

# Diverging Pathways

## Immigrants' Legal Status and Access to Postsecondary Credentials

OCTOBER 2022

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### Executive Summary

As the U.S. economy seeks to rebound following the turmoil caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, labor shortages persist. The number of unfilled vacancies—10.1 million as of August 2022—remains high, and many of the demographic and labor market forces driving these shortages predate the pandemic. Population aging, low fertility, lower life expectancy, and a pandemic-induced Great Resignation on the one hand, and reduced immigration on the other, do not bode well for the vitality of the future U.S. workforce. Automation, digitization, and other forms of technological change across many sectors have led to losses of some lower-skilled jobs while creating jobs requiring higher skill levels. Although the speed and extent of new technologies' displacement of workers remain contested, there is a consensus that for the U.S. economy to grow with fewer workers, their productivity will have to increase and U.S. workers will need higher levels of skills and training.

This issue brief focuses on the 115.3 million U.S. adults ages 16 to 64 who as of 2019 did not have a postsecondary credential, whether a college degree or apprenticeship certificate. Among these adults without postsecondary credentials, 23.9 million or 21 percent were immigrants. Using the Migration Policy Institute (MPI)'s unique methodology for assigning legal status to immigrants in the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, this analysis breaks this population down by U.S. citizenship and

legal status to better understand its characteristics, highlighting those that can make credential acquisition more straightforward or more challenging and, by extension, that should be taken into account in policies and programs that aim to promote workforce development and economic mobility. Including immigrant adults more fully in credentialing initiatives would help fill gaps in the labor force, expand local economies, and add to local tax revenues. As immigrant adults are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities, their inclusion would also serve the larger goal of promoting greater equity on the part of state and local education and training programs.

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Among the brief's key findings are:

- ▶ **The great majority of immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials—15.8 million or 66 percent—are legally present and eligible for key federal and state programs that promote credential attainment.** These naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents (also known as green-card holders), and immigrants who arrived in the United States with a humanitarian

status (resettled refugees, asylees, Special Immigrant Visa holders, and Cuban and Haitian entrants) are qualified to receive public support for education and training through programs such as Pell Grants.

- ▶ **For the 7.7 million unauthorized immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials, their lack of legal status makes them ineligible for federal and many state programs that support upskilling.**

While 21 states and the District of Columbia extend postsecondary education benefits such as in-state tuition to unauthorized state residents, unauthorized immigrants are largely ineligible for federal benefits. Several legislative proposals have recently been advanced in Congress that would extend Pell Grants and student loans to two subgroups of unauthorized immigrants who have protection from deportation and work authorization—Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients. Of all unauthorized immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials, 788,000 were DACA eligible and 397,000 were eligible for TPS.

- ▶ **Most immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials had education levels that should position them to obtain credentials relatively rapidly and inexpensively.** About 13.8 million or 58 percent had earned a high school degree or had attended some college. Notably, virtually the entire DACA-eligible population had earned either a high school degree or had attended some college—in large part because of the DACA program's eligibility requirements. At the same time, a significant number of immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials had not completed high school (10.1 million or 42 percent). For

them, attaining such credentials would likely take greater investments of time and money.

- ▶ **The population of immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials is largely composed of racial and ethnic minorities, underscoring both the racial equity and immigrant integration imperatives for closing gaps in credential attainment.** In 2019, 73 percent of the 23.9 million immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials were Latino or Black. Even though Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) immigrants were more likely to hold postsecondary credentials than other racial and ethnic groups, numerically they represented the second largest group of immigrant adults (close to 4 million) without postsecondary credentials.
- ▶ **Many immigrant adults face challenges to accessing and completing postsecondary education and training, including those linked to being in a low-income household, having young children, having a low level of English proficiency, or being older than the common college-going age.** More than half of unauthorized immigrants, including those eligible for TPS or DACA, and immigrants who arrived in the United States as humanitarian migrants were from low-income families, compared to 34 percent of naturalized citizens. More than 40 percent of unauthorized immigrants, green-card holders, and TPS-eligible immigrants had children under age 18. And more than half of humanitarian migrants and unauthorized immigrants (excluding those eligible for DACA) had low English proficiency. In contrast, immigrants eligible for DACA were younger, had higher English proficiency levels, and were less likely to be parents, all of which may make it easier for them to pursue a postsecondary credential.

- ▶ **Some immigrant groups are more likely to experience the cumulative effect of barriers to postsecondary credential attainment than others.** As of 2019, 47 percent of TPS-eligible immigrants and 55 percent of other unauthorized immigrant adults without credentials faced three or four of the above-mentioned barriers, as did about 44 percent of green-card holders and humanitarian migrants. Meanwhile, naturalized citizen and DACA-eligible adults typically faced fewer.
- ▶ **Immigrant adults accounted for at least one-fifth (the national average) of adults without postsecondary credentials in 14 states.** These states included traditional immigrant destinations, such as California, Texas, and New York, as well as newer destinations and less immigrant-dense states, such as Nevada, Connecticut, Washington, and Rhode Island. Most of these states have established goals for boosting the postsecondary credential attainment of their adult residents.

In sum, the data presented in this brief paint a mixed picture of the adult immigrant population without postsecondary credentials. Most members of this large population have legal status and have graduated from high school or even attended some college, and they are thus eligible for most state and federal programs, such as Pell Grants, that could promote credential attainment. Though unauthorized, the DACA-eligible population's other characteristics—higher education and English levels, relative youth, and more limited likelihood to have young children—suggest that DACA holders are also well positioned to attain marketable postsecondary credentials. That said, they remain barred from Pell Grants and other federal financial aid. Targeting policies and programs to promote immigrants' credentialing has the potential to support their mobility while

positioning them to fill openings in middle-skill jobs, thereby boosting local economies.

## 1 Introduction

Media accounts are filled with stories of extraordinary individuals such as Steve Jobs, Ellen DeGeneres, and Harry S. Truman who either dropped out of or never went to college and who nonetheless become technology, business, political, and cultural icons.<sup>1</sup> But for most people in the United States, quality postsecondary credentials—which include four- and two-year college degrees, nondegree certificates obtained through vocational training, and professional licenses—offer the most direct path to economic and social mobility.<sup>2</sup> Degree holders are not the only beneficiaries of expanded access to credentials. Increasing the number of workers with high-quality credentials also helps the economy, aligning the labor force's skills with the increasing number of jobs that require more than a high school education but less than a four-year degree.<sup>3</sup> Efforts to upskill workers are particularly relevant in a labor market where the number of job openings—many in middle- and high-skill positions—is high, at 10.1 million as of August 2022,<sup>4</sup> and when economists have begun to detect a decline in U.S. labor productivity.<sup>5</sup>

One important, often overlooked target for initiatives that seek to expand the number of postsecondary credential holders is the nation's large immigrant population.<sup>6</sup> An estimated 21 percent of all U.S. adults without postsecondary credentials are immigrants. Several broad, long-running trends—such as the declining fertility and aging of the U.S. population—reinforce the logic of including immigrants in workforce development policies and programs. Taken together, these labor market and demographic trends mean that the country's sustained growth will depend on how well the United States trains and utilizes its available workforce, including immigrants.

