



There Are No Jobs Americans Won't Do

A detailed look at immigrants (legal and illegal) and natives across occupations

By Steven A. Camarota, Jason Richwine, and Karen Zeigler

If immigrants “do jobs that Americans won’t do”, we should be able to identify occupations in which the workers are nearly all foreign-born. However, among the 474 separate occupations defined by the Department of Commerce, we find only a handful of majority-immigrant occupations, and none completely dominated by immigrants (legal or illegal). Furthermore, in none of the 474 occupations do illegal immigrants constitute a majority of workers.

Notable findings:

- Of the 474 civilian occupations, only six are majority immigrant (legal and illegal). These six occupations account for 1 percent of the total U.S. workforce. Moreover, native-born Americans still comprise 46 percent of workers in these occupations.
- There are no occupations in the United States in which a majority of workers are illegal immigrants.
- Illegal immigrants work mostly in construction, cleaning, maintenance, food service, garment manufacturing, and agricultural occupations. However, the majority of workers even in these areas are either native-born or legal immigrants.
- Only 4 percent of illegal immigrants and 2 percent of all immigrants do farm work. Immigrants (legal and illegal) do make up a large share of agricultural workers — accounting for half or more of some types of farm laborers — but all agricultural workers together constitute less than 1 percent of the American work force.
- Many occupations often thought to be worked overwhelmingly by immigrants (legal and illegal) are in fact majority native-born:
 - Maids and housekeepers: 51 percent native-born
 - Taxi drivers and chauffeurs: 54 percent native-born
 - Butchers and meat processors: 64 percent native-born
 - Grounds maintenance workers: 66 percent native-born
 - Construction laborers: 65 percent native-born
 - Janitors: 73 percent native-born
- There are 65 occupations in which 25 percent or more of the workers are immigrants (legal and illegal). In these high-immigrant occupations, there are still 16.5 million natives — accounting for one out of eight natives in the labor force.

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- High-immigrant occupations (25 percent or more immigrant) are primarily, but not exclusively, lower-wage jobs that require relatively little formal education.
- In high-immigrant occupations, 54 percent of the natives in those occupations have no education beyond high school, compared to 30 percent of the rest of the labor force.
- Natives tend to have high unemployment in high-immigrant occupations, averaging 9.8 percent during the 2012-2016 period, compared to 5.6 percent in the rest of the labor force. There were a total of 1.8 million unemployed native-born Americans in high-immigrant occupations.
- The stereotype that native-born workers in high-immigrant occupations are mostly older, with few young natives willing to do such work, is largely inaccurate. In fact, 34 percent of natives in high-immigrant occupations are age 30 or younger, compared to 29 percent of natives in the rest of labor force.
- Not all high-immigrant occupations are lower-skilled. For example, 38 percent of software engineers are immigrants, as are 28 percent of physicians.
- A number of politically influential groups face very little job competition from immigrants (legal and illegal). For example, only 7 percent of lawyers and judges and 7 percent of farmers and ranchers are immigrants, as are at most 9 percent of English-language reporters and correspondents.¹

Full Results

The Excel spreadsheet that accompanies this report gives the share of each occupation that is comprised of immigrant workers. (Download [here](#).)

Discussion

Because the American economy is so dynamic, with many factors impacting employment and wages, it would be a mistake to believe that every job taken by an immigrant is a job lost by a native. It would also be a mistake, however, to assume that dramatically increasing the number of available workers in high-immigrant occupations has no impact on the employment prospects or wages of natives. As our results indicate, at the most detailed level of analysis possible, there are very few occupations that are majority immigrant — just six out of 474 — and 46 percent of workers even in these high-immigrant occupations are native-born. Moreover, high-immigrant occupations employ less than 1 percent of all native workers and 3 percent of all immigrant workers.² Therefore, speaking of “jobs Americans won’t do” gives the false impression that the labor market is strictly segmented between immigrant and native jobs.

Of course, immigrants are much more concentrated in some occupations than in others, but a large number of native-born Americans still work in high-immigrant occupations. There are nearly 900,000 U.S.-born maids and housekeepers, for example, and 1.3 million native-born construction laborers. Clearly, natives are willing to do these jobs — in fact, they *are* doing them. Assertions by employers that it is impossible to hire Americans should therefore be treated skeptically. Given the large number of native-born Americans who already do “immigrant jobs”, and given the 42 million working-age natives who are not currently in the labor force, it seems likely that increasing wages and benefits, improving working conditions, and changing recruitment practices could go a long way toward securing needed workers even in the absence of immigration.³

Illegal Immigrants. Illegal immigrants tend to be even more associated with the “jobs Americans won’t do” mantra. And yet there are just 24 occupations out of 474 in which illegal immigrants comprise at least 15 percent of workers. There are 5.7 million natives in these high-illegal-immigrant occupations, 67 percent of whom have no education beyond high school. But in occupations that are made up of 5 percent or less illegal immigrants, 75.5 percent of natives have education beyond high school.⁴ This suggests that the impact of illegal immigration on wages and employment opportunities will be felt most by less-educated natives. More-educated natives will tend to avoid competition with illegal immigrants.

