

# Leveraging Data to Ensure Equitable and Effective Adult Skills Programming for Immigrants

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BY JACOB HOFSTETTER AND MARGIE MCHUGH

## Executive Summary

Immigrants in the United States—who comprise one in every six adults in the country—contribute greatly to the vitality of the country’s economy and local communities. At the same time, many immigrant adults face multiple, often compounding barriers to economic mobility and broader integration into American society. Common challenges include limited proficiency in English, persistent employment in low-wage jobs, lack of permanent legal status, low levels of formal education, and unfamiliarity with American society, culture, and institutions. Adult skills programs operating within both workforce development and adult education systems offer services that are intended to address or reduce many of these barriers. Too often, however, the policy and program designs at the heart of these systems fail to account for important differences in the characteristics of the country’s immigrant and U.S.-born adult populations, which can lead to programming that does not effectively and equitably meet the needs of immigrant adults.

To aid policymakers and other system actors in understanding these differences and their implications for efforts to improve effectiveness and equity in adult skills programs, Migration Policy Institute researchers analyzed pooled 2015–19 data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey,

comparing foreign- and U.S.-born adults across a variety of sociodemographic indicators. The analysis demonstrates that large shares of the immigrant population face barriers to their economic mobility and integration, and it identifies disparities between immigrant and U.S.-born adults in income, levels of formal education, and employment in middle- and high-skill jobs. The scale of this challenge is also evident from the data: roughly 10.8 million immigrant adults have less than a high school diploma or equivalent, and approximately 20.4 million have limited proficiency in English. Such findings underscore that immigrants are a significant target population for adult skills systems, in many states comprising a large minority or even majority of the adults such programs are intended to serve, such as those without a high school diploma or equivalent.

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With a potential reauthorization of the federal law governing adult skills programs (the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act*, or WIOA) on the horizon, the data highlighted in this analysis carry important

implications for adult skills policies and program designs. These include:

- ▶ **Differences in the demographic profiles of immigrant and U.S.-born adults mean that assumptions and approaches commonly embedded in adult skills system designs may not be relevant or accessible for many immigrants.** Perhaps most notably, far larger shares of immigrants have lower levels of formal education (including less than a 9th or 5th grade education) and limited proficiency in English than U.S.-born adults. Yet existing system policy frameworks prioritize individuals' participation in workforce training, entrance into postsecondary education, and the earning of credentials—all of which generally require higher levels of English proficiency and education as a condition for enrollment. For many immigrants, these prerequisites pose high barriers to accessing educational and training services within these systems.
- ▶ **WIOA's mandatory performance measures can act as a disincentive for local systems and programs to serve adults with lower levels of formal education and English proficiency.** Because program success is measured based on outcomes that are more attainable for people with advanced English and formal education—for example, earning an employer-recognized credential—programs are incentivized to serve this population and not adults who are unlikely to achieve such outcomes. Given the disparities Census data demonstrate between immigrant and U.S.-born adults, this means many adult skills providers can find it difficult to equitably serve immigrants with significant barriers to integration and economic mobility and still meet mandatory performance measures.
- ▶ **Since immigrant adults are employed at similar rates to U.S.-born adults, increasing immigrant families' economic mobility and self-sufficiency will require programs to focus on job quality, wages, and skill acquisition, rather than merely gaining employment.** To do so, adult skills programs serving immigrants should focus on services that can help participants overcome barriers to higher-wage employment. These include factors that also affect some U.S.-born adults, such as lower levels of formal education, along with more integration-specific challenges, such as limited proficiency in English or a lack of familiarity or connections with employers and available career paths.
- ▶ **Immigrant adults' widely varied levels of English proficiency, formal education, and previous professional experiences require programmatic approaches that allow for services tailored to participants' needs.** For higher-skilled or internationally trained individuals, programs could include assistance with foreign credential recognition, career counseling, or specialized English instruction. For those with limited proficiency in English and limited literacy in their native language, programs may need to focus more intensively on native language literacy and workplace-focused English instruction.
- ▶ **Given that immigrants comprise a disproportionately large share of parents in many states, there is a need to significantly expand two-generation programs that effectively meet the needs of immigrant families.** This includes two-generation models in adult education, early childhood, and K-12 systems that support these families' integration trajectories as well as children's healthy development and school success.

In order to address many of these issues, WIOA's performance measures will need to be revamped to ensure that programs are not penalized when they work effectively and at an equitable scale with key subpopulations that are intended to be served under the law. Taking a broader view, adult skills systems have untapped potential to deliver important education and training programs that could more fully support the linguistic, economic, and civic integration of immigrant adults. Indeed, these systems are often the only arena in which the various levels of government provide support for programs that facilitate upward integration trajectories for immigrants and their children. Yet integration is not centered in system designs beyond attainment of a level gain in English or basic education. While these achievements are certainly important to integration success, they do not address the fact that a rich understanding of how to navigate American systems and norms is an important skill in and of itself, and one that can bring higher wages, deeper community and civic engagement, and long-term economic self-sufficiency.

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To support important outcomes such as these, adult skills policymakers should consider adopting and expanding approaches that recognize civic and economic integration, along with English proficiency, as key factors in the success of immigrants, their families, and the communities in which they settle. Developing more responsive, integration-focused programming can also provide navigation support and on-ramps for immigrants to access other important

services, such as higher education or apprenticeship programs.

## 1 Introduction

Due to high rates of immigration to the United States over the past several decades, immigrants now comprise one out of every six adults, one out of every four parents, and one out of every six workers in the country.<sup>1</sup> In some states such as California and New Jersey as well as many urban areas, immigrants and their children comprise an even larger share of residents, parents, and workers. While immigrants make significant contributions to the country's economy and social fabric, many also face significant barriers to their integration into American society, including not speaking English proficiently, lacking legal status, or being stuck in low-wage employment and poverty.

The adult education and workforce development systems, which are funded and governed via a federal-state partnership laid out in the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA), provide many of the services that support adult skills development and immigrant integration. Through WIOA-funded programs, immigrants can enroll in adult education courses to learn English, progress toward obtaining a high school diploma or equivalent, complete workforce preparation or training activities designed to help participants gain higher wages and economic self-sufficiency, and participate in civics classes to prepare for naturalization or improve their understanding of and participation in American society.<sup>2</sup> Immigrants also represent an important target population for WIOA programs, given that they comprise approximately half of all adults in the country with learning needs as well as roughly half of those served by federally funded adult education programs in the 2021–22 program year—shares notably higher than their percentage of the total adult population (roughly 17 percent).<sup>3</sup>

The policy designs at the heart of these systems, however, present a serious challenge to fully harnessing their potential to boost immigrant integration. Despite the overlap between immigrants' integration support needs and the services offered by adult skills programs, WIOA's mandatory performance measures focus predominantly on employment-related outcomes such as finding a job, gaining a higher wage, and attaining credentials. The law's performance measures and the incentive structures they create for state systems and service providers leave less space to serve those with lower levels of literacy and English proficiency and often hinder programs' attempts to provide immigrants with skills and knowledge related to integration—such as navigating American society or supporting their children's education—that are not as easily measurable or aligned with these metrics.<sup>4</sup>

Exacerbating this disconnect is the fact that the country's adult immigrant population has a significantly different demographic profile than the U.S.-born adult population. Immigrants are more likely to face obstacles such as low levels of formal education, poverty, and employment in low-skill jobs, in addition to integration-specific barriers such as limited proficiency in English and inexperience navigating public services, such as school and health-care systems. As a result, the very adult skills programs and systems that could be well-positioned to support immigrants' economic, civic, and linguistic integration are often neither geared toward nor incentivized to serve them. These dynamics paradoxically create a gap between adult skills programs and the individuals who have the greatest adult literacy or English proficiency challenges, and who are thus most in need of further education, upskilling, integration services, and pathways to economic mobility.

To more effectively promote both the integration of immigrants and their participation in adult skills programs, policymakers at both the federal and state levels must reconcile the accessibility of existing

## BOX 1 Explore State-Level Data

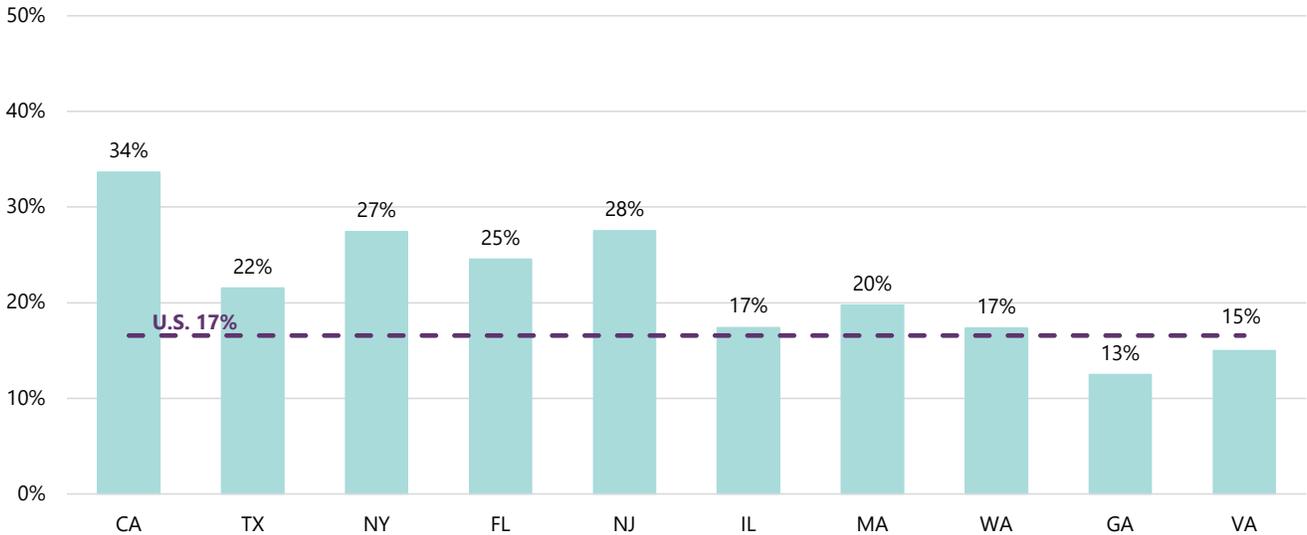
This brief focuses on trends at the national level and in the ten states with the largest immigrant populations. Data profiles for immigrant and U.S.-born adults in all 50 states and the District of Columbia can be found on the Migration Policy Institute's website: [www.migrationpolicy.org/research/data-adult-skills-programming](http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/data-adult-skills-programming)

