

## The Foreign Born in the US Labor Force: Numbers and Trends

President Bush's initiative on immigration reform has raised questions about the participation of the foreign born in the civilian labor market of the United States. The Migration Policy Institute has compiled the following information on immigrant workers from census and survey data.

### **The foreign born make up 14 percent of the total civilian labor force in the United States.**

There were approximately 20.3 million foreign-born workers in the civilian labor force age 16 years and older in 2002. This accounted for 14 percent of the 144.1 million total, according to the results of the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. Of the 14 percent, 5 percent were naturalized citizens while 9 percent were non-citizens. Non-citizens include all foreign born who have not naturalized, for example, legal non-immigrants, such as refugees and persons on student or work visas, and persons illegally residing in the United States. (See *Graph 1 and Table 1.*)

### **The majority of foreign-born workers in the United States are non-citizens.**

According to the 2002 Current Population Survey, of the 20.3 million foreign-born workers in the civilian labor force, 12.7 million or 63 percent were non-citizens while 7.6 million or 37 percent were naturalized citizens. (See *Table 1.*)

### **Non-citizens in the labor force are more likely to be unemployed than either naturalized citizens or natives.**

In 2002, the unemployment rate for non-citizens in the civilian labor force was 7.9 percent, which was higher than the rate for either naturalized citizens (5.3 percent) or natives (6.1 percent). (See *Tables 3 and 4.*)

### **The percentage of foreign born in the civilian labor force increased between 1990 and 2002.**

According to the 1990 Census, there were approximately 11.6 million foreign born in the civilian labor force, representing 9 percent of the total 123.5 million. By 2002, the proportion of foreign-born in the civilian labor force increased to 14 percent, or 20.3 million, of the 144.1 million total, according to the results of the Current Population Survey. (See *Graph 2 and Tables 1 and 2.*)

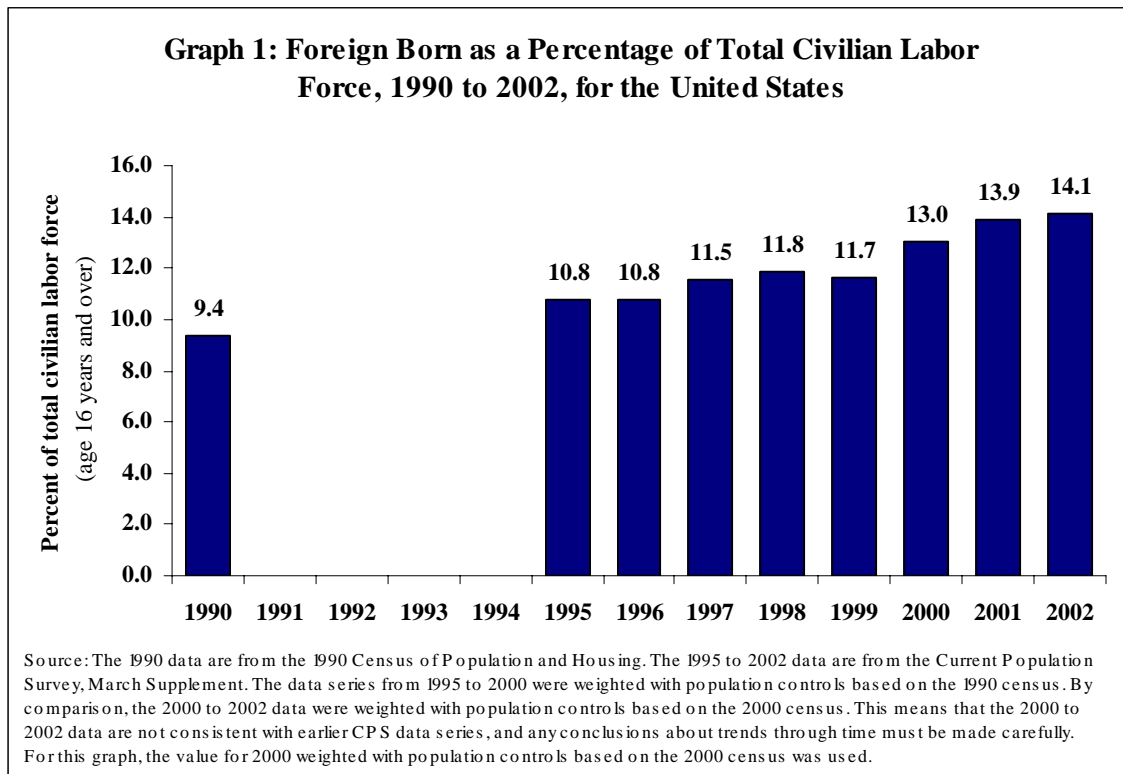
### **The number of foreign born in the labor force increased at a faster rate than the number of natives.**