## A. *Policies Shaping Immigrants' Access to Postsecondary Credentials*

Efforts to promote the upskilling and credentialing of immigrants lie at the intersection of immigration law and policies guiding federal and state support for education and training programs. Federal support for postsecondary education involves a complex mix of loans and grants to students and enrollees in training programs that include direct student loans, unsubsidized loans, and federal grants.<sup>7</sup> A prime example of a federal grant is Pell Grants, which are given to mostly undergraduate, low-income students to promote access to postsecondary education. In September 2022, the Biden administration announced that it would forgive up to \$20,000 in student debt for Pell Grant recipients (compared to \$10,000 for other low- and middle-income debt holders), further increasing the value of Pell Grant eligibility.<sup>8</sup>

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Immigration law—and specifically, immigrants' legal status—comes into play because federal loans and grants for education and training programs are generally available to only to “qualified immigrants,” as defined by the 1996 welfare reform law.<sup>9</sup> Qualifying immigrants include naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders), refugees, and those granted asylum. Some immigrants with other humanitarian statuses have also been deemed eligible for federal loans and grants.

Unauthorized immigrants, other immigrants without work authorization, and temporary visa holders are not considered “qualified” and are thus excluded from most federal postsecondary loan and grant programs.<sup>10</sup> Two groups of unauthorized immigrants whose presence has been recognized and who have been granted work authorization—Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients—are similarly ineligible for Pell Grants and other federal postsecondary education benefits. However, several legislative proposals have recently been advanced that would extend Pell Grants and student loans to these two groups.<sup>11</sup>

Another policy issue that has received congressional attention and that has implications for immigrants' and others' access to postsecondary credentials is whether Pell Grants can be used to pay not only for a college education but also for career-focused instruction that might be delivered outside of two- and four-year colleges and universities. To date, Pell Grants have been authorized to subsidize the costs of training programs that are 600 hours or longer. Recent debates, though, have focused on authorizing the use of Pell Grants for shorter training programs that last 300 hours or more and lead to a credential.<sup>12</sup> These shorter courses may be of particular value to adult learners who work and have family and other obligations competing for their time.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to federal laws and policies, state decisions also have an effect on whether immigrants with different legal statuses can access postsecondary education. Across the nation, states vary widely in the inclusiveness of their policies, particularly with regard to unauthorized immigrants. While 21 states and the District of Columbia offer in-state tuition rates to their unauthorized immigrant residents,<sup>14</sup> some states require unauthorized immigrant students to pay full tuition when attending public institution, and others bar unauthorized immigrant students from enrolling in public colleges and universities altogether.

A final piece in this complex policy landscape is federal policies that govern the nation's workforce training system.<sup>15</sup> These include most prominently Title I of the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA), which is intended to help enrollees obtain work skills and find jobs. Title I generally follows the same eligibility rules as federal postsecondary education policy—that is, only “qualified immigrants” are eligible for employment and training services, although certain unauthorized immigrants with employment authorization, including DACA and TPS holders, are also eligible.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, WIOA's Title II (also known as the *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act*), which supports adult basic education and English as a Second Language classes, is not limited to qualified immigrants and, thus, such programs are accessible to some immigrants who do not qualify for other educational opportunities, including unauthorized immigrants without a work permit.

## B. *Exploring Immigrants' Credentials and Other Characteristics*

To explore the intersection between immigrants' legal status and their eligibility for public workforce training and education programs, this issue brief analyzes data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), the most up-to-date, comprehensive, nationwide data at the time of publication.<sup>17</sup> Employing a unique methodological approach (see Box 1 for details), the brief offers first-of-their-kind estimates of:

- ▶ The population of immigrants without postsecondary credentials disaggregated by their legal status, discussed as part of

three policy-relevant groups: those who are currently eligible for public subsidies (naturalized citizens, for example); those who could become eligible for federal education benefits if Congress acts on recent policy proposals (unauthorized immigrants eligible for DACA or TPS); and those who are unlikely, at least in the near term, to become eligible for most public education and training benefits (that is, unauthorized immigrants, excluding those eligible for DACA or TPS).

- ▶ Immigrants without postsecondary credentials and with differing legal statuses, disaggregated by their educational attainment: less than a high school diploma or equivalent, only a high school degree, or some college but no degree. These education levels are helpful for understanding how much time and money and what types of support would be needed for these immigrants to obtain postsecondary credentials.
- ▶ The extent to which immigrants with different legal statuses face certain barriers to securing a postsecondary credential, including limited English proficiency, low incomes, having parental responsibilities, and being older than the traditional college-going age.

These estimates can aid policymakers and other stakeholders seeking to identify and address the challenges of boosting immigrants' credential attainment. Among other things, the data should guide debates about the eligibility criteria of programs that provide financial support for education and training and that serve as gateways to credentials.

**BOX 1****Methodology and Key Definitions**

This issue brief leverages two Migration Policy Institute (MPI) methodological approaches, which enable researchers to determine the legal status and credential attainment of adult immigrants in U.S. Census Bureau data.

*Legal status.* The American Community Survey (ACS), this brief's main data source, does not ask respondents about their legal status, only their place of birth and whether they have U.S. citizenship. MPI has developed an imputation technique that enables analysts to assign legal status to immigrants in ACS data, thus making it possible to determine the credential attainment of naturalized citizens; lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders); humanitarian migrants, such as refugees and asylees; individuals from certain countries who are deemed by the U.S. government to be unable to return to those countries due to natural disasters or conflict, making them eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS); unauthorized immigrants who were brought to the United States as children and are eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program; and other unauthorized immigrants. For a description of MPI's methodology for assigning legal status to noncitizens in Census Bureau data, see: [bit.ly/MPILegalStatusMethods](https://bit.ly/MPILegalStatusMethods).

*Credential attainment.* The ACS asks respondents about their highest level of educational attainment, providing them with a list of options including a high school diploma or its equivalent, an associate degree, a bachelor's degree, or a master's degree. However, the ACS does not ask about nondegree credentials. Another nationwide survey—the Current Population Survey (CPS), collected by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics—goes a step further and asks whether respondents have earned a professional certification or license, common categories of nondegree postsecondary credentials. This brief uses the information the CPS gathers about nondegree credentials to estimate the number of adults in the ACS without postsecondary degree credentials but with professional certifications or occupational licenses.

