Leaving Money on the Table

The Persistence of Brain Waste among College-Educated Immigrants

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Executive Summary

The election of President Joe Biden has opened a new chapter in immigration and immigrant integration policies. The administration has, among other things, raised the ceiling on refugee resettlement, rescinded the public-charge rule, re-established the White House Task Force on New Americans, proposed to extend legal status to DREAMers, and proposed a marker bill—the *U.S. Citizenship Act*—that offers a more or less comprehensive approach to immigration and integration policy.

Among the proposals embedded in the *U.S. Citizenship Act* is a call for a comprehensive study of factors that limit the employment opportunities of internationally trained professionals. There are several reasons for Congress and the executive branch to focus greater attention on underemployed immigrants with college degrees. First, almost half of recent arrivals (i.e., immigrants who arrived in the past five years) have a bachelor's degree or higher, most often gained abroad. Second, 21 percent of college-educated immigrants, or 2 million, are either unemployed or working in jobs that require no more than a high school diploma—an outcome often referred to as "brain waste" or underemployment. Third, while most states have seen their college-educated immigrant populations grow since 2010, there have been few strategic efforts to improve the integration prospects of these new residents. Put differently, despite a strong influx of human capital, the states and the nation overall are failing to fully leverage the skills that millions of college-educated immigrants have to offer. Finally, as documented here, stark patterns of racial and ethnic disadvantage emerge in the underemployment of both highly skilled immigrants and the U.S. born.

There are several reasons for Congress and the executive branch to focus greater attention on underemployed immigrants with college degrees.

This report analyzes state and national trends and factors linked to brain waste among four-year college graduates, both immigrant and U.S. born. The analyses are based on the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 and 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), the Labor Department's O*NET data on job skill levels by occupation, and the pooled 2014–18 ACS with MPI's assignment of legal status among noncitizens.

Key findings include:

► **Among college graduates, underemployment rates are higher for immigrants than the U.S. born.** In 2019, following a ten-year rise in the educational attainment of recent immigrants, underemployment among internationally trained immigrants remained high, and substantially exceeded that found among U.S.-born college graduates (21 percent versus 16 percent, respectively).

► **Nearly all states saw rapid growth in their college-educated immigrant populations between 2010 and 2019.** However, the underemployment of highly skilled immigrants exceeded that of U.S.-born graduates in 40 states, with strikingly wide gaps in some of those states with the fastest-growing economies, such as Utah and Nevada. By contrast, a set of Rust Belt and midwestern states, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, had relatively low underemployment rates among immigrants, and the gaps between the underemployment rates of immigrant and U.S.-born college graduates were narrow to nonexistent.

▶ **Underemployment is concentrated among racial and ethnic minorities across both foreign- and U.S.-born college graduates.** During periods of growth and recession, underemployment serves as a valuable lens for examining racial disparities and economic inequality. Regardless of place of birth, college-educated Blacks and Latinos are more likely to be underemployed than their White counterparts, even when other sociodemographic and educational characteristics are taken into account in regression analyses: The odds of underemployment for Black immigrants are 54 percent higher compared to their White counterparts; for Latinos they are 40 percent higher.

The regression results also reveal that highly skilled Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) were 12 percent less likely than White immigrants to face underemployment. However, because AAPIs account for almost half of the 9.6 million college-educated immigrants, numerically speaking they also make up larger shares of the 2 million underemployed immigrants (37 percent or 738,000).

▶ **In addition to race and ethnicity, place of education, English proficiency, and legal status are strong predictors of brain waste.** Immigrants who received their education abroad are more likely to be underemployed (24 percent) than those educated in the United States (17 percent). In contrast, U.S.-educated immigrants were only slightly more likely to be underemployed than their U.S.-born counterparts (17 percent versus 16 percent). Approximately 55 percent of college-educated immigrants with very low English proficiency were underemployed in 2019, compared to 33 percent of those who reported speaking English "well" in the ACS.

▶ **College-educated immigrants on temporary visas were the least likely to be in low-skilled employment or unemployed (8 percent).** Unauthorized immigrants and those admitted on humanitarian grounds were far more likely to experience brain waste (34 percent and 44 percent, respectively).

▶ **Immigrants with degrees in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and health are less likely to be underemployed than those in other fields.** These lower underemployment levels held for both foreign- and U.S.-educated immigrant professionals. For example, less than 17 percent of internationally trained immigrants with STEM and health-related bachelor's degrees were underemployed in 2019, compared to 35 percent or more of those with degrees in law, education, or business.

▶ **Nonetheless, brain waste levels for immigrants with both health-related degrees and degrees in architecture or engineering were almost twice as high as for their U.S.-born counterparts.** Many of these underemployed immigrants with college degrees in health or medicine have been overlooked by efforts to overcome health-worker shortages during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Taken together, these findings suggest several targets of opportunity for policymakers, service providers, educational institutions, and immigrant advocacy organizations to work toward reducing brain waste. One target for such efforts is highly skilled, underemployed immigrants who speak English "well" but who are not fluent. Many may require only modest, relatively inexpensive "topping-off" instruction to become fully integrated in the labor force. Another potentially promising strategy is to design or strengthen initiatives focused on highly regulated occupations (e.g., education), where immigrant professionals experience particularly high levels of underemployment. A third policy focus given the authors' findings of disadvantage among native- and foreign-born Blacks and Latinos would be antidiscrimination

policies that can influence the actions of both employers and licensing bodies. A final area of focus—and arguably the most urgent given the nation's public-health crisis—would be to develop pathways for underemployed immigrant and U.S.-born health-care professionals to join the U.S. health-care workforce. The recently passed $1.9 trillion stimulus legislation, the *American Rescue Plan of 2021*, offers unique funding opportunities to expand access to health-care services and boost the public-health workforce. Underemployed immigrants and refugees with health-related degrees and training, who bring critical cultural and linguistic skills, represent a significant, largely untapped, pool of workers.

Several recent federal policy developments may present opportunities for reducing skill underutilization. These include an expanded and better supported refugee resettlement program and the re-establishment of a White House Task Force on New Americans that could make brain waste a focus of its integration portfolio. Both state and federal governments have much to learn from the natural experiments that have taken place within the health-care system in 2020 as several states sought to bring internationally trained health-care professionals off the sidelines and into the fight against COVID-19 by adjusting licensing requirements. Although the results of these efforts were mixed, they hold important lessons for developing successful credential-recognition policies in the future.

1   Introduction

A foreign-trained brain surgeon taking a job as an Uber driver to make ends meet is but one example of the "brain waste" often seen among high-skilled immigrants in the United States. The underutilization of immigrant—and indeed U.S.-born—professionals' skills is a phenomenon that comes at a substantial cost to individual workers, their families, and the broader society. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has estimated that the forgone wages of underemployed college-educated immigrants in the country amounted to almost $40 billion annually, and that federal, state, and local governments combined were losing $10 billion in taxes as a result of these forgone earnings.[1] Analysts have also found that beyond earnings losses, brain waste has other negative long-term effects as underemployed workers have fewer opportunities to acquire on-the-job skills and to build professional connections that could lead to future jobs.[2]

The COVID-19 pandemic brought other dimensions of highly skilled immigrants' underemployment into focus. With the crisis's onset and the sustained shortages of health-care workers, several states sought to incorporate underutilized internationally trained health-care professionals in their pandemic response by altering longstanding licensing and credentialing barriers. Proponents hoped that the policy changes would allow this reserve corps of practitioners to assist beleaguered health-care professionals throughout the health system. While these measures' results were mixed, they brought to the fore the issue of skill underutilization among immigrant professionals in a vivid way largely new to many policymakers.

Looking beyond the pandemic and its economic impacts, several broad sociodemographic trends underscore the importance of mitigating this brain waste.

