

Survey of US Immigrants: Financial Gaps & Opportunities in the Citizenship Process

An unprecedented survey gets to the root of why immigrants seeking US citizenship often stop short of fulfilling their American dream.





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About the Survey

One Percent for America (OPA) completed a national blind survey of immigrants living in the US to understand better the challenges and opportunities in becoming a naturalized US citizen. This report's data and findings offer an unprecedented view into the experience of seeking citizenship from the first-hand perspective of noncitizen and recently naturalized immigrants.

Between September 10 and September 29, 2021, OPA surveyed 1,238 immigrants through the Qualtrics enterprise platform and then independently ran several focus groups. The survey criteria: respondents must reside in the US, be 18–60 years old, and be noncitizens or have been naturalized between 2016 and 2021. The self-administered online survey comprised 33 questions offered in English and Spanish. Qualtrics used four certified panel providers and capped total respondents identifying as visa holders at 20% of the final number of respondents to ensure the inclusion of other noncitizen populations.

Respondents represented a diverse set of demographics. Their responses indicate the hurdles to citizenship are prevalent across the US immigrant population.

❖ **1,238**
respondents

❖ **49**
49 states +
US territories

❖ **75%**
fall into income categories
between \$50,000 and
\$200,000+



New data reveals insights into immigrant naturalization delays—and they are not what you think.

9 million immigrants are eligible for US citizenship, yet 91% do not proceed with their applications. Why? We wanted to find out.

What you need to know about our findings: The lack of accessible financial resources for immigrants has kept many prospective citizens from completing their US naturalization process. It's not all about processing backlogs. A significant barrier: noncitizens' limited access to fast, low-cost financing options for their government application fees.

The data in this first-of-its-kind report reveals that the upfront payment requirement of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) application fees is a primary deterrent preventing prospective US citizenship applicants from realizing their American dream. Respondents were unequivocally motivated to naturalize, yet without access to fair credit, they face a difficult choice: Should they stall their naturalization process? Or should they proceed using high-interest financing they know will saddle them with debt?

What they told us across all demographics: access to fast, low-cost financial options would empower them to pursue their goal of US citizenship more rapidly.

3 critical findings:

88%

of noncitizen respondents¹ said they are “extremely interested/very interested” in becoming a US citizen.

2

Two top challenges among all respondents: length of application process and citizenship application fees.

87%

of recently naturalized citizens borrowed funds to pay for their citizenship fees; 97% of noncitizens said they would consider borrowing.

¹ Noncitizen respondents include those who hold green cards, visas, or Temporary Protected Status (TPS); undocumented immigrants; and those who are part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.



About the Author

One Percent for America is a nonprofit, self-sustaining online platform built to smooth the immigration process through low-cost financing for citizenship applications. OPA empowers immigrants on their path to citizenship by immediately providing 1% loans for USCIS application fees.



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OPA is sponsored by BlueHub Capital (BHC), a national, mission-driven, nonprofit community development finance organization focused on building healthy communities where low-income people live and work. BHC uses innovative financial tools and has deployed over \$2.4 billion (and leveraged over \$12 billion) in capital to support projects that make communities more vibrant places to live. BHC has four distinct programs: BlueHub Loan Fund (community development financing), BlueHub SUN (foreclosure relief), BlueHub Energy (clean energy access) and One Percent for America (citizenship financing).

To learn more about OPA, please visit www.onepercentforamerica.org.



What we Learned

Our most significant and telling finding from our research: paying USCIS's upfront application fees is a primary concern and stumbling block for motivated prospective US citizenship applicants. If there were a safe, low-cost means of borrowing funds for USCIS fees, the majority of eligible noncitizens would proceed with an application. While the fees are generally seen as reasonable—only 18% of respondents report USCIS fees are “far too expensive”—the challenge is paying them upfront and in full at the time of application.

Based on our findings, we see that immigrants have two predominant paths available to them. Many choose to avoid debt of any kind and save for the full amount, which stalls many applications. Or, they move forward, often turning to high-interest financing that can burden them with debt.

What are USCIS fees?

US Citizenship and Immigration Services requires individuals seeking US citizenship to pay fees before completing their naturalization process. These government application processing fees are roughly between \$500 and \$1,200 unless an individual qualifies for a fee waiver. These figures are in addition to other costs associated with naturalization, which can add up to thousands of dollars.



