

A Response to the *Washington Post* regarding "The Search for Skills"

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October 2014

A recent *Washington Post* article raises questions about the methodologies and aims of research we conducted in 2012 regarding the H-1B visa program. This note attempts to address those questions.

The main purpose of the [Search for Skills report](#) was to examine geographic variation in employer demand for H-1B visas across U.S. metropolitan areas, which form the focus of the Metropolitan Policy Program's research. This approach contrasted with previous research in the area, which had focused primarily on national-level trends in H-1B visas granted. The only publicly available dataset that provided local data ("city, state") for each employer request for an H-1B visa was the Department of Labor's Labor Conditions Applications (LCAs), which tallies requests for H-1B visas by employment location.

As the report made clear, the LCA data do not tell us which applications were actually granted and resulted in an H-1B visa; that information can be found in another dataset from U.S. Department of Homeland Security that was not publicly available and has no "city, state" data. However, the LCA data usefully allowed us to explore the "demand" for H-1B visas at the metropolitan level.

In the course of our analysis, we noticed that a small percentage of LCAs had multiple H-1B requests under one application. We made a methodological decision to count each LCA as one request, given that 1) there were obvious errors in the number of workers requested in the database (for example, some LCAs listed 20,000 H-1B requests) among other errors such as the misspelling of city and company names, 2) an inaccuracy in counting demand for workers would be magnified at smaller geographies (i.e. metro areas), and 3) the vast majority of LCAs were for one worker. Thus, given the imperfections in the Department of Labor database, and the fact that the bulk of our analysis was focused on metro level trends, we decided to err on the side of underestimating rather than overestimating demand at the metro level. This decision is consistent with other researchers' approach.¹

The vast majority of the report focuses on interpretation of the metro-level data on H-1B demand. Consistent with our metro-level research methodology, one table (Table 1, page 9) summarizes the top employers nationally using the LCA data. These results differ from those available via other national-level datasets, especially of actual approved H-1Bs. And this is why some so-called "outsourcing" companies (e.g., Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, Infosys), which were more likely than others to have had multiple requests for H-1B visas within a single

LCA, ranked lower in this table than they would if ranked via national-level data on H-1B visas. We brought this discrepancy to the attention to the Department of Labor handling the LCA applications, and believe they now have corrected the problems with those data. Notwithstanding these discrepancies, the report did not focus on these national employer-level data, but instead aimed to analyze and interpret how total H-1B demand varied across major U.S. metro areas.

As to how this report was received and used, like other researchers at Brookings, we do policy-relevant research, and welcome any and all stakeholders to use it, regardless of their position on immigration policies. Notably, at no point does the report argue for any increase or decrease in the number of H-1B visas granted. Its most prominent recommendation (pp. 22-24) was to create an independent “Standing Commission on Labor and Immigration” that would make timely recommendations to Congress on national immigration policy, taking into account local demand for H-1B visas given the wide geographic variation evident in our findings. This was adapted from similar recommendations made by organizations including the Migration Policy Institute, the Economic Policy Institute, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

And as is the case with all Brookings research, we pursued this analysis with a commitment to its quality, independence, and impact. Our conclusions and recommendations are solely our own, and were not determined or influenced by any donation.

ⁱ Robert Clifford, “Demand of H-1B Visas in New England: An Analysis of Employer Requests for Highly Skilled Guest Workers.” (New England Public Policy Center, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 2014); William R. Kerr and William F. Lincoln, “The Supply Side of Innovation: H-1B Visa Reforms and US Ethnic Invention,” *Journal of Labor Economics*, vol. 28(3): 473-508.