Looking beyond the pandemic and its economic impacts, several broad sociodemographic trends underscore the importance of mitigating this brain waste. One is the aging of the U.S. population along with

the retirement of its large baby boomer population that will result in new demands for labor. Another is the U.S. population's slow rate of growth over the past decade: the second slowest in the nation's history.[3] One result of these demographic trends is that a disproportionate share of this demand for workers across skill levels will need to be met by immigrant-origin populations, including those trained abroad. Another related macro trend is the gulf between the skills of the nation's workforce and the demands of its economy. Before the pandemic's onset, this gap was broader than it had been in decades, a gulf that has only widened with the onset of the recovery: The number of unfilled jobs reported by the U.S. Department of Labor's survey on job openings rose from 7.1 million in January 2020 to 8.1 million as of the end of March 2021.[4]

In this report, the authors use data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 and 2019 American Community Surveys (ACSs), employing MPI-developed methodologies for assigning job skills to occupations[5] (see Box 1) and legal status to noncitizens.[6] The report addresses the following questions:

1   How did the educational attainment of U.S. immigrants change between 2010 and 2019, both nationwide and at the state level?

2   How did underemployment change among foreign- and U.S.-born college graduates from 2010 through 2019? What factors (e.g., U.S. versus foreign degrees, English proficiency, legal status, and gender) are associated with brain waste?

3   How do patterns of immigrant underemployment compare to those among U.S.-born populations, especially among racial and ethnic groups that have been historically disadvantaged?

4   How does the underemployment of highly skilled immigrants vary across states?

5   What are the implications of these education and employment trends for immigrant integration policies?

BOX 1
Brain Waste and Other Key Terms

"Brain waste" (also referred to as "underemployment" or "skill underutilization") is defined here as the employment of college-educated adults in low-skilled jobs or as their unemployment (i.e., when they are jobless and looking for a job). "College-educated adults" refers to civilian, noninstitutionalized persons ages 25 and older with at least a four-year education (i.e., a bachelor's, master's, professional, or doctoral degree). This term is used interchangeably in this report with "college graduates," "highly educated," and "highly skilled." "Workers" are adults ages 25 and older in the civilian labor force. "Recently arrived" immigrants are those who entered the United States within the five-year period before the survey.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) methodology for classifying job skills draws on the U.S. Department of Labor's online database of occupational profiles, O*NET. The database classifies occupations by educational requirements, segmenting them into "job zones." Based on this categorization, MPI assigns jobs to three skill levels:

► *High-skilled jobs* require at least a bachelor's degree. Examples include physicians and scientists (job zones 4 and 5).

► *Middle-skilled jobs* require some postsecondary education or training (i.e., an associate's degree or long-term on-the-job training or vocational training). Examples include registered nurses, electricians, and teachers' assistants (job zone 3).

► *Low-skilled jobs* require a high school degree or less, and little to moderate on-the-job training. Workers in these jobs include home health aides, construction laborers, and taxi drivers (job zones 1 and 2).

2   Trends in the U.S. College-Educated Population and Workforce

The persisting underemployment among highly skilled immigrant professionals documented here has taken place against the backdrop of a steady rise in the educational credentials of new immigrant flows to the United States. The number of highly skilled immigrant adults (ages 25 and older) grew 42 percent from 9 million in 2010 to 12.8 million in 2019. This rate of increase was much higher than that of U.S.-born college graduates, which rose 27 percent from 48.1 million to 61 million during the same period. As of 2019, immigrants accounted for 17 percent of the nation's 55.1 million college-educated workers and an even larger share of college graduates who had joined the U.S. labor force since 2010 (25 percent). As of 2019, almost half of recently arrived immigrants had a four-year college degree. This rate is almost double that seen in the second half of the 1980s (27 percent).

Immigrants from India accounted for 23 percent of the 2.3 million recently arrived college graduates in 2019, up from 8 percent in 1990. Other countries that sent large numbers of college graduates were China (including Hong Kong), Mexico, the Philippines, and Venezuela (see Table 1).

FIGURE 1

Share of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher, by Nativity and Recency of Arrival, 1990 and 2019
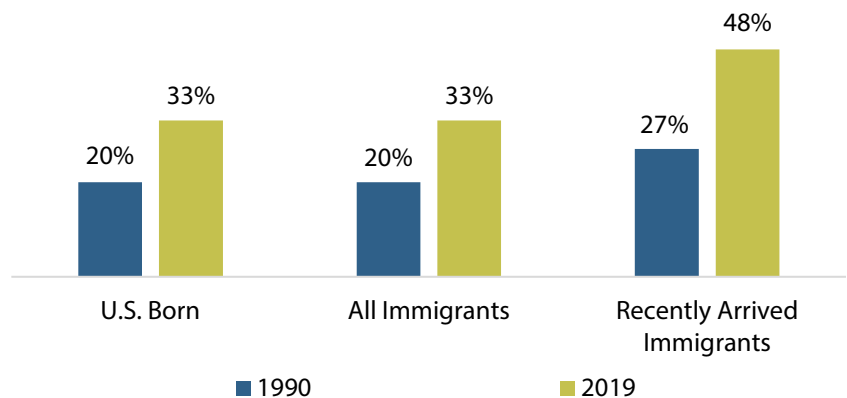
Note: Recently arrived immigrants are those who entered the United States within the five-year period before the survey.
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 1990 decennial census and 2019 American Community Survey (ACS).

TABLE 1

Top Ten Sending Countries of Recently Arrived College-Educated Immigrants to the United States, 2019

	Number	Percent
Recently arrived immigrants	**2,323,000**	**100.0%**
India	537,000	23.1%
China/Hong Kong	225,000	9.7%
Mexico	108,000	4.7%
Philippines	96,000	4.2%
Venezuela	96,000	4.1%
Brazil	73,000	3.2%
South Korea	64,000	2.7%
Cuba	57,000	2.5%
Canada	55,000	2.4%
Nigeria	54,000	2.3%

Note: Figure includes all recently arrived immigrant adults, not only those in the labor force.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

The share of immigrants with college degrees has risen across all legal status categories. Thirty-two percent of recently arrived lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders) were college graduates, versus 20 percent of all green-card holders, according to the analysis of the pooled 2014-18 ACS with MPI's legal status assignments.[7] Thirty-one percent of recently arrived humanitarian migrants[8] held a college degree versus 24 percent of all humanitarian immigrants. And even among unauthorized immigrants—often thought of as being less educated—34 percent of recent entrants were college graduates versus 19 percent of the total unauthorized population.

Among all immigrants with a college education, the majority were either naturalized U.S. citizens (57 percent) or green-card holders (17 percent). About 14 percent of college-educated immigrants were unauthorized immigrants, including the young adults who are eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. Immigrants on temporary work visas, such as H-1B or TN visas for high-skilled workers, accounted for 10 percent of immigrant college graduates. A much smaller share (2 percent) were humanitarian migrants.

3   The Persisting Challenge of Brain Waste

Labor force and skill employment outcomes of college-educated adults vary by their place of education, gender, and nativity (see Table 2). Roughly equal shares (about one-quarter each) of both natives and immigrants with a college degree or more were not in the labor force (i.e., they were not employed and not looking for a job). Regardless of nativity, women were more likely to be out of the labor force: the share was largest among foreign-educated women (39 percent), followed by U.S.-born women (28 percent), and then by U.S.-educated immigrant women (23 percent). U.S. and international research has found that the lower rates of labor force participation among immigrant women, including higher-educated women, has to do in large part with cultural approaches to family and child-care responsibilities as well as the availability of child-care services and their costs.[9] Among men, immigrants who were U.S.-educated were the least likely to be out of the labor force. Only 14 percent reported being out of the labor market, versus 21 percent of foreign-educated immigrants and 23 percent of the U.S. born.

A.   The Extent of Brain Waste

Despite a growing economy and rising education levels among foreign workers from 2010 to 2019, brain waste among highly educated immigrants persisted. In 2010, an estimated 1.74 million college-educated immigrants were either unemployed or worked in low-skilled jobs such as retail salespersons, customer service representatives, or personal care aides. Almost a decade later, the number of underemployed college-educated immigrants remained largely unchanged at about 2 million (see Table 2). As in earlier years, foreign-born college graduates in 2019 were more likely to be underemployed than U.S.-born graduates: 21 percent versus 16 percent (Figure 2).