**Key Definitions**

*Degree and nondegree credentials.* There are almost 968,000 unique credentials in the United States' complex, constantly evolving, and often confusing credentialing system. Credentials act as a verification of the holder's competence in a specific field and are issued by third parties such as universities, specific industries, and government agencies. Examples of degree credentials are associate and bachelor's degrees. Nondegree credentials, meanwhile, include certificates (e.g., home health aide certificates or pharmacy technician certificates), industry certifications (Cisco Certified Network Associate or Certified Welder certification), apprenticeship certificates (for software development engineer apprentices), and occupational licenses (for commercial truck drivers or licensed practical nurses). It typically takes less time to earn a nondegree credential than a degree credential, and nondegree credentials are arguably more broadly accessible given the large number of issuing entities.

*Adults without postsecondary credentials.* To estimate the number and characteristics of U.S. adults without postsecondary credentials, this brief focuses on adults who are between ages 16 and 64, have less than an associate degree, and do not have professional certifications or occupational licenses. These estimates exclude young adults (ages 16 to 24) without a high school education who were enrolled in high school or college at the time of the survey.

*Lawful permanent residents (LPRs, also known as green-card holders)* are noncitizens who are legally authorized to live, work, and study permanently within the United States. In this analysis, the LPR group excludes those who arrived in the United States as humanitarian migrants and have shifted to LPR status after a year or more in the country.

**BOX 1 (cont.)**  
**Methodology and Key Definitions**

*Humanitarian migrants* are persons who arrived in the United States through humanitarian channels, including resettled refugees, asylees, Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders, and Cuban and Haitian entrants. This group includes persons who were estimated to be in one of these statuses at the time of the survey as well as those who had already adjusted to LPR status.

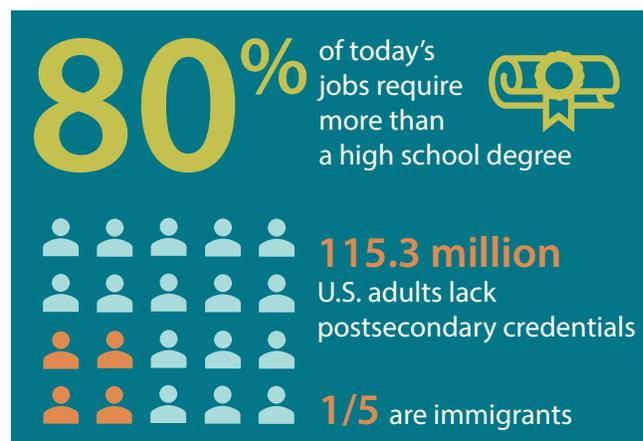
*Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* eligible refers to individuals who were DACA holders at the time of the survey as well as those who met eligibility criteria but had not applied.

*Temporary Protected Status (TPS)* eligible refers to unauthorized immigrants who were eligible for TPS based on their country of origin and time of arrival, including both TPS holders and those who were eligible but had not applied. Because these population estimates are for 2019, the TPS eligible population does not include immigrants from countries designated for TPS after 2019, including Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar, Ukraine, and Venezuela.

## 2 U.S. Adults without Postsecondary Credentials

A 2019 poll of young adults in the United States found that a majority believed that postsecondary credentials were the best way to prepare for economic success.<sup>18</sup> These beliefs are supported by data showing that obtaining high-quality postsecondary credentials opens many doors. Researchers have found that higher levels of education and marketable skills are associated with improved employability, access to better jobs, and positive and cumulative earnings gains, particularly for Black and Latino workers and those from low-income families.<sup>19</sup> Credentials can also help their holders withstand economic shocks, such as a recession.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, automation and other technological advances accelerated by the pandemic have increased the demand for workers with education and training beyond secondary school.<sup>21</sup> In stark contrast with past trends, 80 percent of today's jobs require more than a high school degree.<sup>22</sup> While the recovery from the pandemic-induced economic crisis has seen sub-

stantial nominal wage growth among low-skill workers, without further skills and credentials their future labor force mobility will likely be limited.<sup>23</sup>



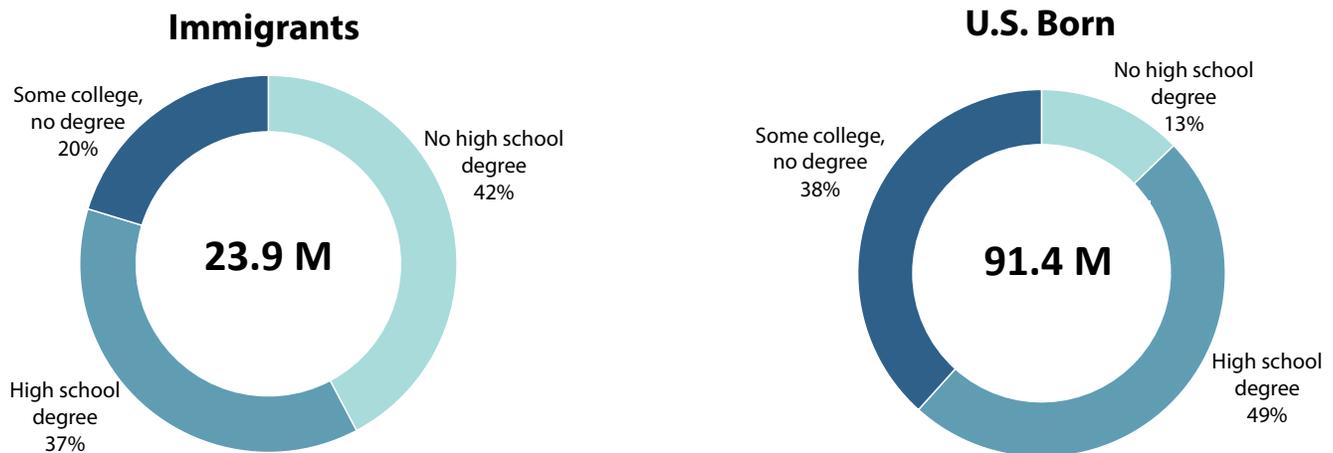
### A. Number of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults without Postsecondary Credentials

The number of U.S. adults without postsecondary credentials is strikingly large. As of 2019, about 115.3 million U.S. adults ages 16–64 did not have a postsecondary credential; 91.4 million were U.S. born

and 23.9 million—or one in five—were immigrants. The length of the road to obtaining a marketable credential depends in part on an individual's starting point. Among adults without postsecondary credentials, immigrants were three times more likely to lack a high school diploma than U.S.-born adults (see Figure 1). This means that 42 percent of immigrant adults without credentials (or 10.1 million) would typically need to obtain a high school degree or its equivalent before they can take the next step

in their education and training careers. In contrast, close to 9 million or 37 percent of immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials had a high school degree, and 4.9 million or 20 percent had attended some college but not obtained a degree. These 13.8 million immigrant adults may be able to more rapidly attain a postsecondary credential, and at a lower cost, than their counterparts with lower levels of education.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Number and Share of U.S. Adults (ages 16–64) without Postsecondary Credentials, by Nativity and Highest Level of Education, 2019**



Notes: This figure shows adults ages 16–64 with less than an associate degree and without professional certifications or occupational licenses. The estimates exclude young adults (ages 16–24) without a high school degree who were enrolled in high school or college at the time of the survey.