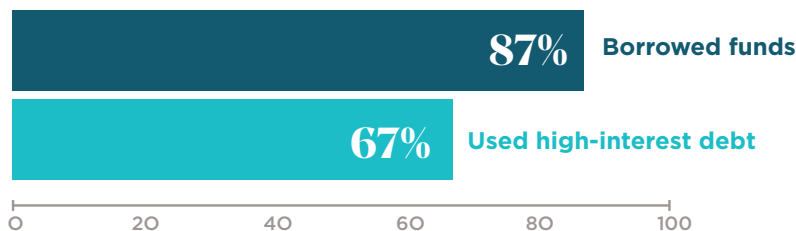
Survey respondents are highly motivated to pursue citizenship in the US but face a major financial roadblock: quick, affordable financing for USCIS application fees.



The Data

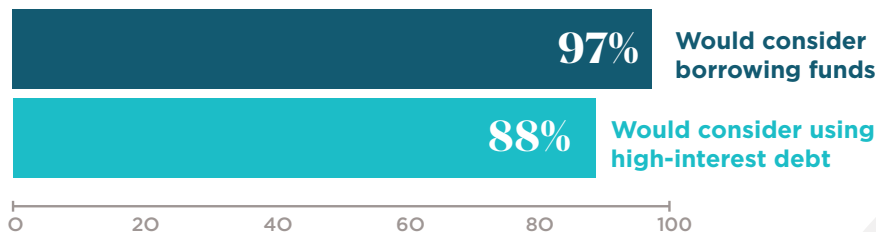
The survey results show that noncitizens are resorting to borrowing money to finance their dream of citizenship, even if it means incurring high-interest debt. Indeed, 87% of recently naturalized survey respondents indicated they borrowed funds to cover USCIS fees, with 67% overall having tapped high-interest financing (including credit card and payday loan/cash advance). This response was repeated across income levels. The upfront cost of a citizenship application represents a challenge across all demographics.

Recently naturalized respondents said they used debt to help pay their USCIS fees.



Similarly, 97% said they would consider borrowing funds to pay their USCIS fees. 88% said they would consider taking on high-interest debt to do so.

97% of noncitizens indicated they would consider borrowing funds to pay their USCIS fees.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“It is very expensive, but it’s just one payment. You just have to be prepared for it. You have to make the investment. Even if it hurts, you have to make the payment.” – Florangel L.

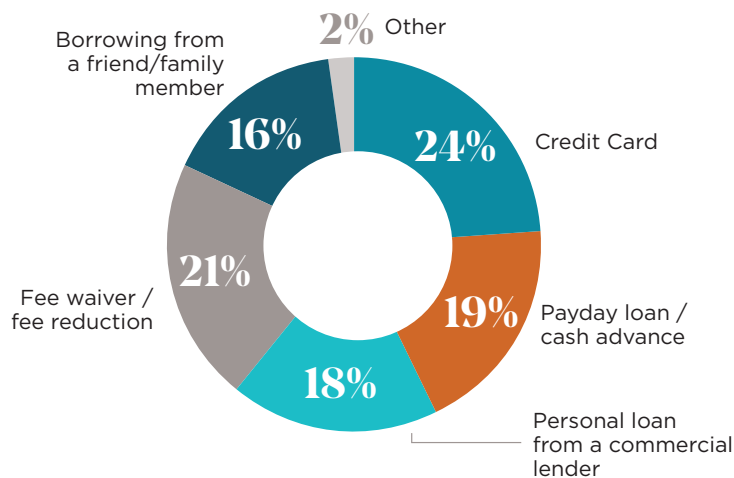


When asked more specifically to choose the types of debt they would use, 61% of noncitizen responses indicate respondents would likely turn to commercial debt to help pay their USCIS application fees. Unfortunately, 43% of responses indicated respondents would consider high-interest options. Only 16% of the responses showed interest in borrowing from a friend or family member.

The takeaway: noncitizens are most likely to borrow funds through commercial sources. Giving them a fast, low-interest option would set them on a more stable financial footing as they move forward in the US.