TABLE 2

Employment Status of Civilian College-Educated Adults (ages 25 and older), by Nativity, Place of Education, and Gender, 2019

	Immigrants	U.S. Born	Internationally Educated Immigrants		U.S.-Educated Immigrants		U.S.-Born College Educated	
			Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Total civilian population	**12,805,300**	**61,034,500**	**3,515,300**	**3,635,900**	**2,705,400**	**2,948,600**	**28,459,700**	**32,574,800**
Percent of the total population								
Out of labor force	**24.7%**	**25.5%**	**20.5%**	**38.6%**	**13.8%**	**22.7%**	**22.9%**	**27.8%**
In the civilian labor force	**9,639,400**	**45,465,800**	**2,793,100**	**2,232,900**	**2,333,200**	**2,280,200**	**21,940,400**	**23,525,300**
Percent of the labor force								
Employed	97.7%	98.0%	97.9%	97.0%	98.0%	97.8%	97.9%	98.1%
High skilled	63.3%	68.1%	66.7%	52.9%	70.2%	62.4%	71.1%	65.2%
Middle skilled	16.0%	16.1%	11.7%	20.9%	12.4%	20.1%	12.8%	19.2%
Low skilled	18.3%	13.8%	19.4%	23.2%	15.3%	15.3%	13.9%	13.7%
Unemployed	2.3%	2.0%	2.1%	3.0%	2.0%	2.2%	2.1%	1.9%
Brain waste (underutilized)								
Estimate	**1,991,700**	**7,186,300**	**602,400**	**585,800**	**404,300**	**399,200**	**3,521,100**	**3,665,200**
Percent of the labor force	**20.7%**	**15.8%**	**21.6%**	**26.2%**	**17.3%**	**17.5%**	**16.0%**	**15.6%**

Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

This study, like prior MPI research, defines "brain waste" to be the unemployment or low-skill employment of those with at least a four-year college degree.[10] By defining underemployment in this way, the authors exclude workers with four-year college degrees who are employed in middle-skilled jobs for which they are also overqualified. Table 2 shows that an additional 16 percent (or 1.5 million) of immigrants in the civilian labor force with a bachelor's degree or higher were employed in middle-skilled jobs, such as registered nurses, administrative assistants, and computer support. If these arguably overqualified workers were included in this report's estimates they would increase the number of underemployed, highly skilled immigrants from 2 million to 3.5 million.

FIGURE 2

Share of College-Educated Workers, by Nativity and Job Skill Type, 2019

	In high-skilled jobs	In middle-skilled jobs	In low-skilled jobs or unemployed
U.S. Born	68%	16%	16%
Immigrants	63%	16%	21%
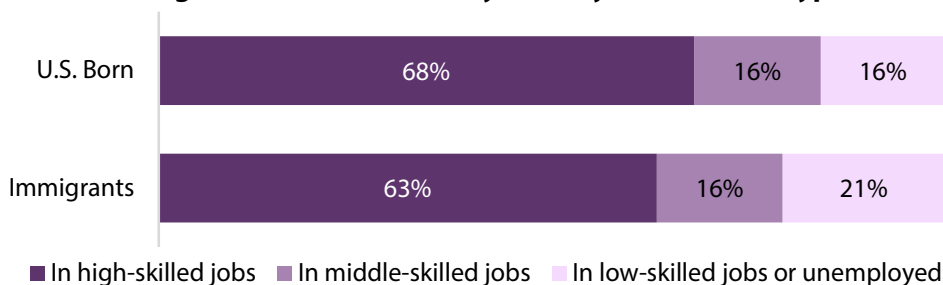
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

## B. Key Factors Linked to Brain Waste

Several factors drive underemployment,[11] with many holding for both immigrant and U.S.-born college graduates. Here, the authors use both descriptive analysis and logistic regression models[12] to quantify the relationship between underemployment and workers' characteristics. Other factors[13] that have been linked to brain waste, but that do not lend themselves to ACS data analyses, are discussed in Box 2.

Race and Ethnicity

Latino and Black immigrant college graduates were more likely to be underemployed in 2019—32 percent and 26 percent, respectively—than Whites and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) (18 percent and 16 percent, respectively) (see Figure 3). Among U.S.-born college graduates, Blacks were the most likely to be underemployed (22 percent), followed by Latinos (19 percent).

One approach to measuring economic integration and inequality is to compare the shares of college graduates who work in high-skilled jobs with those who are underemployed. Here, the data reveal that U.S.-born Black college graduates are over-represented among the underemployed relative to their share among U.S. workers in high-skilled jobs (see Figure 4) (see Appendix, Table A-1). As Figure 4 indicates, Blacks composed 13 percent of U.S.-born underemployed workers, but they made up only 8 percent of U.S.-born workers in high-skilled jobs. Similarly, Black immigrants accounted for 12 percent of

FIGURE 3

**Share of Underemployed College-Educated Workers, by Nativity and Race/Ethnicity, 2019**
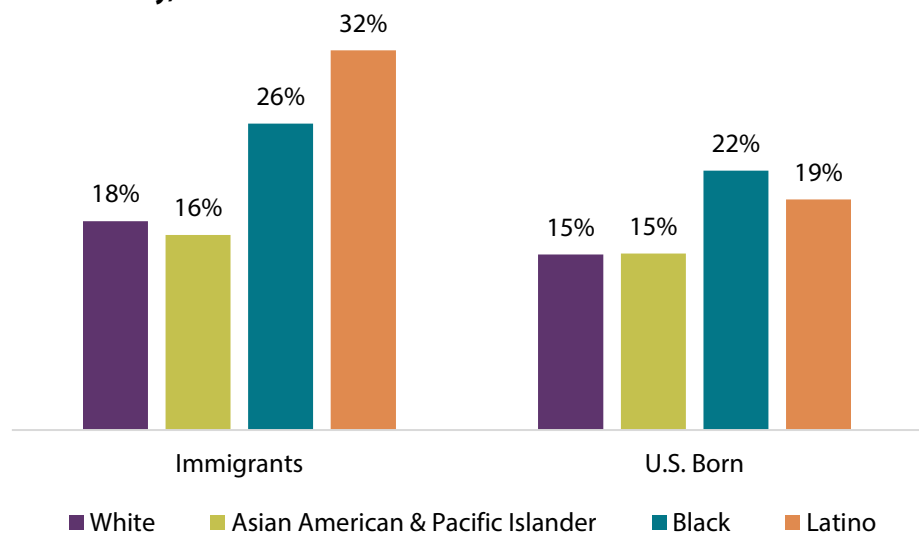
Note: Latinos can be of any race. The other racial groups refer to non-Latinos. Black refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "Black alone" or "Black in combination with other race." Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "AAPI alone" or "AAPI in combination with other race" except Black. American Indian/other races (not shown in the chart above) include non-Latino people who reported their race as "American Indian alone," "American Indian and White," or unspecified multiracial. The remainder group (White) refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "White." Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

underemployed immigrant college graduates but only 8 percent of immigrants in high-skilled jobs in 2019. This disheartening pattern can also be seen among college-educated Latino immigrants: they represented 30 percent of underemployed immigrants versus 15 percent of immigrants in high-skilled jobs. Because the absolute number of AAPI college-educated immigrants is so high, they make up large shares of immigrants who are underemployed (37 percent or 738,000) as well as those employed in high-skilled jobs (50 percent).

