



# Metropolitan Policy Program at BROOKINGS

CONTACTS: John Fairbanks, 202.797.6087 or [jfairbanks@brookings.edu](mailto:jfairbanks@brookings.edu)  
Rachel Harvey, 202.797.6073 or [rharvey@brookings.edu](mailto:rharvey@brookings.edu)

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A copy of the embargoed paper and individual profiles for the 100 largest metro areas are available at [http://www.brookings.edu/metro/immigrant\\_skills.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/metro/immigrant_skills.aspx)

## **SKILLED IMMIGRANTS A GROWING FORCE IN THE U.S. ECONOMY**

*New Brookings research challenges conventional beliefs about education of immigrants in the workforce, calls for “policies that reflect realities”*

WASHINGTON, DC—While the highly-charged debate about immigration policy in America focuses on stopping illegal immigration, a much more important trend, the growing economic contributions of American immigrants, is not getting enough attention.

That’s one of the conclusions of a new report from the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program. The new report, *The Geography of Immigrant Skills: Educational Profiles of Metropolitan Areas*, analyzes data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for the nation’s 100 largest metros and finds that, contrary to conventional beliefs, more immigrants have at least a bachelor’s degree than lack a high-school diploma. It is essential for this country to do a better job supporting high- and low-skilled immigrant workers in order to remain globally competitive.

“Nearly one in six workers in our country was born somewhere else,” said Audrey Singer, a Brookings Senior Fellow and co-author of the report. “Low- and high-skilled immigration has grown nationally, but the mix varies across metropolitan areas. High-skilled immigrants cluster in coastal metros like Seattle and Washington, D.C., and in older industrial metros like Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Detroit, and Cleveland. Lower-skilled immigrants are more strongly represented in metro areas in the Southwest border states and in places with the fastest-growing immigrant populations, particularly in the Southeast.

“From the local level to the federal level, we need policies that reflect realities,” Singer said.

“We have millions of well-educated workers who are over-qualified for the jobs they hold,” said Matthew Hall, a co-author of the report and an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “This is a major challenge for those regions with large high-skilled immigrant populations. We need better strategies to match qualified workers with appropriate jobs.”

Among the report's findings:

- **The share of working-age immigrants in the United States who have a bachelor's degree has risen considerably since 1980, and now exceeds the share without a high school diploma.** In 2010, 30 percent of working-age immigrants had at least a college degree and 28 percent lacked a high school diploma. In 1980, just 19 percent of immigrants aged 25 to 64 held a bachelor's degree, and nearly 40 percent had not completed high school.
- **Compared with their U.S.-born counterparts, low-skilled immigrants have higher rates of employment and lower rates of household poverty, but also have lower individual earnings, in all types of metro areas.** Almost half of immigrants with a bachelor's degree, across all destinations, appear to be over-qualified for their jobs. They are less likely than their native-born counterparts to hold jobs commensurate with their education and more likely to be unemployed.
- **Forty-four (44) of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas are high-skilled immigrant destinations, where college-educated immigrants outnumber immigrants without high school diplomas by at least 25 percent.** These destinations include large coastal metro areas like San Francisco and Washington, D.C. and in older industrial metros like St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Cleveland. The 30 low-skill destinations, where the relative sizes of these immigrant skill groups are reversed, include many in the border states of the West and Southwest, as well as in the Great Plains.
- **Recent immigrants to metro areas with the fastest-growing immigrant populations have markedly lower educational attainment than immigrants settling elsewhere.** Low-skilled immigrants are much more likely to arrive from Mexico, less likely to speak English proficiently, more likely to be male, and less likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens than high-skilled immigrants.

“Understanding how immigrants’ skills influence the success of local economies, for everyone, is essential to creating more effective immigration policies and economic strategies,” Singer said. “We are in the midst of an historic demographic transformation, taking place first and most intensely in our metros, and this affects the composition of our workforce.”

The report recommends creation of a Standing Commission on Labor and Immigration to provide evidence-based policy advice, greater investments in English language and business training, and creating programs that will assist highly-skilled immigrants with transferring their skills to U.S. labor markets.

**The Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings** provides decision-makers with cutting-edge research and policy ideas for improving the health and prosperity of metropolitan areas, including their component cities, suburbs, and rural areas. To learn more, please visit: [www.brookings.edu/metro](http://www.brookings.edu/metro).

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