



Similarities, and Crucial Differences, Among Immigrant Households in Philadelphia

English proficiency and language access underlie many distinctions from U.S.-born residents

Overview

Immigrant households in Philadelphia have a lot in common with those headed by U.S.-born residents, but there are some telling differences. Immigrant-headed households tend to have more members—sometimes including spouses, children, and grandparents—and often live in smaller homes. They are also more likely to be burdened by housing costs that are higher than they can easily afford.

Not surprisingly, one of the biggest differences is that immigrant households sometimes have fewer English speakers at home, and those in the household who have a command of the language are often tasked with navigating U.S. immigration laws for themselves or their family members. They may also have to adapt to the U.S. system of local services and government functions, which are often quite different from what they were accustomed to in their countries of origin. All of this can cause stress that U.S.-born residents don't face. For example, immigrants may struggle to understand their household bills or doctors' instructions provided in English, leading them to sometimes rely on their young children as translators—a practice that can recast established family roles.¹

This fact sheet, which is part of The Pew Charitable Trusts' [series on Philadelphia's immigrants](#), looks at the composition and characteristics of immigrant households in recent years, using detailed survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau. This analysis aims to expand understanding of these households in Philadelphia, the family dynamics within them, and how immigrant families access resources and services. A companion piece examines foreign-born Philadelphians' neighborhoods, social networks, and civic infrastructure.

Household and family composition

Although most immigrants come to the United States as adults, most of their children are born in this country, making them U.S. citizens. This largely explains why adults make up a bigger share of Philadelphia's immigrant population and why they tend to be nearly a decade older than Philadelphians born in the U.S., with a median age of 42.2 compared with 33.1, according to census data from the 2018-22 period. (Household figures in this report do not include people living in what the Census Bureau calls "group quarters," such as dormitories, care facilities, prisons, and shelters owned and operated by an organization.)

Immigrants also are more likely than U.S.-born residents to live with relatives, which reflects the reliance many foreign-born Philadelphians have on family support in their adopted city, according to various studies.² The average size of immigrants' families and households in Philadelphia was larger than those of U.S.-born residents. And immigrant-led households were more likely to include grandparents or children; nearly half had at least one child at home (often born in the U.S.), compared with a third of households headed by U.S.-born residents, according to Pew's analysis of census data.

Immigrant heads of household in Philadelphia were twice as likely as their U.S.-born counterparts to have a spouse in the same household or living elsewhere, including abroad. Most married immigrants in Philadelphia—about 9 in 10—were married to other immigrants, with around half of those marriages to noncitizens and the rest to naturalized citizens. Marriages to people born in the U.S. were relatively infrequent. Under U.S. law, noncitizens who marry citizens—whether naturalized or U.S.-born—are eligible for permanent U.S. residency; how much this affects marriage rates in Philadelphia was unclear.

Despite sharing a home with more people than the average household headed by a U.S.-born resident, Philadelphia's immigrant-headed households had fewer rooms per person. Their homes were more than three times as likely to average more than one person per room (7.4% vs. 2.1%). That share rose over the preceding decade, although it was lower than the share in most of the nine comparison cities we examined—Baltimore; Boston; Denver; Minneapolis; New York; Portland, Oregon; San Jose, California; Seattle; and Washington. (In most cases, federal guidelines define a dwelling as overcrowded when it has more than one person per room.³)

Immigrants' homeownership rates were roughly the same as those for U.S.-born residents, but foreign-born homeowners were more likely to face housing costs exceeding 30% of their income, a level that the federal government defines as "cost-burdened."