There were approximately 11.6 million foreign born in the civilian labor force, according to the 1990 census, compared with 111.9 million native workers. By 2002, there were

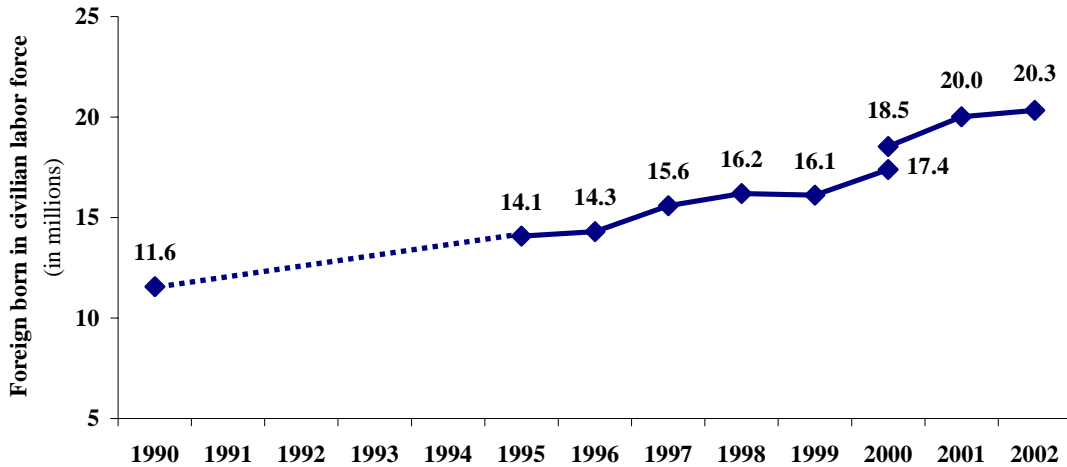
approximately 20.3 million foreign born workers compared with 123.8 million native workers in the civilian labor force, according to the Current Population Survey. This suggests a growth rate of approximately 76 percent for the foreign born compared 11 percent for natives. The growth rate for the total civilian labor force was approximately 17 percent, from 123.5 million in 1990 to 144.1 million in 2002. (See Table 1.)

**The number of non-citizens in the labor force increased at a faster rate than the number of naturalized citizens.**

According to the 1990 Census, there were 6.9 million non-citizens in the civilian labor force, compared with 4.7 million naturalized citizens. By 2002, there were about 12.7 million non-citizens in the civilian labor force, compared with 7.6 million naturalized citizens, according to the Current Population Survey. This suggests the growth rate of 86 percent for non-citizens compared with 62 percent for citizens. (See Table 1 and Graph 3.)

