

# Marriage Trends and Relationship Issues Among U.S. Immigrants: A Fact Sheet

## Background

For many years, immigrants have come to the United States for economic opportunities, religious and political freedom, and to make better lives for themselves and their families. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division reported that the United States has the largest number of international migrants of any country in the world.<sup>1</sup> This Fact Sheet describes some of what is known about legal U.S. immigrants, including demographic information, marriage and divorce trends, and unique challenges immigrant couples face in maintaining their relationships.

The U.S. Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey (ACS)<sup>2</sup> estimated 38 million foreign-born people are living in the United States, accounting for 12.5% of the nation's residents. Unlike the late 1800s and early 1900s when the majority of immigrants were European, by 2008 the majority of U.S. immigrants were born in either Latin America (53%) or Asia (27%), with only 13% immigrating from Europe. Of the foreign-born population age five and older, 15.5% speak only English at home while 84.5% speak a language other than English at home. Additionally, 52% speak English less than "very well." The majority of U.S. immigrants are between the ages of 25 and 44 (median age 40.8 years), slightly older than the total U.S. population (median age 36.9 years). Regarding educational attainment, most (67.5%) U.S. immigrants have achieved high school graduation or higher and 27.1% have attained a bachelor's degree or higher.



## Headlines/Trends

Nearly 13 percent (38 million) of the nation's residents are foreign-born. Fifty-eight percent of new legal permanent residents (this statistic includes minors) are married.<sup>3</sup> U.S. immigrants are more likely to be married and less likely to be divorced than their peers who are U.S. citizens. They are also much less likely than U.S. citizens to marry a spouse of a different race or ethnicity.

## Definitions

**Acculturation** – The adoption of the beliefs and behaviors of another culture.

**Family Reunification** – Admitting immigrants who already have family members in the United States; a goal of U.S. immigration policy. Including spouses, parents of citizens ages 21 and older, and unmarried children under 21.

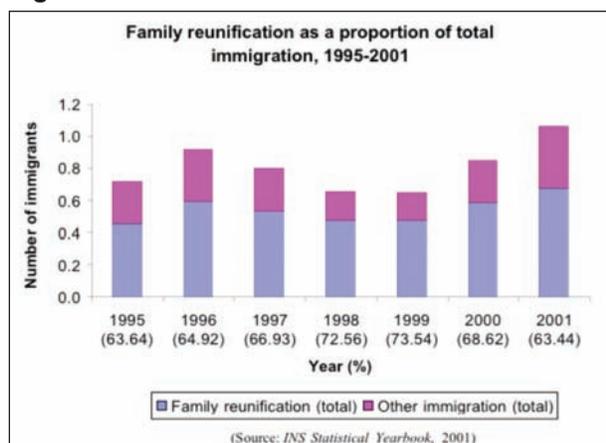
**Immigrant** – United States immigration law defines an immigrant as an individual legally admitted for permanent residence in the United States.

**Legal Permanent Resident** – The U.S. Department of Homeland Security defines *legal permanent residents* as foreign nationals granted the right to permanently reside in the United States. Legal permanent residents are frequently referred to as *immigrants* but are also known as *permanent resident aliens* and *green card holders*.

## Marriage and Divorce Trends

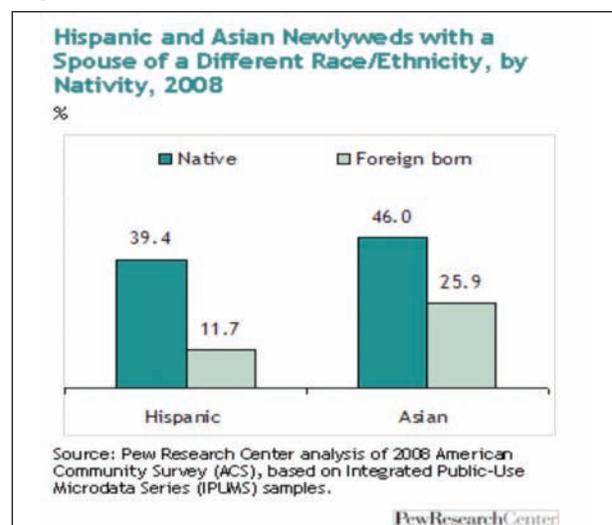
The 2008 American Community Survey (ACS) also reported that U.S. immigrants are more likely to be married (60%) and less likely to be divorced (7.3%) than the total U.S. population (50% married, 10.7% divorced). Some of these immigrants marry a U.S. citizen and then immigrate to the United States. Others immigrate to the United States and then get married. Although there are limited available statistics on the exact proportion of immigrants who fall into each of these categories, family reunification (i.e., Family-Sponsored Immigrants) is the largest channel through which individuals immigrate to the United States—a trend that has continued for several decades (see Figure 1). The U.S. Department of State concludes that of the 470,099 immigrant visas issued in 2008, the majority of recipients (51%) were spouses, sons or daughters (36%) of someone already in the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1<sup>5</sup>



Although some immigrants marry U.S. citizens of a different racial or ethnic background, there appears to be greater interest among recent immigrants in preserving traditional cultural norms (also see [Interracial Marriage and Relationships: A Fact Sheet](#)). According to a Pew Research Center analysis of the 2008 ACS, marrying a spouse of a different race or ethnicity was much more common among native-born citizens than among immigrants (see Figure 2). In fact, U.S.-born Hispanics were more than three times as likely as foreign-born Hispanics to marry a non-Hispanic. U.S.-born Asians were almost twice as likely as their foreign-born counterparts to marry a spouse of a different race or ethnicity. The U.S. Census Bureau<sup>6</sup> reported that in 2000, of the 8.7 million married-couple families that included at least one foreign-born spouse, the majority (5.5 million, approximately 63%) included two immigrants, while 3.2 million (nearly 37%) included one foreign-born spouse and one native spouse. These data suggest the majority of married U.S. immigrants either immigrate from their native country with a spouse, reunite with a spouse (through an Immediate Relative and Family-Sponsored Visa) who has immigrated before them, or marry their immigrant spouse after migrating to the United States.