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the pooled 2015–19 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIIP), weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University.

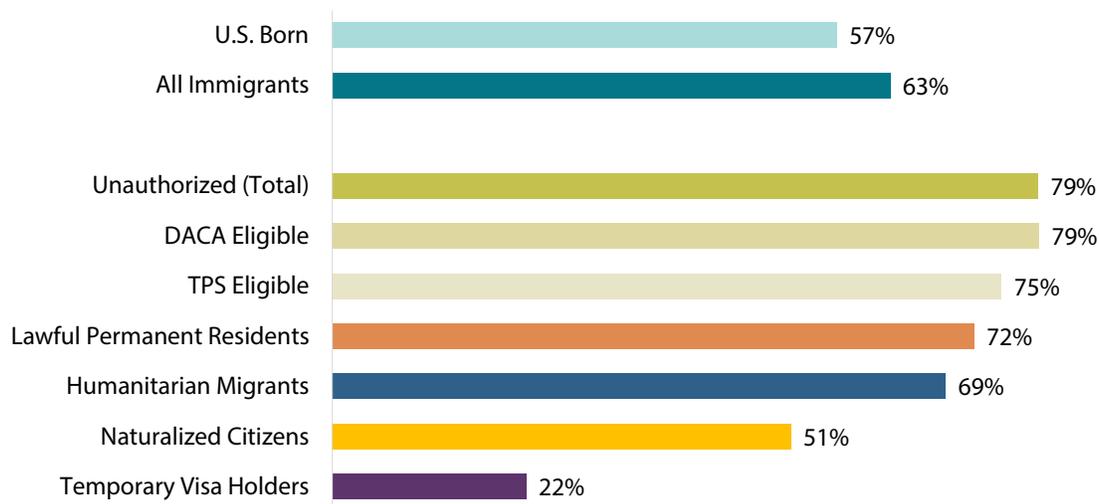
## B. Citizenship and Legal Status

While immigrant adults overall are more likely to lack postsecondary credentials than the U.S. born (63 percent versus 57 percent), the share varies by immigrants' legal status. For example, a lack of legal status represents a formidable barrier to obtaining postsecondary credentials, while citizenship opens opportunities for the foreign born. As shown in Figure 2, close to 80 percent of unauthorized im-

migrant adults lacked postsecondary credentials in 2019. Two subgroups of unauthorized immigrants—those eligible for DACA and TPS, both of which offer temporary protection from deportation and work authorization—were also highly likely not to have a postsecondary credential. Immigrants who arrived in the United States through humanitarian channels, including refugees and asylees, were only slightly more likely to have such credentials.<sup>24</sup> Notably, naturalized immigrants were *more* likely than

FIGURE 2

**Share of U.S. Adults (ages 16–64) without Postsecondary Credentials, by Nativity and Citizenship or Legal Status, 2019**



Note: For definitions of these immigrant groups, see Box 1.

Sources: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook. On TPS, see Jill Wilson, *Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2022).

U.S.-born adults to have a postsecondary credential; in 2019, 49 percent of naturalized immigrants had a credential, compared to 43 percent of U.S.-born adults. Immigrants on temporary visas (such as work or student visas) were by far the most likely to have a postsecondary credential, in large part because a certain level of educational attainment is often a requirement of their visas.

One way to understand the policy relevance of these numbers is to view these groups along a continuum of those who are and are not eligible for education and training resources offered by federal and state governments based on their legal status. Taking this approach, the overall immigrant population without postsecondary credentials can be split into three groups:

- ▶ immigrants who are *currently eligible* for educational resources, including naturalized citizens, green-card holders, and humanitarian migrants;

- ▶ DACA- and TPS-eligible immigrants, who are currently ineligible and whose *eligibility is contingent on policy changes*; and
- ▶ immigrants who are unauthorized and are thus *ineligible* for federal financial aid or most other educational benefits.

Of the 23.9 million immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials, the largest three groups are naturalized citizens (who make up 34 percent of the total), LPRs (29 percent), and unauthorized immigrants (32 percent). While the first two groups are eligible for Pell Grants and other forms of federal and state financial aid and in-state tuition support, unauthorized immigrants are generally barred. A small subset of all unauthorized immigrants—those eligible for DACA and TPS—are not currently eligible for federal financial aid but could become eligible if recent congressional proposals to extend federal financial to DACA and TPS recipients are passed.<sup>25</sup>

Depending on their state of residence, eligible DACA holders and Dreamers can benefit from inclusive in-state tuition, state financial aid, and professional and occupational licensing policies. For instance, eligible unauthorized immigrants in California have access to in-state tuition and state financial aid and can obtain professional and occupational licenses (for regulated professions such as nursing and teaching, for example). Other states have taken a more narrow approach. For instance, Arkansas extended in-state tuition rights to eligible DACA recipients planning to attend the state's public colleges and universities, and it allows unauthorized immigrants with work permit, including DACA and TPS recipients, to receive professional licenses. These policies address key barriers in terms of the affordability of postsecondary education and training as well as graduates' ability to work in regulated professions if they obtain a work permit.<sup>26</sup>

### 3 The Educational Attainment of Immigrants without Postsecondary Credentials

The average educational attainment of immigrants without credentials also varies by citizenship or legal status. In 2019, there were close to 5.8 million naturalized citizens without credentials who had at least a high school degree (see Figure 3). This includes about 3.4 million who had a high school degree or equivalent and another 2.3 million who had completed some college. Among LPRs, 3.6 million had at

