

Today's Issues

New Legal Immigrants' Background, Skills, and Impact on U.S. Society

- **Most “new” legal immigrants are not new:** Two-thirds of immigrants who recently received green cards granting them permission from the U.S. government to reside permanently in the United States had prior experience living in this country.
- **Compared with native-born U.S. citizens, new legal immigrants include a higher percentage of individuals who have attended graduate school as well as a higher percentage who have fewer than nine years of schooling.**
- **For immigrants who had previously entered the United States illegally, the most common way to acquire a visa was as the spouse of a U.S. citizen.**
- **Before receiving a green card, at least one in five new legal immigrants had entered the United States illegally at least once.**
- **Compared with their last job abroad, most new legal immigrants who were employed enjoyed large increases in their annual earnings.**

These are some of the initial findings from the New Immigrant Survey Pilot. This survey lays the groundwork for the New Immigrant Survey, the first nationally representative survey of immigrants recently granted legal permanent residence. These surveys collect current and background information on immigrants and their families and then track them over time.

To date, major national surveys have distinguished among U.S. natives, naturalized citizens, and noncitizens, but have not distinguished among types of noncitizens. But noncitizens are not homogeneous (see Figure 1). For instance, noncitizens (or aliens) who are in the United States illegally have extremely different education and income levels from aliens who are here

with U.S. government permission. Even among aliens who are residing legally in the United States, those who are admitted for a limited time (called “legal nonimmigrants”) differ from aliens admitted to the United States to settle permanently (known as “legal permanent residents” or green-card holders). The characteristics of legal permanent residents differ according to their visa categories—whether they received a green card because they were the spouse (or other relative) of a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, were admitted based on their educational or occupational qualifications, were refugees, or won a diversity visa in the lottery that grants visas to people from countries with few recent U.S. immigrants.

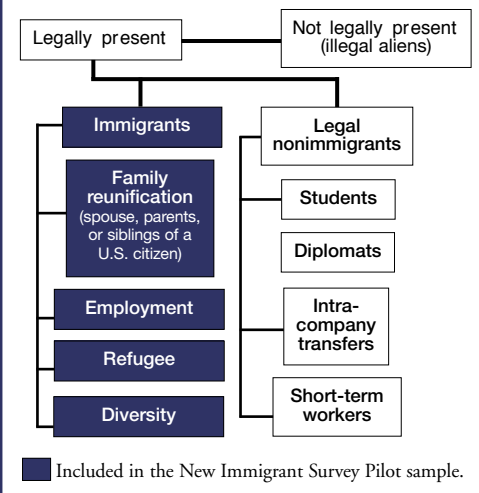
Past studies included large numbers of illegal immigrants among noncitizens surveyed. Because illegal aliens tend to have low earnings and education levels, researchers probably underestimated the educational level and occupational status of legal noncitizen immigrants.

The lack of detailed data on legal permanent residents has meant that many policy and research questions have not been answered satisfactorily. The full New Immigrant Survey, now underway, will allow policymakers and researchers to answer the following questions:

- How do different categories of immigrants assimilate, and what are their contributions and costs to the U.S. economy and society?
- Are current immigrants more or less skilled than immigrants in previous years?
- How many immigrants return to their home countries?
- What is the impact of current immigration law on family reunification?

The New Immigrant Survey Pilot was funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the National Institute on Aging, with support from the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the National Science Foundation. The Pilot is based on a representative sample of nearly 2,000 immigrants granted green cards between July and August of 1996. Respondents were interviewed four times. The study was conducted by Guillermina Jasso of New York University, Douglas S. Massey and Mark R. Rosenzweig of the University of Pennsylvania, and James P. Smith of the RAND Corporation.

Figure 1
Noncitizens Residing in the United States



Findings from the New Immigrant Survey Pilot underscore the diversity of new immigrants and shed light on misconceptions about the legal immigrant population.

Schooling

- Adult new immigrants were more than twice as likely to have schooling beyond college than native-born U.S. citizens (21 percent compared with 8 percent). New immigrants also were more than

three times more likely to have completed fewer than nine years of school than native-born citizens (20 percent compared with 6 percent).