FIGURE 4

Shares of Immigrant and U.S.-Born College Graduates among Underemployed Workers and among Workers in High-Skilled Jobs, by Race/Ethnicity, 2019
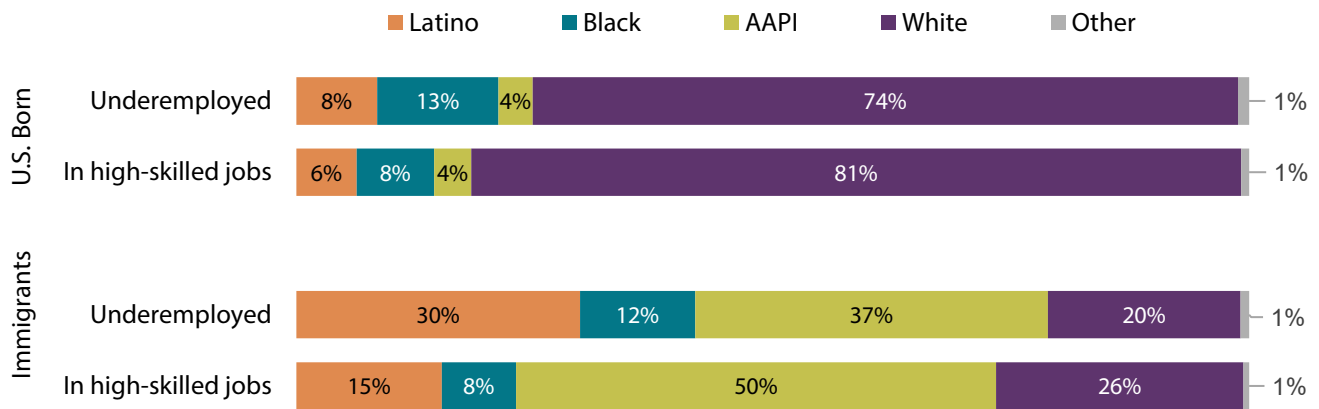
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

Regression analyses reveal that race remains one of the most salient factors in shaping outcomes for both immigrant and U.S.-born college graduates even after other factors, such as gender, educational attainment level, English proficiency, and state of residence, are considered. Among highly skilled immigrant adults, the odds of underemployment for Blacks are 54 percent higher compared to their White counterparts, and for Latinos they are 40 percent higher. AAPI immigrants, meanwhile, are 12 percent less likely than White immigrants to face underemployment. For Latino immigrant college graduates, limited English skills explain about half of this disadvantage, whereas the impact of English proficiency is less pronounced for Blacks. Among the U.S. born, the odds of underemployment among Black and Latino college graduates are also higher than among their White peers (by 56 percent and 30 percent, respectively), while there is no meaningful difference between AAPIs and Whites. Taken together, the results of both descriptive and regression analyses point to a persistent labor market disadvantage experienced by Black and Latino college-educated workers, native born and immigrant alike.[14]

Regression analyses reveal that race remains one of the most salient factors in shaping outcomes for both immigrant and U.S.-born college graduates even after other factors, such as gender, educational attainment level, English proficiency, and state of residence, are considered.

Gender

College-educated women were much more likely to be out of the workforce than men (see Table 2), which is consistent with other studies of gender differences in the labor market. Table 2 also shows that immigrant women with foreign degrees were more likely to be underemployed than other groups, while there was almost no gender difference in the risk of brain waste among U.S.-educated immigrants and the U.S. born. However, once other factors, in particular the presence of young children, are taken into account in regression analyses, female college graduates were in fact somewhat less likely to be underemployed than college-educated men, regardless of nativity.

Immigrant Workers' English-Language Proficiency

Other personal characteristics, such as English-language proficiency, also play a role in shaping workers' labor market outcomes. There is a strong inverse relationship between English proficiency and brain waste: About 55 percent of those who reported speaking English "not well" or "not at all" and 33 percent of those who reported speaking English "well"[15] were underemployed in 2019. In contrast, only 15 percent of English-only speakers and 16 percent of immigrants who speak another language and are English proficient were underemployed. One-quarter of underutilized immigrants (or 490,000) speak English "well" and may be positioned to be fully employed with modest levels of occupation-specific language training. (See Appendix, Table A-2, for the number and share of immigrants by level of English proficiency and job skills.)

The regression analyses affirm that the strongest single predictor of underemployment among college-educated immigrants is their level of English-language proficiency. Immigrant college graduates with very limited English skills are almost five times more likely to be underemployed than those who are fully proficient.

The strongest single predictor of underemployment among college-educated immigrants is their level of English-language proficiency.

Education

Immigrants' level of education along with what and where they studied are also determinants of underemployment. Among immigrants with only a bachelor's degree, 29 percent were either working in low-skilled jobs or unemployed in 2019—more than twice the level of advanced-degree holders. Thus, for many highly skilled immigrants in the U.S. labor force, as for many U.S.-born graduates, the return on investment in a bachelor's degree can be relatively low. In contrast, 77 percent of immigrants with a master's degree, 80 percent of those with a professional degree, and 91 percent of those with a doctoral degree were employed in high-skilled jobs, versus only 50 percent of immigrants with a bachelor's degree. Immigrant graduates' underemployment rates exceed those of the U.S. born at every degree level. Regression analyses confirm the importance of advanced degrees for both immigrant and U.S.-born college graduates.

U.S. and international research shows that education and experience obtained by immigrants in their origin country are less valued and often not formally recognized by the destination country's labor market.[16] These perceptions can owe, among other things, to employers' inability to assess whether foreign credentials come with the same knowledge requirements as those earned in the United States, to racial and ethnic bias, and to employers' concerns about the stability of an applicant's employment due to lack of citizenship (see also Box 2). MPI researchers find that immigrants who received their education in another country are more likely to be underemployed than those educated in the United States (24 percent versus 17 percent, respectively, in 2019). This gap persists even when English skills and other characteristics are taken into account. Notably, immigrants educated in the United States are only slightly more likely to be underemployed than their U.S.-born counterparts (17 percent versus 16 percent), demonstrating the value of domestic training in the eyes of U.S. employers.

Immigrants in certain professional fields are more likely to face underemployment. Some of the highest levels of immigrant underemployment are in occupations that require formal credential recognition and

licensing, such as law and education (see Figure 5). Other fields with high underemployment levels are business and journalism, both of which rely on strong English-language and general communications skills. In contrast, immigrants with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) and health degrees are less likely to be underemployed.

Immigrants who received their education in another country are more likely to be underemployed than those educated in the United States.

Despite low overall levels of underemployment relative to immigrants with other degrees, internationally trained immigrants with degrees in health, architecture, and engineering are significantly more likely than their U.S.-born counterparts to be underemployed. To illustrate, while only 9 percent of U.S.-born health graduates are underemployed, 15 percent of internationally trained immigrants with a health or medical degree are underemployed. Indeed, recent MPI research has found that close to 270,000 immigrant college graduates with medicine- or health-related degrees were underemployed or out of the labor force as of 2019.[17] Similar patterns can be seen in architecture and engineering. In the area of health, this brain waste among immigrants has come at the expense of an overwhelmed U.S. health system that has struggled to cope with COVID-19.[18]

