

Immigrants in the North Carolina Economy: Overcoming hurdles, yet still facing barriers

There are 840,585 immigrants living in North Carolina. Making up 8 percent of the state's population, immigrants are a vital part of the social, economic, and cultural life of all American communities.¹

The economic role of immigrants has frequently been misunderstood. On the one hand, immigrants are a big and important part of the economy. And, on the other hand, immigrants are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage jobs. Both things are true at the same time.

- **Immigrants account for 11 percent of the NC economic output (GDP), even higher than their share of the population.** North Carolina has a \$542 billion economy, according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis 2021 statistics, which means immigrants are conservatively responsible for \$59.6 billion of economic output.²
- **A key reason for this high share of economic output is that immigrants are concentrated in prime working age.** In North Carolina, while immigrants make up 8 percent of the population, they make up 11 percent of the working-age population (ages 16 to 64), and a corresponding 11 percent of the labor force.
- **Immigrants work in jobs across the economic spectrum.** A common misperception is that when we are talking about immigrants we are talking mostly about people in low-wage work. Yet, looking at all immigrant workers in North Carolina — documented and undocumented — 58 percent of those with full-time jobs earn at least \$31,000 per year, which is a middle wage for full-time work.
- **While most immigrants are in middle- or upper-wage jobs, immigrants are at the same time disproportionately likely to be in low-wage jobs.** In all, 34 percent of immigrants are in jobs paying under \$31,000, compared to 24 percent of U.S.-born workers.
- **Race and gender are as much a factor as nativity in wage outcomes for workers.** Men have higher wages than women. And people who are white have considerably higher wages than Black or Latinx workers, whether they are U.S.-born or immigrants.
- In **low-wage occupations** held by immigrants in North Carolina, more than half (60 percent) work in service or production jobs, such as building cleaners, cooks, meat processors, or sewing machine operators. The pandemic highlighted the importance of many of these jobs to America's daily life that can often seem underappreciated or invisible. There is little doubt that the 212,500³ undocumented immigrants estimated to be in the labor force are overwhelmingly in these low-wage occupations.

- Among **middle-wage occupations**, immigrants are spread across every sector of the economy. Significant numbers of immigrants work as nurses, computer programmers, educators, architects, logistics specialists, emergency services staff, and much more.
- Among **upper wage occupations**, immigrants are highly concentrated in a few fields. Fully 87 percent of immigrants in upper-wage occupations work either in computer occupations, or in management and finance occupations.

1. Immigrants Work in Jobs Across the Economic Spectrum

For this report, low-wage was defined as earning less than two-thirds of the overall median — in North Carolina, that means under \$31,000. Middle wage was earning between two-thirds of the median (\$31,000) and double the median (\$93,000). And upper wage was earning more than double the median, over \$93,000.⁴

The IRI analysis shows that 66 percent of immigrants in North Carolina earn at least a middle wage — 47 percent in the middle-wage range and an additional 19 percent in the upper-wage bracket of \$93,000 or more. Among U.S.-born workers, 76 percent earn at least a middle wage. Among U.S.-born workers, a smaller share are in low-wage and high-wage jobs, and a larger share in middle-wage jobs.

The share of immigrants and U.S.-born workers in upper-wage jobs is 19 percent for immigrant workers and 16 percent for U.S.-born workers. Indeed, the immigrant share continues to match the U.S.-born share, even looking at the top 5 percent and the top 1 percent of wage earners—indeed, it is slightly higher for immigrants. The top 5 percent of workers are those who earn \$161,000 or more per year. The share of workers earning over \$161,000 per year is the same for U.S. and immigrant workers at 4 percent. The top 1 percent of all workers are those who earn \$456,000 or more per year, and again the same share of U.S.-born workers and immigrant workers fall in this category, 1 percent.

Most workers in the North Carolina economy are in jobs that pay over the low-wage level of \$31,000 per year. By definition, there will always be some workers in bottom rungs of the economy, but it is not necessary for there to be some workers below a certain percentage of the median. Around the world, two-thirds of the median is often considered the poverty wage level, and in some countries very few full-time workers fall below that level.

In North Carolina, 24 percent of U.S.-born workers and 34 percent of immigrant workers make under two-thirds of the median wage. The immigrants who make up a disproportionate share of this group face numerous barriers in the labor market, from language to educational attainment, recognition of credentials, immigration status, or discrimination in the workplace.

Fig. 1 Immigration Research Initiative analysis of 2021 American Community Survey 5-year data, looking at annual earnings for full-time, year-round workers. “Low wage” is people earning under 2/3 of the median—that is, under \$31,000; “middle wage” is from 2/3 to double the median, \$31,000 to \$93,000, and “upper wage” is earning above \$93,000.