When noncitizens were asked how they would borrow funds for USCIS fees, 61% of responses indicated they would consider turning to a commercial lender.

*Respondents were allowed multiple selections



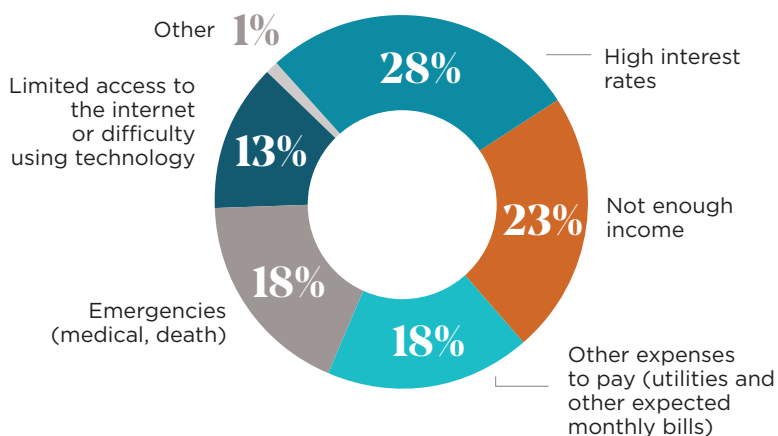
61%
of responses indicated higher interest commercial lending options

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ I just don’t like to be in debt with family.”

– Yenifer L.

What do you think are the greatest challenges of paying this debt back?



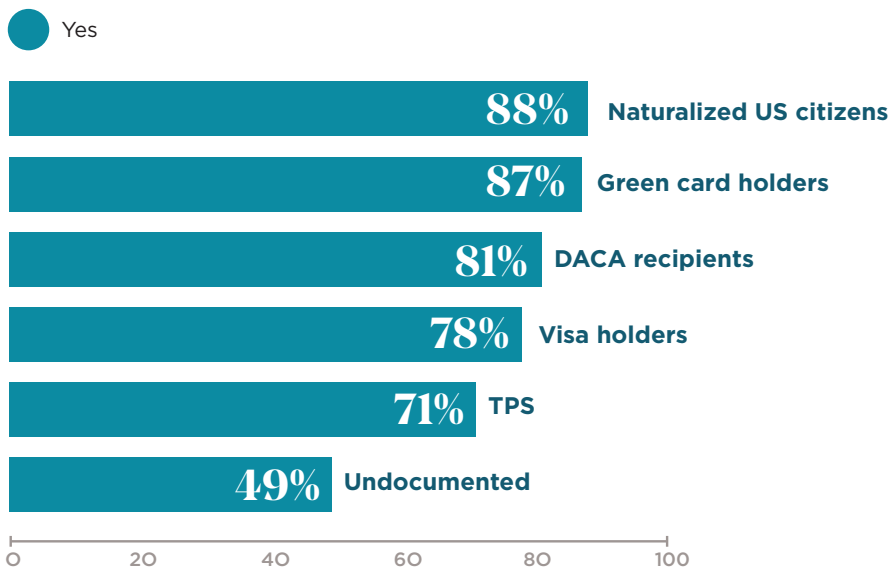
69%
of respondents said the cost of borrowing and monthly expenses would present a challenge



USCIS fees are not a hurdle exclusively for low-income or unbanked immigrants.

Of note, the vast majority of respondents are “banked,” meaning 84% have a US bank account. And, as noted previously, 75% of all respondents have an annual household income between \$50,000 and \$200,000+, which aligns with the US median income for 2020 of \$67,521.²

Do you have a US bank account?



Another important consideration: because of their immigrant status, noncitizens have limited access to mainstream credit options and rates, making the USCIS fee hurdle that much higher. They simply lack access to the options available to US citizens. For many immigrants, the US financial system is new and confusing. The survey results found that over 70% of all respondents are “extremely interested/very interested” in free money-management courses. They are willing and ready to learn about and integrate into the American financial system.