FIGURE 5

Underemployed Share of College-Educated Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults, by Place of Education and Bachelor's Degree Major, 2019*
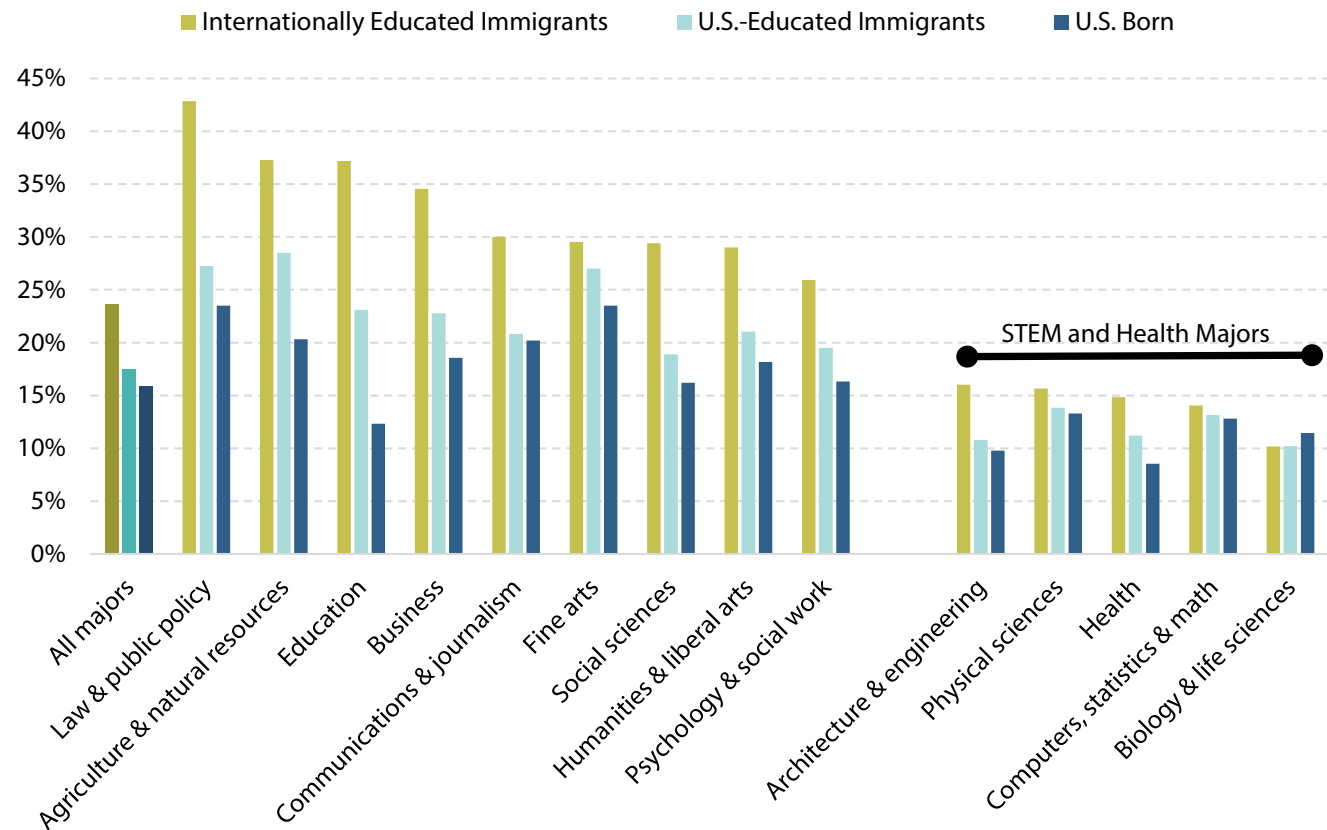

Note: The ACS does not provide information on fields of study or majors at educational levels higher than the undergraduate level. "Major" refers to the main major.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

Legal Status

Unauthorized immigrants with a college education are more likely to be underemployed than most immigrants with other forms of legal status, an outcome that can be tied in part to legal status restrictions on obtaining professional licenses or credentials (see Figure 6). Immigrants entering through humanitarian channels also experience high levels of underemployment: almost half were underemployed in 2018. This may be attributed in part to the refugee resettlement program's strong focus on getting people into the labor force as quickly as possible, irrespective of the fit between their education and the jobs at hand.[19]

FIGURE 6
Underemployed Share of College-Educated Immigrant Adults, by U.S. Citizenship and Legal Status, 2014–18
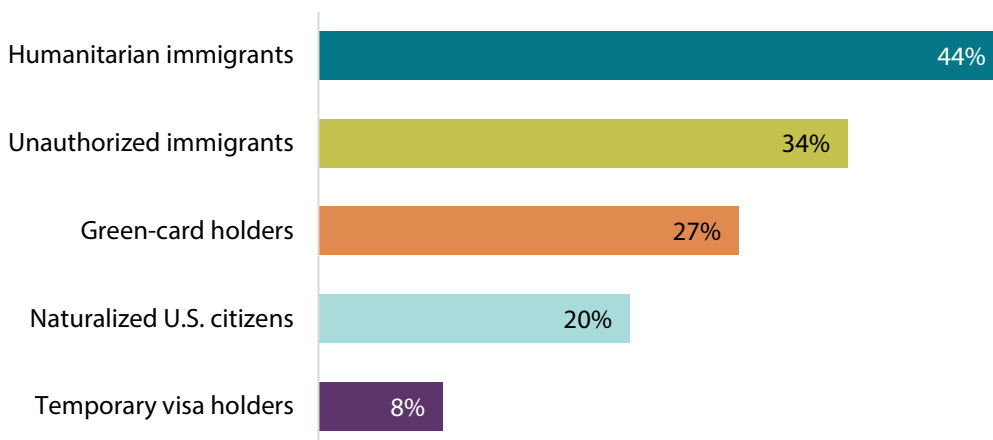
Source: MPI tabulation of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2014–18 American Community Survey (ACS) pooled and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), drawing on an MPI methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of the Pennsylvania State University's Population Research Institute.

BOX 2
Other Factors Contributing to Brain Waste among College-Educated Immigrants

Beyond the factors captured in the American Community Survey data and regression analyses, an extensive body of knowledge has been accumulated by, among others, nonprofit organizations such as Upwardly Global and the Welcome Back Centers that work with immigrant professionals. Their service work and analyses identify important, systemic barriers to gainful employment for immigrants and refugees.

One such barrier is recent immigrants' limited social and professional networks. Another is employer bias and discrimination against foreign-born or foreign-educated candidates. Some employers may be reluctant to hire candidates with unfamiliar credentials, little U.S. work experience, or work authorizations that may not be renewed.

Another barrier to good jobs for immigrant college graduates is their often-interrupted career trajectories. Returning to gainful employment after a period of un- or underemployment due to raising children, living in refugee camps, or being unauthorized is particularly challenging. In addition to outdated skills, immigrants whose careers have been disrupted are likely to face increased difficulties related to lack of English-language proficiency, as work often constitutes an important mechanism for obtaining proficiency and developing the ability to communicate in a business setting in English.

BOX 2 (cont.)
Other Factors Contributing to Brain Waste among College-Educated Immigrants

Difficulties in filling skills gaps represent another set of obstacles. The relative lack of "bridge" programs to fill gaps in coursework or practical training, as well as advanced English courses teaching professional language and communications skills can prevent immigrant professionals with years of experience from fully applying their skills. Because much of the U.S. workforce development system is designed to "upskill" and support people with few skills, highly educated workers—both immigrant and native—are largely on their own when it comes to navigating the labor market.

Finally, there are barriers that limit opportunities for gainful employment for college-educated immigrant and U.S.-born workers alike, such as licensing and regulatory challenges. As the number of occupations that require licenses or certifications has increased—from 5 percent in 1950 to more than 25 percent in 2015—the process of obtaining licenses has become more complex and difficult to navigate. A lack of transparency regarding licensing requirements and career pathways, which vary across states and occupations, increases these challenges. In addition, refugees and other humanitarian migrants who fled their home countries may lack documents that prove their foreign-earned credentials and work experience and that are required to obtain a professional license in the United States.

Sources: Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Tapping the Talents of Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States: Takeaways from Experts Summit* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018); Margie McHugh and Madeleine Morawski, *Unlocking Skills: Successful Initiatives for Integrating Foreign-Trained Immigrant Professionals* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017); National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), *Occupational Licensing Final Report: Assessing State Policies and Practices* (Washington, DC: NCSL, 2020); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2020* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

4   State Trends in Immigrant Underemployment

Skilled and educated workers help propel both national and local economies. Between 2010 and 2019, the U.S. college-educated immigrant population grew by 42 percent. During the same period, the number of immigrant college graduates grew faster than the national average in 25 states[20] (see Figure 7). Notably, five of the ten states with the fastest rates of growth among high-skilled immigrants also led the nation in 2016–19 GDP growth, according to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.[21] They included Washington State (ranked 1st in GDP growth), Texas (10th), Utah (2nd), Idaho (3rd), and Colorado (4th). These patterns suggest that immigrants are both attracted to places with strong economies and that their skills and entrepreneurship contribute to that growth.

But even as the population of college-educated immigrants grew faster than U.S.-born graduates, in most states underemployment among high-skilled immigrant workers exceeded that of the U.S. born (see Figure 8), making brain waste an abiding state as well as national issue. This underemployment also indicates that many states are not reaping the full economic benefits of their highly skilled immigrant populations.

