of a linear relationship between two variables, where:
  - -1 means a perfect negative linear relationship
  - 0 means no linear relationship
  - 1 means a perfect positive linear relationship

- The correlation coefficient does not explain the fraction of variation in a linear regression (represented by r-squared), nor does it provide a measure of statistical significance.
- The slope line is included only where there is at least moderate correlation (r › 0.50) between the two variables on the x-axis and the y-axis. For purposes of this report, a correlation of r › 0.60 is described as "relatively strong."