Agricultural Work. The tendency for immigrants to work in agriculture is often overestimated. In fact, we find that only 4 percent of illegal immigrants and 2 percent of all immigrants work on farms.⁵ Immigrants do make up a significant share of farm workers — accounting for half or more of some types of farm work. But only about one million people of any nativity work on farms in the United States, accounting for less than 1 percent of the entire civilian labor force of 160 million.⁶

State and Local Picture. This analysis focuses on the nation as a whole. Of course, the immigrant share of occupations will vary significantly at the state and local level. For example, a very high-immigration state like California will have more majority-immigrant occupations than a low-immigration state like Ohio. In low-immigrant areas, the overwhelming majority of workers are natives, even in low-wage, difficult jobs, meaning that when immigrants are not present natives do this type of work. Furthermore, we live in a national economy in which workers can and do move to higher-wage and lower-unemployment areas over time. Of native-born adults, 14.8 percent changed addresses in just the last year. Moreover, 38.4 percent live outside of their state of birth.⁷ In its large 2016 study of immigration, the National Academies of Sciences concluded that the effects of immigration are likely to be national in scope. Capital, labor, goods, and services can all move. This means that the impact of immigration is not confined to only those areas of the country where immigrants settle.⁸

Data and Methods

The data for this analysis comes from the public-use file of the combined five-year sample of the American Community Survey (ACS), covering the years 2012 through 2016. The file includes 7.6 million individuals in the civilian, non-institutionalized labor force, about 1.1 million of whom are immigrants. Persons in the labor force are either working or looking for work. Consistent with the way the government reports most labor force statistics, we confine our analysis to civilians 16 years of age and older and not living in institutions. Immigrants, who can also be referred to as the “foreign-born”, are defined as persons living in the United States who were not U.S. citizens at birth. This includes people who are naturalized American citizens, legal permanent residents (green card holders), illegal aliens, and people on long-term temporary visas such as students or guestworkers. It does not include those born abroad to American parents or those born in outlying territories of the United States, such as Puerto Rico.

Identifying Illegal Immigrants. Illegal immigrants are present in Census data, but never explicitly identified by the Bureau. To determine which respondents are most likely to be illegal, CIS follows a methodology similar to those used by the Pew Research Center and the Center for Migration Studies.⁹ We start by eliminating immigrant respondents who are almost certainly not illegal — for example, spouses of natural-born citizens; veterans; people who receive direct welfare payments (except Medicaid for women who gave birth within the past year and for residents of certain states); people who have government jobs; Cubans (because of special rules for that country); immigrants who arrived before 1980 (because the 1986 amnesty should have already covered them); people in certain occupations requiring licensing, screening, or a government background check (e.g. doctors, pharmacists, and law enforcement); and people likely to be on student visas. The remaining candidates are weighted to replicate known characteristics of the illegal population (size, age, gender, country of origin, and state of residence) as determined by the Department of Homeland Security.¹⁰ The resulting illegal population closely approximates other published estimates.

Of course, all profiles of the illegal immigrant population carry significant uncertainty, and the illegal immigrant shares of various occupations included in the table are no exception. When those shares become small, we designate them as “less than 4 percent” (or a smaller percentage) to avoid false precision.

End Notes

¹ The accompanying [Excel spreadsheet](#) shows that 12.3 percent of news analysts, reporters, and correspondents are immigrants (legal and illegal). However, if we exclude all immigrants in this job category that speak English less than very well, making it very unlikely they work at an English-language outlet, then only 9.2 percent of English-language reporters are immigrants. This is likely still a high estimate since some share of immigrants who speak English very well still work for foreign language media. The bottom line is that native-born reporters who work at English-language media outlets face only modest levels of competition from immigrants.

² In this report, we follow the Census Bureau's approach of assigning unemployed people to the occupation they last worked, as long as they have worked within the previous five years.

³ In fairness to employers, getting some of the long-term unemployed back into the labor force is a challenge, but the challenge will be taken up only when immigration no longer provides a convenient alternative. For a longer discussion of this topic, see Amy Wax and Jason Richwine, "[Low-Skill Immigration: A Case for Restriction](#)", *American Affairs*, Winter 2017.

⁴ Figures are from the 2012-2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey.

⁵ For corroboration, the Pew Research Center also concluded in 2014 that "only 4 percent of unauthorized immigrant workers held farming jobs in 2014." See Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "[Size of U.S. Unauthorized Immigrant Workforce Stable After the Great Recession](#)", Pew Research Center, November 3, 2016.

⁶ The occupational codes for farm work are 6010, 6005, 6040, and 6050. The codes and names of the occupations are listed in the Excel spreadsheet.

⁷ Figures are from the 2012-2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey.

⁸ Francine D. Blau and Christopher Mackie, Eds., [The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Immigration](#), Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2016, p. 161 (online version).

⁹ See Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, "[Overall Number of U.S. Unauthorized Immigrants Holds Steady Since 2009](#)", Pew Research Center, September 20, 2016; and Robert Warren, "[Democratizing Data about Unauthorized Residents in the United States: Estimates and Public-Use Data, 2010 to 2013](#)", *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 2014.

¹⁰ We chose the 2014 DHS estimates to represent the middle of the 2012-2016 period covered by the five-year ACS data used in this report. About 90 percent of illegal immigrants are thought to respond to the ACS. See Bryan Baker, "[Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2014](#)", Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, July 2017.