Table 1

Composition of Households Headed by Foreign-Born or U.S.-Born Residents, 2018-22

Immigrants were more likely than U.S.-born Philadelphians to live with spouses and relatives

Household characteristics	Share of households headed by a U.S.-born citizen	Share of households headed by an immigrant
Married, spouse lives in household	25%	49%
Married, spouse does not live in household	2%	5%
Married, spouse is foreign-born noncitizen	2%	42%
Married, spouse is foreign-born naturalized citizen	2%	50%
Married, spouse is U.S.-born citizen	96%	7%
Two generations in household	32%	44%
At least one child of head of household, any age and nativity	32%	46%
Number of people in family, on average	3.1	3.4
Number of people in household, on average	2.3	2.8
Median number of rooms	5.6	5.0
More than one person per room, on average	2.1%	7.4%
Homeowner's cost burden exceeds 30% of income	25.8%	30.9%
Renter's cost burden exceeds 30% of income	48.1%	50.7%

Notes: Members of the household may be from a generation that is either older or younger than the one to which the head of household belongs. Rooms include bedrooms, living rooms, and kitchens but not bathrooms. See methodology for more information. Percentages have a margin of error ranging from plus or minus 0.6 percentage points to plus or minus 1.6 percentage points. Numbers have margins of error ranging from plus or minus 0.01 decimal points to plus or minus 0.05 decimal points.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, five-year estimates, 2018-22, from IPUMS USA; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, five-year estimates, 2018-22, Table S0502: Selected Characteristics of the Foreign-Born Population by Period of Entry Into the United States

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Sources of income

Having more household members often means having more sources of income as well. In the 2018-22 period, the average immigrant-headed household in Philadelphia had 1.26 members in the labor force, more than the 1.04 workers in the average household led by a U.S.-born resident. Immigrants were also more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to be in their prime working years, ages 25-54 (57% vs. 40%), which is why a bigger share of immigrant-led households reported income from wages and earnings than native-led households did (84% vs. 74%).

At the same time, a smaller share of immigrant-led households in Philadelphia got income from retirement nest eggs than U.S.-born households did (30% vs. 50%). That was a result of several factors: Immigrants tend to have

lower earnings and accumulate fewer working years in the United States, and they are less likely than U.S.-born workers to hold jobs with pension benefits. In addition, a smaller share of immigrants than U.S.-born workers qualify for Social Security benefits, and noncitizens without permanent resident status don't qualify at all, even though some pay into the system via withholding at their jobs.⁴

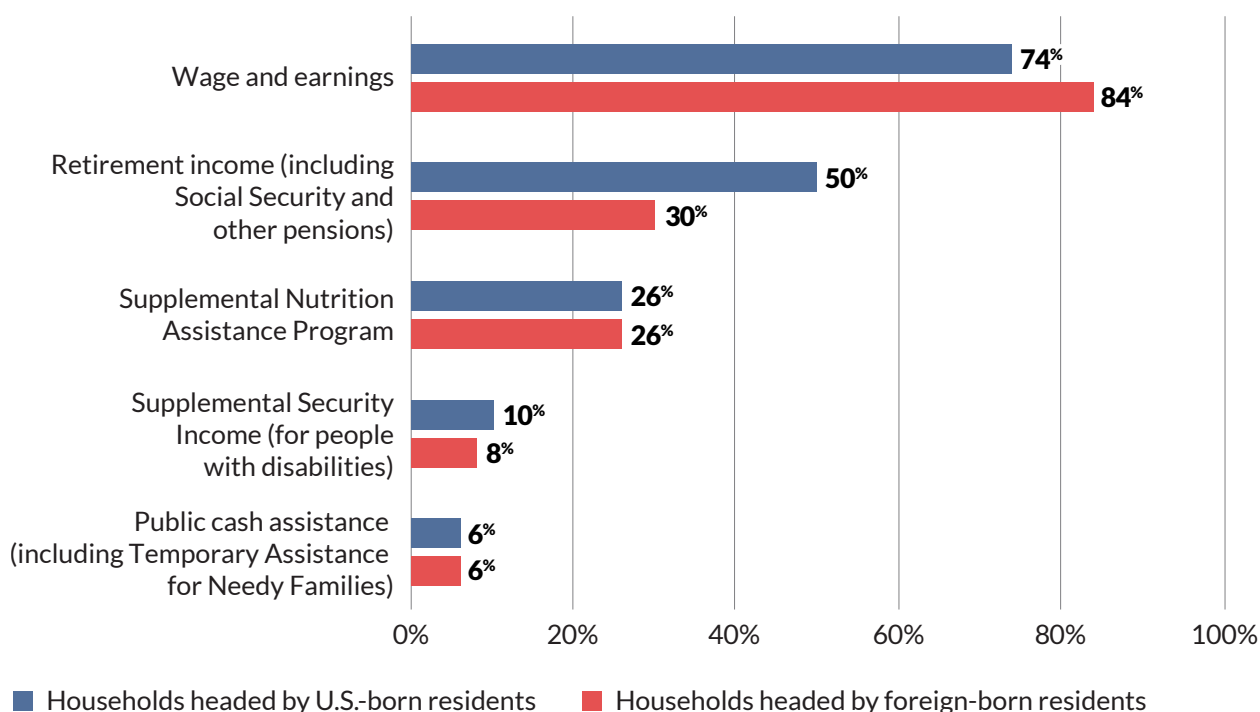
For many years, for foreign-born and U.S.-born residents alike, the median household income has been relatively low in Philadelphia compared with other cities. And the share of Philadelphia households living below the poverty line has been relatively high for both groups as well.