FIGURE 7

Percent Change in Populations of College-Educated Immigrants and U.S.-Born Adults, by State, between 2010 and 2019
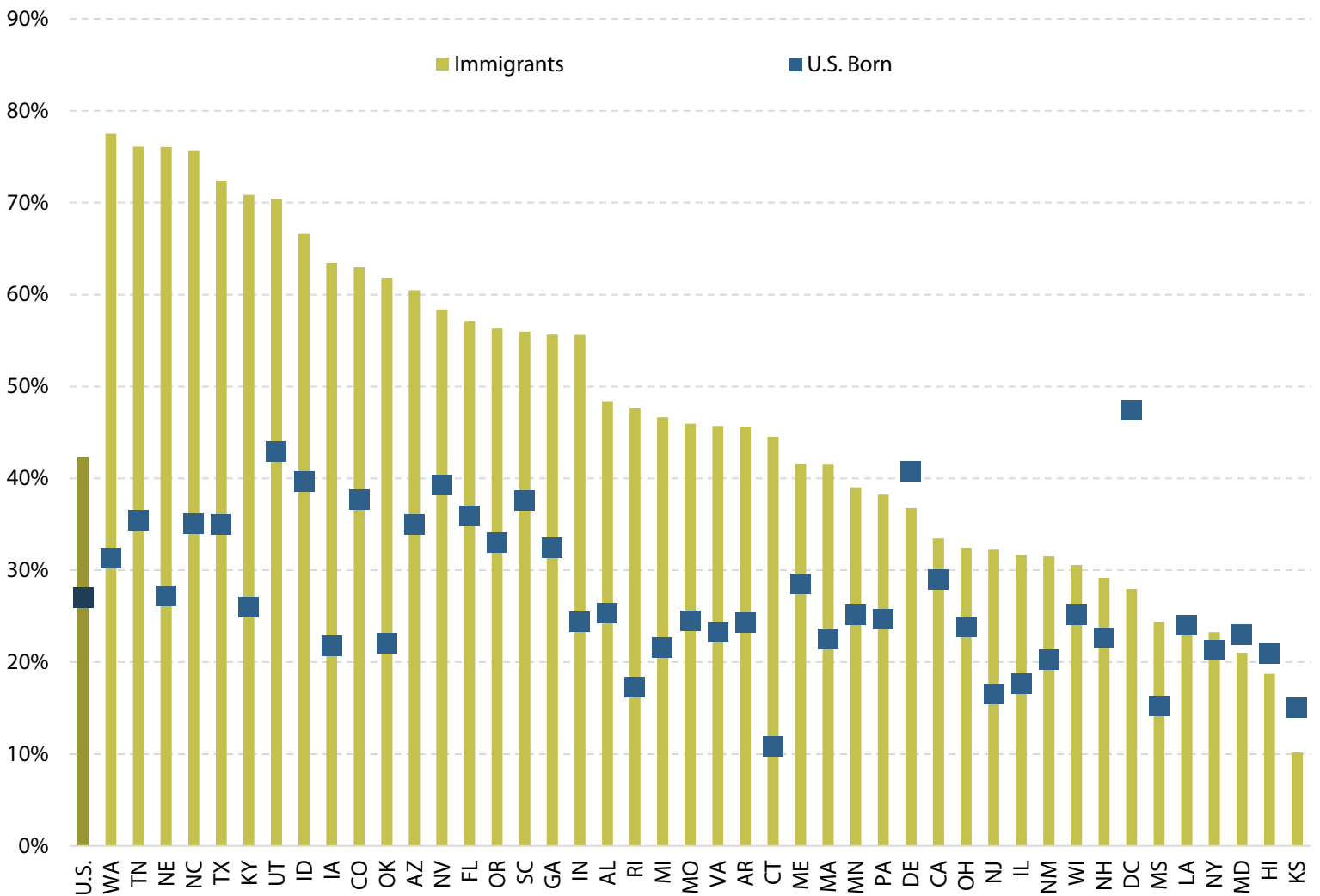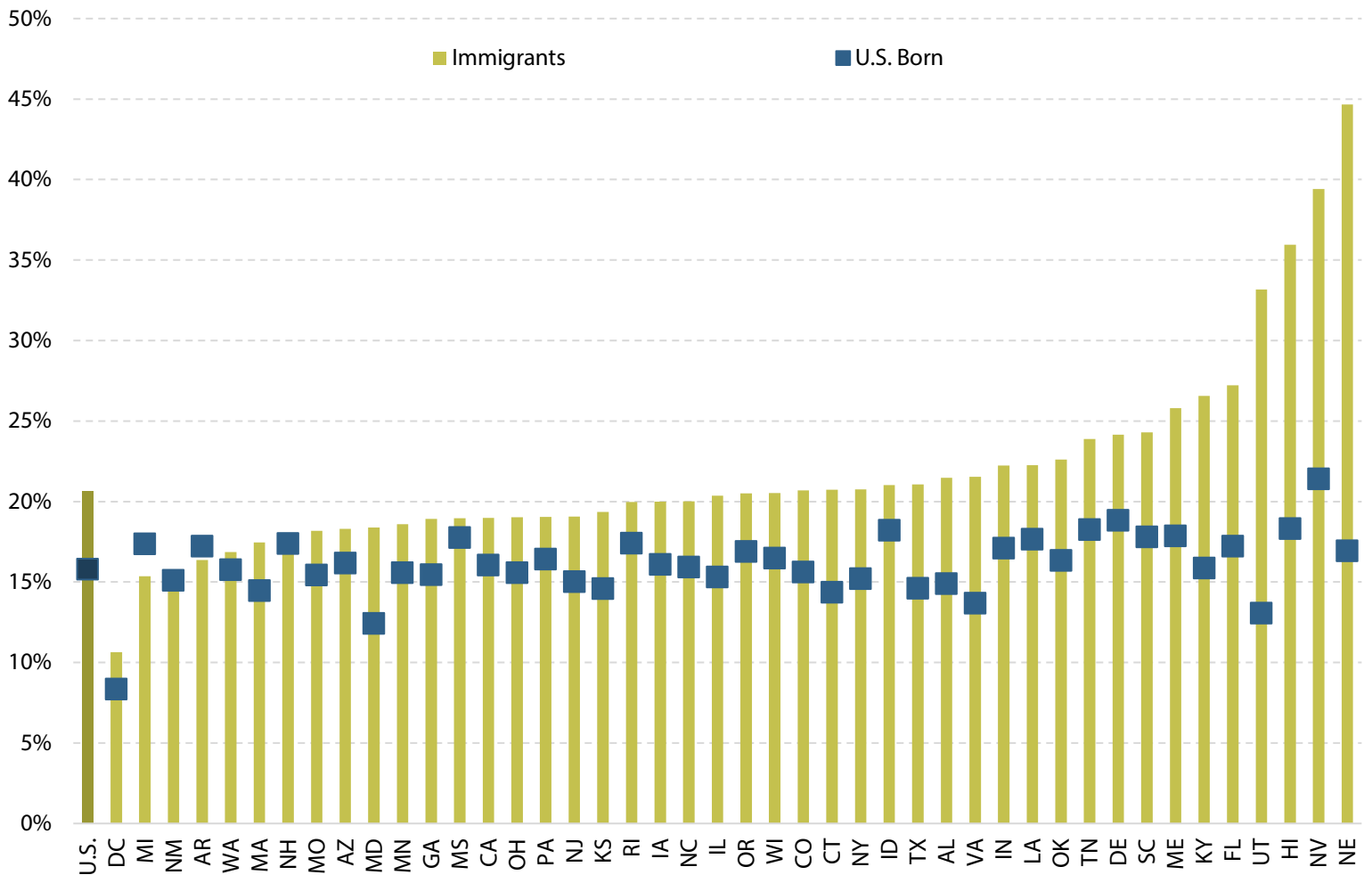

Note: Seven states—Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming—are not shown here due to a small sample size.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 and 2019 ACS.