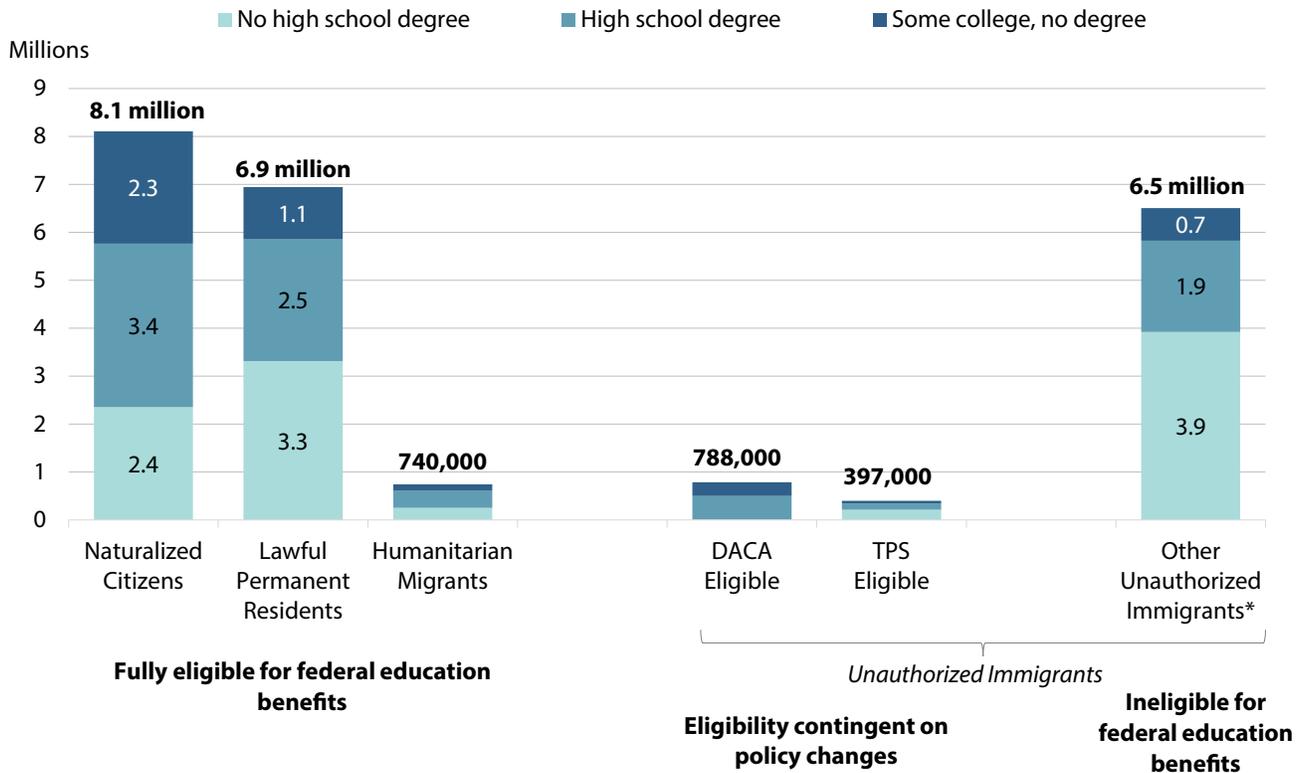
least a high school degree, including 2.5 million who had only a high school degree or equivalent and 1.1 million who had completed some college. Taken together, these immigrants represent 40 percent of all foreign-born adults without postsecondary credentials. Given that they already possess a high school diploma and are eligible for federal education benefits, these groups may be promising targets for state and philanthropic efforts to raise the number and shares of adults with marketable postsecondary credentials.

Virtually all of the 788,000 DACA-eligible immigrants without credentials in 2019 had at least a high school degree, in part as a function of the DACA program's requirement that participants be in school or already have at least a high school degree (see Figure 3). Thus, the extension of Pell Grant eligibility to DACA recipients would reach a significant number of those who meet the programs' other criteria, providing them access to both degree and nondegree programs and—depending on other legislative developments—grants for short-term training programs aimed at career and technical credential acquisition.

There is a notable number of unauthorized immigrants without postsecondary credentials who are ineligible for DACA or TPS and who are either high school graduates (1.9 million) or who have completed some college but do not hold a college degree (676,000). This relatively well-educated population has access to some education, training, and licensing opportunities in select states, but will likely continue to find it difficult to translate credentials into strong economic outcomes under current federal immigration law because they are barred from lawful employment.

FIGURE 3

**Number of Immigrant Adults (ages 16–64) in the United States without Postsecondary Credentials, by Citizenship or Legal Status and Highest Level of Education, 2019**



\* In this figure, “other unauthorized immigrants” excludes DACA- and TPS-eligible individuals, who are shown separately because legislative proposals under consideration in Congress would make them eligible for federal postsecondary education loans and grants. Notes: See Box 1 for definitions of these legal status categories. Temporary visa holders are not shown in this figure; in general, they are ineligible for education or training program funding. Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

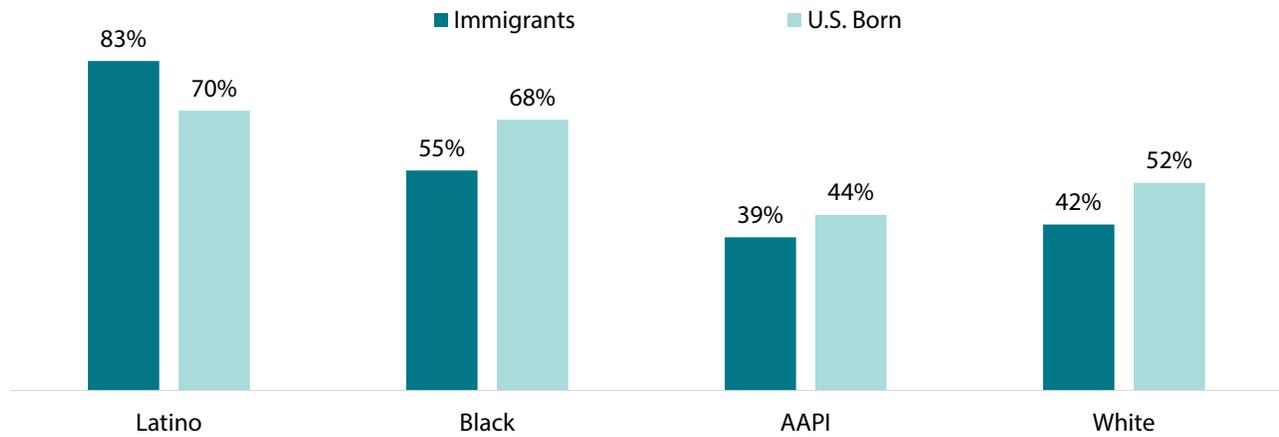
## 4 The Race/Ethnicity of Immigrants without Postsecondary Credentials

Like the U.S. population overall, the nation’s postsecondary student population has grown more racially and ethnically diverse. However, while the absolute number of Black and Latino students attending postsecondary institutions has risen, racial and ethnic disparities in access and achievement persist.<sup>27</sup> Consistent with other research, this analysis finds significant disparities in credential attainment.

In 2019, 83 percent of Latino immigrant adults did not have a postsecondary credential, the highest share of all groups, foreign and native born. This was followed by U.S.-born Latino (70 percent) and U.S.-born Black adults (68 percent), as shown in Figure 4. For immigrants, the gap was particularly wide between Latino immigrants and both Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and White immigrants, among whom about 40 percent did not have postsecondary credentials. Black and Latino adults, regardless of nativity, were more likely to not have postsecondary credentials than AAPI and White adults. At the same time, Black, White, and to a smaller degree AAPI immigrants outperformed their U.S.-born counterparts.

