

# The Washington Times

## Two-thirds of jobs go to immigrants during Obama's four years

*Researchers say legal and illegal immigrants are more mobile than natives in America*

By Stephen Dinan - Wednesday, October 31, 2012

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Two-thirds of those who have found employment under President Obama are immigrants, both legal and illegal, according to an analysis that suggests immigration has soaked up a large portion of what little job growth there has been over the past three years.

The [Center for Immigration Studies](#) is releasing the study Thursday morning, a day ahead of the final [Labor Department](#) unemployment report of the campaign season, which is expected to show a sluggish job market more than three years into the economic recovery.

That slow market, combined with the immigration numbers, could explain why Mr. Obama and Republican nominee [Mitt Romney](#) have struggled to find a winning jobs message in some of the country's hardest-hit postindustrial regions.

"It's extraordinary that most of the employment growth in the last four years has gone to the foreign-born, but what's even more extraordinary is the issue has not even come up during a presidential election that is so focused on jobs," said [Steven A. Camarota](#), the [center's](#) research director, who wrote the report along with demographer [Karen Zeigler](#).

His numbers are stark: Since the first quarter of 2009, the number of immigrants of working age (16 to 65) who are employed has risen 2 million, from 21.2 million to 23.2 million. During the same time, native-born employment has risen just 1 million, to reach 119.9 million.

It's a trend years in the making: Immigrants are working more, and native-born Americans are working less.

In 2000, 76 percent of natives aged 18 to 65 were employed, but that dropped steadily to 69 percent this September. By contrast, immigrants started the last decade at 71 percent employment and rose to a peak of 74 percent at the height

of the George W. Bush-era economic boom. They since have slid down to 69 percent amid the sluggish economy.

### **Competitive advantage**

The [Center for Immigration Studies](#), which wants the government to impose stricter limits on immigration, based its numbers on the [Census Bureau](#)'s Current Population Survey.

[Alex Nowrasteh](#), a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, which favors letting the markets rather than the government control the flow of immigration, said [Mr. Camarota](#)'s numbers are "making a mountain out of a molehill."

He said delving into specific numbers explains why immigrants have done better over the past four years: They generally gravitate toward parts of the economy that have picked up faster in the nascent recovery.

"Most of the areas of the U.S. economy that are hiring right now, like agriculture and high-tech industries, are those where immigrants have always been overly represented," [Mr. Nowrasteh](#) said.

He also said immigrants are quicker to jump into the rebounding job market while native-born Americans, who under federal law have more welfare options and access to unemployment benefits, are slower to find work.

[Mr. Nowrasteh](#) and [Mr. Camarota](#) said another factor could be immigrants' mobility.

Natives have roots wherever they live, and it may take higher wages to get them to move for jobs, even if their homes are in depressed areas. Immigrants already have uprooted themselves and can more easily pick places where jobs are available.

Indeed, [Mr. Camarota](#)'s numbers show that most of the immigrant employment growth went to new arrivals, not to foreign-born residents already in the United States — a figure that suggests immigrants already settled here were having some of the same difficulties as the native-born.

There is some bright news: an uptick over the past year among native-born Americans accounting for two-thirds of all new employment growth.

### **Full overhaul**

Net immigration — both legal and illegal — averaged more than 1.1 million in the 1990s and slightly less than 900,000 in the past decade.

[Mr. Camarota](#) said it didn't slow much despite the economic downturn.

"We have a situation where the job market — the bottom fell out, yet we kept legal immigration relatively high without even a national debate," he said. "As a consequence, a lot of the job growth has been going to immigrants."

Immigration has been a touchy political issue for more than a decade, and while all sides agree that the system is broken, efforts to overhaul it in 2006 and 2007 fell short.

This campaign, [Mr. Romney](#) and Mr. Obama have talked about streamlining the legal immigration system to allow in more high-tech workers. [Mr. Romney](#) has said he wants to "staple a green card" to every advanced degree in science, mathematics or engineering earned by an immigrant.

Beyond that, Mr. Obama has vowed to make legalizing illegal immigrants a major push in a second term — and has said if he wins re-election, he thinks Republicans will embrace that goal, realizing that otherwise, Hispanic voters will reject the GOP.

[Mr. Romney](#) has talked about legalizing a small number of illegal immigrants, though he has been studiously vague about his specific plans in an effort to try not to alienate voters on either side of the issue.

Mr. Obama did take action this year to grant many illegal immigrants up to 30 years of age a tentative legal status that prevents them from being deported and authorizes them to work in the United States.

Some Republicans in Congress have criticized Mr. Obama's policy, saying it violates his powers and will mean more competition for scarce jobs.

[Mr. Romney](#) has said he would not rescind any stays of deportation that Mr. Obama issues but wouldn't issue any new ones himself.

The current system doles out legal visas based on family ties or employment prospects or even a random lottery designed to increase the diversity of those coming to the United States.

In 2007, senators proposed scrapping the legal system and replacing it with a points-based system that would assign a desirability grade to would-be immigrants. Work skills would have gained under that system.

But that proposal, along with the rest of the bill, collapsed amid a bipartisan Senate filibuster.

[Mr. Nowrasteh](#) at the Cato Institute said those decisions shouldn't be left up to bureaucrats anyway.

“The government can't pick winners and losers when it comes to green-energy firms like Solyndra, so what makes you think it can pick winners and losers when it comes to immigration?” he asked rhetorically.