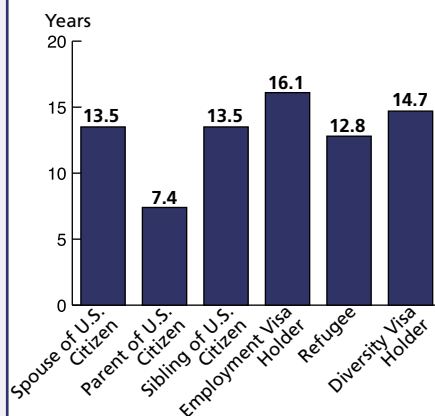
- Educational attainment varied significantly by visa category. Immigrants who received green cards because they qualified under the employment provisions of U.S. immigration law had the highest education levels, about 16 years compared with about 13 years for native-born U.S. citizens. Immigrants entering as parents of U.S. citizens had the lowest schooling levels, only about seven years on average (see Figure 2).

Employment and Wages

- New immigrants earned an average of about \$24,000 annually in the United States. But their median income—the level in relation to which half the group earned more and half earned less—was lower (\$16,000 among men and \$12,000 among women) because of the large number of low earners in the group.
- Earnings also varied by visa category. Immigrants who entered the United States under employment visas had by far the highest annual earnings (\$36,400 median earnings for males and \$35,100 for females). In contrast, refugees who held jobs had the lowest median earnings—\$13,220 for males and \$10,710 for females (see Figure 3).
- Most employed new immigrants realized large gains in earnings over their last job abroad. The researchers assessed the economic gains from immigrating, taking into account the cost of living in different countries. Men experienced a 68 percent increase in earnings, while women experienced a 62 percent increase. The gains totaled an average of \$10,000 for men and \$6,000 for women. Nonetheless, more than one-quarter of immigrants (28 percent of males and 27 percent of females) were earning less at their U.S. job than in their last job abroad.
- New immigrants who came primarily for work-related reasons saw the greatest increase in earnings, with men averaging almost a \$27,000 increase. Immigrant men entering as husbands of U.S. citizens increased their earnings by about \$14,000, but gains for immigrants in other visa categories were small, averaging less than \$2,000.

Figure 2

Average Years of Schooling of New Immigrants Ages 25 and Older, by Visa Category



Note: Figures for the sibling, refugee, and diversity visa categories cover both the immigrant principals and their spouses.

Source: 1996 New Immigrant Survey Pilot.

Insights into Illegal Migration

- Almost 20 percent of legal immigrants had entered the United States illegally at least once before, on either their first or last visit. The total share of legal immigrants with prior illegal U.S. experience is actually probably higher. Some legal immigrants may have entered the United States illegally on an intermediate trip, and others may have overstayed or otherwise violated the terms of a valid nonimmigrant visa.
- The most common way for former illegal entrants to obtain a green card is by being married to a U.S. citizen. Almost 40 percent of the new legal immigrants who entered the United States illegally received visas because they were married to a U.S. citizen.
- Immigrants with a history of illegal entry had completed fewer years of schooling and were younger, more likely to be male, and less likely to speak English “very well,” compared with immigrants who did not report entering the United States illegally. About 40 percent of the legal immigrants who had entered the country illegally were born in Mexico.

Figure 3

Median Annual Earnings of New Immigrants by Visa Category

All Visa Categories	
Male	\$15,600
Female	12,500
Spouse of U.S. Citizen	
Male	18,000
Female	16,640
Parent of U.S. Citizen	
Male	16,640
Female	10,400
Sibling of U.S. Citizen	
Male	12,840
Female	13,280
Employment Visa Holder	
Male	36,400
Female	35,100
Refugee	
Male	13,220
Female	10,710
Diversity Visa Holder	
Male	15,600
Female	11,330

Note: Figures for the sibling, refugee, and diversity visa categories cover both immigrant principals and their spouses.

Source: 1996 New Immigrant Survey Pilot.

- The economic gains from legal admission to the United States were larger for the formerly illegal than for other immigrants. Employed legal immigrants who had never been an illegal entrant saw their earnings increase by about 50 percent for men and 40 percent for women. Among employed legal immigrants who had previously entered the United States illegally, men doubled their earnings and women tripled their earnings.

For more information: Guillermina Jasso, Douglas S. Massey, Mark R. Rosenzweig, and James P. Smith. “The New Immigrant Survey Pilot (NIS-P): Overview and New Findings About U.S. Legal Immigrants at Admission,” *Demography* 37, no. 1 (February 2000).

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