Not Just Agriculture

U.S. Jobs Held by Immigrants and Other Foreign-Born Workers

By Pawel Styrna | October 2020

When Americans think of immigrant or other foreign-born workers, oftentimes it is images of farm laborers, housekeepers, office cleaners, or plant workers that come to mind. Although many immigrants do hold low-skilled roles such as these, this stereotype ignores the increasing number of high-skilled foreign workers employed in the United States on both a temporary and permanent basis, according to data from the Pew Research Center.

This stereotyped view of immigrant and foreign-born workers is not surprising given that Americans have long been told by many politicians (both Democrats and Republicans), think-tank policy analysts, and journalists – that immigrants and other foreign-born workers are indispensable to our economy because they “do jobs Americans won’t do.” As a result, many Americans seem to have bought into this myth.

Both the “jobs Americans won’t do” narrative and the above-mentioned stereotype are wrong. The former unfairly depicts Americans as allegedly lazy and spoiled. It is also undermined by evidence that Americans are willing to work in labor-intensive, lower-skilled jobs that are frequently associated with foreign-born workers. The latter inaccurately portrays the foreign-born employed in this country as a group that is primarily low-skilled, poorly-educated, and low-income. The stereotype also helps the pro-mass-immigration lobby lull Americans – particularly the middle-class and college-educated professionals – into a false sense of security about the impact of consistently high immigration levels and cheap foreign labor programs on the U.S. job market.

The reality is that the foreign-born work in all sectors of the U.S. economy. This includes many well-paying jobs Americans do want. Thus, for instance, American college graduates are forced to compete for jobs in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields with immigrants or foreign guestworkers on H-1B visas.

To put matters in context, less than 4 percent of noncitizens working in the U.S. – or 2 percent of all foreign-born workers – are employed in agriculture and related occupations, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
The last four decades have witnessed the foreign-born share of the U.S. labor force increase by more than 2.5 times, from 6.7 percent in 1980 to 17.4 percent in 2019. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, this amounted to 28.4 million foreign-born persons in our nation’s work force in 2019. As noted by Pew, the fastest-growing immigrant group is from Asia, which is one reason that explains an increasing percentage of foreign-born workers in higher-skilled – and therefore often also better-paying – occupations.

Based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately half of the foreign-born labor force consists of naturalized citizens. The other half consists of noncitizens, including legal permanent residents (LPRs, or “green card” holders), guestworkers, and illegal aliens.

The following is a list of eight random major occupation categories in which immigrants and other foreign-born individuals work, showing the proportion of each category represented by the native-born, naturalized citizens, and noncitizens. All data, job category names, and the breakdown based on nativity and citizenship come from the U.S. Census Bureau’s most recent available (2018) Current Population Survey (Table 1.7).

1. **Management, professional, and related occupations**
   - Native-born Americans – 85.8 percent (54 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 8.4 percent (5.3 million)
   - Noncitizens – 5.8 percent (3.6 million)

2. **Service occupations**
   - Native-born Americans – 76.6 percent (20 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 9.8 percent (2.6 million)
   - Noncitizens – 13.6 percent (3.6 million)

3. **Sales and related**
   - Native-born Americans – 86.5 percent (13.4 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 7.9 percent (1.2 million)
   - Noncitizens – 5.6 percent (874,000)

4. **Office and administrative**
   - Native-born Americans – 88.3 percent (15.5 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 7 percent (1.2 million)
   - Noncitizens – 4.7 percent (800,000)

5. **Construction and extraction**
   - Native-born Americans – 68 percent (5.4 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 8 percent (700,000)
   - Noncitizens – 24 percent (1.9 million)

6. **Installation, maintenance, and repair**
   - Native-born Americans – 84 percent (4 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 7 percent (350,000)
   - Noncitizens – 9 percent (430,000)
7. **Production**
   - Native-born Americans – 76 percent (6.5 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 10 percent (860,000)
   - Noncitizens – 14 percent (1.2 million)

8. **Transportation and material moving**
   - Native-born Americans – 78 percent (7.7 million)
   - Naturalized citizens – 10 percent (973,000)
   - Noncitizens – 12 percent (1.2 million)