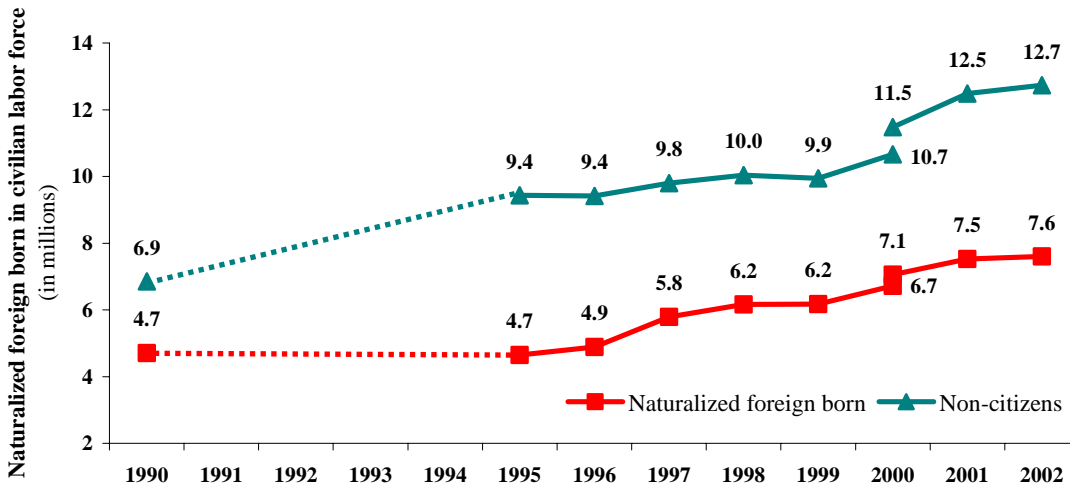


**Graph 2. Number of Foreign Born in the Civilian Labor Force, 1990 to 2002, for the United States**



Source: The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 1995 to 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March Supplement. The data series from 1995 to 2000 were weighted with population controls based on the 1990 census. By comparison, the 2000 to 2002 data were weighted with population controls based on the 2000 census. This means that the 2000 to 2002 data are not consistent with earlier CPS data series, and any conclusions about trends through time must be made carefully. This graph shows two values for 2000, the first weighted to the 1990 census and the second weighted to the 2000 census.

**Graph 3. Number of Foreign Born in the Civilian Labor Force, Showing Naturalized Foreign Born and Non-Citizens, 1990 to 2002, for the United States**



Source: The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 1995 to 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March Supplement. The data series from 1995 to 2000 were weighted with population controls based on the 1990 census. By comparison, the 2000 to 2002 data were weighted with population controls based on the 2000 census. This means that the 2000 to 2002 data are not consistent with earlier CPS data series, and any conclusions about trends through time must be made carefully. This graph shows two values for 2000, the first weighted to the 1990 census and the second weighted to the 2000 census.

**Table 1. Employment Status for Native and Foreign Born, Age 16 and Over, 1990 to 2002, for the United States (in thousands)**

| Employment status  | 1990    | 1995    | 1996    | 1997    | 1998    | 1999    | 2000(a) | 2000(b) | 2001    | 2002    |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| <b>NUMBERS</b>   |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Total civilian labor force                                 | 123,473 | 130,928 | 132,324 | 135,227 | 136,926 | 138,120 | 140,454 | 142,013 | 143,705 | 144,100 |
| Native   | 111,909 | 116,845 | 118,026 | 119,635 | 120,725 | 122,006 | 123,070 | 123,483 | 123,691 | 123,764 |
| Foreign born   | 11,565  | 14,083  | 14,299  | 15,592  | 16,201  | 16,114  | 17,384  | 18,530  | 20,014  | 20,336  |
| Naturalized citizen  | 4,706   | 4,652   | 4,883   | 5,792   | 6,160   | 6,171   | 6,720   | 7,056   | 7,529   | 7,601   |
| Not a citizen  | 6,858   | 9,431   | 9,416   | 9,800   | 10,041  | 9,943   | 10,664  | 11,474  | 12,485  | 12,735  |
| <b>PERCENTS</b>  |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
| Total civilian labor force                                 | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   |
| Native   | 90.6    | 89.2    | 89.2    | 88.5    | 88.2    | 88.3    | 87.6    | 87.0    | 86.1    | 85.9    |
| Foreign born (as a percent of total civilian labor force)  | 9.4     | 10.8    | 10.8    | 11.5    | 11.8    | 11.7    | 12.4    | 13.0    | 13.9    | 14.1    |
| Naturalized citizen  | 3.8     | 3.6     | 3.7     | 4.3     | 4.5     | 4.5     | 4.8     | 5.0     | 5.2     | 5.3     |
| Not a citizen  | 5.6     | 7.2     | 7.1     | 7.2     | 7.3     | 7.2     | 7.6     | 8.1     | 8.7     | 8.8     |
| Foreign born (as a percent of foreign born in labor force) | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   | 100.0   |
| Naturalized citizen  | 40.7    | 33.0    | 34.1    | 37.1    | 38.0    | 38.3    | 38.7    | 38.1    | 37.6    | 37.4    |
| Not a citizen  | 59.3    | 67.0    | 65.9    | 62.9    | 62.0    | 61.7    | 61.3    | 61.9    | 62.4    | 62.6    |

**Notes:**

(a) Weighted using population controls from the 1990 Census

(b) Weighted using population controls from Census 2000

**Source notes:**

Data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute. The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 1995 to 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March Supplement. Note the data series from 1995 to 2000 were weighted with population controls based on the 1990 census. By comparison, the 2000 to 2002 data were weighted with population controls based on the 2000 census. This means that the 2000 to 2002 data are not consistent with earlier CPS data series, and any conclusions about trends through time must be made carefully.