WIOA services with the sociodemographic profile of the country's adult learner population, including differences between foreign- and U.S.-born adults. This policy brief aims to inform such deliberations by providing a demographic profile of immigrant and U.S.-born adults along with analysis of the data's implications for policymakers seeking to equitably include immigrants' needs in adult skills policy and program frameworks. The analysis is based on the Migration Policy Institute's tabulation of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), pooled for the 2015–19 period. The brief starts by providing an overview of the demographic characteristics of the immigrant and U.S.-born adult populations before examining data related to educational attainment, English proficiency, and income and workforce characteristics. It concludes with a discussion of considerations for federal and state adult skills policymakers regarding avenues to more equitably and effectively serve immigrant populations via improved policy frameworks and program designs.

## 2 General Demographics

The immigrant population in the United States overall and in the states with the most foreign-born residents comprises a sizeable share of the total adult population. Immigrant adults also have a starkly different demographic profile compared to the U.S.-born adult population in terms of age structure, racial and ethnic makeup, and the share of adults who are parents.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Immigrant Share of Adults in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19**



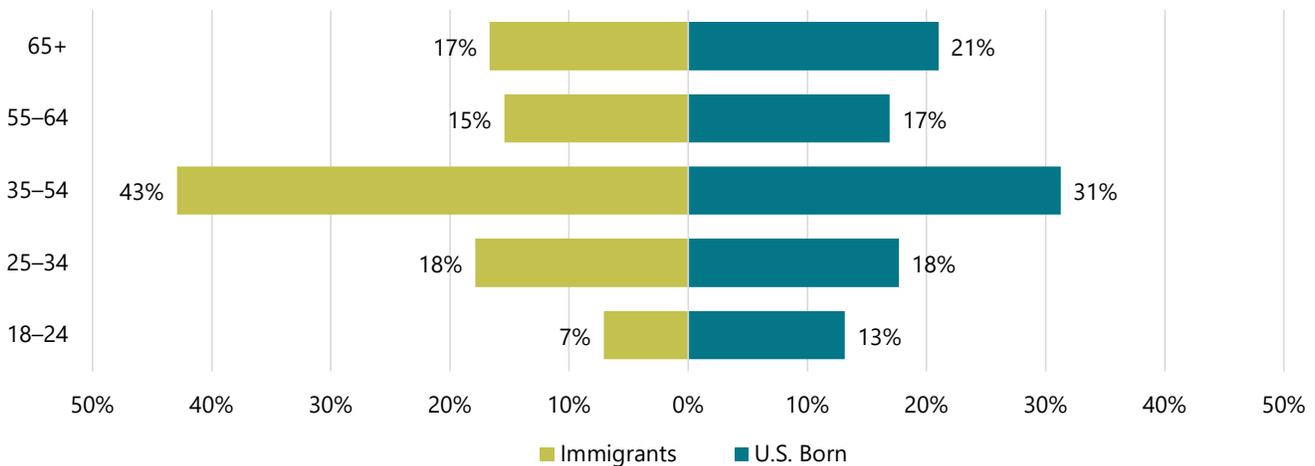
Note: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of 2015–19 pooled data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s annual American Community Survey (ACS).

Nationally, immigrants comprised 17 percent of the adult population in 2015–19 (see Figure 1). In some states with long immigration histories, such as Florida, New York, and New Jersey, immigrants represented approximately one in every four adults (25 percent, 27 percent, and 28 percent, respectively),

while in California immigrants made up one in every three adults (34 percent).

Within the immigrant population, larger shares of adults were of prime working or parenting age compared with the U.S.-born population. As Figure 2 shows, considerably more than half (61 percent)

**FIGURE 2**  
**Shares of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults in the United States by Age Range, 2015–19**



Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

of immigrant adults were between the ages of 25 and 54, compared to slightly less than half (49 percent) of U.S.-born adults. In contrast to immigrants, greater shares of U.S.-born adults were either young adults or at retirement age.

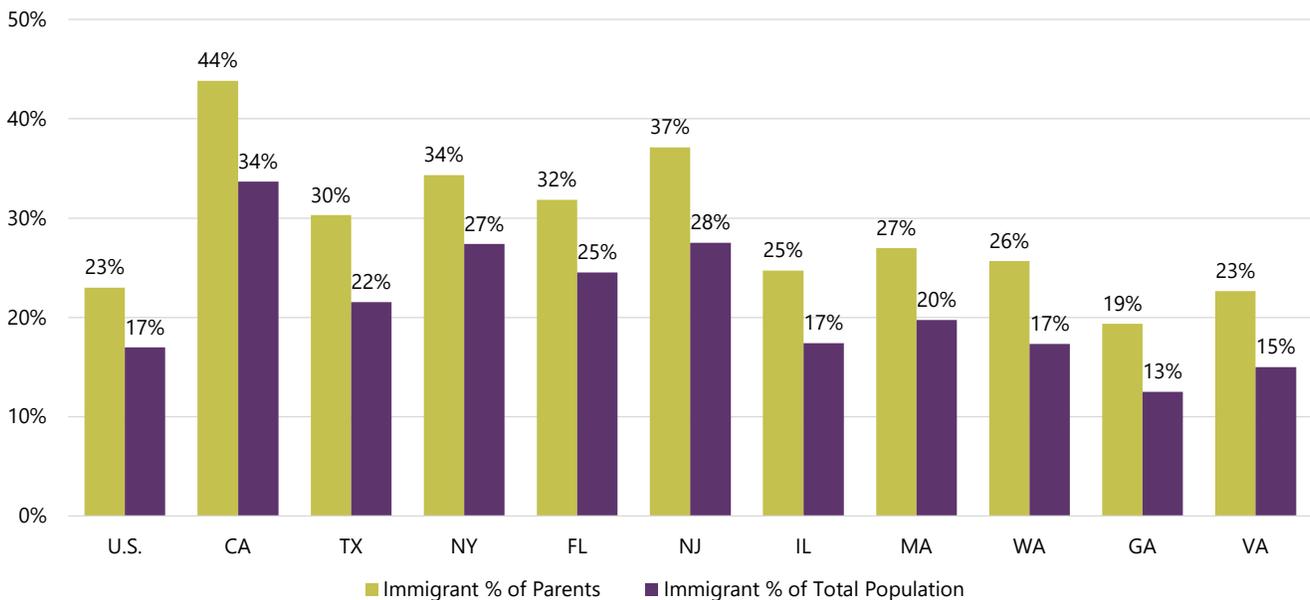
Similarly, roughly one in three (35 percent) immigrant adults were parents of children under age 18, compared to approximately one in four (23 percent) U.S.-born adults. In the United States overall and in all ten states with the largest immigrant populations, immigrants comprised a disproportionately large share of parents, compared to their share of the total adult population, as displayed in Figure 3.

The racial and ethnic composition of the immigrant adult population is also starkly different from that of U.S.-born adults. As Figure 4 shows, as of 2015–19,

slightly less than half of immigrant adults identified as Latino (45 percent), more than one-quarter as Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI; 28 percent), one in five as White (18 percent), and one in ten as Black (9 percent).<sup>5</sup> With some minor differences, this pattern largely held in the states with the largest immigrant populations as well. By contrast, among U.S.-born adults, nearly three-fourths identified as White (73 percent), with smaller but significant shares identifying as Black (13 percent) or Latino (10 percent) and just 2 percent identifying as AAPI.

