

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Political rhetoric around immigration can be polarizing. Today on the Work in Progress Podcast, we step back and look at the numbers, the economic impact of immigrants and the jobs they fill. One in five US workers is an immigrant. From high-paying jobs in tech to low-wage jobs in agriculture and home healthcare, they are a vital part of our workforce, contributing \$1.6 trillion to the economy and paying more than \$579 billion in taxes. Jane Oates, senior policy advisor to WorkingNation is my guest today. A little later in the podcast, we'll dive further into the impact immigrants are having on the economy. But we start with Jane explaining what today's immigrant population looks like.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

Looking at the demographics of who immigrants are in the United States, and I'm getting this data from the census and reports that Pew Trust has put out. 45% are Latino. That means they come from Mexico, from Central America, from South America. And let me make very clear that Puerto Ricans are not immigrants. They are American citizens, even though they've been picked up in East Coast raids.

So 45% are people that are Latino from Spanish-speaking countries. 31% are Asian. So that means Southeast Asia, Korea, Japan, China, that's where they're from. Only when you look at that, it's that's the majority. 5% are from India, 2% are from the Philippines, the rest from Africa, and small amounts. Interesting, 12% as of that study, which was 2023 data based on the census, 12% are from Europe and Canada. Our borders are porous. Lots of people want to come here just like a lot of people in America want to emigrate to other places.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So what kind of visas do people come into our country with?

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

So it's probably a good idea to do a fact check, right? H-1B visas are bachelor's degree and above. And by the way, these all fall under the category of employer visas. So an employer has to promise you a job before you can get that visa. If you look at where they go, and by the way, there are only 65,000 a year granted. They're three years to six years. Most people stay the full six years. So for instance, in 2023, which is the last number I have, there were probably maybe a little over 260,000 people in the United States on H-1B visas.

So that represents, do your math, six times 65. That's basically the majority of them are staying as long as they possibly can. The next visa that has a cap are the H-2B visas, and those are visas for non-agricultural temporary workers. That also has a cap 66,000. For that same year, 2022, 23, there were over 300, like 310,000 people on those visas. What are they doing? They're doing construction. Some of them, they're doing special manufacturing. They may be people doing masonry because we don't have many programs in teaching masonry anymore.

Or they may be doing specialty things in, I wouldn't call it specialty, but a lot of them doing landscaping. You'll see a lot of people who love hedge shapers. People who shape those hedge, do topiaries. There most of them are on guest work or visas. Again, they can stay up to three years, so that's why you get a bigger number of them. But they can go back and forth. So they can work when it season on the East

Coast to do landscaping, go back to their home country, come back. They're allowed to come back and forth. But they're really important to the economy. And you know I was at the Department of Labor.

When I was there, the H-2B visas, I got more phone calls about those because people wanted the same experienced landscaper they had or whatever particular area. It was the very popular visa program. And then finally the H-2A, which I told you before, has no caps. That's ag workers. But there are all kinds of programs that people don't realize are visa programs. There is a visa program called the First Preferred Immigrant, actors, directors models, sports athletes, many of the athletes that are here. I mean, again, going back to my time there, I was getting frantic calls because a major league baseball team's backup catcher had to have a visa.

These are all really critical visa programs. These are all immigrants. People forget that. And then when you look at H-1B, H-1B visa holders are allowed to bring their families. They're allowed to bring their spouse or partner, and they're allowed to bring any children under the age of 21. So that adds to the number of immigrants that are here. But again, this country cannot operate without the talent that these people bring in. Whether it's the people I talked about doing landscaping or whether it's engineers and physicists. And don't forget the cap that I told you for H-1B, you can break that cap for higher ed.

So higher ed two and four-year colleges are allowed an extra 20,000 people every year on an H-1B visa. Teaching at universities, teaching at community colleges in areas where we have a deficit of qualified professors. So that's very interesting. And then in the early 2000s, they added some extra H-1B categories for people from certain countries. I think people really don't understand it.

They think immigrants are people walking over the border. They think that they're coming, they're uneducated. The reality is, even those people that are here without visa status, who are here as undocumented are working. They're caring for my grandmother. They're babysitting my kid. They're in-home healthcare where Americans don't want to work because the pay is poor and the working conditions are awful. I mean, going into strangers homes is not an area that's of great comfort to many American workers.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I want to talk to you about the economic impact that immigrants have in our country. They're a pretty big part of the workforce.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

Not only are they a big part of the workforce, but the money that that, let's take one subgroup, Latinos, which are about 45% of the immigrants in the country. The Latino population in the United States represents a GDP that's greater than the GDP of India or the UK. I mean, that just tells you it's having them not be able to buy, losing any of that buying power is going to be really detrimental to the US.