**Table 2. Employment Status of the Total Foreign Born, Age 16 Years and Over, 1990 to 2002, for the United States (in thousands)**

| Employment status    | 1990   | 1995   | 1996   | 1997   | 1998   | 1999   | 2000(a) | 2000(b) | 2001   | 2002   |
|----------------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| Civilian labor force | 11,565 | 14,083 | 14,299 | 15,592 | 16,201 | 16,114 | 17,384  | 18,530  | 20,014 | 20,336 |
| Employed             | 10,665 | 12,980 | 13,204 | 14,523 | 15,260 | 15,237 | 16,532  | 17,616  | 18,979 | 18,933 |
| Unemployed           | 900    | 1,104  | 1,095  | 1,069  | 940    | 877    | 852     | 914     | 1,035  | 1,403  |
| Not in labor force   | 6,467  | --     | --     | --     | --     | --     | 8,715   | 9,074   | 9,317  | 9,654  |
| Employment rate      | 92.2   | 92.2   | 92.3   | 93.1   | 94.2   | 94.6   | 95.1    | 95.1    | 94.8   | 93.1   |
| Unemployment rate    | 7.8    | 7.8    | 7.6    | 6.9    | 5.8    | 5.4    | 4.9     | 4.9     | 5.2    | 6.9    |

**Notes:**

(a) Weighted using population controls from the 1990 Census

(b) Weighted using population controls from Census 2000

**Source notes:**

Data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute. The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 1995 to 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March Supplement. Note the data series from 1995 to 2000 were weighted with population controls based on the 1990 census. By comparison, the 2000 to 2002 data were weighted with population controls based on the 2000 census. This means that the 2000 to 2002 data are not consistent with earlier CPS data series, and any conclusions about trends through time must be made carefully.

**Table 3. Employment Status of the Naturalized Foreign Born, Age 16 Years and Over, 1990 to 2002, for the United States (in thousands)**

| Employment status    | 1990  | 1995  | 1996  | 1997  | 1998  | 1999  | 2000(a) | 2000(b) | 2001  | 2002  |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------|---------|-------|-------|
| Civilian labor force | 4,706 | 4,652 | 4,883 | 5,792 | 6,160 | 6,171 | 6,720   | 7,056   | 7,529 | 7,601 |
| Employed             | 4,451 | 4,398 | 4,674 | 5,542 | 5,927 | 5,915 | 6,499   | 6,821   | 7,288 | 7,202 |
| Unemployed           | 255   | 255   | 209   | 250   | 232   | 256   | 221     | 235     | 241   | 399   |
| Not in labor force   | 2,993 | --    | --    | --    | --    | --    | 3,582   | 3,679   | 3,893 | 3,997 |
| Employment rate      | 94.6  | 94.5  | 95.7  | 95.7  | 96.2  | 95.9  | 96.7    | 96.7    | 96.8  | 94.7  |
| Unemployment rate    | 5.4   | 5.5   | 4.3   | 4.3   | 3.8   | 4.1   | 3.3     | 3.3     | 3.2   | 5.3   |

**Notes:**

(a) Weighted using population controls from the 1990 Census

(b) Weighted using population controls from Census 2000

**Source notes:**

Data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute. The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 1995 to 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March Supplement. Note the data series from 1995 to 2000 were weighted with population controls based on the 1990 census. By comparison, the 2000 to 2002 data were weighted with population controls based on the 2000 census. This means that the 2000 to 2002 data are not consistent with earlier CPS data series, and any conclusions about trends through time must be made carefully.