Figure 2<sup>7</sup>



## Issues to Consider in Immigrant Marriages

Given the large and growing population of married U.S. immigrants, marriage education for this population merits attention from the marriage and relationship education (MRE) field. It is important to understand that U.S. immigrants encounter unique challenges to maintaining their relationships. For example, trying to integrate into U.S. culture while simultaneously preserving one's culture can strain a marriage. (See NHMRC Tip Sheet [Considering Culture in Marriage Education](#)).

### Acculturation

Acculturation is a familiar challenge that immigrant couples face; however, differences in how each partner experiences acculturation may cause stress within the relationship. One person may readily adopt the beliefs and behaviors of U.S. culture and expect similar behaviors from his/her partner. Conflicts may arise if the other partner is not ready for or accepting of his/her partner's changes.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, U.S. culture and its gender norms/expectations may be different from a couple's country of origin, adding a new stressor on the family.

### Extended Family

Many immigrants reside with extended family members when they first immigrate to the U.S. Extended family members may provide help with childcare, allowing the couple to seek outside employment. However, the living situation may also increase the potential for conflict. In some cases, important decisions are made collaboratively within the family, instead of independently by the couple.<sup>10</sup> The couple may face additional challenges if the extended family bases its recommendations on their current cultural reality without considering



the acculturation process of the couple.<sup>9</sup> In many cultures, the extended family is deeply intertwined with the couple's nuclear family emotionally (i.e., participates in the decision-making process) and physically (i.e., often will live with the couple or nearby); thus, the couple may plan on living with their extended family long term.

### Financial Stress

The U.S. Department of Labor compared the 2009 labor force characteristics of foreign-born citizens with their native-born counterparts and reported that the median weekly earnings of foreign-born full-time wage and salary workers were 79.1 percent of those of their native-born counterparts.<sup>11</sup> Financial concerns are a common source of stress within marital relationships and many studies reveal the link between financial strain and relationship satisfaction. In their sample of 4,997 married couples, Gudmunson and colleagues<sup>12</sup> found that a couple's financial strain strongly contributed to increased emotional distress in husbands and wives. Financial strain was also linked to couple disagreements and perceived marital instability.

### Intimate Partner Violence

Another formidable challenge to maintaining relationships is the incidence of domestic violence

among immigrants. Foreign-born and minority women are overrepresented among intimate partner violence victims. In fact, studies have found that:

- Foreign-born women were significantly more likely to be killed by their intimate partners than U.S.-born women.<sup>13</sup>
- Nearly half of the Latinas in one study reported an increase in partner violence since immigrating to the United States.<sup>14</sup>
- Of Korean and Vietnamese citizens, less-acculturated and less-educated individuals were more likely to endorse pro-violence attitudes.<sup>15</sup>

Although the incidence of domestic violence is not unique to the immigrant population, immigrants may be less likely to report abuse than non-immigrants due to language barriers<sup>16</sup> or fear of deportation. The abuser may threaten the immigrant economically (e.g., not allowing job training or schooling), sexually (e.g., telling the spouse that “as a matter of law” in the United States that he/she must continue to have sex on demand until they are divorced), or emotionally (e.g., threatening to remove his/her children from the United States)<sup>17</sup>—making the decision to leave the relationship more challenging. Consequently, marriage and relationship education providers should be aware of the intersection between domestic violence and immigrant status and be prepared to address it.

## Conclusion

Marriage and relationship education practitioners may want to consider the special circumstances surrounding immigrant marriages. Some of the challenges facing immigrant marriages are financial stress (as immigrants, on average, earn lower wages than citizens), integrating into U.S. culture, dealing

with extended family members in their day-to-day lives, and disproportionate levels of domestic violence.

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## Data Sources

- 1 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, Trends in International Migrant Stock: The 2008 Revision, UN database, (New York: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2009). Available at <http://esa.un.org/migration/index.asp?panel=1>
- 2 [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201PR&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201T&-qr\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201TPR&-TABLE\\_NAMEX=&-ci\\_type=B&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_&-reg=ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201:601;ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201PR:601;ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201T:601;ACS\\_2008\\_1YR\\_G00\\_S0201TPR:601&-\\_lang=en&-format=](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/IPTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-qr_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201&-qr_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201PR&-qr_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201T&-qr_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201TPR&-TABLE_NAMEX=&-ci_type=B&-ds_name=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_&-reg=ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201:601;ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201PR:601;ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201T:601;ACS_2008_1YR_G00_S0201TPR:601&-_lang=en&-format=)
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- 15 Kim-Goh, M. & Baello, J. (2008). Attitudes toward Domestic Violence in Korean and Vietnamese Immigrant Communities: Implications for Human Services. *Journal of Family Violence*, 23, 647-654.
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