

## The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in Florida

By Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, Jeanne Batalova, and Michael Fix

As the fourth-largest economy in the nation, Florida is home to industries that employ workers across the skill spectrum: from tourism and agriculture to pharmaceuticals and aerospace.<sup>1</sup> The state has the fourth-largest foreign-born population, with approximately 4 million immigrants; it ranks third, however, in the number of highly skilled immigrants, after California and New York.<sup>2</sup> Notably, Florida is home to the largest number of college-educated Hispanic immigrants. These highly skilled immigrants in Florida often find that they cannot put their academic and professional qualifications to full use. Moreover, they appear to have more difficulties restarting their careers than college-educated immigrants nationwide.

### Box 1. What Is Brain Waste? Quick Definitions

Brain waste describes the situation when college graduates cannot fully utilize their skills and education in the workplace despite their high professional qualifications. (The terms *college educated* and *highly skilled* are used interchangeably in this fact sheet.)

Brain waste (or *skill underutilization*) is defined here as comprising two unfavorable labor market outcomes: unemployment and underemployment.

- *Unemployment* occurs when a person who is actively searching for employment is unable to find work.
- *Underemployment* refers to work by the highly skilled in *low-skilled jobs*, that is, jobs that require only moderate on-the-job training or less (e.g., home-health aides, personal-care aides, maids and housekeepers, taxi and truck drivers, and cashiers). These occupations typically require a high school diploma or less.

In contrast, highly skilled individuals who are *adequately employed* work in high- or middle-skilled jobs. *High-skilled* jobs require at least a bachelor's degree (e.g., surgeons, scientists, and engineers); *middle-skilled* jobs require long-term on-the-job training, vocational training, or an associate's degree (e.g., carpenters, electricians, and real estate brokers).

Because individuals in middle-skilled jobs are considered adequately employed in this analysis, underemployment refers only to those who are *severely underemployed*, or in positions substantially below their level of training.

Using an innovative methodology developed by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), this fact sheet examines the skill underutilization of highly skilled immigrants—also known as “brain waste”—and its economic costs in Florida. The authors estimate the number and share of college-educated immigrants who work in low-skill jobs or are unemployed in Florida. They identify the key factors underlying this brain waste and estimate the amount of annual earnings and state and local taxes lost because immigrant college graduates end up working in low-skilled jobs. In general, the analysis employs two types of comparisons: (1) between the

foreign born<sup>3</sup> and U.S. born who are college graduates; and (2) between foreign-educated and U.S.-educated immigrants. This fact sheet accompanies a national report on skill underutilization, *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States*.<sup>4</sup>

## Key Findings

- Florida was home to 608,000 highly skilled immigrants with at least a bachelor's degree during the 2009-13 period.<sup>5</sup> Of this group, 32 percent—or 192,000 people—were either working in low-skilled jobs or unemployed. That compared to the 25 percent rate of skill underutilization for college-educated immigrants nationwide.
- Low-skilled employment resulted in immigrant college graduates in Florida forgoing approximately \$3.6 billion in annual earnings. As a result, Florida experienced \$214.7 million in forgone state and local tax revenue. Nationally, immigrant underemployment resulted in more than \$39.4 billion in annual earnings losses and \$3 billion in unrealized state and local taxes.
- As with the country as a whole, highly skilled immigrants in Florida experienced higher levels of brain waste than the U.S. born—with 32 percent of college-educated immigrants in the state working in low-skilled jobs or without work compared to 20 percent of Floridians born in the United States. This difference represents a wider gap than in other study states.
- Having a degree earned outside the United States increases the likelihood of brain waste: Foreign-educated<sup>6</sup> immigrants in Florida were

significantly more likely to be either underemployed or unemployed (37 percent) than U.S.-educated immigrants (25 percent). (Nationally, these shares were 29 percent and 21 percent, respectively). Immigrants in Florida were also more likely to experience brain waste if they had limited English skills, had only a bachelor's degree, or were Hispanic or Black.<sup>7</sup> Time in the United States reduced skill underutilization for immigrant women more than for men.<sup>8</sup>

- As at the national level, Hispanic immigrants in Florida had the highest skill underutilization rates of all racial and ethnic groups (37 percent), followed by Black immigrants (30 percent). In contrast, Asian and White immigrants had much lower levels of brain waste (23-26 percent).
- Unlike the country as a whole, highly skilled immigrants in Florida were significantly more likely to be from the Caribbean and South America. The skill underutilization rates of Caribbean and South American immigrants were among the highest across origin groups in both Florida and the United States.

