

Facts About Immigrant Workers

April 2007

■ Foreign-born workers make up a significant portion of the U.S. workforce.

- In 2005, the foreign-born population accounted for nearly 15% of the total U.S. civilian workforce.¹
- The majority of foreign-born workers in the U.S. are non-U.S. citizens. According to the 2002 Current Population Survey, of the 20.3 million foreign-born workers in the civilian labor force, 12.7 million, or 63%, were noncitizens, while 7.6 million, or 37%, were naturalized citizens.²
- Among foreign-born men ages 20 to 64, the employment-to-population ratio in March 2003 was 83%, slightly higher than the 80% ratio for U.S.-born men in that age group.³
- There are approximately 7.2 million undocumented workers in the U.S. labor force, representing approximately 5% of U.S. workers. The labor-force participation of male undocumented immigrants is 94%, exceeding the rate of both native-born and work-authorized immigrant men.⁴

■ Immigrants are critical to the current and future growth of the U.S. economy.

- New immigrants (who entered the U.S. between 2000 and 2004) contributed at least 67% of the growth in the civilian labor force over the past 3 years, exceeding their contribution to the labor force in the decade of the 1990s, which was a historical high for the U.S.⁵
- During the 1990s, the immigrant population in “new immigrant” states grew twice as fast as the immigrant population in the six states that receive the greatest number of immigrants.⁶ The most rapid growth in the number of undocumented migrants has been in states that previously had relatively small foreign-born populations, including Arizona, Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee.⁷
- Twelve states owe at least 80% of their labor force growth between 2000 and 2004 to new immigrant workers.⁸
- The fluctuation of employment rates among native-born citizens cannot be directly linked to an increase of foreign-born workers.⁹
- New immigration is likely to contribute between one-third and one-half of the growth of the labor force through 2030. Between 2010 and 2030, first and second generation immigrants together are projected to account for all growth in the U.S. labor force.¹⁰
- Between 1996 and 2003, the number of native-born workers belonging to a union declined, while the number of foreign-born workers belonging to a union increased.¹¹
- Undocumented immigrants contribute to the tax rolls and the Social Security Trust Fund. The Social Security Administration has estimated that undocumented immigrants contribute approximately \$8.5 billion in Social Security and Medicare funds each year.¹² The Internal Revenue Service has determined that undocumented immigrants paid almost \$50 billion in federal taxes from 1996 to 2003.¹³

■ But despite high participation in the workforce . . .

- Immigrant workers are overrepresented in the highest-risk, lowest-paid jobs. Low-wage immigrant workers are concentrated in these sectors due to a number of factors, including educational background, work history and skills, limited English proficiency, and immigration status.¹⁴
- One in five low-wage workers is an immigrant.¹⁵



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- 42% of immigrant working families have incomes below 200% of poverty, in comparison to 21% of native-born households.¹⁶
- The median income of families with a foreign-born head of household was about \$43,000, 79% of the median income of families headed by a native.¹⁷
- Only 32% of immigrants have job-based health insurance.¹⁸

■ **Low-wage immigrant workers are among the most vulnerable to workplace exploitation, such as wage-and-hour and health-and-safety violations.**

- A Human Rights Watch report found, “Federal laws and policies on immigrant workers are a mass of contradictions and incentives to violate their rights.”¹⁹
- The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) found that 100% of all poultry processing plants were noncompliant with federal wage and hour laws.²⁰
- A survey by the DOL found that 67% of garment factories in Los Angeles violate wage and hour laws.²¹
- An Associated Press investigation found that the Mexican death rate has reached 1 in 16,000 workers, even as the death rate steadily decreased for the average U.S.-born worker to about 1 in 28,000 workers. Mexicans now represent about 1 in 24 workers in the United States, but about 1 in 14 workplace deaths in the U.S.²²

¹ Lowell, Gelatt, Batalova, et al, IMMIGRANTS AND LABOR FORCE TRENDS: THE FUTURE, PAST AND PRESENT (Migration Policy Institute, July 2006).

² IMMIGRATION FACTS: THE FOREIGN BORN IN THE U.S. LABOR FORCE: NUMBERS AND TRENDS (Migration Policy Institute, Jan. 2004).

³ A DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMIGRANT POPULATION (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, Nov. 2004).

⁴ Jeffrey S. Passel, THE SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF UNAUTHORIZED MIGRANT POPULATION IN THE U.S. (Pew Hispanic Ctr., Mar. 2006).

⁵ Sum, Harrington, Khatiwade, et al, NEW FOREIGN IMMIGRANTS AND THE LABOR MARKET IN THE U.S.: THE UNPRECEDENTED EFFECTS OF NEW FOREIGN IMMIGRATION TO THE GROWTH OF THE NATION’S LABOR FORCE AND ITS EMPLOYED POPULATION, 2000 TO 2004 (Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, Jan. 2005).

⁶ Fix, Zimmermann, and Passel, THE INTEGRATION OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE UNITED STATES (Urban Institute, July 2001).

⁷ Jeffrey S. Passel, ESTIMATES OF THE SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNDOCUMENTED POPULATION (Pew Hispanic Ctr., Mar. 2005).

⁸ NEW FOREIGN IMMIGRANTS AND THE LABOR MARKET IN THE U.S., *supra* note 5.

⁹ Rakesh Kochhar, GROWTH IN THE FOREIGN-BORN WORKFORCE AND EMPLOYMENT OF THE NATIVE BORN (Pew Hispanic Ctr., Aug. 2006).

¹⁰ IMMIGRANTS AND LABOR FORCE TRENDS, *supra* note 1.

¹¹ IMMIGRANT UNION MEMBERS FACTS AND NUMBERS (Migration Policy Institute, May 2004).

¹² Eduardo Porter, “Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security with Billions,” NEW YORK TIMES, Apr. 5, 2005.

¹³ Statement of The Honorable Mark W. Everson, Commissioner, Internal Revenue Service, Testimony before the House Committee on Ways and Means, July 26, 2006.

¹⁴ IMMIGRANT WORKERS AT RISK: THE URGENT NEED FOR IMPROVED WORKPLACE SAFETY AND HEALTH POLICIES AND PROGRAMS (AFL-CIO, Aug. 2005).

¹⁵ Capps, Fix, Passel, Ost, Perez-Lopez, A PROFILE OF THE LOW-WAGE IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE (Urban Institute, Nov. 2003).

¹⁶ Capps, Fix, Henderson, Reardon-Anderson, A PROFILE OF LOW-INCOME WORKING IMMIGRANT FAMILIES (Urban Institute, June 2005).

¹⁷ A DESCRIPTION OF THE IMMIGRANT POPULATION, *supra* note 3.

¹⁸ A PROFILE OF LOW-INCOME WORKING IMMIGRANT FAMILIES, *supra* note 16.

¹⁹ BLOOD, SWEAT, AND FEAR: WORKERS’ RIGHTS IN U.S. MEAT AND POULTRY PLANTS (Human Rights Watch, Jan. 2005).

²⁰ U.S. Dept. of Labor, FY 2000 Poultry Processing Compliance Report (2000).

²¹ ONLY ONE-THIRD OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA GARMENT SHOPS IN COMPLIANCE WITH FEDERAL LABOR LAWS (U.S. Dept. of Labor, USDL-112, Aug. 25, 2000).

²² Justin Pritchard, “AP’s Mexican Worker Death Probe Elicits Concern,” ASSOCIATED PRESS, Mar. 19, 2004.