Several Rust Belt and midwestern states have low underemployment rates among immigrants and the gaps between the underemployment rates of immigrant and U.S.-born college graduates are narrow. Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania are notable in this respect (Figure 8). Two of the three, Michigan and Ohio, have implemented programs to attract and fully employ high-skilled immigrants.[22]

Not surprisingly, six traditional immigrant-receiving states accounted for most underutilized immigrants in 2019. California and Florida were home to 32 percent of the 2 million college-educated immigrants who were either in low-skilled work or were unemployed. New York, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois accounted for another 29 percent. Among these six states, Florida stands out as having one of the highest immigrant underemployment rates in the nation (27 percent).

FIGURE 8
Underemployed Share of College-Educated Workers, by Nativity and State, 2019

Note: Seven states—Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming—are not shown here due to a small sample size.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

5   Concluding Thoughts

The decade between 2010 and 2019 was one of strong economic growth and declining unemployment, during which the United States saw increasingly educated immigration flows. But despite these favorable economic conditions, brain waste persisted at high levels, with 2 million college-educated immigrants in low-skilled jobs or unemployed in 2019. Patterns of underemployment were evident among both foreign- and U.S.-born workers with Latino and Black college graduates suffering higher levels of underemployment than other racial and ethnic groups.[23]

These trends in highly skilled immigration and underemployment can be seen across the nation. All but six states (with available data) saw their college-educated immigrant populations grow faster than their highly skilled U.S.-born populations. And in all but three states, immigrant college graduates had higher underemployment rates than their U.S.-born peers, indicating how widespread the brain waste phenomenon is. These rates of underutilization translate into lower earnings, and in turn, to lower tax

collections at all levels of government.[24] Many states, then, have been "leaving money on the table" by not fully capitalizing on the skills of their highly educated immigrant workers.

Maximizing the opportunities for highly trained immigrants and refugees represents one powerful tool for increasing the pool of skilled and talented professionals needed in the post-pandemic economy. A diverse set of institutions could support efforts to reduce immigrant underemployment: community colleges, workforce development boards, adult education programs, immigrant advocacy and rights organizations, and refugee resettlement organizations.

Maximizing the opportunities for highly trained immigrants and refugees represents one powerful tool for increasing the pool of skilled and talented professionals needed in the post-pandemic economy.

Several potential targets for policy and practice interventions flow from the empirical analyses set out in this report. One would be the 25 percent of highly skilled, underemployed immigrants (or close to 490,000) who report that they speak English "well" but not "very well," given the strong inverse relationship between English proficiency and underemployment. The increased funding for immigrant integration proposed by the Biden administration could support programs to help these immigrant professionals "top up" their language skills: skills that would act as a bridge toward securing more skilled employment.

Another policy focus supported by the data reported here would be highly regulated occupations, such as education, in which immigrant professionals experience particularly high levels of underemployment. Given teacher shortages resulting in part from pandemic-associated retirements across the nation, alternative teacher certification or bridge programs could help many of these bilingual and bicultural teachers re-enter the classroom, to the benefit of students and broader communities as well as the immigrant professionals themselves.[25]

This research finds that underemployment affects a significant number of traditionally disadvantaged racial minority groups: 42 percent of immigrant and 21 percent of native underemployed college graduates are Blacks or Latinos. Even when controlling for other factors related to underemployment, college graduates who are Black or Latino are significantly more likely to experience brain waste than their White or AAPI counterparts. This finding suggests that labor market discrimination based on race and ethnicity persisted even in a tight labor market. At the same time, skills, such as cultural sensitivities and linguistic competencies, have not been put to good use where they are needed.[26]

The data also support policies aimed at the health-care field, where underemployment among immigrant graduates with health-care degrees is twice that of their U.S.-born counterparts. (Recent MPI research has found that close to 270,000 immigrants with medicine or health-related four-year degrees were underemployed or out of labor force as of 2019.)[27] This underutilization has occurred against the backdrop of pandemic-driven shortages of professionals across the health-care system. Demand for health-care professionals is likely to be further boosted by the Biden administration's call for a surge in new workers to support vaccination and other efforts to combat COVID-19 under the *American Rescue Plan Act of 2021*, signed into law in mid-March.[28] The administration's pandemic response strategy also calls for expanding

the scope of practice laws and waiving licensing requirements where appropriate—shifts that stand to benefit internationally trained health professionals.[29]

The data in this report also highlight the fact that the underemployment of college-educated immigrants is not just concentrated in a handful of states but is a challenge across the country. Among the recent policy experiments of most interest when it comes to brain waste are the efforts of eight states, including New Jersey, Colorado, and Idaho, to adjust licensing and practice requirements for internationally trained health-care professionals during the pandemic.[30] The success of those experiments so far has been modest. But their implementation provides important lessons for the broader policy issue of recognizing foreign credentials and overcoming the underemployment of college graduates going forward.[31] These lessons lie in such areas as the cost and availability of malpractice insurance and the unintended exclusions arising from rigidities in emergency rules that bear on the length and recency of U.S. medical practice. The successes and limits of those emergency orders need to be more deeply understood and broadly communicated to the immigrant integration field. They also need to be placed in the broader context of licensing and occupational regulation reforms that are underway as brain waste is an abiding issue for many college-educated U.S.-born workers.[32]

While credential recognition and underutilization have traditionally been a state-level issue, the recent election provides opportunities for policy change at the federal level. The Biden administration is supporting the *U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021* that expressly calls attention to the issue of the underemployment of immigrants and refugees, proposing that the Department of Labor study its causes and public and private resources that can be devoted to it.[33]

And finally, the authors would recommend that the re-established White House Task Force on New Americans could make the issue of brain waste among high-skilled immigrants a focus of its activities—as the task force's predecessor did under President Barack Obama.[34]

While credential recognition and underutilization have traditionally been a state-level issue, the recent election provides opportunities for policy change at the federal level.

Appendix. Additional Tables

TABLE A-1

Number and Share of College-Educated Workers, by Nativity, Job Skill Level, and Race/Ethnicity, 2019

	College-Educated Workers	Employed in High-Skilled Jobs	Employed in Middle-Skilled Jobs	Underemployed (i.e., employed in low-skilled jobs or unemployed)
Immigrants	**9,639,000**	**6,104,000**	**1,543,000**	**1,992,000**
Latino	1,856,000	932,000	331,000	593,000
Black	933,000	475,000	218,000	241,000
AAPI	4,496,000	3,077,000	682,000	738,000
Amer. Indian/ Other Races	63,000	37,000	8,000	18,000
White	2,291,000	1,584,000	305,000	402,000
Share of the total				
Latino	19%	15%	21%	30%
Black	10%	8%	14%	12%
AAPI	47%	50%	44%	37%
Amer. Indian/ Other Races	1%	1%	1%	1%
White	24%	26%	20%	20%
U.S. Born	**45,466,000**	**30,942,000**	**7,338,000**	**7,186,000**
Latino	3,140,000	1,957,000	574,000	609,000
Black	4,191,000	2,518,000	759,000	914,000
AAPI	1,746,000	1,204,000	283,000	259,000
Amer. Indian/ Other Races	406,000	254,000	68,000	84,000
White	35,983,000	25,010,000	5,654,000	5,319,000
Share of the total				
Latino	7%	6%	8%	8%
Black	9%	8%	10%	13%
AAPI	4%	4%	4%	4%
Amer. Indian/ Other Races	1%	1%	1%	1%
White	79%	81%	77%	74%

Note: Latinos can be of any race. The other racial groups refer to non-Latinos. Black refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "Black alone" or "Black in combination with other race." Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "AAPI alone" or "AAPI in combination with other race," except Black. American Indian/other races include non-Latino people who reported their race as "American Indian alone," "American Indian and White," or unspecified multiracial. The remainder group (White) refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as "White."
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey (ACS).