Some of these immigrant-led households don't qualify for federal assistance through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly referred to as "food stamps") or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF, also known as "cash assistance"). However, immigrants who have U.S.-born children and meet the income requirements are eligible to obtain benefits regardless of the head of household's residency status. In the 2018-22 period, a similar share of immigrant-led and native-led households in Philadelphia reported receiving SNAP and TANF benefits. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1

Share of Households Receiving Income From Select Sources, 2018-22

Philadelphia's foreign-born residents more likely to get money from jobs; U.S.-born residents more likely to get money from retirement income



Notes: Margins of error range from plus or minus 0.3 percentage points to plus or minus 1.5 percentage points.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, five-year estimates, Table S0501: Selected Characteristics of the Native and Foreign-Born Populations

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Spotlight on children

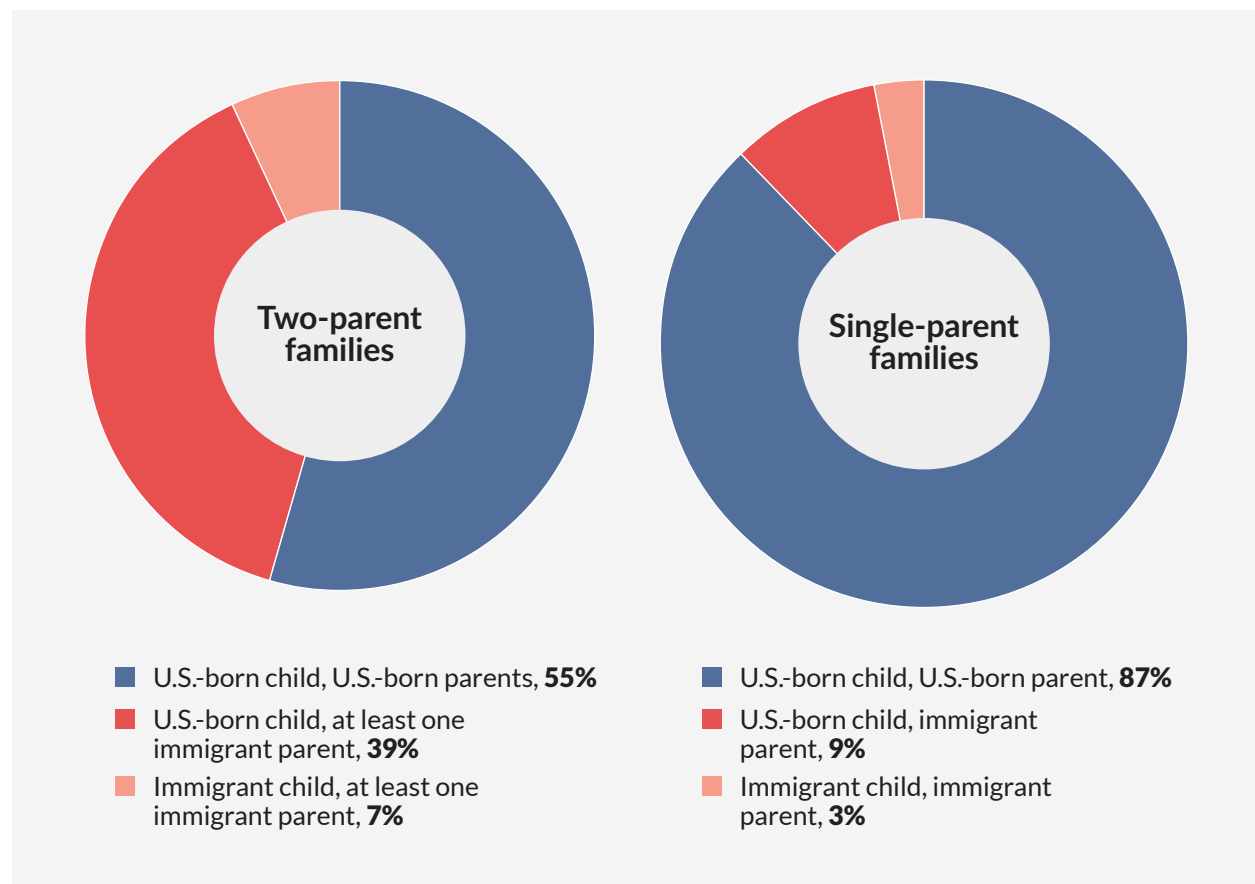
Adults have led the immigrant influx in Philadelphia and nationally, but their children and grandchildren have extended and expanded its impact. For children born abroad and those born to immigrants in the United States, the experience of acculturation and integration has been shown to have marked effects on the trajectory of their lives, including stronger academic achievement compared with children of U.S.-born parents.⁵