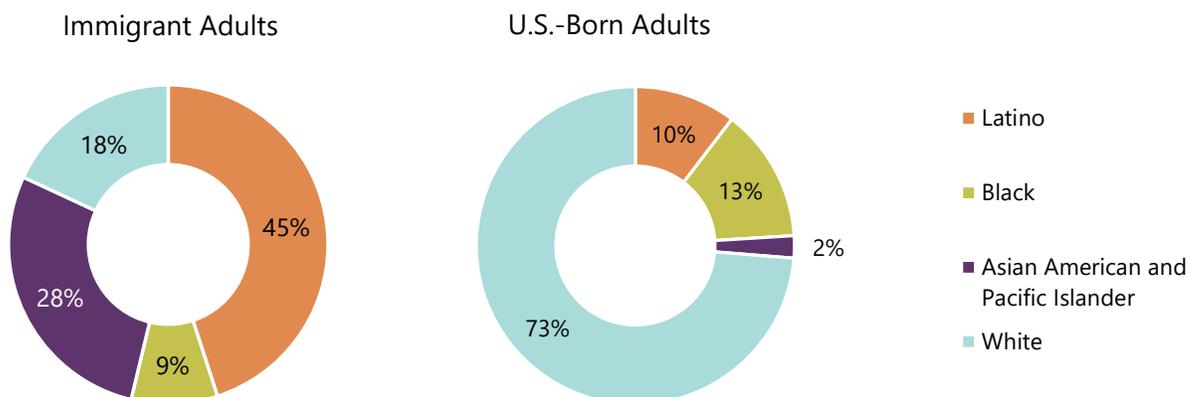
Although not applicable to native-born adults, given they acquired U.S. citizenship at birth,<sup>6</sup> the legal status of immigrant adults presents an important consideration for adult skills policy. Roughly half (51 percent) of immigrant adults nationwide were nat-

**FIGURE 3**  
**Immigrant Share of Parents (ages 18 and older) and of All Adults in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19**



Notes: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. In this figure, “parents” refers to adults with children under age 18.  
Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

FIGURE 4

**Race and Ethnicity of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults in the United States, 2015–19**

Note: Latinos can be of any race. In this figure, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, and White refer to individuals who do not identify as Latino.

Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

uralized citizens as of 2015–19 and are thus entitled to full access to the same range of public benefits and services as U.S.-born adults.<sup>7</sup> The noncitizens that make up the other half of the adult immigrant population hold a variety of statuses that enable or bar access to different public benefits and services. This group includes lawful permanent residents (also known as green-card holders), refugees, asylees, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, holders of temporary statuses, and unauthorized immigrants. Those without legal status generally can access WIOA-funded adult education services but have limited access to workforce development services.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Educational Attainment

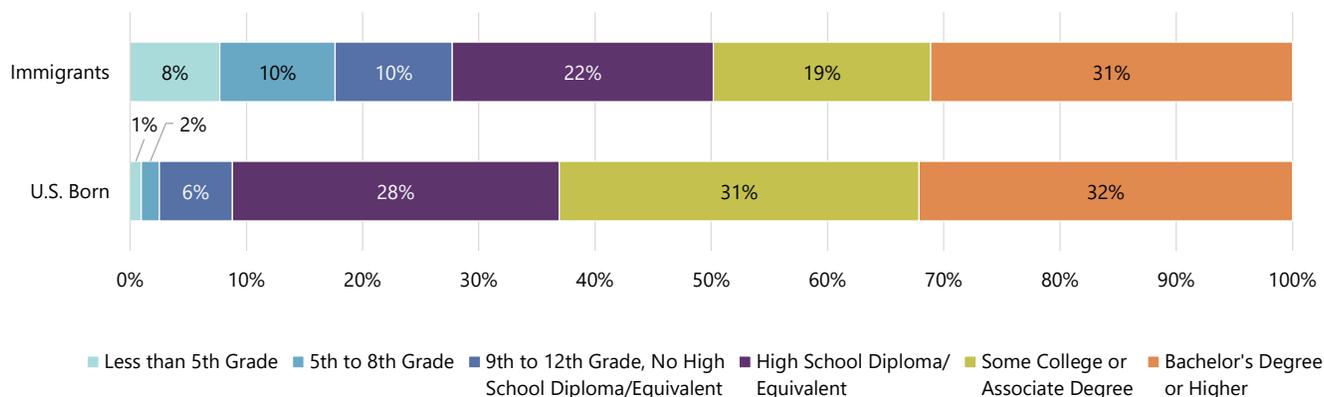
There are noteworthy differences in the educational attainment of immigrant and U.S.-born adults that have important implications for the design and inclusiveness of adult skills programs as well as efforts by adult education systems to advance adult literacy. As observed in previous Migration Policy Institute research, immigrants' formal education levels tend to be concentrated at either end of the spectrum,

with a significant share lacking a high school diploma while another notable share possess a college degree.<sup>9</sup> Among U.S.-born adults, the data reveal a roughly even split between the share with a high school diploma, those with some college or an associate degree, and those with a bachelor's degree or higher, as well as very few with less than a 9th or 5th grade education.

As displayed in Figure 5, immigrant adults were more likely than U.S.-born adults to have less than a high school diploma or equivalent (28 percent vs. 9 percent in 2015–19, respectively). However, due in part to the much larger size of the U.S.-born adult population, there were still more U.S.-born than immigrant adults who lacked a high school diploma (16.3 million vs. 10.8 million). Looking at the level of formal schooling for those without a high school diploma, the gaps were even more pronounced. Nearly one in five (18 percent) immigrant adults had less than a 9th grade education, and 8 percent, or roughly 3 million individuals, had less than a 5th grade education. Among U.S.-born adults, a much smaller share (3 percent) had less than a 9th grade education and just 1 percent, or 1.8 million individuals, had less than a 5th grade education.

FIGURE 5

**Educational Attainment of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults (ages 25 and older) in the United States, 2015–19**



Note: All educational attainment statistics in this brief are for adults ages 25 and older and not enrolled in school or college, meaning they had not attended at any time in the three months before the data were collected.  
 Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

At the other end of the educational spectrum, roughly equivalent shares of immigrant and U.S.-born adults had a bachelor’s degree or higher (31 percent vs. 32 percent). Meanwhile, a smaller share of immigrant than U.S.-born adults had some college or an associate degree (19 percent vs. 31 percent) or solely a high school diploma or equivalent (22 percent vs. 28 percent).

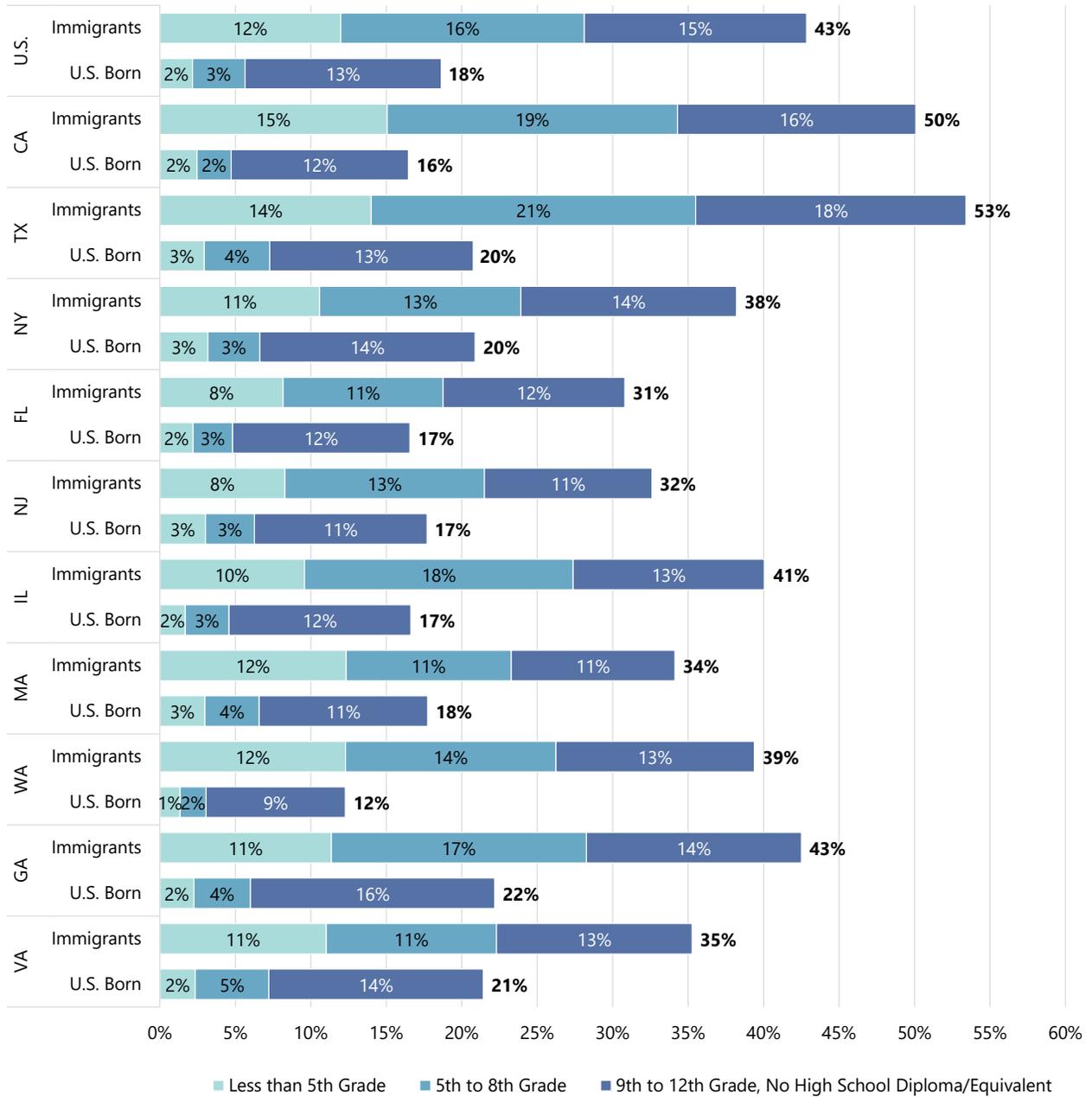
Immigrants also comprised a disproportionate share of adults with lower levels of formal education compared to their share of the overall population. Immigrants made up 17 percent of all adults nationally, but they represented 40 percent of those who did not have a high school diploma and 60 percent of those with less than a 9th grade education. These disparities were even greater in some states such as California, where immigrants comprised 34 percent of the total adult population but 71 percent of adults without a high school diploma and 86 percent of those with less than a 9th grade education.

