

Working in America

Overview of the Immigrant Workforce in the United States

The immigrant workforce contributes to the nation's skills, knowledge, and labor across the economy with immigrant workers in every sector of the economy—from child care and home health to information technology and construction. Millions of foreign-born workers, however, have long toiled in the shadows of the formal labor market, earning low wages and working in dangerous conditions, with many of them excluded from labor and safety protections. At a time of weak economic recovery and heated political debate around a plan for comprehensive immigration reform, a close look at the role and experience of immigrants in the U.S. labor market is critical to building a stronger, more competitive economy while improving opportunities for all workers.

Demographics and Characteristics of the Foreign-born Population and Workforce

Approximately 25 million workers or 16 percent of the U.S. civilian labor force¹ is foreign-born.² In 2012:

- 58 percent of the foreign-born labor force was male. The labor force participation rate of foreign-born men was ten percentage points higher than native-born men (79 percent and 69 percent, respectively) while foreign-born women had a slightly lower rate than native-born women (55 percent and 58 percent, respectively).³
- 76 percent of the foreign-born labor force was between the ages of 25-54, prime working years.
- Hispanics accounted for nearly half of the foreign-born labor force and Asians accounted for nearly a quarter of the immigrant workforce.⁴
- The unemployment rate for foreign-born persons overall was 8.1 percent in 2012, the same rate as for native-born workers.⁵
- Approximately 7 million workers are unauthorized immigrants in the United States, down from a peak in 2007 of an estimated 12 million people,⁶ although this estimate is likely under-reported.⁷

Jobs and Job Quality for Foreign-Born Workers

Immigrants are over-represented in certain industries and occupations, particularly those with lower earnings.

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Foreign-Born Workers Labor Force Characteristics—2012," 22 May 2013, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/forbrn.nr0.htm> (accessed 27 June 2013).

² The terms foreign-born and immigrant are used here interchangeably to refer to anyone living in the United States who was born outside of the country and not a citizen at birth. Foreign-born immigration includes non-U.S. citizens and naturalized U.S. citizens. Native-born herein refers to anyone born in the United States.

³ Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2013.

⁴ Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2013.

⁵ Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2013.

⁶ Passel, Jeffrey and D'Vera Cohn, "Unauthorized Immigrants: 11.1 Million in 2011," 6 December 2012, <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2012/12/06/unauthorized-immigrants-11-1-million-in-2011/> (accessed 27 June 2013).

The Pew Hispanic Center calculates the demographic estimate of the unauthorized immigrant population using the "residual method," by which the number of legal foreign-born individuals is subtracted from the total foreign-born population.

⁷ Capps et al., May 2013.

- Approximately one-fifth of all workers in construction, food service, and agriculture are foreign-born.
- About half of all workers employed in private households and nearly a third of the workers in the accommodation sector are foreign-born.⁸ Lower-wage industries, such as accommodation and food services, also tend to employ more noncitizens from the foreign-born labor force than naturalized citizens.⁹

Foreign-born workers experience lower median earnings than native-born workers overall and are less likely to be members of unions.

- In 2012, median typical weekly earnings of foreign-born full-time wage and salary workers were \$625, compared with \$797 for native-born counterparts.¹⁰
- Nationally, foreign-born workers earn hourly wages that are 12 percent lower than hourly wages of native-born workers. At 26 percent, this wage gap is even larger in California—the state with the highest proportion of foreign-born workers in its labor force (37 percent).¹¹
- Approximately 10 percent of immigrant workers had some form of union representation, whether under an employee association contract or union membership, compared to nearly 14 percent of native-born workers.¹²

Foreign-born workers are less likely to have employment benefits such as health insurance, and many have work conditions that do not comply with U.S. labor laws.

- In 2011, 38 percent of immigrant adults overall had no insurance coverage, compared to 71 percent of unauthorized adults.¹³
- A survey of low-wage workers across three U.S. metropolitan areas found foreign-born workers were nearly twice as likely as their native-born counterparts to experience a minimum wage violation.¹⁴
- In addition, a 2009 study found that immigrants were more likely to work in more dangerous industries and occupations than native-born workers. The likelihood of experiencing workplace injuries and fatalities was substantially higher for immigrants with no English language skills.¹⁵



Education Levels and Opportunities of Foreign-Born Workers

In the years ahead foreign-born workers will need to upgrade their math, reading, English language and vocational skills in order to access better job opportunities. A look at the education levels and potential pathways for immigrants to upgrade their skills shows:

⁸ Audrey Singer, “Immigrant Workers in the U.S. Labor Force,” March 15, 2012, Brookings Institution, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2012/03/15-immigrant-workers-singer> (accessed July 5, 2013).