**Table 4: Employment Status of Non-Citizens, Age 16 Years and Over, 1990 to 2002, for the United States (in thousands)**

| Employment status    | 1990  | 1995  | 1996  | 1997  | 1998   | 1999  | 2000(a) | 2000(b) | 2001   | 2002   |
|----------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|-------|---------|---------|--------|--------|
| Civilian labor force | 6,858 | 9,431 | 9,416 | 9,800 | 10,041 | 9,943 | 10,664  | 11,474  | 12,485 | 12,735 |
| Employed             | 6,214 | 8,582 | 8,530 | 8,981 | 9,333  | 9,322 | 10,033  | 10,795  | 11,691 | 11,731 |
| Unemployed           | 645   | 849   | 866   | 819   | 708    | 621   | 631     | 679     | 794    | 1,004  |
| Not in labor force   | 3,474 | --    | --    | --    | --     | --    | 5,133   | 5,395   | 5,424  | 5,657  |
| Employment rate      | 90.6  | 91.0  | 90.6  | 91.6  | 92.9   | 93.8  | 94.1    | 94.1    | 93.6   | 92.1   |
| Unemployment rate    | 9.4   | 9.0   | 9.2   | 8.4   | 7.1    | 6.2   | 5.9     | 5.9     | 6.4    | 7.9    |

**Notes:**

(a) Weighted using population controls from the 1990 Census

(b) Weighted using population controls from Census 2000

**Source notes:**

Data compiled by the Migration Policy Institute. The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 1995 to 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March Supplement. Note the data series from 1995 to 2000 were weighted with population controls based on the 1990 census. By comparison, the 2000 to 2002 data were weighted with population controls based on the 2000 census. This means that the 2000 to 2002 data are not consistent with earlier CPS data series, and any conclusions about trends through time must be made carefully.

## GLOSSARY

### Who are the foreign born?

The term *foreign born* refers to people residing in the United States who were not United States citizens at birth. The foreign-born population includes immigrants, legal non-immigrants (e.g., refugees and persons on student or work visas), and persons illegally residing in the United States.

By comparison, the term *native* refers to people residing in the United States who were United States citizens in one of three categories: (1) people born in one of the 50 states and the District of Columbia; (2) people born in United States Insular Areas such as Puerto Rico or Guam; or (3) people who were born abroad to at least one parent who was a United States citizen.

### Defining the civilian labor force.

The *civilian labor force* includes all civilians 16 years and over who were classified as *employed* or *unemployed* during the reference week of the survey or census.

The term *employed* refers to all civilians 16 years old and over who were either (1) “at work” — those who did any work at all during the reference week as paid employees, worked in their own business or profession, worked on their own farm, or worked 15 hours or more as unpaid workers on a family farm or in a family business; or (2) were “with a job but not at work” — those who did not work during the reference week, but who had jobs or businesses from which they were temporarily absent because of illness, bad weather, industrial dispute, vacation, or other personal reasons. Excluded from the employed are people whose only activity consisted of work around their own house (painting, repairing, or own home housework) or unpaid volunteer work for religious, charitable, and similar organizations. Also excluded are all institutionalized people and people on active duty in the United States Armed Forces.

The term *unemployed* refers to all civilians 16 years old and over were classified as unemployed if they were neither “at work” nor “with a job but not at work” during the reference week, were looking for work during, and were available to start a job. Also included as unemployed were civilians 16 years old and over who: did not work at all during the reference week, were on temporary layoff from a job, had been informed that they would be recalled to work within the next 6 months or had been given a date to return to work, and were available to return to work during the reference week, except for temporary illness. Examples of job seeking activities include registering at a public or private employment office, meeting with prospective employers, investigating possibilities for starting a professional practice or opening a business, placing or answering advertisements, writing letters of application, or being on a union or professional register

*Not in labor force* refers to all people 16 years old and over who are not classified as members of the labor force. This category consists mainly of students, individuals taking care of home or family, retired workers, seasonal workers enumerated in an off-season who were not looking for

work, institutionalized people (all institutionalized people are placed in this category regardless of any work activities they may have done in the reference week), and people doing only incidental unpaid family work (fewer than 15 hours during the reference week).

The term *labor force* includes all people classified in the civilian labor force (i.e., “employed” and “unemployed” people), plus members of the U.S. Armed Forces (people on active duty with the United States Army, Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard).

**DATA SOURCES.**

The 1990 data are from the 1990 Census of Population and Housing. The 2002 data are from the Current Population Survey, March supplement.

This information was compiled by Elizabeth Grieco, MPI’s Data Manager, in January 2004. For questions or to arrange an interview with a data expert or policy analyst, please contact Colleen Coffey at 202-266-1910 or [ccoffey@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:ccoffey@migrationpolicy.org). Please visit us at [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org).

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