Even greater disparities in educational attainment were evident among immigrant and U.S.-born adults with lower levels of income, an important target

population for both adult education and workforce development programs. Nationally, low-income immigrant adults were more likely than low-income U.S.-born adults to have less than a high school diploma or equivalent (43 percent vs. 18 percent); this includes 28 percent of low-income immigrant adults who had less than a 9th grade education compared to 5 percent of low-income U.S.-born adults, as shown in Figure 6. Looking across the ten states with the largest immigrant populations, half of low-income immigrant adults in both California (50 percent) and Texas (53 percent) had less than a high school diploma or equivalent, including more than one-third who had less than a 9th grade education. Immigrant adults also represented disproportionate shares of the total number of adults who had low income levels and less than a high school diploma in many states, making up more than half of all such adults in California, Texas, New Jersey, and New York (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 6

**Educational Attainment of Low-Income Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults (ages 25 and older) without a High School Diploma or Equivalent in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19**

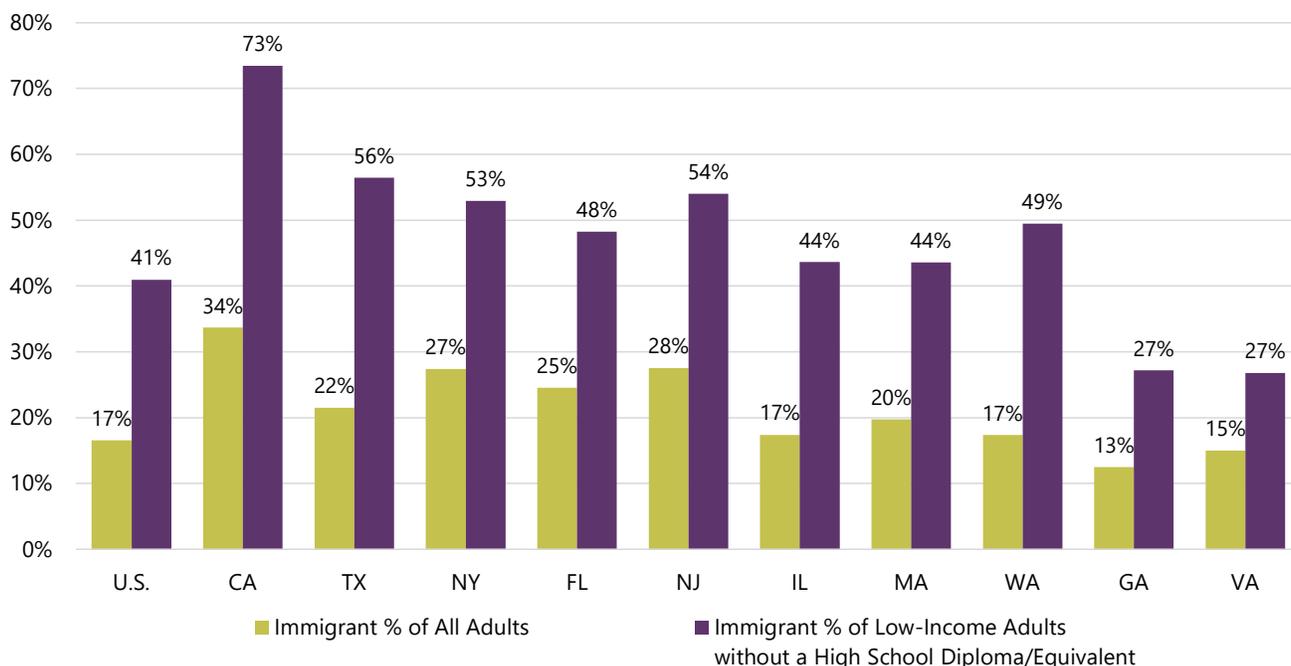


Notes: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. All educational attainment statistics in this brief are for adults ages 25 and older and not enrolled in school or college, meaning they had not attended at any time in the three months before the data were collected. In this analysis, “low income” refers to individuals with a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

FIGURE 7

**Immigrant Share of All Adults and Low-Income Adults (ages 25 and older) with No High School Diploma or Equivalent in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19**



Notes: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. All educational attainment statistics in this fact sheet are for parents who were not enrolled in school or college, meaning they had not attended at any time in the three months before the data were collected. In this analysis, “low income” refers to individuals with a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

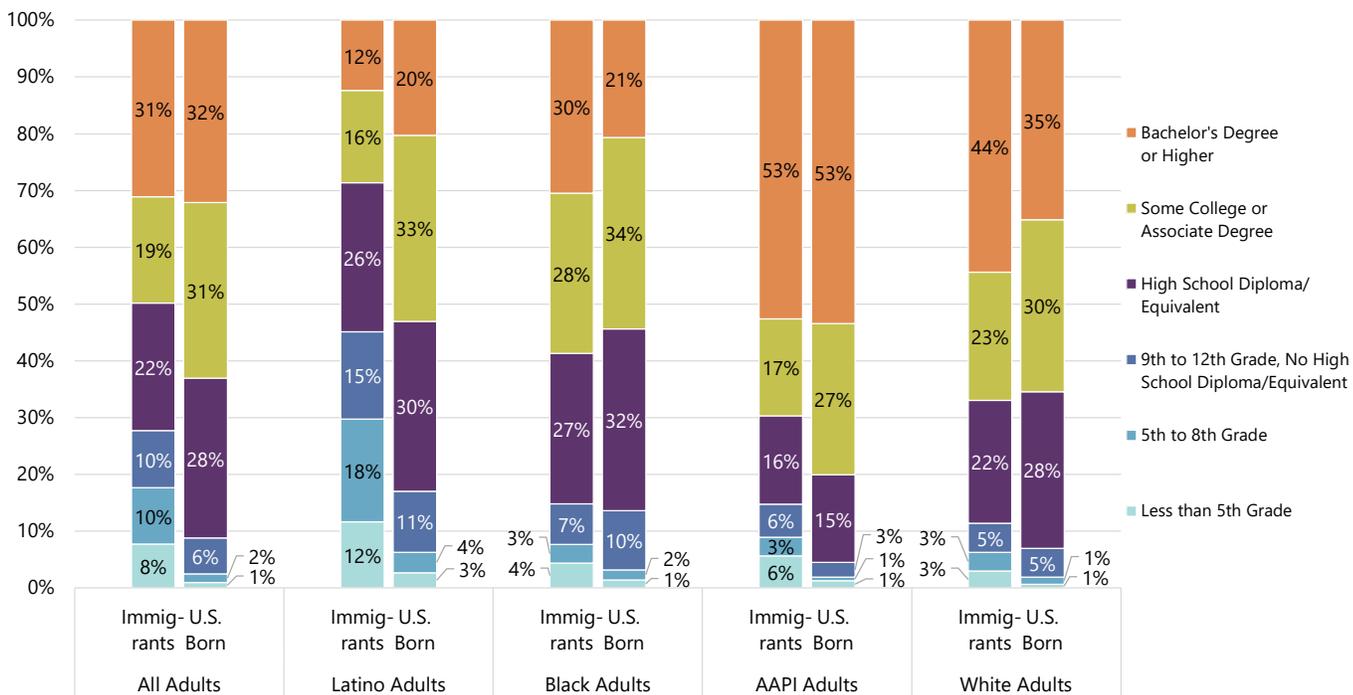
Examining educational attainment data broken down by race and ethnicity reveals even more serious disparities that particularly affected Latino immigrants. Broadly speaking, much larger shares of foreign-born Latino adults had lower levels of formal education compared to adults from other racial and ethnic groups in 2015–19 (see Figure 8). Among Latino immigrants, 30 percent had less than a 9th grade education, 45 percent had less than a high school diploma, and 71 percent had at most a high school diploma or equivalent—rates much higher than U.S.-born Latinos (7 percent, 18 percent, and 48 percent, respectively). These disparities were not nearly as severe for AAPI, Black, and White immigrant vs. U.S.-born populations, though some differences emerge when examining the data for low-income individuals specifically as well as gaps between racial/ethnic groups at the state level. For example, disparities in educational attainment were more pronounced for

AAPI immigrant vs. U.S.-born adults in New York and for Black immigrant vs. U.S.-born adults in Florida. In addition, notable shares of low-income AAPI, White, and Black immigrant adults nationwide had less than a 9th grade education (as did U.S.-born Latinos compared to other U.S.-born groups).

Gaps in digital access, while less pronounced between the overall U.S.-born and immigrant adult populations, were also evident for some groups in the data analyzed for this brief. Overall, 12 percent of immigrant adults and 11 percent of U.S.-born adults nationwide lived in a household without access to the internet. When broken down by income and education level, these disparities were more severe: Roughly one in five low-income immigrant and U.S.-born adults (20 percent and 22 percent, respectively) lived in households without access to the internet, as did roughly one in four adults

FIGURE 8

**Educational Attainment of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults (ages 25 and older) in the United States, by Race and Ethnicity, 2015–19**



Note: Latinos can be of any race. In this figure, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, and White refer to individuals who do not identify as Latino.

Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

without a high school diploma (29 percent and 23 percent, respectively). Looking at adults who were limited English proficient (LEP), low income, and had less than a high school diploma (a group comprised almost entirely of immigrants), 30 percent did not have access to the internet and 50 percent did not have a computer or laptop in their home. These data demonstrate not only challenges related to digital access but also suggest broader challenges related to digital literacy, a growing area of work for adult skills programs. The data also suggest that ongoing digital equity efforts, such as those supported by the *Digital Equity Act*, will need to be inclusive of immigrant communities, given that foreign-born communities face digital access challenges at similar rates to U.S.-born populations.

The data examined in this section carry important implications for adult skills policy and WIOA services as well as broader efforts to support upward integra-

tion trajectories for immigrants and their families. Individuals with lower levels of formal education present a structural challenge for programs, particularly those offered in adult education systems. Without addressing the intersection between English proficiency and formal education—and in some cases, native language literacy—systems may default to enrolling participants in English courses based on their level of English proficiency, without taking into account their level of formal education or literacy. As a result, immigrant students with vastly different educational backgrounds may be placed into a single beginner English course, when in reality a student with a higher level of formal education in their native language might be well suited to accelerated English instruction while a student with less formal education might benefit more from literacy instruction in their native language before advancing their English proficiency.

From a purely numerical standpoint, immigrants comprised many, and in some states most, of the adults in need of adult education services. Immigrants are also more likely to face more profound challenges related to literacy and formal education than U.S.-born adults. Under WIOA, however, the nation's adult education system performance and accountability measures, as detailed in Box 2, have become increasingly aligned with earning a recognized postsecondary credential (generally a specific employer-recognized credential) and to measurable educational or professional skill gains (such as attaining a high school diploma or passing an occupational exam)—goals that are not appropriate or

realistic for many adults with lower levels for formal education, particularly below the high school level. This tension between adult learners' needs and policy design is a serious challenge for ensuring equity in adult skills programs, especially if many immigrant adults with lower levels of formal education are excluded from participation or face limited program offerings. This challenge also raises concerns around the capacity of the adult education system, as currently designed and funded, to address disparities in formal education levels, one of the primary obstacles to integration and economic mobility for many immigrant adults.

## BOX 2 WIOA's Performance and Accountability Measures

Passed in 2014, the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA) established a common set of six performance and accountability measures for all of its core programs, including those focused on workforce development for adults, youth, and dislocated workers (Title I) as well as adult education (Title II). These performance measures are used to evaluate the effectiveness of WIOA programs, creating a strong incentive for systems and providers to ensure participants reach these outcomes. The six performance measures for WIOA programs are:

- 1 the share of participants employed the second quarter after exiting a program;
- 2 the share of participants employed the fourth quarter after exiting a program;
- 3 the median earnings of employed participants the second quarter after exiting a program;
- 4 the share of participants who attain a "recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma, or its recognized equivalent" during or one year after exiting a program;
- 5 the share of participants who achieve a "measurable skill gain," which can include a range of academic and professional outcomes; and
- 6 the effectiveness of the program in serving employers.

WIOA applies all six performance measures to both workforce development and adult education programs, despite their differing goals, structure, and participant base. Researchers have raised concerns about the effects of this approach, including the ways in which it encourages providers to serve those most likely to achieve WIOA's outcomes rather than those most in need of assistance ("creaming" effects) as well as how it crowds out individuals with goals that do not align with WIOA's performance outcomes, such as attaining citizenship or supporting their children's education.

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration, "[WIOA Performance Indicators and Measures](#)," accessed September 20, 2023; Margie McHugh and Catrina Doxsee, *English Plus Integration: Shifting the Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration Success* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

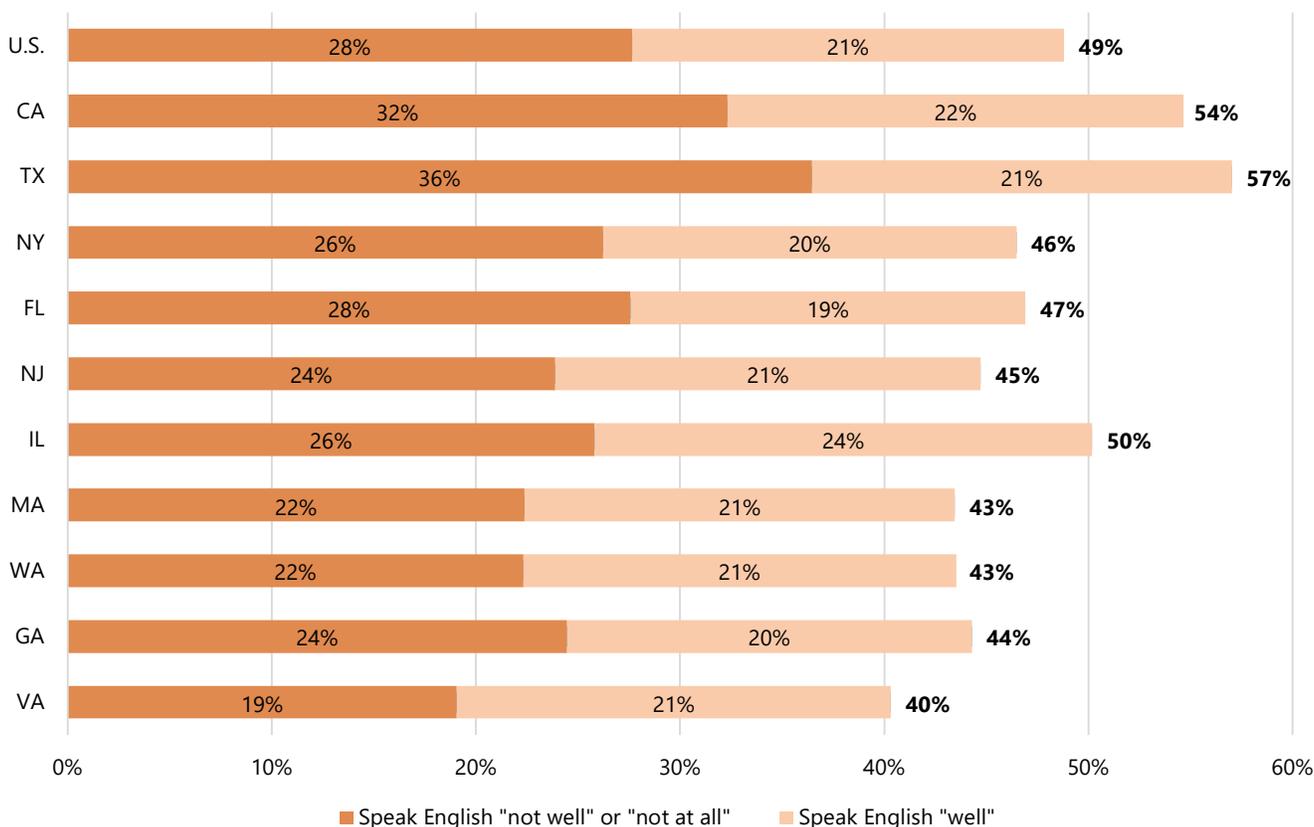
## 4 English Proficiency

Given the importance of English skills for both integration and economic mobility, the adult LEP population (referred to as “English Language Learners” under WIOA) represents a key target for adult education and workforce development systems across the country. LEP individuals are those who report speaking English less than “very well” in the ACS, which includes those who say they speak English “well” as well as those who report speaking English “not

well” or “not at all.” Although a small segment of LEP adults are U.S. born, immigrants make up roughly 91 percent of this population nationwide.

Nationally, 20.4 million immigrant adults had limited proficiency in English in 2015–19. These LEP adults comprised nearly half (49 percent) of all adult immigrants, and slightly more than one-quarter (28 percent) reported speaking English “not well” or “not at all.” As shown in Figure 9, some states’ adult immigrant populations had similar shares of LEP individuals to the national average, such as in Florida and Illi-

**FIGURE 9**  
**Share of Immigrant Adults with Limited Proficiency in English in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, by English Proficiency Level, 2015–19**



Notes: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. English proficiency is self-reported in the ACS. Limited English proficient (LEP) adults are those who report speaking English less than “very well” but represent a range of proficiency levels—“well,” “not well,” and “not at all.”  
 Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