In 2022, around 83,000 Philadelphians younger than 18 had at least one foreign-born parent, according to Pew's analysis of census data. They represented around 28% of all children in the city. And 83% of children whose parents were immigrants were themselves U.S. citizens, having been born in the United States. In 2022, nearly four times as many children of immigrants lived in two-parent households than in single-parent homes: 46% vs. 12%. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

Foreign-Born and U.S.-Born Children in Philadelphia, 2022

Most children of immigrants were born in the United States



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, one-year estimates, 2022, Table B05009: Age and Nativity of Own Children Under 18 Years in Families and Subfamilies by Number and Nativity of Parents

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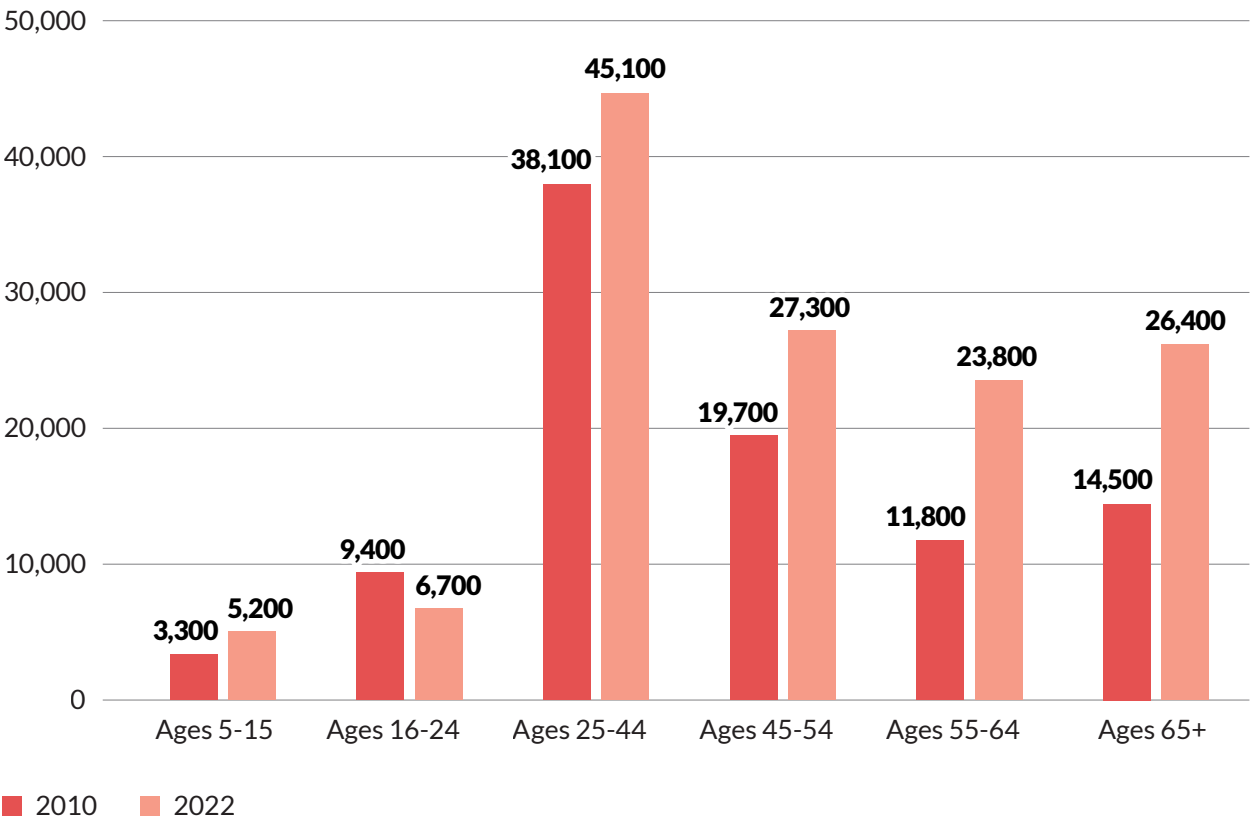
The importance of language access