## I. Highly Skilled Immigrants by the Numbers

**Highly Skilled Immigrants.** There were 608,000 immigrant college graduates in the Florida civilian labor force during the 2009-13 period (see Table 1). They accounted for 25 percent of all highly skilled workers in the state—higher than the share that immigrants made up of the total Florida population (19 percent). (“College graduates” and the “highly skilled” are used interchangeably in this fact sheet and refer to adults with a bachelor's degree or higher.)

**Table 1. Employment Status of Highly Skilled Adults in Florida and United States, by Nativity (%), 2009-13**

	Florida		United States	
	Immigrants	U.S. Born	Immigrants	U.S. Born
<b>Total labor force</b>	<b>608,000</b>	<b>1,824,000</b>	<b>7,618,000</b>	<b>37,936,000</b>
<i>Percent</i>	100	100	100	100
Unemployed	7	5	6	4
Employed by job type				
High-skilled	47	59	57	62
Middle-skilled	22	21	18	19
Low-skilled	24	15	19	14
<b>Brain waste: Unemployed or in low-skilled jobs</b>				
Number	192,000	369,000	1,918,100	6,974,800
Percent	32	20	25	18

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2009-13 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), with legal status assignments by James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

**Brain Waste Levels.** Thirty-two percent (192,000) of college-educated immigrants in Florida were either underemployed or unemployed compared to 20 percent (369,000) of their U.S.-born counterparts (see Table 1). This is a higher level of brain waste than highly skilled immigrants experienced nationwide (25 percent).

## II. Economic Cost of Brain Waste

Beyond the human-capital losses that are felt by individuals and their families, brain waste has broader economic implications. Workers who are either underemployed or lack employment despite their high professional qualifications have lower disposable incomes to spend and invest, and they pay less in taxes as a result of these forgone earnings. At the same time, employers—and the economy—miss an opportunity to hire available workers with needed skills and qualifications.

In this fact sheet, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) for the first time estimates the value of forgone earnings associated with low-skilled employment of highly skilled immigrants, as

well as the state and local taxes that would be generated by those earnings.<sup>9</sup> To do so, the authors compared the average annual earnings of highly skilled immigrants working in low-skilled jobs to those of “adequately” employed immigrants—i.e., those working in middle- and high-skilled jobs. Using decomposition analysis, the authors then estimated the amount of earnings losses attributable to low-skilled employment after controlling for demographic, educational, linguistic, legal status, and other factors.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that these figures are in some ways conservative, as they do not account for the lost wages of highly skilled immigrants who were unemployed during the study period, despite wanting to work. Lost wages are also not quantified for highly skilled immigrant workers in occupations that require more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelor’s degree (e.g., dental hygienists, teacher assistants, and electricians).

The value of annual earnings that highly skilled immigrants in Florida lost due to their employment in low-skilled jobs amounted to \$3.6 billion during the period surveyed. If these immigrants had instead been adequately employed and remunerated correspondingly, their households would have paid an additional \$214.7

million in state and local taxes. Nationwide, the low-skilled employment of college-educated immigrants resulted in \$39.4 billion in forgone wages and \$3 billion in unrealized state and local taxes annually.<sup>11</sup>

### III. Factors Driving Brain Waste

Several demographic characteristics of highly skilled immigrants in Florida help explain their rates of skill underutilization. Some of these factors are examined below.

**Place of Education.** Of the 608,000 highly skilled immigrants in Florida, 55 percent (337,000) were foreign educated and 45 percent (272,000) obtained their degrees in the United States. Highly skilled immigrants in Florida were slightly more likely than immigrants nationally to have been educated abroad (52 percent).