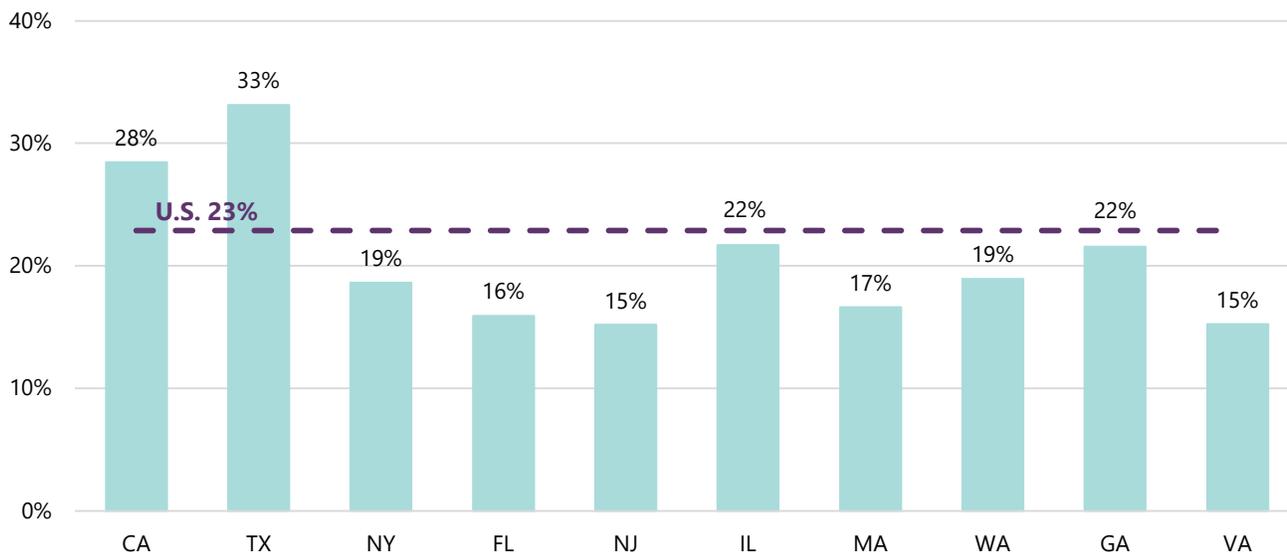
nois. By contrast, more than half of adult immigrants in Texas and California were LEP (57 percent and 55 percent, respectively), and roughly one in three reported speaking English “not well” or “not at all.”

The intersection between English proficiency and formal education levels is also a key consideration for the design of educational programs for immigrant adults. Nationally, one in four (23 percent) adult immigrants had both limited proficiency in English and less than a high school diploma or equivalent, as shown in Figure 10. In most of the ten states with the largest immigrant populations, immigrants facing both of these barriers made up similar or smaller shares of all adult immigrants, while California and Texas had shares larger than the national number. Given the educational indicators presented in the previous section of this brief, it is likely that a significant share of those immigrants who were LEP

and had less than a high school diploma had even lower levels of formal education, either below the 9th or 5th grade level.

The roughly half of LEP immigrant adults who speak English “not well” or “not at all” require special consideration from adult skills programs, and especially programs with employment-based approaches (such as Integrated Education and Training, or IET), which have grown in popularity in recent years. There are few workforce training programs equipped to serve LEP adults, and those that are generally require participants to have an advanced or at least intermediate level of English proficiency to participate.<sup>10</sup> Yet these data suggest that a large share (more than half in some states) of immigrant adults who do not speak English proficiently would have difficulty participating in such programs, especially given the considerable amount

**FIGURE 10**  
**Share of Immigrant Adults with Limited English Proficiency and No High School Diploma or Equivalent in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19**



Notes: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. English proficiency is self-reported in the ACS. Limited English proficient (LEP) adults are those who report speaking English less than “very well” but represent a range of proficiency levels—“well,” “not well,” and “not at all.” All educational attainment statistics in this fact sheet are for adults who were over age 25 and not enrolled in school or college, meaning they had not attended at any time in the three months before the data were collected.  
 Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

of instruction time it can take to advance to higher levels of English proficiency.<sup>11</sup> As a result, workforce development and adult education systems operating programs that pair skills training with English instruction should take explicit steps to make those services more accessible to adults with lower levels of English proficiency—for example, by designing training for more jobs that do not require advanced English skills (such as employment in the industrial sewing or culinary fields) or including more intensive English instruction within workforce training.

At the same time, these data also highlight the need for adult skills programs to consider how to accommodate and support immigrants who are LEP but have higher levels of education—such as a college or even graduate degree—from their country of origin. Many of these immigrants experience skill underutilization or “brain waste” due to barriers they face in having their education or training recognized by U.S. employers or state licensing bodies.<sup>12</sup> Too often, workforce training programs are unable to help these individuals since their group training and classroom-favored approaches lack the ability to provide customized career navigation, English instruction, and relicensing support that would ensure these immigrants can put to use the education and skills they brought with them to the United States.

On a broader level, the data suggest that merely seeking to bring more immigrant adults into workforce-centered WIOA programs will not result in equitable access or effective programming for them. Doing so would likely favor immigrants with higher levels of English proficiency and exclude many of those most in need of such services. This development would be even more harmful given the already limited capacity of adult English programs. Due to their limited funding, such programs are estimated to meet only about 2 percent of the need for services to support adults as they learn English.<sup>13</sup> To avoid further narrowing the accessibility of these services, workforce and adult education systems

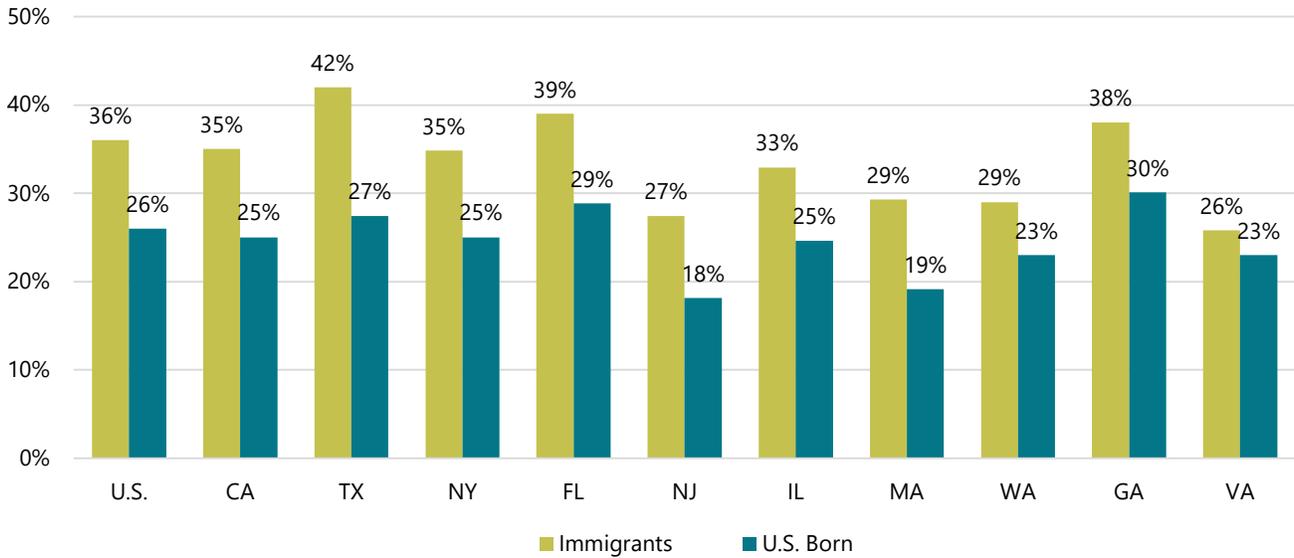
would need to adapt their performance, program, and funding designs to ensure equitable inclusion of LEP adults, especially those with low levels of English proficiency.

## 5 Income and Workforce Characteristics

Across the country and the states with the largest immigrant populations, immigrant adults were as likely as U.S.-born adults to be employed but more likely to work in jobs classified as low-skill. The size of the immigrant population in many areas, along with the fact that a key goal of WIOA programs is to help individuals gain the skills they need to enter higher-wage employment, make this an important consideration for adult skills policy—and one that requires equity-sensitive approaches and policies designed to promote the inclusion of those adults most in need of services.

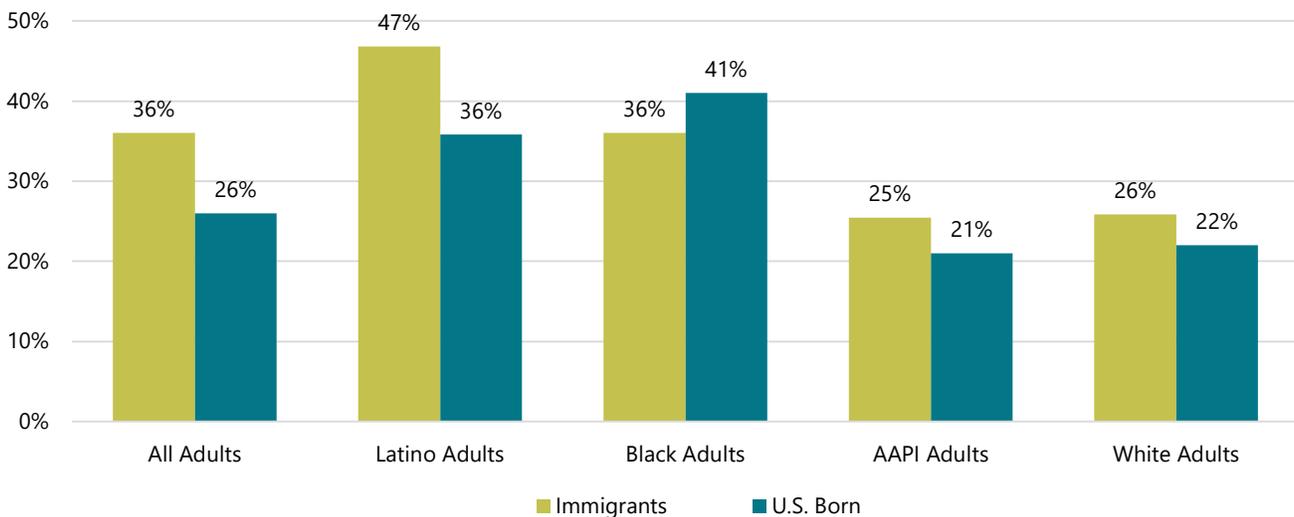
A higher share of immigrant adults were low income compared to U.S.-born adults in 2015–19 (36 percent vs. 26 percent). As Figure 11 shows, this trend also held across the states with the largest adult immigrant populations. However, because the U.S.-born population is much larger overall, the number of U.S.-born adults who were low income was higher than the number of low-income immigrant adults (52.8 million individuals vs. 14.8 million individuals). These disparities, however, were not evenly distributed across racial and ethnic groups. Overall, larger shares of Latino and Black adults—both immigrant and U.S. born—were low income, including nearly half (47 percent) of Latino immigrant adults (see Figure 12). The next highest share was for Black U.S.-born adults, 41 percent of whom were low income, followed by Latino U.S.-born and Black immigrant adults (each 36 percent). In contrast, much smaller shares of both U.S.-born and immigrant AAPI and White adults were part of low-income families.

