U.S. Immigration: Current policy debates

Agreement that immigration policy should change, but little agreement on how

• Broad reform viewpoint
• Specific reform viewpoint
  – Enforcement focused
  – High-skill focused
How many immigrants should we admit?

Which kind should we prioritize?

How do we modify immigration policy to better meet national and local economic needs?
U.S. Immigration: New settlement patterns, new policy responses, new contexts for integration

- Economic restructuring, geographic component (metros + suburbs)
- Rise of new immigrant gateways
- Proliferation of laws
- Significance of suburban settlement
The big picture:

Educational attainment of U.S. immigrants
Immigrant contributions to the labor force

• Immigrants are 12.5 percent of the population but 16 percent of the labor force

• Immigrants have slightly higher rates of labor force participation but have the same unemployment rates as natives

• Immigrant workers are over represented in both low- and high-skilled industries: agriculture, construction, hospitality and IT, life sciences and healthcare
Immigrant Skill Definitions:

Education levels for all immigrants ages 25+

- **High-Skilled**: Immigrants with a bachelor’s degree or more
- **Low-Skilled**: Immigrants lacking a high school diploma
- **Middle-Skilled**: Immigrants with a high school diploma and may have some college

All Immigrants
The share of working age immigrants with a bachelor’s degree exceeds the share without a high school diploma.
Similar shifts in skills are evident among the working age US-born, although those without a high school diploma is a much smaller share.
In 1980, there were twice as many low-skilled as high-skilled immigrants, but by 2010, they had converged.

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<tr>
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<th>Low-Skilled</th>
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<td>27.8</td>
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What accounts for the rise in the skill level of the foreign-born in the US?

- Rising demand for high-skilled workers in an increasingly knowledge-based economy
- Policy changes which have augmented the supply of skilled immigrants—such as H-1B visas which require a BA
- Increase in the number of international students
Metropolitan Area Skill Definitions:
Ratio of high-skilled to low-skilled immigrants

- **High-Skill Destinations**: More than 125 high-skilled immigrants for every 100 low-skilled immigrants
- **Balanced Destinations**: 75 to 125 high-skilled immigrants for every 100 low-skilled immigrants
- **Low-Skill Destinations**: Less than 75 high-skilled immigrants for every 100 low-skilled immigrants
Recent immigrants to metro areas with the fastest-growing immigrant populations have markedly lower educational attainment than immigrants settling elsewhere.
Skill levels within metropolitan gateway types
The Geography of Immigrant Skills

Immigrant Skill Ratio, 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 2009

Source: Brookings Institution analysis of 2009 ACS data
Immigrants’ skill levels vary by metropolitan area due to historical settlement patterns and economic structures.

Former industrial centers with low demand for immigrant workers, especially low-skilled.

Providence is the only metro area that is low-skilled.

Median skill ratio: 166

Source: Author’s analysis of 2009 American Community Survey data.
Immigrants’ skill levels vary by metropolitan area due to historical settlement patterns and economic structures.

Areas with long history of immigrant settlement and diverse populations

Technology and finance centers

Median skill ratio: 129

Source: Author’s analysis of 2009 American Community Survey data
Immigrants’ skill levels vary by metropolitan area due to historical settlement patterns and economic structures.

Minor-Continuous

Median skill ratio: 51

Long history of Mexican settlement in Western metros

Contrast between the low-skilled metros in the south/west and the high-skilled suburban Boston/New York metros

Source: Author’s analysis of 2009 American Community Survey data
Immigrants’ skill levels vary by metropolitan area due to historical settlement patterns and economic structures.

Post-WWII

Median skill ratio: 62

More than half are in Border states

CA and TX metros have large populations of illegal immigrants

Washington has a skill ratio of 189 due to the concentration of government jobs

Immigrant Skill Types in the 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 2009

Post World War II Gateways

Source: Author’s analysis of 2009 American Community Survey data
Emerging

Median skill ratio: 73

Fast-growing areas create construction jobs, etc.

Overall fairly low-skilled, however Atlanta and Orlando are balanced metros

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Source: Author’s analysis of 2009 American Community Survey data
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Immigrant Skill Types in the 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 2009

Nongateways

Source: Author's analysis of 2009 American Community Survey data
Key characteristics of low-skilled and high-skilled immigrants differ by gateway type

• Low-skilled more likely to be from Mexico and have lower English proficiency

• High-skilled more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens
Low-skilled immigrant workers comparisons with US-born

• More likely to be employed (67% vs 49%) but income is lower

• Immigrants earn about $5,000 less annually

• Poverty rates are lower (23% vs 31%)
High-skilled immigrant workers comparisons with US-born

• Somewhat less likely to be employed and income is lower

• Immigrants earn about $8,150 less annually

• Poverty rates are low for both groups (6% vs 3%)
The big question:

How to reshape national immigration policy?