And if you think about that, what does that mean in a domino effect, the trickle-down effect? If you lose 10% of that, stores that weren't owned by Latinos, stores that weren't necessarily marketing only to Latinos but are going to lose that business, they're going to be impacted. And then it's going to be, again, a trickle-down effect of they're going to have to lay people off who are white, black, orange, it doesn't make any difference. They're going to have to lay people off because they've lost revenue.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In a time when employers are saying to us, "We can't find enough skilled workers," to eliminate part of that potential workforce seems kind of detrimental to the economy.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

Yeah. Short-sighted at the very least, right? I mean, as we look at talent, so many people, when you talk to them about, again, specifically Latino immigrants, they think they're farm workers. Not true at all. Farm workers are here on a special visa that has no cap. So we can let as many temporary farm workers into the country as farm employers need. That's not an issue. There's not full-time American immigrants looking to work as farm labor. That's all taken care of by that special H-2B Visa program.

If you look at the real industries that are going to be impacted by a loss of people who have been working on an EIN, they don't have a green card, they're paying into Medicare, they're paying into social security. If you look at where they are, they're in food processing. So in the plants that process meat products or make your applesauce, in the plants that are doing all those kinds of things, they're overrepresented there because Americans who are non-immigrants don't take those jobs.

They're represented heavily in construction. And when you look at, you're based in Los Angeles, Ramona, so firsthand, the devastation of the fires, who's going to rebuild those homes? Who's going to rebuild those businesses? I mean, people in every state will complain about how hard it is to get somebody to even do home improvements. The Home Builders Institute always talking about the need for construction workers in home building. I think it's going to be in places where people least expect it. It's no good if we can still grow crops, if you can't get them ready and packaged to go to market.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you've referenced this, that a lot of the meatpacking plants are immigrants. So that really points to the fact that when we talk about immigrants, they are all over our country. They're in our urban areas, and they're in our rural areas. So it's not just the southern border of Texas or California, but they're all over our country. They're a part of our fabric.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

Absolutely. I mean, immigrants are us. The only people who aren't immigrants in this country are Native Americans. And the fact that all of a sudden we're questioning their economic impact, their worth is astounding to me. Because if you look for instance, every month when BLS puts out the job numbers, they talk about labor market participation. Latino labor market participation is 80%. The general average for the whole population is 62.5%. Latinos are working. Asians are working.

It's very interesting that we're saying they're taking jobs. Before you can apply for a visa, whether H-1B, H-2B H-2A, it doesn't matter, you have to demonstrate that you have advertised locally for local talent. And every employer will tell you they cannot get people to pick fruit, to pack fruit. They can't get them to mow lawns, to pick apples. I mean, you can talk to employer after employer and they'll say, "I tried to get local talent. I'd like to do that. I can't."

So these are the people that are, you could say the backbone of our country. For me, they're the cereal bowl of our country. They're everything. They are working. And again, they are paying taxes, and they are not eligible for many of the government programs that people think that they're on the dole, that they taking food stamps, that they're getting TANF. They're not. They can't get it. And the last thing they're going to do if they're undocumented is go to a federal office and try to get something because they'll be afraid of being deported. Not in this administration, in any administration, they like to lay low.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Speaking of business and economic impact, a study from the Stanford Latino Entrepreneurship Initiative each year shows that Latino women are starting businesses faster than any other group. So they are not

only contributing by buying, they're contributing by creating jobs because those businesses are one in two, sometimes 10 or more jobs.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

Well, you're exactly right about that because if you look at some of the studies, Latino-owned businesses from 2020 to 2023 grew at a rate of 8.7%. Businesses writ large across the country grew at 5.6%. Latinos are starting businesses at a much greater rate. They're not getting capital because we know that people of color and women get about 1% of all the capital out there for business startups. Instead, they're building their business as a family business and then hiring outside their family. And it's not just restaurants. They're doing it in service industries.

They're doing it in warehousing and transportation. They're all over the map in this. They start small, they grow conservatively, but they grow. And they're hiring people. And you know what? They're not just hiring Latinos. They're hiring any talent in their region. I think it's such a misperception that they're takers, they're givers, they're builders. And if we don't see that, if we don't recognize that, especially as they grow, they are 19% of the population right now, projected to be about 24% of the population by 2030. I mean, do the math. If we don't respect this subgroup of our population and we don't encourage them and assist them, we're going to be in big trouble.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Jane, thank you very much.

Jane Oates, WorkingNation senior policy advisor:

My pleasure, Ramona. Anytime.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Jane Oates, Senior Policy Advisor to WorkingNation. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.