Language access and English proficiency are key to the integration of immigrants and their children into the fabric of life in Philadelphia. Although they can and do thrive in their native languages, an inability to communicate in English can discourage immigrants and immigrant-rich neighborhoods from engaging with the broader society. Language-access services help with communication and access to vital information and city services, but growth in the number of speakers and languages has sometimes outpaced organizations’ and facilities’ ability to provide these services.

From 2010 to 2022, the population of foreign-born Philadelphians over the age of 5 who reported speaking English less than “very well”—which is how limited English proficiency, or LEP, is defined—grew 39%, to around 134,600. (Another nearly 48,000 people with limited English proficiency were U.S.-born, coming mainly from Puerto Rico.) All but one age group of Philadelphia residents with limited English proficiency increased in number over that decade, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3
Foreign-Born Philadelphians With Limited English Proficiency by Age Group, 2010 and 2022

Demand for language services and language training is also increasing



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, one-year estimates, 2022, from IPUMS USA

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One side effect of an increase in the number of people with limited English proficiency and the demand for language access is the corresponding increase in the number of young children who serve as translators or interpreters. Foreign-born children of immigrants typically pick up English more readily than their parents do, while U.S.-born children of immigrants usually speak English fluently. In either case, adults may rely on their children for everyday translation tasks, from explaining bills to speaking with a doctor. This familial task, known as “language brokering,” has been shown to have both positive and negative implications for a child’s well-being, depending on the circumstances, people’s national origins, and even the children’s gender. For example, research shows that some immigrant children who translated their parents’ confidential medical records ended up having stressful and negative relationships with the adults, while other children found that the experience fostered bonding and felt empowering. The practice can also hurt children’s academic performance, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, however, language brokering also increases cross-cultural integration and cultural identity, with some effects differing by race and ethnicity.⁶ The federal Affordable Care Act bans the use of children as interpreters by health care providers, and federal civil rights laws require health care providers to offer a translation of their services if the patient needs it, except in emergencies when a professional translator is not available.⁷ However, enforcement of these laws has been unclear.

Figuring out just how often children in Philadelphia are called upon to act as interpreters for their family members is difficult at best. In 2022, an estimated 84,000 households in the city reported having at least one immigrant member with limited English proficiency. Of those, an estimated 17,500 to 26,600 households—around 12% to 18% of all households with immigrants—also had at least one person under the age of 18 who was able to speak English “very well” and could conceivably be asked to translate or interpret. (These numbers may include households with another adult English speaker but do not count households that include U.S.-born individuals with limited English proficiency, such as some people born in Puerto Rico.)