² <https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2021/demo/p60-273.html>



Addressable Challenges to Pursuing Citizenship

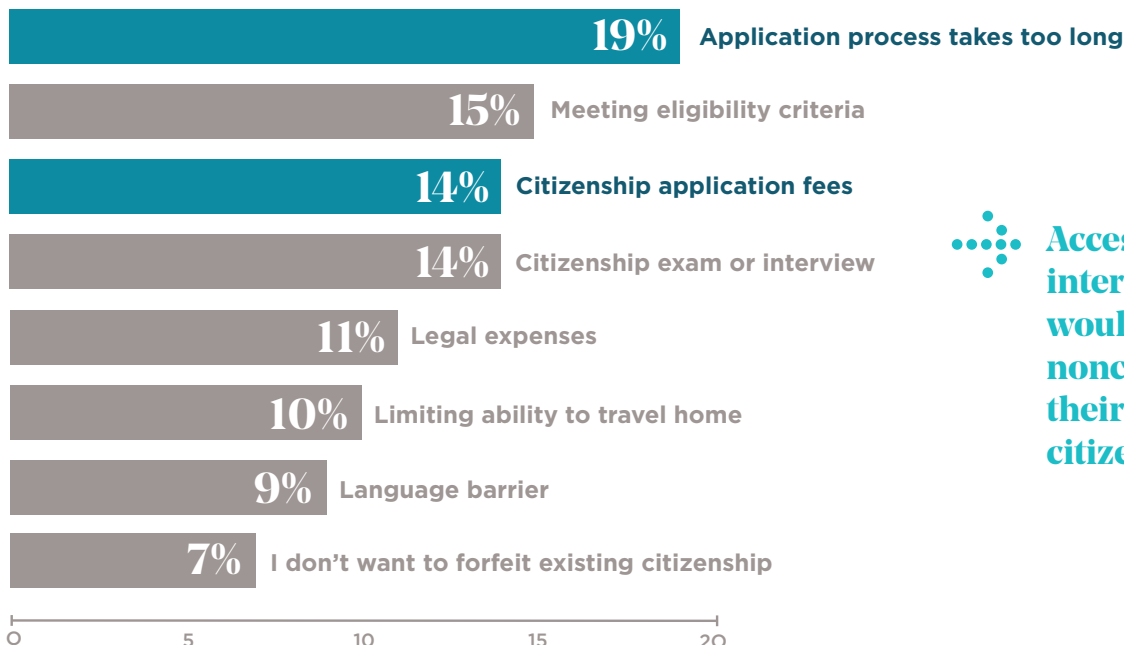
Both noncitizens and those who recently naturalized point to the lengthy process and fees associated with citizenship application as formidable obstacles. Interestingly, only 18% of all survey respondents said that USCIS fees are “far too expensive.” This suggests that the fee itself is not what poses the greatest challenge; rather an individual’s ability to pay the fee is at issue. As one focus group participant put it, “There are people who say ‘I do not have that kind of money all at once.’ There are many people who postpone it because of the cost.” Said another way, lack of access to fast, low-risk financing contributes to delays in applying for citizenship.

It appears that offering low-cost payment options for USCIS fees would increase the number of citizenship applications. Both recently naturalized citizens and noncitizen immigrants reported length of application process and citizenship application fees as major challenges. A fast, low-interest loan has the potential of easing both challenges by allowing an immigrant to apply for citizenship immediately, without having to borrow or wait to save the required funds.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“I would do a credit card payment. When I pay my taxes, I do it that way too. I pay them with a credit card.” – Carlos C.

What are/were your biggest challenges to becoming a US citizen?



Access to fast, low-interest funds would help more noncitizens achieve their goal of US citizenship.



So, why do 91% of the 9 million eligible immigrants hold back from applying for US citizenship?

A significant barrier lies in noncitizens' limited access to fast, low-cost financing options for citizenship application fees.

Addressing the demand for low-cost borrowing solutions.

Q:

Would a 1% no-fee, flexible loan with a fast approval process from a nonprofit institution be an attractive option when pursuing citizenship?



71%

of all respondents were “extremely interested/very interested” irrespective of immigration status.

93%

said they could repay such a loan in under 12 months.



This affirms the idea that the challenge is not the USCIS fees, but prospective citizens' ability to pay them in a single payment.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ I think it is perfect, excellent and the annual percentage rate of 1%, that is very difficult to find on the market right now. Usually, it is 12 to 22% monthly...I think it is a good idea that they are helping the community in this matter.”