**FIGURE 11**  
**Low-Income Share of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults in the United States and Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19**



Notes: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. In this analysis, “low income” refers to individuals with a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

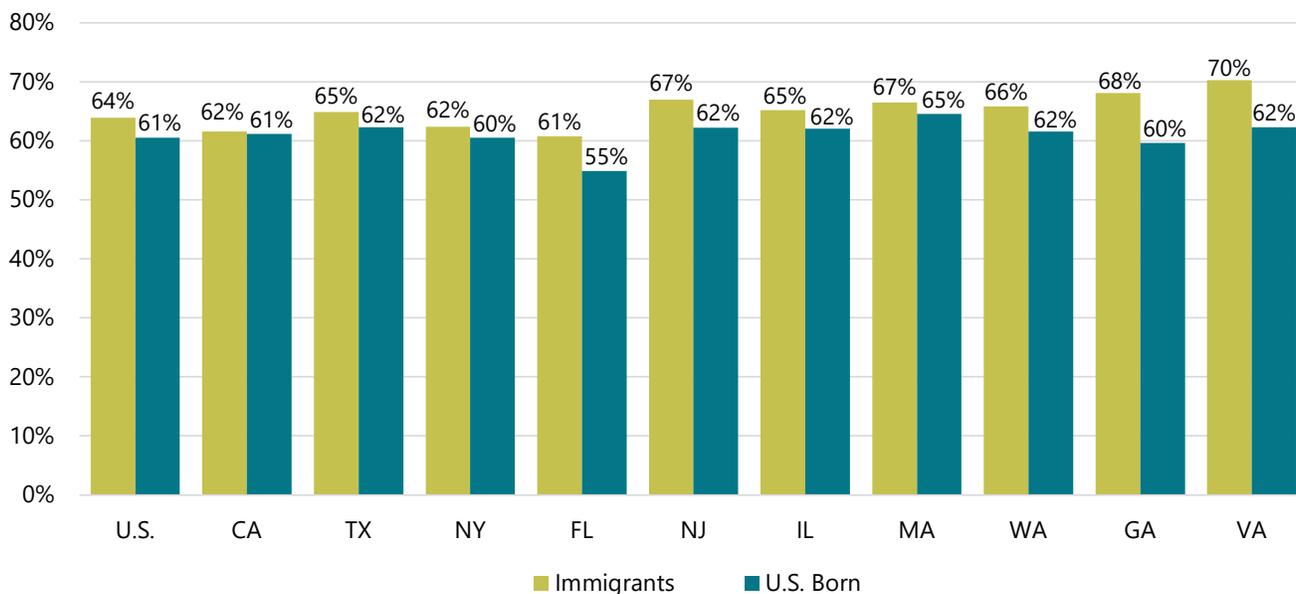
**FIGURE 12**  
**Low-Income Share of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults in the United States, by Race and Ethnicity, 2015–19**



Notes: In this analysis, “low income” refers to individuals with a family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level. Latinos can be of any race. In this figure, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Black, and White refer to individuals who do not identify as Latino. Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

FIGURE 13

### Employed Share of Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults in the United States and the Top Ten States by Immigrant Population Size, 2015–19



Note: States are listed in order of the size of their adult immigrant population, with California having the largest such population. Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

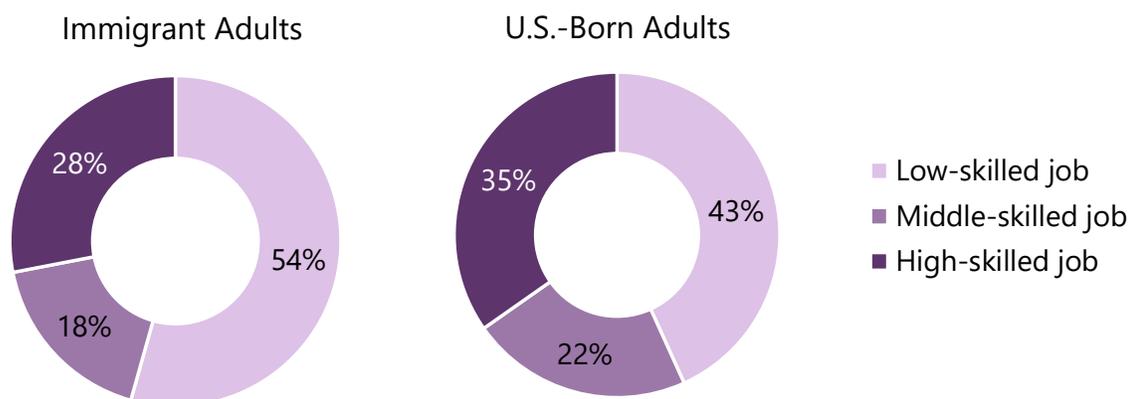
Although immigrant adults were more likely to be low income than U.S.-born adults, they were equally if not more likely to be employed, as shown in Figure 13. Across the country and in the states with the largest immigrant populations, roughly two-thirds of immigrant adults were employed; in some states, such as Georgia and Virginia, the share was even larger. Given that the data in Figure 13 capture all adults over the age of 18, and thus include some individuals still enrolled in school as well as many retired individuals, it is likely that the employed share of both U.S.-born and immigrant adults is even higher among those of prime working age.

The fact that immigrants were equally likely to be employed but more likely to be low income is connected to the types of jobs immigrants hold. Compared to U.S.-born workers, much larger shares of immigrant workers were employed in jobs classified as low-skilled (those that require a high school degree or less and minimal on-the-job training), which

often pay lower wages.<sup>14</sup> As shown in Figures 14, more than half (54 percent) of employed immigrant adults held such jobs, which include construction laborers, home health aides, and drivers, compared to 43 percent of employed U.S.-born adults. The share was even larger for Latino immigrant adults, 72 percent of whom were employed in low-skilled jobs. Prior Migration Policy Institute research has also found that skill underutilization (or “brain waste”) affects a sizeable share of immigrants with higher levels of education, with 21 percent of college-educated immigrants either unemployed or underemployed as of 2019.<sup>15</sup>

A variety of factors contribute to the fact that many immigrants in the country are employed in low-skill jobs and part of low-income families. These can include limited proficiency in English and/or formal education and, for some, a lack of legal status, all of which can negatively affect employability in higher-wage jobs.<sup>16</sup> When considering the goals of adult

FIGURE 14

**Share of Employed Immigrant and U.S.-Born Adults by Job Skill Level, 2015–19**

Source: MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.

skills programs, the fact that immigrants are equally as likely to be employed as U.S.-born adults suggests that programs whose sole or primary focus is to get immigrant adults into jobs should not be the top priority, whereas those designed to help participants increase their wages or professional skills, including English proficiency and adult literacy, should be an area of greater focus.

At the same time, efforts to remedy these disparities by simply bringing more immigrants into existing workforce development systems across the country are likely to encounter challenges, given that most programs are geared toward adults with a high school diploma and generally require more advanced levels of English proficiency—not to mention work authorization, which unauthorized immigrants and some groups of legal immigrants lack.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the data analyzed in this brief demonstrate the need for approaches to skills training that recognize the serious impacts that lower levels of formal education, English proficiency, and familiarity with American society can have on immigrants' employability and wages. In addition, such approaches will have to recognize that many immigrant adults are not eligible for public benefits such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supple-

mental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) that can help those with low incomes cover household costs and, thus, support participation in training programs.

Consequently, efforts by adult skills systems to effectively support the economic mobility of immigrant adults will need to both recognize that traditional skills programs are a poor fit for many immigrants and to prioritize more suitable approaches, such as practical or vocational English instruction that is accessible to low-income, working adults. Although such approaches are used to varying extents in adult education and workforce development systems across the country, as well as by many community-based organizations, they are neither prioritized nor incentivized under current WIOA guidelines.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

Immigrants contribute greatly to the prosperity and social fabric of the United States, but as this data analysis shows, many face multiple, often compounding barriers to achieving economic stability and integrating into U.S. society. For policymakers,

system leaders, and community stakeholders in adult education and workforce development services, these data demonstrate that immigrants often comprise many, if not most, of the individuals that adult skills programs—and in particular, adult education programs—are intended to serve. The analysis also demonstrates, however, that many such programs are misaligned with the profile of immigrant adults in the country, which is considerably different from that of U.S.-born adults. For example, immigrants are more likely to have lower levels of formal education (especially below the 9th or 5th grade level), and many face integration-related challenges such as not speaking English proficiently.