“Language access in the city is often one-directional, through pamphlets and other handouts, so parents are often forced to rely on children to interact effectively with systems and services,” said Emma Restrepo, founder of 2PuntosPlatform, a Philadelphia-based bilingual community newsroom and collective. “And the school district is the point of entry, because if parents—especially Mom—can be successful there, then the family can inherit a brighter future.”

The need for language assistance in Philadelphia can be seen in the number of requests made via the city government’s phone lines. In fiscal years 2022 and 2023, the city fulfilled 212,655 requests for spoken interpretations and written translations into English from 114 languages, according to the city’s Office of Immigrant Affairs.⁸ Most of those requests were made to the Department of Public Health and the Managing Director’s Office for help with 911 emergency calls. Separately, the School District of Philadelphia reported growth in its English Language Learner programs for students and language services for parents.⁹

Each city department must have a language access plan to ensure that its services are available in different languages, but officials told Pew that Philadelphia lacks a centralized system for monitoring and updating the documents. A review of 53 plans [posted on the city’s official website](#) shows that, as of June 2024, 66% were dated 2019 or later. This lack of a centralized system was not unique to Philadelphia: Pew compared Philadelphia with nine other cities (see methodology) and found little centralization of funding or updating of departmental language access plans in any of the cities.

A companion piece in this series examines Philadelphia immigrants’ neighborhoods, social networks, public safety, and community organizations. For each household, the immigrant experience in Philadelphia is shaped by the demographic realities and housing conditions of parents and children, as well as their ability to access services—and the government’s obligation and ability to provide them.

Endnotes

- 1 Umme Orthy, “Millions of Children Translate for Their Immigrant Families. I Am One of Them,” *Chalkbeat Philadelphia*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/philadelphia/2022/5/18/23061616/translators-child-language-broker-student-voices/>.
- 2 Mary C. Waters and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, eds., “Family Dimensions of Immigrant Integration,” in *The Integration of Immigrants Into American Society* (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2015), <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/21746/chapter/10>.
- 3 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Measuring Overcrowding in Housing,” 2008, https://archives.huduser.gov/periodicals/ResearchWorks/march_08/RW_vol5num3t4.html. The HUD research found consistently “higher rates of overcrowding among Hispanics, renters, foreign-born noncitizens, Westerners, lower-income families, and central city dwellers.”
- 4 Purvi Sevak and Lucie Schmidt, “Perspectives: Immigrants and Retirement Resources,” *Social Security Bulletin* 74, no. 1 (2014): <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v74n1/v74n1p27.html>. See also David Love and Lucie Schmidt, “The Comprehensive Wealth of Older Immigrants and Natives,” *Social Security Bulletin* 79, no. 4 (2019): <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v79n4/v79n4p25.html#:~:text=Because%20Social%20Security%20rules%20link,not%20be%20eligible%20for%20benefits>.
- 5 Lingxin Hao and Han S. Woo, “Distinct Trajectories in the Transition to Adulthood: Are Children of Immigrants Advantaged?,” *Child Development* 83, no. 5 (2012): 1623-39, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22966927/>.
- 6 Yishan Shen et al., “Language Brokering and Immigrant-Origin Youth’s Well-Being: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *The American Psychologist* 77, no. 8 (2022): 921-39, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36190758/>.
- 7 Scott Brown, “Beyond Their Years: The Legal and Emotional Implications of Child Interpreters,” *LanguageLine Solutions*, April 10, 2024, <https://www.language.com/blog/beyond-their-years-the-legal-and-emotional-implications-of-child-interpreters>. See also “Limited English Proficiency,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/limited-english-proficiency/index.html>.
- 8 “PHL Language Services Usage,” City of Philadelphia Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2023, <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/51923768a6b14d5bb773bfcc1cf74cd1/>.
- 9 The School District of Philadelphia, “English Learner Experiences in SDP: Enrollment Trends, Linguistic Diversity, and Supports for Students,” 2023, <https://www.philasd.org/research/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2023/09/September-2023-Research-Roundup-EL-Support.pdf>.

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