FIGURE 4

**Share of U.S. Adults (ages 16–64) without Postsecondary Credentials, by Race/Ethnicity and Nativity, 2019**



Notes: 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. White refers to non-Latino persons who reported their race as “White alone.” The remainder (not displayed here) is a group called “other races” that is too small to visualize; it includes non-Latino people who reported their race as “American Indian alone,” “American Indian and White,” or unspecified multiracial group.

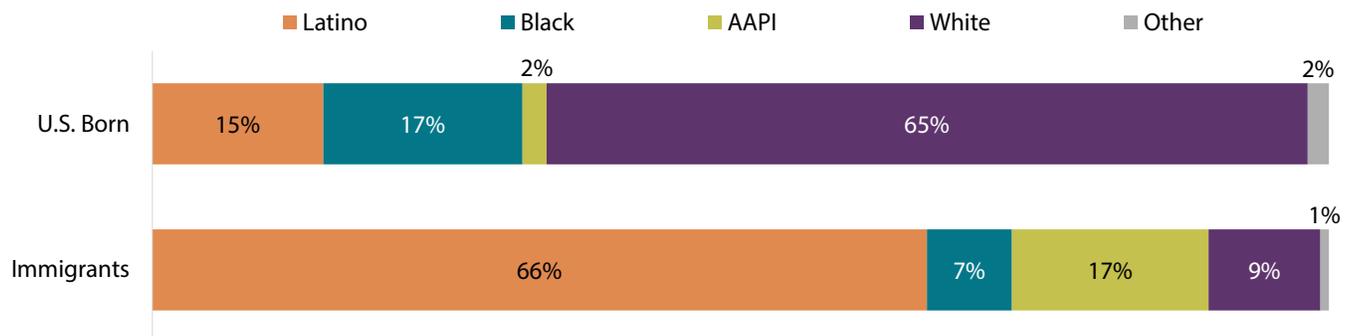
Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

Concerns about wide gaps in credential attainment by race and ethnicity are highly pertinent to the educational trajectories of immigrant adults.<sup>28</sup> In 2019, 73 percent of immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials were Latino or Black (see Figure 5), a much larger share than the 58 percent these groups represented of all immigrant adults.

Latino immigrants’ disadvantage in terms of credential attainment deepens once legal status is considered. In 2019, about 6.5 million Latino immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials were unauthorized, meaning Latinos made up 84 percent of unauthorized immigrant adults who were ineligible for federal public education supports be-

FIGURE 5

**Race/Ethnicity of U.S.-Born and Immigrant Adults (ages 16–64) without Postsecondary Credentials, 2019**



Note: See the notes under Figure 4 for a description of the racial and ethnic categories used.

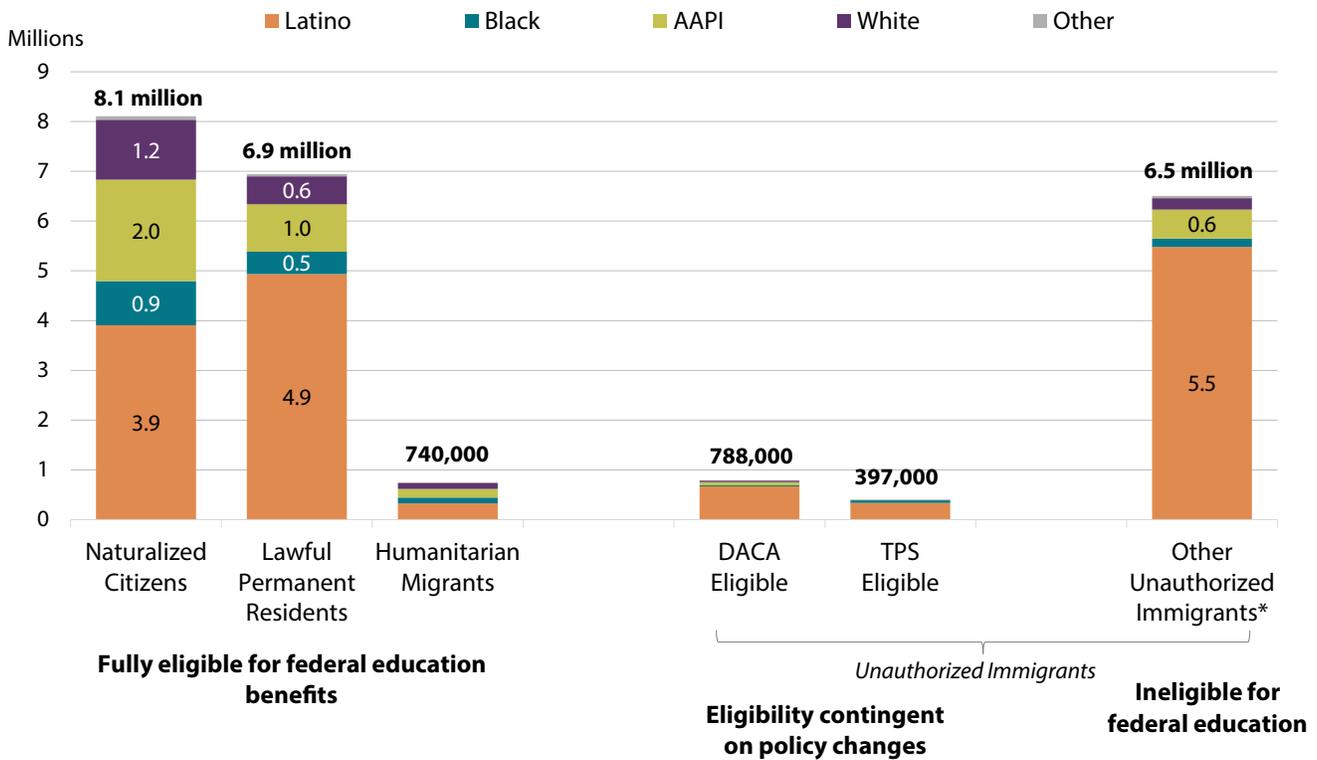
Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

cause of their status. At the same time, it should be emphasized that there were more Latino immigrants without postsecondary credentials who were either naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, or humanitarian migrants (9.2 million total), and thus who were eligible for such forms of assistance.

The AAPI immigrants without credentials (approximately 4 million total) also stand out. On the one hand, AAPI immigrants were proportionately less likely to be without postsecondary credentials than other racial and ethnic groups (see Figure 4).

On the other hand, numerically they represented the second largest groups of naturalized, LPR, and humanitarian immigrants without postsecondary credentials (3.2 million). They also comprised the second largest group of unauthorized immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials (650,000; see Figure 6). These findings mean that significant numbers of AAPI immigrant adults, like Latino immigrants, were ineligible for most financial and other educational supports due to their unauthorized status even as many others could access those forms of assistance.