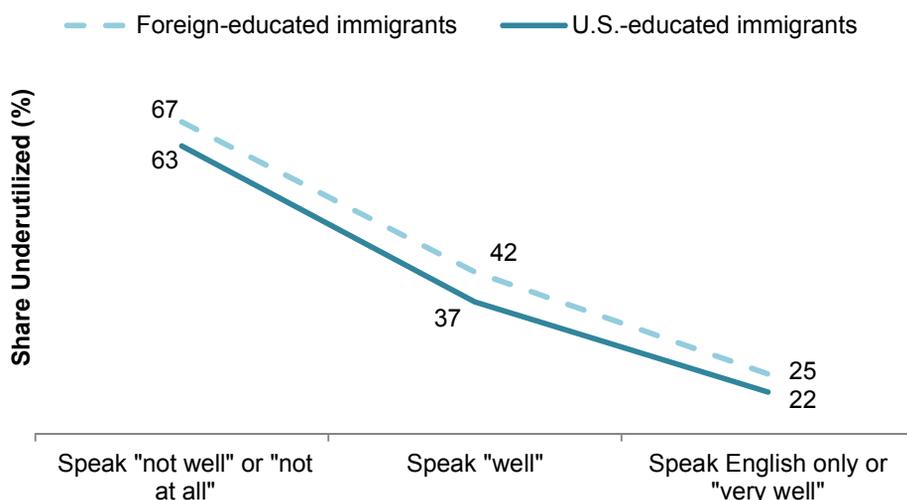
Like the country as a whole, foreign-educated immigrants in Florida were significantly more likely to be either underemployed or unemployed (37 percent) than U.S.-educated immi-

grants (25 percent). These higher rates of skill underutilization among the foreign educated reflect a number of factors, among them real and perceived differences in the quality of U.S. and foreign education, adult newcomers' access to professional networks, and the difficulties that immigrants can face in getting their foreign credentials and professional experiences recognized by employers and professional licensing bodies.

**English Proficiency.** The majority of high-skilled immigrants in Florida were English proficient: 56 percent of the foreign educated and 86 percent of the U.S. educated (compared to 67 percent and 86 percent respectively at the national level).<sup>12</sup>

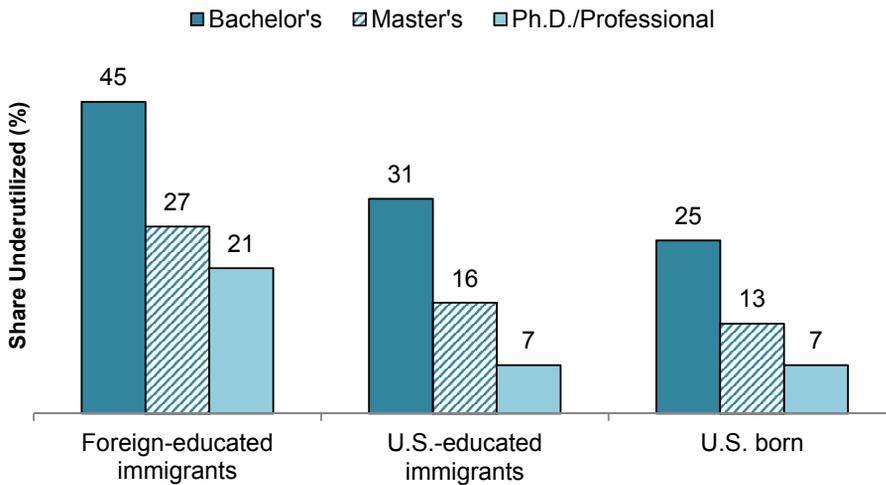
Limited English skills contribute significantly to higher risk of brain waste. Immigrants in Florida who spoke English "not well" or "not at all" were approximately three times more likely to be underemployed or unemployed than those who spoke English "only" or "very well" (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Underemployment and Unemployment of Highly Skilled Immigrants in Florida, by Place of Education and English Proficiency (%), 2009-13**



Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

**Figure 2. Underemployment and Unemployment of Highly Skilled in Florida, by Nativity, Place of Education, and Degree Level (%), 2009-13**



Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

**Level of Degree.** As at the national level, college-educated immigrants in Florida were slightly more likely than the U.S. born to have advanced degrees:<sup>13</sup> 37 percent versus 34 percent. Nationally, immigrants were also more likely to hold a graduate degree than the U.S. born (43 percent versus 37 percent).