⁹ Newburger, Eric and Thomas Gryn, *The Foreign-Born Labor Force in the United States: 2007*, December 2009, American Community Survey Reports, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/acs-10.pdf> (accessed 15 July 2013).

¹⁰ Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2013.

¹¹ Bohn, Sarah and Eric Schiff, “Immigrants and the Labor Market,” March 2011, Public Policy Institute of California, http://www.ppic.org/main/publication_show.asp?i=823 (accessed 24 July 2013).

¹² Batalova, Jeanne, “Foreign-Born Wage and Salary workers in the US Labor Force and Unions,” September 2011, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=855#top> (accessed 5 July 2013).

¹³ Capps et al., May 2013.

¹⁴ Bernhardt, Annette, Ruth Milkman, Nik Theodore, et al. *Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers: Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America’s Cities*, National Employment Law Project, November 2008, <http://labor.ucla.edu/publications/reports/brokenlaws.pdf> (accessed 23 July 2013).

¹⁵ Orrenius, Pia and Madeline Zavodny, “Do Immigrants Work in Riskier Jobs?,” *Demography* (Vol 46, No. 3: August 2009:535-551), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2831347/pdf/dem-46-0535.pdf> (accessed 24 July 2013).

- 29 percent of the adult foreign-born population does not hold a high school diploma, compared to seven percent of the adult native-born population. Both native-born and foreign-born populations hold bachelor's degrees and graduate degrees at similar rates, approximately 30 percent and 11 percent, respectively.¹⁶
- Over three quarters of immigrant workers in the agricultural sector lack a high school diploma compared to 29 percent of native-born workers in the same sector. In the high-skilled industries, such as health care, high-tech manufacturing, information technology, and life sciences, the foreign-born have educational attainment levels similar to those of their native-born co-workers.¹⁷
- 70 percent of unauthorized adults describe their ability to speak English as “not well” or “not at all.”¹⁸
- Foreign-born high school graduates are more likely than native-born students of the same racial or ethnic group to pursue postsecondary education.¹⁹
- Foreign-born students attend community colleges more than any other type of postsecondary educational institution. It has been estimated that during 2003-2004, approximately one-fourth of the nation's 6.5 million degree-seeking community college students were foreign-born.²⁰

Projections for the Immigrant Workforce

Immigration and workforce trends point to an increasing number of immigrants working in the U.S., but many jobs immigrants are expected to fill are in low-wage occupations.

- The number of foreign-born workers will increase by 9.9 million between 2010 and 2030. Without the immigrant population, it has been estimated that the civilian workforce would be insufficient to replace retirees.²¹
- Seven of the fifteen fastest-growing occupations projected for the 2010-2020 time period had high shares (greater than the foreign-born share of the total labor force) of foreign-born workers employed in those jobs. These occupations were mostly low-wage jobs, including home health aides, personal care aides, and various helper jobs in construction.²²

¹⁶ Singer, 2012.

¹⁷ Singer, 2012.

¹⁸ National Skills Coalition, *Comprehensive Immigration Reform: A Proposal for a Skills Strategy that Supports Economic Growth and Opportunity*, June 2013, http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/assets/reports-/2013-6-24_nsc-cir.pdf (accessed 16 July 2013).

¹⁹ Teranishi, Robert, Carola Suarez-Orozco, and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, *Immigrants in Community Colleges*, Future of Children, Vol.21, No. 1, Spring 2011, http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/21_01_07.pdf (accessed 16 July 2013).

²⁰ Horn, Laura and Stephanie Nevill, *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 2003-2004, With a Special Analysis of Community College Students*, National Center for Education Statistics, June 2006, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006184> (access 18 July 2013).

²¹ Myers et al., June 2013.

²² Singer, 2012.