

# Immigrant Labor Concentrated at Both Ends of Labor Spectrum

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Immigrants working in the U.S. are just as likely as the native born to have a college degree, but they are far more likely to lack a high school diploma, according to a [report](#) released in March by the Brookings Institution.

Immigrant labor is concentrated in two different worlds of employment, representing disproportionately large shares in industries as divergent as agriculture and information technology, the report says, citing 2010 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Immigrants account for nearly a quarter of those working in information technology and high-tech manufacturing, the report says. In high-skilled industries with a large number of immigrant workers, like healthcare and life sciences, foreign-born workers are more likely than their native counterparts to have a bachelor's degree.

In healthcare, they were more likely than the native born to be physicians and surgeons, though in raw numbers, native-born physicians and surgeons outnumbered the foreign born nearly 5 to 2.

Visa programs for skilled workers, like the H1B program, launched in the '90s, bring hundreds of thousands of workers with at least a bachelor's degree to the United States every year. The number of international students enrolled in the nation's universities has nearly tripled since the '70s; many of those students stay after college and become part of the labor force.

And as the American population has become more educated, immigrants without high school degrees have increasingly filled the demand for low-skill labor. In 1994, 72 percent of those who had a job but lacked a high school diploma were born in the U.S. By 2010, that number was down to 48 percent.

That same year, immigrants represented about one-fifth of all construction, food services and agriculture workers. Nearly 50 percent of people working in private households and more than 30 percent of those working in the accommodation sector were born outside the country.

Immigrants working in agriculture and accommodation were less educated than natives working in the same fields.

In the accommodation sector, for example, more than half the foreign-born lacked a high school diploma, compared to only 25 percent of the native-born workers. Immigrants generally filled "back of the house" roles, taking jobs as housekeepers, cooks and dining attendants, while native workers were more likely to work in the "front of the house" as desk clerks and managers.

Most immigrants working in agriculture were low-skilled farm workers, while native-born workers were farmers and ranchers who primarily owned and operated farms.

Immigrants of all educational backgrounds come to the United States for jobs, according to the report. The growth of the foreign-born population living in the U.S. slowed during the recession -- as did their share of

growth in the labor force. From 2000 to 2005, immigrants made up about two thirds of the growth in the labor market; from 2005 to 2010, they contributed about 42 percent.

The report finds reason for optimism among immigrants working on both ends of the labor market: Seven of the 15 occupations expected to grow the fastest between 2010 and 2020 have a high percentage of immigrant workers, including iron workers and home health aides on the low-skill end, and interpreters and market research analysts on the high-skill end.

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