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The Share of Foreign-Born Workers in the U.S. Labor Force Reaches a New High

In 2016, they accounted for 16.9%, up from 10.8% a decade before, according to the Labor Department

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The share of foreign-born workers in the U.S. climbed to a record last year, as workers continue to flock to an attractive U.S. labor market and younger immigrants join the labor force.

In 2016, there were 27 million foreign-born people in the U.S. labor force, accounting for 16.9% of the total. The share was 10.8% in 1996, according to **Labor Department** data tracking back two decades.

The Labor Department report doesn't distinguish between workers in the U.S. legally or illegally, and doesn't track country of origin.

“What's happening in terms of the number of foreign-born workers is we have a lot of very young people who came to the U.S. a decade ago and are aging into the labor market,” said **Sara Curran**, director for studies in demography and ecology at the **University of Washington**.

Among workers tracked by the Labor Department, the foreign-born were more likely to work than the native-born. The labor-force participation rate was 65.2% versus 62.3% for native-born.

Thursday's report only takes into account data through 2016, so wouldn't yet show any impact from policies of the Trump administration.

The administration, which took office earlier this year, “is focused on immigration enforcement, and any impact of the policies will show up in the labor-force numbers,” said **Alex Nowrasteh**, an immigration policy analyst at the **Cato Institute**, a think tank dedicated to free-market principles.

Efforts to curtail immigration could run counter to the administration's stated goal to ramp up economic growth. Relatively low birth rates and an aging population mean immigration is the source of nearly all of the labor force's net increase, so its growth rate would lower if legal immigration were curbed.

Other highlights from Thursday's report include:

- Foreign-born workers were more likely than native-born workers to be employed in service occupations and less likely to be employed in management, professional and related occupations.
- The median usual weekly earnings of foreign-born workers were \$715 in 2016, compared with \$860 for native-born workers.
- In 2016, nearly half of the foreign-born labor force was Hispanic, and one-quarter was Asian, compared with 10.4% and 1.9%, respectively, of the native-born labor force.