WORKFORCE PROGRAM DATA & IMMIGRANTS
FAQs

Who Needs Data on Immigrant Workers?

- **Policymakers** can use immigration workforce data to evaluate how effectively workforce programs reach and serve eligible immigrant populations.

- **Educators, career advisors, and other service providers** can use immigration data to assess how successfully a workforce program serves immigrant clients, enabling providers to make better-informed program referrals for immigrant participants and/or improvements to their own programming.

- **Employers** from industries that employ large numbers of immigrants can use immigration workforce data to identify which training programs may be best suited for their foreign-born workers. Employers can also use this information to better inform sector partnerships in which they participate.

- **Students and Workers** who are immigrants can use this data to help determine which workforce programs may be best suited to their priorities and needs.

How many workers in the United States are immigrants?

The US is home to 41.3 million immigrants, who represent 13% of the overall population and 17% of the American workforce.

A plurality of all immigrants (42%) are naturalized US citizens. Another 24% of immigrants are unauthorized. The remaining 34% have another type of immigration status, such as a student visa, employment-based visa, refugee status, or lawful permanent residence.[1] Approximately half of all immigrants have limited English proficiency.

What does federal workforce data currently tell us about immigrants?

While the Census Bureau[2] collects general data about immigrants' educational attainment, English proficiency, employment status, industry, and occupation, data collection on immigrant *participation in federal workforce programs* is much more limited.

In addition, the limited amount of participation data that is collected can be difficult to compare, because it is collected by numerous federal agencies, each with its own distinct program eligibility criteria for immigrant participants, definitions of terms, and data collection processes.

Below, we highlight selected federal workforce development programs, along with the key immigration-related data elements that are reported to the federal government.[3]

Federal Agency	Program	Type of Immigration-related Data Collected	Total Annual Participants *(immigrants and US-born)*
Department of Labor	Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title I (occupational training)	Limited English Proficient (LEP) status	101,000
Department of Education	WIOA Title II (adult education)	Limited English Proficient (LEP) status	1.6 million
Department of Health and Human Services	Refugee Matching Grant Program	Type of qualifying immigration status (e.g. refugee, asylee, etc.)[4]	36,000
Department of Education	Career and Technical Education	Limited English Proficiency status; Migrant/Seasonal worker (or child thereof) status	12 million

Notably, federally funded workforce programs often *do not collect or are not required to report data on nativity,* so it is frequently impossible to know how many immigrants are being served. Instead, programs often report data on limited English proficiency — which also includes *non*-immigrants with limited English skills (such as some Puerto Ricans), and does not include those immigrants who are proficient English speakers.

What questions could be answered with better immigrant workforce program data?

Better data on immigrant participation in workforce programs would enable policymakers to answer a number of important questions, including:

- How closely does the population served by federally funded workforce programs reflect local workforce demographics?
- Are federal workforce programs leading to the desired outcomes for immigrants? If not, what can the data tell us about how outcomes might be improved?

How can federal agencies improve immigrant workforce program data?

Establishing common definitions and consistent metrics is essential for comparing data. If federal agencies define a term differently, comparison of data across programs and services isn't possible because the data doesn't reveal comparable information. Consistent definitions would allow programs to work together more effectively to achieve their mutual goals.

Particular data elements that should be considered include:

- **Nativity.** As noted above, without nativity data it is impossible to know how many immigrants are being served in a given program.
- **Naturalization status.** Immigrants who have become naturalized US citizens often experience different economic outcomes than non-naturalized immigrants. Collecting this data using the same broad categories as the Census Bureau's American Community Survey would allow for continued analysis of these differences, while respecting privacy concerns.
- **Foreign education/credentials.** Many immigrants arrive in the US having already acquired substantial education and training abroad. Developing standardized measures for tracking such information can help states and training providers understand how this variable may affect program outcomes.

Addressing Concerns about Data Collection

The above recommendations are intended to help states and program providers improve their understanding of the immigrant constituents they serve, and identify issues for further analysis. However, it is important to consider potential unintended consequences of expanded data collection — such as discouraging program participation among eligible immigrants by inquiring into the sensitive topic of immigration status — and how such consequences could be mitigated.

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1   Source: Migration Policy Institute analysis of 2013 data from the American Community Survey (ACS); MPI analysis of 2009-2013 ACS data and 2008 Survey of Income Program Participation data by Colin Hammar and James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University Population Research Institute.

2   Other federal agencies, such as the Bureau of Labor Statistics, also collect general data on immigrant workers.

3   While programs may *collect* additional immigration-related data — such as the particular type of immigration work authorization held by a participant in a training program — they are not necessarily required to report it federally.

4   Like most workforce programs, the Refugee Matching Grant program also collects extensive data on participants' employment outcomes. Because the RMG program serves only foreign-born individuals, this data serves as an unusually valuable source of information on foreign-born workers.