TABLE A-2

Number and Share of Immigrant College-Educated Immigrant Workers, by Job Skill Level and English Proficiency, 2019

	Immigrant College-Educated Workers	Employed in High-Skilled Jobs	Employed in Middle-Skilled Jobs	Underemployed (i.e., employed in low-skilled jobs or unemployed)
Estimate	**9,639,000**	**6,104,000**	**1,543,000**	**1,992,000**
Speak English only	2,039,000	1,417,000	309,000	313,000
Speak English "very well"	5,559,000	3,804,000	871,000	885,000
Speak English "well"	1,484,000	724,000	271,000	489,000
Speak English "not well" or "not at all"	558,000	160,000	93,000	305,000
Share of the total				
Speak English only	21%	23%	20%	16%
Speak English "very well"	58%	62%	56%	44%
Speak English "well"	15%	12%	18%	25%
Speak English "not well" or "not at all"	6%	3%	6%	15%

Notes: The ACS includes a question asking respondents to self-report their spoken English proficiency as "not at all," "not well," "well," "very well," or "English only." In this report, persons who reported speaking English "not well" or "not at all" are defined as persons with very low levels of English proficiency. Persons who speak only English or who reported speaking English "very well" are considered fully proficient in English.
Source: MPI tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 ACS.

Endnotes

1   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, 2016).

2   Burning Glass Technologies and Strada Institute for the Future of Work, *The Permanent Detour: Underemployment's Long-Term Effects on the Careers of College Grads* (Boston, MA: Burning Glass Technologies, 2018).

3   Sandra Leigh Johnson, *New Estimates Show U.S. Population Growth Continues to Slow* (Washington DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

4   U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "Impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic on Job Openings and Labor Turnover Data for March 2021," Table 3a. Job Openings by Sector and Region (numbers in thousands), accessed May 20, 2021.

5   To assign job skill level to occupations, Migration Policy Institute (MPI) researchers used the Occupational Information Network (O*NET) database of occupational profiles that describes day-to-day work tasks and activities, tools and technologies, and qualifications and skills of the typical worker. The O*NET database is updated regularly from surveys of workers, occupational experts, and occupational analysts. Its development is supported by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. Further detail on the O*NET database can be found at O*NET, "About O*NET," last updated May 25, 2021.

6   For MPI's methodology for assigning legal status to noncitizens, see MPI, "MPI Methodology for Assigning Legal Status to Noncitizen Respondents in U.S. Census Bureau Survey Data," accessed May 25, 2021..

7   The "green-card holder" group excludes immigrants who arrived as humanitarian migrants and have shifted to lawful permanent resident (LPR) status. This latter group is classified as "humanitarian migrants."

8   MPI researchers define humanitarian migrants as those who arrived in the United States as resettled refugees, certain asylees, special immigrant visa holders, and Cuban and Haitian entrants. Because the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) does not ask respondents about their legal or immigration status or visa at the time of arrival in the United States, MPI researchers developed a proxy estimate of humanitarian migrants based on foreign-born respondents' countries of birth and year of immigration in the United States (in some cases, additional information such as ancestry or language was also used). This estimate is a conservative one. In the case of a few countries that send large numbers of nonhumanitarian immigrants as well as humanitarian migrants (for instance, asylum seekers from the People's Republic of China), it is impossible to distinguish between the two groups based on the information collected by ACS. For this reason, arrivals from these countries were not included in the "humanitarian migrant" estimate total.

9   Neeta P. Fogg and Paul E. Harrington, *Labor Market Underutilization Problems among College-Educated Immigrants in the United States* (Philadelphia: Center for Labor Markets and Policy, Drexel University, 2013); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *International Migration Outlook 2020* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020).

10   It should be noted that other, more expansive definitions of underemployment are found in the workforce and employment literature. They include workers who are working part-time involuntarily, those working more than one job, and workers who believe that their education or work experience is not being fully utilized. See David Bell and David Blanchflower, "Underemployment in the US and Europe," working paper 24927, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, August 2018; Binyamin Appelbaum and Damon Winter, "One Job Is Better Than Two," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2019; BLS, "Table A-15. Alternative Measures of Labor Underutilization," accessed March 15, 2021.

11   Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Tapping the Talents of Highly Skilled Immigrants in the United States: Takeaways from Experts Summit* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018); Amanda Bergson-Shilcock and James Witte, *Steps to Success: Integrating Immigrant Professionals in the U.S.* (New York: World Education Services, 2015); OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2020.*

12   This analysis employs three sets of logistic regression models. One explores the relationship between college graduates' underemployment, nativity, and place of education while controlling for the effects of race and ethnicity; English proficiency; level of education; having a science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) degree; state of residence; and several demographic variables (i.e., gender, age, school enrollment, and presence of children under age 5). A second model tests the relationship between underemployment and race and ethnicity of *U.S.-born college graduates*, while controlling for workers' level of education, having a STEM degree, state of residence, and the demographic variables. A third model tests the relationship between underemployment of *immigrant college-educated workers* and their race and ethnicity, English proficiency, and age at arrival while controlling for workers' level of education, having a STEM degree, state of residence, and demographic variables. Regression results are available upon request.

13   Margie McHugh and Madeleine Morawski, *Unlocking Skills: Successful Initiatives for Integrating Foreign-Trained Immigrant Professionals* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017).

14   Jhacova Williams and Valerie Wilson, *Black Workers Endure Persistent Racial Disparities in Employment Outcomes* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2019).

15   The ACS includes a question asking respondents to self-report their spoken English proficiency as "not at all," "not well," "well," "very well," or "English only." In this report, persons who reported speaking English "not well" or "not at all" are defined as persons with very low levels of English proficiency. Persons who speak only English or who reported speaking English "very well" are considered fully proficient in English.

16   OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2020.*

17   Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and José Ramón Fernández-Peña, *The Integration of Immigrant Health Professionals: Looking beyond the COVID-19 Crisis* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).

18   Batalova, Fix, and Fernández-Peña, *Looking beyond the COVID-19 Crisis*.

19   For more on this "work-first" focus and underemployment among refugees, see, for example, Michael Fix, Kate Hooper, and Jie Zong, *How Are Refugees Faring? Integration at U.S. and State Levels* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2017), 15–17; U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Refugee Resettlement: Greater Consultation with Community Stakeholders Could Strengthen Program* (Washington, DC: GAO, 2012).

20   Seven states—Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming—are not included in the state-level trend analyses due to the small sample size of the college-educated immigrants participating in the ACS.

21   *U.S. News and World Report*, "Growth Rankings: Analyzing State Population and GDP Trends," accessed March 12, 2021.

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23   Anthony P. Carnevale, Jeff Strohl, Artem Gulish, Martin Van Der Werf, and Kathryn Peltier Campbell, *The Unequal Race for Good Jobs: How Whites Made Outsized Gains in Education and Good Jobs Compared to Blacks and Latinos* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2019).

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25   Jeff Gross, *Can Immigrant Professionals Help Reduce Teacher Shortages in the U.S.?* (New York: World Education Services, 2018).

26   Ryan E. Tsuchida, Sydney Fouche, John Burkhardt, Ted Corbin, Harrison Alter, and Mahshid Abir, "When It Comes to U.S. Health Systems—Diversity Matters," RAND Corporation commentary, September 25, 2020.

27   Batalova, Fix, and Fernández-Peña, *Looking beyond the COVID-19 Crisis*.

28   Katie Keith, "Final Coverage Provisions in the American Rescue Plan and What Comes Next," *Health Affairs*, March 11, 2021; American Public Health Association (APHA), "APHA Applauds Passage of American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 as a Step Toward Healing and Recovery," press release, March 10, 2021.

29   President Joe Biden, *National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness* (Washington, DC: White House, 2021).

30   Jeanne Batalova, Michael Fix, and Sarah Pierce, *Brain Waste among U.S. Immigrants with Health Degrees: A Multi-State Profile* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2020).

31   Batalova, Fix, and Fernández-Peña, *Looking beyond the COVID-19 Crisis*.

32   Emma Goldberg, "'I Am Worth It': Why Thousands of Doctors in America Can't Get a Job," *The New York Times*, February 23, 2021; Williams and Wilson, *Black Workers Endure Persistent Racial Disparities in Employment Outcomes*.

33   *U.S. Citizenship Act of 2021*, HR 1177, 117th Cong., 1st sess., Section 3508.

34   White House, "President Biden Outlines Steps to Reform Our Immigration System by Keeping Families Together, Addressing the Root Causes of Irregular Migration, and Streamlining the Legal Immigration System" (fact sheet, White House, Washington, DC, February 2, 2021).

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