**FIGURE 6**  
**Number of Immigrant Adults (ages 16–64) in the United States without Postsecondary Credentials, by Citizenship or Legal Status and Race/Ethnicity, 2019**



\* In this figure, “other unauthorized immigrants” excludes DACA- and TPS-eligible individuals, who are shown separately because legislative proposals under consideration in Congress would make them eligible for federal postsecondary education loans and grants. Notes: See Box 1 for definitions of these legal status categories. See the notes under Figure 4 for a description of the racial and ethnic categories used.

Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

## 5 Barriers to Credential Attainment

In addition to the legal-status-related barriers that some immigrant adults face, other obstacles can also hinder credential acquisition. Some of these barriers affect immigrants in similar ways as their U.S.-born counterparts, while others are more specific to the foreign born. Research shows that low-income individuals have difficulty enrolling in and completing higher education programs because of the high costs of application fees, tuition, books, and housing as well as limited access to information about financial aid.<sup>29</sup> Low-income adults with incomplete college or other credentials may also have existing student debt that keeps them from returning to school. Competing responsibilities, such as family and child care or the need to work to support one's education, represent other barriers for many adults.<sup>30</sup> Limited English Proficient (LEP) adults, who are overwhelmingly immigrants, often face language barriers and may be familiar with the U.S. postsecondary education system.<sup>31</sup> Once enrolled, LEP students may need to take remedial coursework before they can start credit-bearing courses, which adds to costs and slows the credential acquisition progress. Studies also point to discrimination and exclusion based on race and immigration status as factors that contribute to the lack of educational progress among immigrants and their U.S.-born children.<sup>32</sup> Identifying these barriers and how they affect different populations to different degrees is critical for interventions and services that aim to help more adults earn postsecondary credentials.

Based on data available in the ACS, this brief examines the extent to which immigrant and U.S.-born adults without postsecondary credentials face

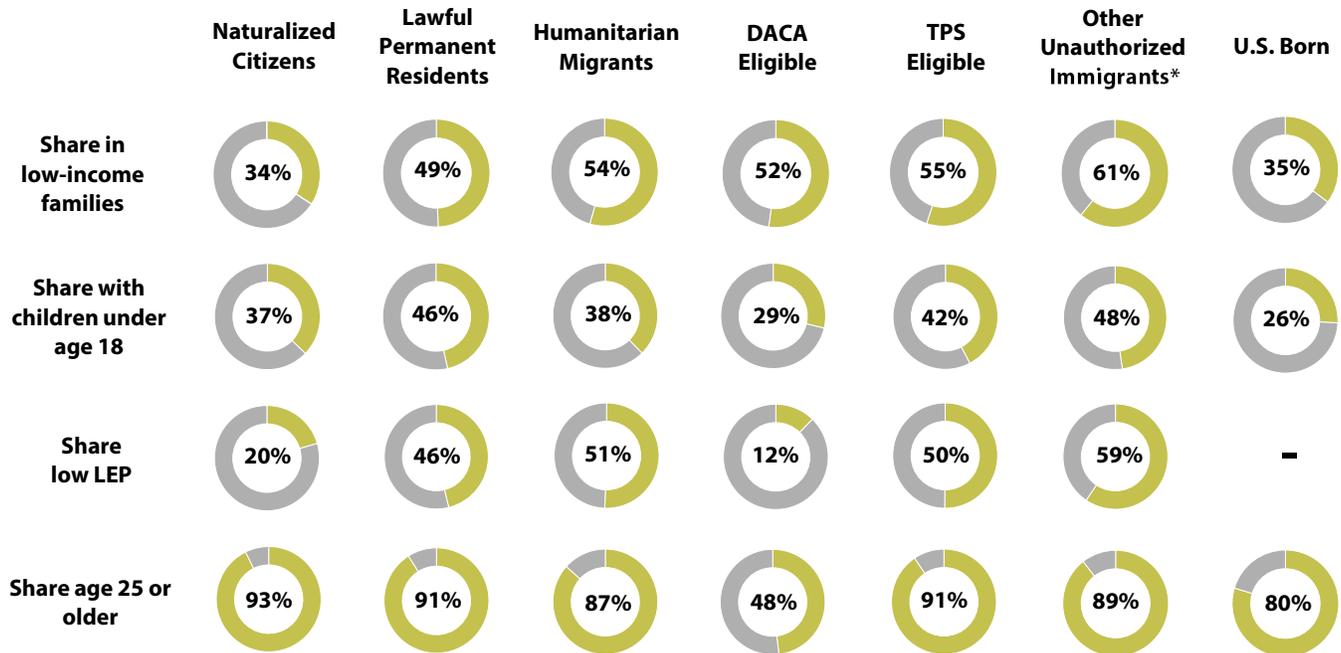
four barriers to upskilling and obtaining credentials. They are:

- ▶ whether the individual's household is low income (i.e., it has an income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level);<sup>33</sup>
- ▶ whether the individual has children under age 18 who live in the same household;
- ▶ whether the individual has low English proficiency (i.e., reported speaking English "not well" or "not at all" in the ACS);<sup>34</sup> and
- ▶ whether the individual is older than the traditional college-going age (i.e., is age 25 or older<sup>35</sup>).

Among adults without postsecondary credentials, immigrants in most legal-status categories were more likely to face these four barriers than their U.S.-born counterparts (see Figure 7). The most common risk factor for both immigrant and U.S.-born adults without credentials was age as many were older than the typical college student. The next most common was household income. In 2019, more than half of unauthorized immigrants, including those eligible for TPS or DACA, and more than half of immigrants who arrived in the United States as humanitarian migrants were from low-income families, compared to 34 percent of naturalized citizen and 35 percent of U.S.-born adults. A significant share of immigrants without credentials were parents: More than 40 percent of unauthorized immigrants (excluding those eligible for DACA or TPS), green-card holders, and TPS-eligible immigrants had children under age 18 who resided with them, compared to 26 percent of U.S.-born adults. More than half of unauthorized immigrants and roughly half of humanitarian and TPS-eligible immigrant adults had low English proficiency.

FIGURE 7

**Share of U.S. Adults (ages 16–64) without Postsecondary Credentials Facing Key Barriers to Credential Attainment, by Citizenship or Legal Status, 2019**



\* In this figure, “unauthorized immigrants” excludes DACA- and TPS-eligible individuals, who are shown separately because legislative proposals under consideration in Congress would make them eligible for federal postsecondary education loans and grants. Notes: See Box 1 for definitions of these legal status categories. “Low-income families” are families with an annual income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. “Low LEP” refers to persons who reported speaking English less than “well” (that is, “not well” or “not at all”) in the ACS. The low LEP share for the U.S. born is not displayed because of its small size. Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

Compared to other immigrants without postsecondary credentials, immigrants eligible for DACA stood out as being much younger, more likely to be English proficient, and less likely to have minor children. Finally, because DACA and TPS holders are eligible for work authorization, they were more likely to work in better-paying jobs than other unauthorized immigrants and hence were somewhat less likely to be low income.