Regardless of place of birth or education, bachelor degree holders had much higher rates of skill underutilization than those with advanced degrees. Among the foreign educated in Florida, 45 percent of bachelor degree holders experienced brain waste compared to 21 percent of those with a Ph.D. or professional degree, such as a law or medical degree (see Figure 2). Foreign-educated immigrants at all degree levels were more likely to be underemployed or unemployed than those with U.S. degrees. In contrast, there was little difference among U.S.-educated immigrants with advanced degrees and their U.S.-born counterparts.

**Legal Status/Citizenship.** Fifty-eight percent of highly skilled immigrants in Florida were naturalized U.S. citizens, 27 percent were legal permanent residents (LPRs), 10 percent were

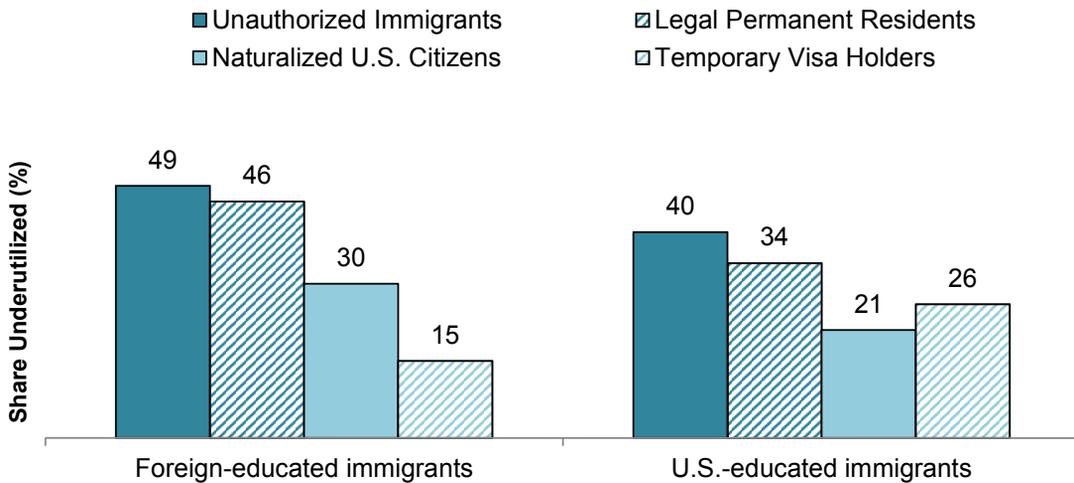
unauthorized immigrants, and 5 percent were temporary visa holders.

In Florida, U.S. citizenship appeared to reduce brain waste for both foreign- and U.S.-educated immigrants. Among foreign-educated immigrants, the skill underutilization rate for naturalized U.S. citizens (30 percent) was lower than that of LPRs (46 percent) (see Figure 3). Similarly, only 21 percent of naturalized U.S. citizens educated in the United States were working in low-skilled jobs or seeking employment compared to 34 percent of LPRs.

**U.S. citizenship appeared to reduce brain waste for both foreign- and U.S.-educated immigrants.**

Unauthorized immigrants had the highest risk of brain waste, with 49 percent of those who were foreign educated and 40 percent of the U.S. educated being either underemployed or unemployed. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that more than 50 percent of college-educated

**Figure 3. Underemployment and Unemployment of Highly Skilled Immigrants in Florida, by Place of Education and Legal Status (%), 2009-13**



Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

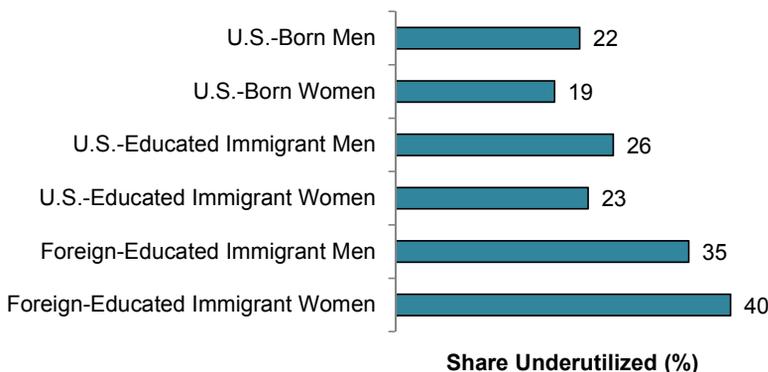
unauthorized immigrants worked in middle- or high-skilled jobs.