*Policy frameworks and performance measures set under WIOA offer too little flexibility for state and local systems to provide, adjust, or expand services tailored to the needs of this sizeable segment of the adult learner population.*

While serving learners with such needs is a key part of the mission of adult skills programs, policy frameworks and performance measures set under WIOA offer too little flexibility for state and local systems to provide, adjust, or expand services tailored to the needs of this sizeable segment of the adult learner population. To help systems reconcile the demographic realities these data illustrate with the services they provide, federal policy frameworks should allow—and ideally even require—state and local systems to offer programs responsive to the characteristics and learning and skill needs of their adult populations.

This is far from the current system's design. WIOA's programming and planning assumptions are that most, if not all, workforce training program participants will be put on a fast track to postsecondary

education and an employer-recognized credential. The design of such programs also often assumes learners will be available for full-time participation, and that many of those who need financial support to take time away from work and make this commitment possible will have access to public income-support programs. Judging by the extraordinary weight WIOA performance measures place on employment after program completion, a more fundamental assumption appears to be that program participants are unemployed. This can perhaps be understood simply as an artifact of a decades-old system design that envisioned adult skills programs as tools to move unemployed individuals into the workforce, rather than services to help low-wage workers earn higher wages and better ensure the economic and social stability of their families.

As this analysis shows, these assumptions ignore the demographics of large swaths of the adults that such programs are meant to serve, many of whom are immigrants. The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout have highlighted the economic and social precarity of many immigrant and U.S.-born adults employed in low-wage jobs, along with the serious consequences that lower levels of formal education and English proficiency can have for individuals' access to critical public information and their ability to support their children's education. Current high rates of employment have also not resolved many of the economic challenges that low-income communities face, again suggesting the presence of demographic and structural barriers such as low literacy levels that are frustrating the ability of already-employed individuals to gain secure, higher-wage employment. Given these realities, continuing to devote large shares of WIOA-funded services to education and training approaches based on decades-old assumptions will only further hinder state and local efforts to meet the needs of their local employers and populations—immigrant and U.S. born alike.

Regarding the adult immigrant population, policy-makers should recognize the importance of integration itself for increasing the well-being and prosperity of immigrants and their children and, in response, more effectively embed integration considerations into adult skills policy development. Understanding and navigating U.S. society, whether school systems, the job market, or cultural norms, are essential for immigrants' ability to achieve economic mobility, raise new generations of Americans, and build stable lives in the United States. These learning needs, however, are often difficult to serve under WIOA. Some WIOA-funded services do already directly address integration, but they are limited by a lack of resources, the law's performance measures, and an inability to provide extensive programming related to civic and social integration, which providers cannot receive credit for under the law.

Relatedly, WIOA-funded adult education programs have limited leeway to provide two-generation programs to support both children and adults in immigrant families, given that the law's employ-

ment-focused performance measures make it nearly impossible to serve parents and caregivers who are not working outside the home. A more effective response to the integration needs of immigrants and their children will require opening more programmatic space and funding for providers to tailor their services to the characteristics of local communities and the school readiness and learning goals of local early childhood and elementary school systems.

Supporting the successful integration of immigrants and their children is an essential pillar for ongoing efforts to build equitable pathways to economic mobility and prosperity in communities across the country. With the proper emphasis, reorientation, and incentives, adult skills systems have the potential to more equitably include immigrants in their services and to provide meaningful opportunities for immigrants to improve their own and their families' economic mobility and integration trajectories—to the benefit of their communities and the country at large.

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*Supporting the successful integration of immigrants and their children is an essential pillar for ongoing efforts to build equitable pathways to economic mobility and prosperity in communities across the country.*

## Endnotes

- 1 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulation of 2015–19 pooled data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s annual American Community Survey (ACS).
- 2 In addition to other broader changes, the implementation of the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA) brought about the end of the English Literacy and Civics Education (EL Civics) program, which previously provided flexible grant funding to support English and civics instruction across the country. Under WIOA, civics is now generally provided via the Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) program, though its services are more focused on economic integration (e.g., employment and skill development) and English acquisition, and in some cases via English Language Acquisition programs. Some states, most notably California, also dedicate portions of their adult education funding to support civics instruction. Outside of adult skills systems, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) provides funding for the Citizenship and Integration Grant Program, which mostly focuses on civics instruction related to increasing naturalization among noncitizens; see USCIS, “[Learn About the Citizenship and Integration Grant Program](#),” updated September 28, 2023.
- 3 MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data and data from U.S. Department of Education, National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), “[Table 3: Participants by Program Type and Age](#),” accessed July 11, 2023.
- 4 Margie McHugh and Catrina Doosee, *English Plus Integration: Shifting the Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration Success* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018).
- 5 This analysis uses the following definitions for racial and ethnic categories. Latinos, who can be of any race, are included in the category “Latino.” The other groups in this analysis refer to non-Latinos. “Black” refers to persons who reported their race in the ACS as “Black alone” or “Black in combination with other race.” “Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)” refers to persons who reported their race as “AAPI alone” or “AAPI in combination with other race,” except Black. “White” refers to persons who reported their race as “White.” The remainder is a small group called “other races,” which includes people who reported their race as “American Indian alone,” “American Indian and White,” or unspecified multiracial. Estimates for this group are not shown in this brief due to the small sample size for the immigrant population.
- 6 Though virtually all U.S.-born individuals are citizens due the legal guarantee of birthright citizenship, in a few limited cases this may not apply—most notably for children of foreign diplomats. For more information, see Ben Harrington, “[The Citizenship Clause and Birthright Citizenship: A Brief Legal Overview](#)” (policy brief, Congressional Research Service, Washington, DC, November 1, 2018).
- 7 MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data.
- 8 For more information on the unauthorized immigrant population in the United States, including detailed demographic indicators, see MPI Data Hub, “[Unauthorized Immigrant Population Profiles](#),” accessed July 11, 2023.
- 9 Margie McHugh and Madeleine Morawski, *Immigrants and WIOA Services: Comparison of Sociodemographic Characteristics of Native- and Foreign-Born Adults in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2016).
- 10 Jacob Hofstetter and Alexis Cherewka, *The IELCE Program: Understanding Its Design and Challenges in Meeting Immigrant Learners’ Needs* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2022).
- 11 Ben Knight et al., *How Long Does It Take to Learn a Foreign Language?* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 12 Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Leaving Money on the Table: The Persistence of Brain Waste among College-Educated Immigrants* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2021).
- 13 MPI tabulation of 2015–19 pooled ACS data and data from U.S. Department of Education NRS, “[Table 3: Participants by Program Type and Age](#).”
- 14 The MPI methodology for job skill classification draws on the U.S. Department of Labor’s online database of occupational profiles, O\*NET, which classifies occupations by educational requirements, among other criteria, 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, such as medical doctors and scientists (job zone 4 and 5). *Middle-skilled jobs* require some postsecondary education or training (i.e., an associate degree or long-term on-the-job training or vocational training); these include registered nurses, electricians, and teacher assistants (job zone 3). *Low-skilled jobs* require a high school degree or less, and little to moderate on-the-job training, such as home health aides, construction laborers, and drivers (job zones 1 and 2).
- 15 Batalova and Fix, *Leaving Money on the Table*.
- 16 Martha Ross and Nicole Bateman, *Meet the Low Wage Workforce* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Metropolitan Policy Program, 2019); Jill H. Wilson, *Investing in English Skills: The Limited English Proficient Workforce in U.S. Metropolitan Areas* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, Metropolitan Policy Program, 2014); Margie McHugh, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Fix, *Adult English Language Instruction in the United States: Determining Need and Investing Wisely* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2007); Robert Lynch and Patrick Oakland, *The Economic Effects of Granting Legal Status and Citizenship to Undocumented Immigrants* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2013).
- 17 U.S. Department of Labor, “[Implementation of the Nondiscrimination and Equal Opportunity Provisions of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#),” *Federal Register* 81, no. 232 (December 2, 2016): 87225.

## About the Authors



**JACOB HOFSTETTER**

 [@\\_JakeHofstetter](#)

Jacob Hofstetter is a Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy, where he conducts research on language access as well as educational and workforce programs for immigrant adults and youth. His work focuses on the civic, economic, and linguistic integration of immigrants and refugees in the United States.

Previously, Mr. Hofstetter worked as a Research and Policy Associate at the Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, interned for Refugee Services of Texas, worked as a Legal Services Coordinator for Human Rights First in Houston, and spent a year as a Fulbright English Teaching Assistant in Spain. He holds a master's degree in global policy studies with a focus on immigration and refugee policy from the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas, Austin, and a BA in history from Miami University.

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**MARGIE MCHUGH**

Margie McHugh is Director of MPI's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy. The Center is a national hub for leaders in government, community affairs, business, and academia to obtain the insights and knowledge they need to respond to the challenges and opportunities that today's high rates of immigration pose for communities across the United States. It provides in-depth research, policy analysis, technical assistance, training, and information resource services on a broad range of immigrant integration issues.

Ms. McHugh's work focuses on education quality and access issues for immigrants and their children, from early childhood through K-12 and adult, postsecondary, and workforce skills programs. She also leads the Center's work seeking a more coordinated federal response to immigrant integration needs and impacts, and more workable systems for recognition of the education and work experience immigrants bring with them to the United States.

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