Each year, hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals become naturalized citizens of the United States. Naturalization is the process by which U.S. citizenship is conferred upon a foreign citizen or national after he or she fulfills the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA). After naturalization, foreign-born citizens can enjoy the same benefits, rights and responsibilities that the Constitution gives to U.S. citizens, such as the right to vote. They can also apply for a U.S. passport to travel overseas. They receive U.S. government protection and assistance when abroad. This Office of Immigration Statistics Annual Flow Report presents information on the number and characteristics of foreign nationals ages 18 years and over who were naturalized during 2004.

Data were obtained from administrative records of US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) of the Department of Homeland Security. These records consist of information from applications for naturalization. In 2004, USCIS naturalized 537,151 persons. The leading countries of birth of new citizens were Mexico (63,840), India (37,975), and the Philippines (31,448). The largest number of persons naturalizing lived in California (145,593), New York (66,234), and Florida (43,795).

THE NATURALIZATION PROCESS

To be naturalized, an applicant generally must fulfill certain requirements set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act concerning age, lawful admission, and residence in the United States. These general naturalization provisions specify that a foreign national must: be at least 18 years of age; have been granted lawful permanent residence in the United States (be a legal permanent resident or LPR); and have resided in the country continuously for at least 5 years. Additional requirements include the ability to speak, read and write the English language; knowledge of the U.S. government and U.S. history; and good moral character.

Special provisions of naturalization law exempt certain applicants from one or more of the requirements of the general provisions. Spouses and children of U.S. citizens and military classes constitute the main categories of special naturalization. The majority of people naturalizing as spouses of U.S. citizens may do so in 3 years rather than the 5 years prescribed under the general provisions. Under the Child Citizenship Act of 2000, foreign-born children under 18 years of age, including adopted children, acquire U.S. citizenship automatically if they meet certain requirements. Among the requirements, the children must be lawful permanent residents and have at least one U.S. citizen parent. Acquisition of citizenship means citizenship acquired by law without the need to apply for citizenship. Previously, adopted children were required to apply for citizenship while children who immigrated with their parents derived U.S. citizenship through the naturalization of their parents. In addition, under certain conditions, children of a U.S. citizen who resides abroad may be naturalized. Under certain other conditions, applicants who served honorably during wartime and other conflicts may naturalize without prior admission to permanent resident status. Also, they need not have resided in the United States for a particular length of time. Aliens with lawful permanent resident status who have served honorably in the Armed Forces of the United States also are entitled to certain exemptions from the general naturalization requirements.

Every applicant for naturalization who is 18 years of age or older must file an N-400 Application for Naturalization. All persons filing these applications who meet the preliminary documentary requirements must be interviewed by officers from USCIS to determine their eligibility to naturalize. During the interview the officer verifies the applicant’s knowledge and understanding of the English language as well as the history and government of the United States. Those applicants found qualified are scheduled for an oath ceremony before a judge or USCIS district director.

DATA

The data presented in this report consist of demographic information taken from the N-400 application. This information includes: date and country of birth; gender; marital status; state and metropolitan area of residence; date of permanent residence; and section of applicable naturalization law. The data were obtained primarily from automated case tracking systems, but if not otherwise available, from the Central Index System of USCIS.
Since 1996, the annual number of persons naturalizing has not always tracked the trend in the number of persons applying for naturalization because of an application processing backlog. At the end of 2004, there were 653,000 naturalization applications pending a decision. Caution should therefore be exercised in drawing conclusions from these data about trends in the demand to naturalize and in the demographic composition of persons naturalizing.

**RESULTS**

The number of persons naturalizing in the United States increased 16 percent to 537,151 in 2004 from 463,204 in 2003 (see Table 1, Figure 1). However, the average annual number of persons naturalizing was 11 percent lower during 2000 to 2004 (614,211) than in the previous five-year period of 1995 to 1999 (686,801).

**Link with Legal Immigration**

The number of persons naturalizing each year is determined partly by trends in legal immigration in preceding years. Because most legal permanent residents become eligible to naturalize after they fulfill a five-year residency requirement, naturalizations typically lag behind legal immigration. In addition, not all legal permanent residents naturalize. Among all persons ages 16 and over who became legal permanent residents between 1973 and 1989, only 57 percent had naturalized by the end of 2004.2

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2 Calculated from matched legal immigrant and naturalization records from USCIS.
Historical Trend

Naturalizations increased from an annual average of less than 120,000 during the 1950s to 210,000 during the 1980s (see Figure 1). During the 1990s, naturalizations rose sharply due to several factors. These include the naturalization of nearly 1 million of the 2.7 million undocumented immigrants legalized under the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, legislative efforts to restrict public benefits for noncitizens, and a program requiring replacement of permanent resident cards, which led many legal permanent residents to naturalize.

Until the 1970s, the majority of persons naturalizing were born in European countries. With increased legal immigration from Asian countries, the arrival of Indo-Chinese refugees in the 1970s, and the historically higher naturalization rate of Asian immigrants, the regional origin of new citizens shifted from Europe to Asia. Asia has been the leading region of origin of new citizens in every year since 1976, except during 1996 to 2000 when IRCA legalization immigrants, nine-tenths of whom were from North American countries, naturalized in large numbers.

Region and Country of Birth

In 2004, 41 percent of persons naturalized were born in Asia compared with 28 percent from North American countries and 17 percent from European countries.

The leading country of birth of persons naturalizing was Mexico (12 percent), followed by India (7.1 percent), the Philippines (5.9 percent), Vietnam and China (each 5.1 percent). The top 10 countries represented 48 percent of new naturalized citizens in 2004 (see Table 2).

State and Metropolitan Areas of Residence

In 2004, 76 percent of persons naturalized were residents of 10 states. California was home to the largest percentage of persons naturalizing (27 percent), followed by New York and Florida (see Table 3).

Of all new citizens in 2004, 44 percent lived in 10 metropolitan areas (see Table 4). The leading metropolitan areas of residence were New York (10 percent), Los Angeles-Long Beach (9.7 percent), and Chicago (5.2 percent).

Gender, Age, and Marital Status

The majority of persons naturalizing are female. In 2004, females accounted for 54 percent of persons naturalizing (see Table 5).

More than one-half (54 percent) of new citizens were between ages 25 to 44 years. The median age of all persons naturalizing was 38 years. Persons ages 65 years and over accounted for 8.1 percent of naturalizations in 2004 (see Table 6).
Two-thirds (65 percent) of persons naturalizing in 2004 were married and 22 percent were single (see Table 7). In addition, 6.2 percent were widowed, and 4.8 percent were divorced or separated.

**Years in Immigrant Status**

The median number of years of residence between the date of legal immigration and the date of naturalization was 8 years among persons naturalized in 2004 (see Table 8). African and European-born immigrants spent the least time in legal immigrant status (7 years), followed by immigrants from Asia and South America (8 years), Oceania (9 years) and North America (11 years).

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