– Carlos C.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ It sounds good to me because of what I had mentioned earlier, that I do not like to borrow money from family members, but if I opted for this, I can do it, and I can pay it off little by little.”

– Yenifer L.



According to the data, prospective US citizenship applicants are clearly motivated to naturalize; yet, without access to fair credit, they often must decide between stalling their American dream or accepting high-interest debt. **Access to safe, low-cost financial options that will empower them to pursue their goal of US citizenship can address the most commonly cited barriers to citizenship.**

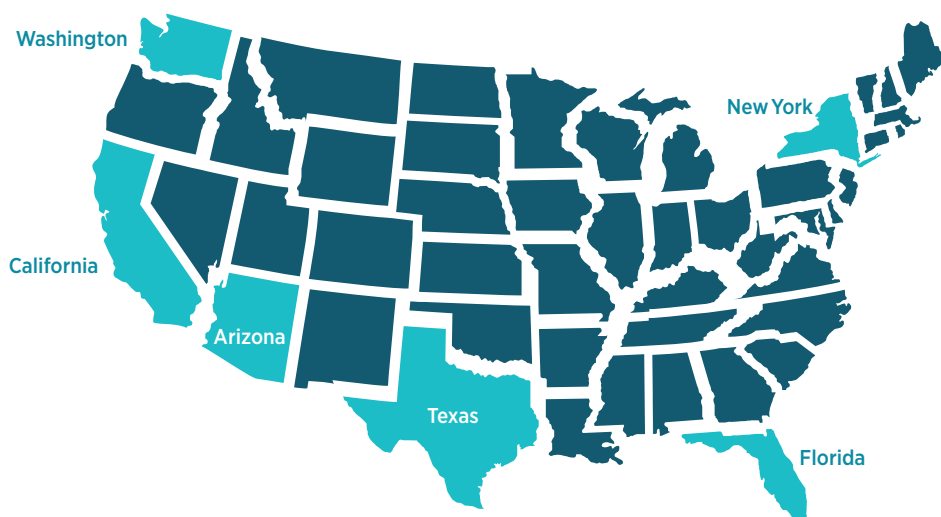


About the survey respondents.

Summary

- The majority (57%) of respondents are green card holders, though a significant number (20%) have a visa or were recently naturalized (15%).
- 77% are between the ages of 30 and 49.
- 65% live in a household of 3 or 4 people.
- They are split 52% female to 47% male.
- 22% of all respondents are Spanish/Hispanic/Latino.
- 137 countries are represented by the group of respondents.
- 88% of noncitizen respondents are “extremely interested/very interested” in becoming a US citizen.

In which state do you currently reside?

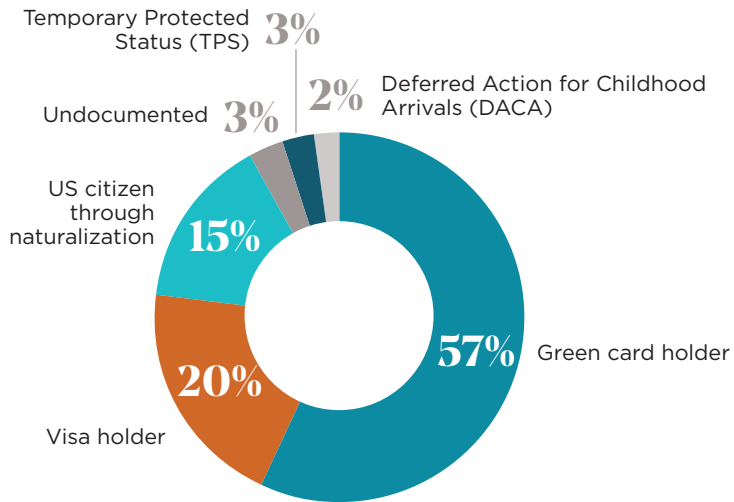


1,238
respondents from
49 states and US
territories

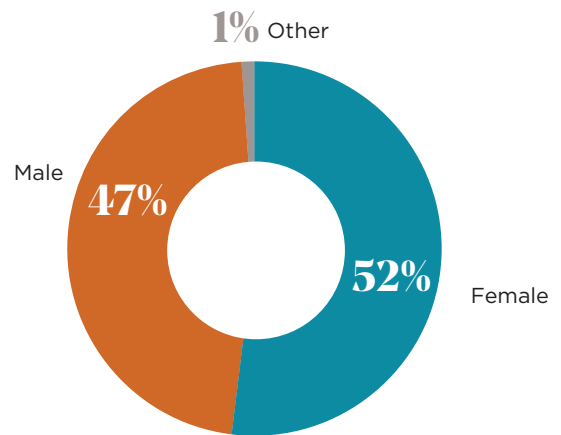
61%
of respondents
concentrated
in 6 states