**Gender.** Women represented 48 percent of the 608,000 highly skilled immigrants in Florida and 49 percent of the state’s 1.8 million U.S.-born college graduates. Foreign-educated immigrant women had the highest skill underutilization rates of all college-educated workers (40 percent) (see Figure 4).

**Time in the United States.** Length of residence in the United States had a bigger impact on

the skill underutilization of immigrant women than of men—a change that may owe to shifting social norms within immigrant families as well as a need for higher household earnings.<sup>14</sup> The levels of brain waste among immigrant women decreased from 49 percent of recent arrivals (i.e., in the country for five years or less) to 24 percent of long-term residents (i.e., in the country for 15 years or more). By contrast, brain waste rates of immigrant men decreased from 38 percent of recent arrivals to 27 percent of long-term residents.

**Figure 4. Underemployment and Unemployment of Highly Skilled in Florida, by Nativity, Place of Education, and Gender (%), 2009-13**



Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

**Table 2. Race and Ethnicity of the Highly Skilled in Florida, by Nativity and Place of Education (%), 2009-13**

Race/Ethnicity	Florida		
	Foreign-Educated Immigrants	U.S.-Educated Immigrants	U.S. Born
<b>Number</b>	<b>337,000</b>	<b>272,000</b>	<b>1,824,000</b>
<i>Percent</i>	100	100	100
Hispanic	51	44	10
Non-Hispanic Black	8	16	9
Non-Hispanic Asian	17	17	1
Non-Hispanic White	23	23	81

Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

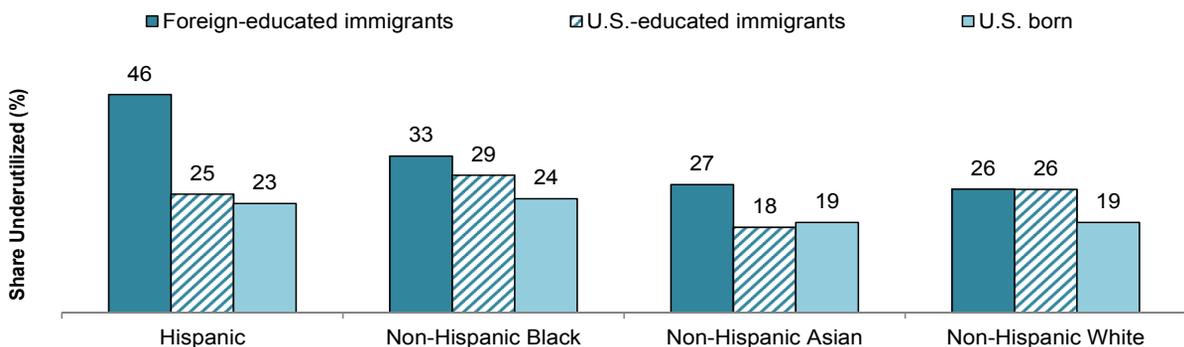
**Race and Ethnicity.** Fifty-one percent of foreign-educated immigrants in Florida were Hispanic, as were 44 percent of U.S.-educated immigrants (see Table 2). Florida had the largest population of highly skilled Hispanic immigrants of all states, accounting for 21 percent of the 1.4 million national total. Whites represented 23 percent of all immigrant college graduates in the state.

Hispanics had the highest skill underutilization rates (46 percent) among foreign-educated immigrants of all racial and ethnic groups (see Figure 5). Blacks had the highest rates

of brain waste among both U.S.-educated immigrants (29 percent) and the U.S. born (24 percent). By and large, Asians had low levels of underemployment or unemployment regardless of nativity or place of education.

There was a significant decline between the skill underutilization rates of foreign-educated Hispanic immigrants (46 percent) and U.S.-educated Hispanic immigrants (25 percent). U.S.-born Hispanics and U.S.-educated Hispanic immigrants had similar levels of brain waste.