One way to understand the impact of these barriers is to consider their potential cumulative effect, based on the assumption that individuals who face fewer barriers are likely to be able to attain a post-

secondary credential more readily than those who face multiple barriers.

In 2019, 21 percent of DACA-eligible immigrants without postsecondary credentials faced none of the four barriers (see Figure 8), faring better than all groups including the U.S. born (13 percent). This is probably due to the DACA-eligible population’s relative youth, its relatively high education levels, and the fact that the group arrived in the United States when they were young—all dictated by the DACA program’s eligibility criteria. Most adults in the other immigrant groups faced some—though not all—of the four risks studied, which could make their credential attainment challenging.

FIGURE 8

**Number of Risk Factors U.S. Adults (ages 16–64) Face to Postsecondary Credential Attainment, by Nativity and Citizenship or Legal Status, 2019**



\* In this figure, “other unauthorized immigrants” excludes DACA- and TPS-eligible individuals, who are shown separately because legislative proposals under consideration in Congress would make them eligible for federal postsecondary education loans and grants. Notes: See Box 1 for definitions of these legal status categories.

Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

The data indicate that 55 percent of unauthorized immigrants (excluding those who are DACA or TPS eligible) faced three or more risk factors, as did between 44 and 47 percent of TPS-eligible immigrants, LPRs, and humanitarian migrants—shares much higher than for naturalized citizens (24 percent) and DACA-eligible immigrants (18 percent).

Several other barriers to credential attainment described by research in the field could not be modeled using ACS data. The ACS does not, for instance, include information that could be used to explore how the inflexibility of some credential programs’ schedules, existing student debt, or discrimination affect different populations. Importantly, while this analysis identifies certain groups as facing more barriers to postsecondary credential attainment, this does not mean these populations are unable to obtain them. Instead, it highlights the fact that even legally present immigrant adults, such as green-card holders and humanitarian migrants, may face sig-

nificant difficulties in obtaining valuable credentials due to barriers other than legal status that may slow their integration and reduce their contributions to the U.S. economy.

## 6 State-by-State Estimates

In 2019, more than half of the 23.9 million immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials were concentrated in four states that have long had large immigrant populations: California (25 percent), Texas (13 percent), and New York and Florida (each with 9 percent). An additional 10 percent resided in either Illinois, New Jersey, or Georgia. These same seven states were home to 66 percent of all unauthorized immigrants without postsecondary credentials nationwide, and they vary in terms of their policies on unauthorized immigrants’ eligibility for in-state tuition, state financial aid, and professional and occupational licenses.<sup>36</sup>

Nationwide, 21 percent of U.S. adults without postsecondary credentials were immigrants in 2019. This share was similar or higher in 14 states, with California leading the list with an immigrant share of 41 percent (see Figure 9). In New York, New Jersey, and Nevada, about one-third of adults without postsecondary credentials were immigrants, and the share ranged from 25 percent to 29 percent in Texas, Florida, Hawaii, and Massachusetts. Other states at or above the national average were Arizona, Illinois, Maryland, Connecticut, Washington State, and Rhode Island. Most of these states have established goals to boost postsecondary credential attainment that are intended to guide their investments in education and training.<sup>37</sup>

## 7 Conclusion

Approximately 23.9 million immigrant adults in the United States lack a postsecondary credential—an asset that has been shown to promote individuals’ career, financial, and social success as well as health and quality of life. Workers with higher skill levels are also a strategic resource for the U.S. economy at a time of population aging and decline and of major shifts in the skills that are most in demand, driven by automation and other technological changes. These 23.9 million immigrants represent one-fifth of all U.S. adults without postsecondary credentials, with the share being even higher in states such as California, New York, Nevada, and Massachusetts. Like their U.S.-born counterparts, immigrants without postsecondary credentials face limited opportunities to be full contributors in the labor market, which prioritizes—and rewards—higher skills and education.

This brief provides some good news: 15.8 million, or two-thirds of the 23.9 million, immigrants without postsecondary credentials in 2019 were naturalized citizens, green-card holders, or humanitarian migrants, making them eligible for various educational and training benefits, such as federal Pell Grants and state aid and other forms of financial support. The

**FIGURE 9**  
**Immigrant Share of All U.S. Adults (ages 16–64) without Postsecondary Credentials, by State, 2019**



Source: MPI analysis of data from the 2015–19 ACS, pooled, and the 2008 SIPP, weighted to 2019 unauthorized immigrant population estimates provided by Van Hook.

majority of these immigrants already hold at least a high school diploma or its equivalent, and thus represent prime targets for national and state efforts to raise postsecondary credential attainment. Nonetheless, many face multiple other barriers, such as having a low household income, low English proficiency, or the challenge of balancing parental, education, and work responsibilities.

Another 1.2 million immigrants without postsecondary credentials are eligible for temporary forms of relief from deportation and work authorization, namely DACA and TPS. Their access to educational support is contingent on congressional proposals that would extend to them some grant and loan programs, most notably Pell Grants. Close to 788,000 of these immigrants were eligible for DACA, a group whose status is tied to their educational attainment.<sup>38</sup> This analysis finds that DACA-eligible adults were younger, less likely to be parents, and had higher English proficiency than other immigrants without postsecondary credentials. This means that these adults are in many ways particularly well-positioned to take advantage of postsecondary education and training programs. Nonetheless, without congressional action, the ability of both DACA recipients and TPS holders to benefit from tuition and financial aid depends on the state in which they reside.

Finally, more than one-quarter of all immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials (or 6.5 million) were unauthorized immigrants who are not eligible for DACA or TPS. More than half of these

immigrants lacked a high school diploma or equivalent, 61 percent were from low-income families, 48 percent had young children at home, and 59 percent reported low English proficiency. Given these high barriers and their lack of legal status, these immigrants face an arduous path to credential attainment in the absence of changes to social welfare, education, or immigration policies.

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*Most adult immigrants in the United States who lack credentials are legally present, and most have at least a high school education and are ready targets for state efforts to increase the number of residents with high-quality credentials.*

In sum, most adult immigrants in the United States who lack credentials are legally present, and most have at least a high school education and are ready targets for state efforts to increase the number of residents with high-quality credentials. Including these adults in broader efforts to upskill and credential the workforce would expand their mobility while at the same time closing skills gaps and meeting employers' labor force needs. Additionally, given the high share of racial and ethnic minorities among immigrant adults without postsecondary credentials, their more purposeful inclusion in education and training programs would help advance important social goals of promoting greater equity.

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## Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to the Lumina Foundation for its support of this research. This issue brief is part of ongoing work by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) exploring ways to promote the acquisition and recognition of postsecondary credentials among immigrants and their children. The authors thank their MPI colleagues Lauren Shaw for her excellent edits and Michelle Mittelstadt for strategic outreach.

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Suggested citation: Batalova, Jeanne and Michael Fix. 2022. *Diverging Pathways: Immigrants' Legal Status and Access to Postsecondary Credentials*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.



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