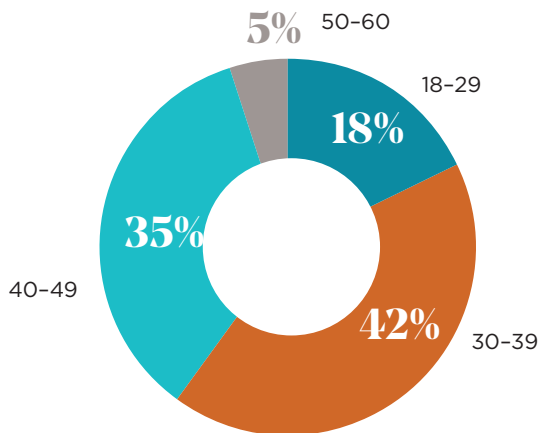
Which of the following best describes your citizenship/immigration status?




What is your gender?



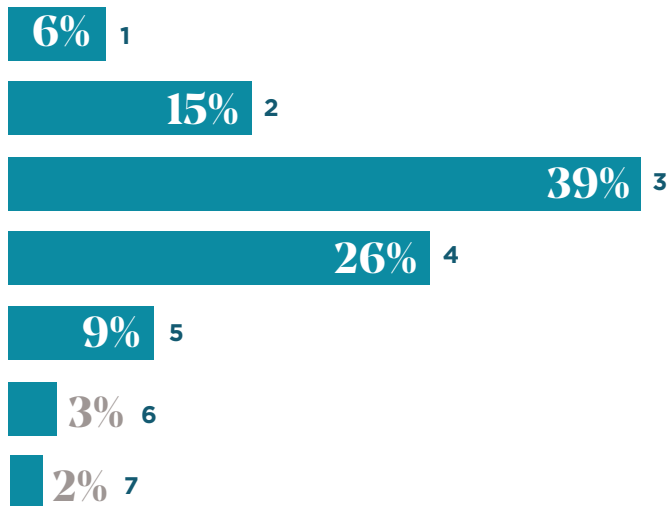
What is your age?



 **77%**
of all respondents
are 30-49 years old

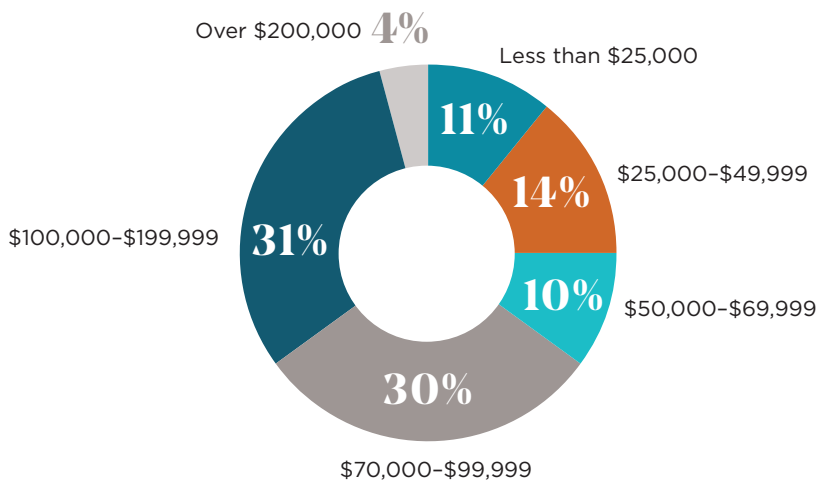


How many people (including yourself) are currently living in your household?



65%
of respondents
are in a household
with 3 or 4 persons

What is your combined annual household income (before taxes)?



75%
fall into income
categories between
\$50,000 and \$200,000+