**Figure 5. Underemployment and Unemployment of Highly Skilled in Florida, by Nativity, Place of Education, and Race/Ethnicity (%), 2009-13**



Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

**Table 3. Region/Country of Birth and Place of Education for Highly Skilled Immigrants in Florida and United States (%), 2009-13**

Region or Country of Birth	Florida		United States	
	Foreign-Educated Immigrants (%)	U.S.-Educated Immigrants (%)	Foreign-Educated Immigrants (%)	U.S.-Educated Immigrants (%)
<b>Total (Number)</b>	<b>336,000</b>	<b>272,000</b>	<b>3,992,000</b>	<b>3,626,000</b>
<i>Percent</i>	100	100	100	100
East Asia	3	4	16	16
China	2	2	9	10
Japan/Asian Tigers*	1	1	6	6
Southeast Asia	7	6	13	14
Philippines	5	3	10	6
Southwest Asia	8	7	20	17
India	6	5	15	12
Middle East	2	2	3	3
Central America	8	9	7	11
Mexico	2	2	5	7
Caribbean	27	35	5	9
South America	27	18	8	7
Canada	3	3	3	3
Australia/Oceania	-	-	1	<1
European Union/EEA**	10	9	12	11
Rest of Europe	3	3	6	4
Africa	3	3	7	5

\* Japan/Asian Tigers refers to Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea.

\*\* European Union/EEA refers to the 28 European countries that were part of the European Union as of 2013, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, which are part of the European Economic Area (EEA).

Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

Although they represented lower shares of highly skilled immigrants in Florida, those from Central America had the highest rate of skill underutilization (45 percent) among those educated abroad and the second-highest rate (35 percent) among those educated in the United States (see Table 4). African immigrants had lower skill underutilization rates in the state than at the national level.

## IV. Conclusion

In sum, 32 percent of the 608,000 college-educated immigrants living in Florida were either underemployed or unemployed during the 2009-13 period. Low-skilled employment among these highly skilled immigrants comes with a price tag: \$3.6 billion in annual lost earnings. And if this amount of earnings had not been forgone, immigrant households would have paid an additional \$214.7 million in state and local taxes.

**Table 4. Underemployment and Unemployment of Highly Skilled Immigrants, by Place of Education and Region/ Country of Birth in Florida and United States (%), 2009-13**

Region or Country of Birth	Florida		United States	
	Foreign-Educated Immigrants (%)	U.S.-Educated Immigrants (%)	Foreign-Educated Immigrants (%)	U.S.-Educated Immigrants (%)
<b>Total (%)</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>21</b>
East Asia	19	14	20	16
China	15	10	16	14
Japan/Asian Tigers*	27	20	25	20
Southeast Asia	32	20	35	20
Philippines	30	20	35	21
Southwest Asia	26	20	23	16
India	21	18	18	13
Middle East	32	28	28	21
Central America	55	35	51	36
Mexico	45	41	47	36
Caribbean	45	24	44	24
South America	40	27	37	25
Canada	19	20	12	15
Australia/Oceania	-	-	16	18
European Union/EEA**	22	24	18	19
Rest of Europe	33	36	33	23
Africa	29	22	37	26

\* Japan/Asian Tigers refers to Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea.

\*\* European Union/EEA refers to the 28 European countries that were part of the European Union as of 2013, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway, which are part of the European Economic Area (EEA).

Source: MPI analysis of 2009-13 ACS and 2008 SIPP data from the U.S. Census Bureau, with legal status assignments by Bachmeier and Van Hook.

The scale of this economic impact suggests that policymakers would do well to examine the barriers to full employment that immigrants—particularly those who are foreign educated—face in the Florida labor market. Given the costs documented here, policies that promote the

recognition of foreign credentials, make licensing requirements more transparent, and expand access to courses that teach professional English and fill educational gaps should provide substantial returns on public investment.

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## Endnotes

- 1 See Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Interactive Tables: Gross Domestic Product (GDP),” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce), [www.bea.gov/regional/index.htm](http://www.bea.gov/regional/index.htm).
- 2 Authors’ tabulations of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS).
- 3 The foreign born (or immigrants) are persons who were not U.S. citizens at birth. The U.S. born (or natives) are persons who were U.S. citizens at birth, even if they were born outside of the country.
- 4 See Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and James D. Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent: The Costs of Brain Waste among Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, New American Economy, and World Education Services, 2016), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/untapped-talent-costs-brain-waste-among-highly-skilled-immigrants-united-states). State-level fact sheets examining brain waste for college-educated immigrants cover California, Florida, Michigan, New York, Ohio, Texas, and Washington, and can be found at [www.migrationpolicy.org/topics/brain-waste-credential-recognition](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/topics/brain-waste-credential-recognition).
- 5 All estimates in this fact sheet refer to civilian adults ages 25 and older and are based on analysis of U.S. Census Bureau pooled 2009-13 ACS data unless otherwise stated. The data were pooled to increase the precision of the estimates. James Bachmeier at Temple University, in consultation with Jennifer Van Hook at The Pennsylvania State University and researchers at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) developed techniques to link the ACS data to the Census Bureau’s 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) to allow for estimates by legal status. The 2009-13 data were the most recent at the time of the analysis.
- 6 The term “foreign educated” refers to immigrants who have at least a bachelor’s degree and arrived in the United States at age 25 or later. They were likely to have obtained all of their formal education abroad; “U.S. educated” refers to college-educated immigrants who came to the United States before age 25 and are likely to have been educated in the United States.
- 7 Persons identified as Black, Asian, and White refer to non-Hispanic individuals. Persons identified as Hispanic are of any race.
- 8 The national report that accompanies this fact sheet employs logistic regression models to test the effect of place of education, time in the United States, level of educational attainment, English skills, race and ethnicity, and citizenship and legal status on the odds of low-skilled employment of immigrant men and women. The report finds that each of these variables had an independent and statistically significant impact on the likelihood of low-skilled employment. The analysis assumes that the relationships observed at the national level hold at the state level as well. See Batalova, Fix, and Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent*.
- 9 MPI in 2008 first estimated the size of the immigrant population experiencing brain waste. See Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix with Peter A. Creticos, *Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2008), [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/uneven-progress-employment-pathways-skilled-immigrants-united-states](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/uneven-progress-employment-pathways-skilled-immigrants-united-states).
- 10 The analysis of forgone earnings was done separately by place of education and gender. See Batalova, Fix, and Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent*, Appendix A-3 for additional discussion of the decomposition methodology. Estimates of unrealized tax contributions at the state and local level were computed for MPI by the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP). See Batalova, Fix, and Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent*, Appendix A-4 for additional discussion of the tax estimation methodology. The value of forgone federal taxes associated with low-skilled employment of immigrants in Florida was not estimated.

- 11 The national report also estimates the amount of forgone federal taxes associated with immigrant low-skilled employment: approximately \$10.2 billion. See Batalova, Fix, and Bachmeier, *Untapped Talent*.
- 12 Persons who reported speaking English only or “very well” in the ACS are considered to be English proficient. Persons who reported speaking English “not well” or “not at all” are considered to have low levels of English proficiency.
- 13 Refers to master, doctoral, and professional degrees.
- 14 See Mary C. Waters and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, eds., *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press), [www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society](http://www.nap.edu/catalog/21746/the-integration-of-immigrants-into-american-society).

## About the Authors



**Ariel G. Ruiz Soto** is a Research Assistant at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), where he provides quantitative research support across MPI programs. His research focuses on the impact of U.S. immigration policies on immigrant experiences of socioeconomic integration across varying geographical and political contexts. More recently, Mr. Ruiz Soto has analyzed methodological approaches to estimate sociodemographic trends of the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States.



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**Michael Fix** is President of MPI, a position he assumed in 2014 after serving as CEO and Director of Studies. He joined the Institute in 2005, and was previously Senior Vice President and Co-Director of MPI's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. His research focus is on immigrant integration and the education of immigrant children in the United States and Europe, as well as citizenship policy, immigrant children and families, the effect of welfare reform on immigrants, and the impact of immigrants on the U.S. labor force.

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The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit think tank dedicated to the study of the movement of people worldwide. The Institute provides analysis, development, and evaluation of migration and refugee policies at the local, national, and international levels. It aims to meet the rising demand for pragmatic responses to the challenges and opportunities that migration presents in an ever more integrated world.

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