North Carolina workers by wage category

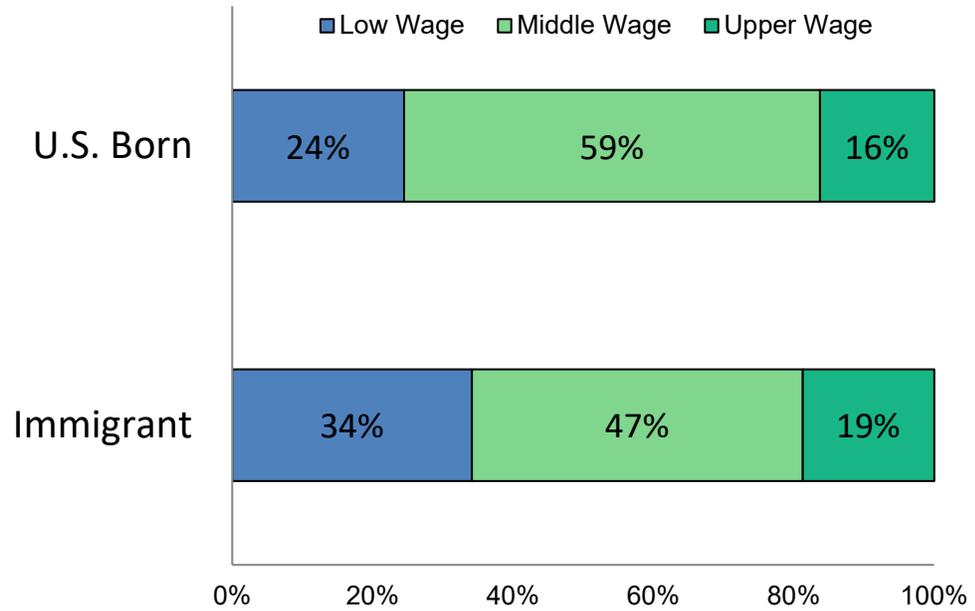


FIGURE 1: IRI ANALYSIS OF 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR DATA, LOOKING AT ANNUAL EARNINGS FOR FULL-TIME, YEAR-ROUND WORKERS. "LOW WAGE" IS UNDER \$31,000; "MIDDLE WAGE" IS FROM \$31,000 TO \$93,000; "UPPER WAGE" IS OVER \$93,000.

2. Race and Gender Are a Big Factor in Economic Outcomes

Immigrants and U.S.-born North Carolina residents work in jobs across the economic spectrum, and so do people in all race and gender groups. However, workers are not spread evenly.

Figure 1 shows that race and gender⁵ are significant factors in determining economic outcomes. White men, both U.S.-born (77 percent) and immigrants (82 percent), as well as Asian and Pacific Islander immigrant men (78 percent) are the most likely to earn middle and upper wages. U.S.-born Black workers are far less likely to earn a decent wage for full-time work. The same is true for foreign-born Black women, though not as much for foreign-born Black men.

Hispanic/Latinx⁶ immigrants are the group that faces the greatest hardship. The number of Latinx immigrants making low wages highlights the economic struggles of a group of Americans who are often the target of hateful anti-immigrant rhetoric, actions of the U.S. deportation regime, and workplace abuses, as well as barriers they may face due to level of formal education or English language ability. Just 46 percent of Latinx men and a strikingly low 32 percent of Latinx women born outside the United States make more than the low-wage threshold of \$31,000.

Latinx Americans who are U.S. citizens by birth have a similar degree of middle- to upper-wage earnings as U.S.-born Black Americans — far below that of white and Asian workers, but higher than foreign-born Latinx workers. Among U.S.-born Latinx men, 54 percent make more than \$31,000 per year, as do 53 percent of women.

Share of N.C. Workers in Middle- and Upper-Wage Jobs Combined

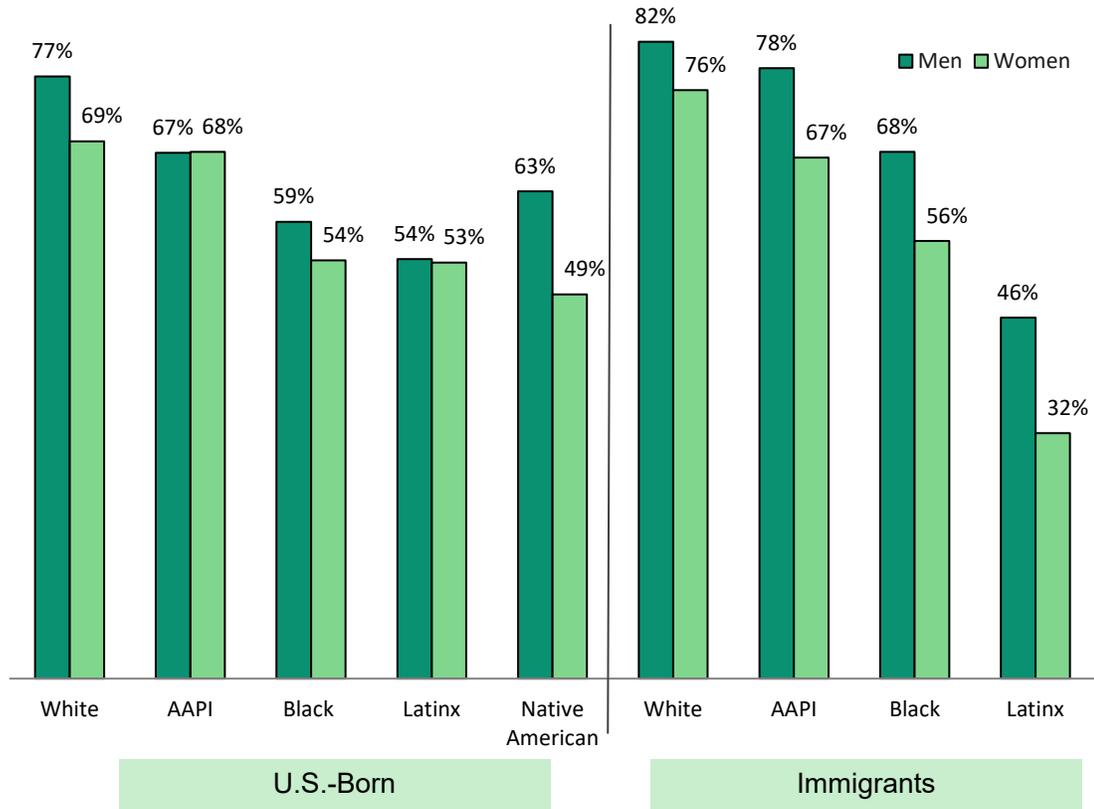


FIGURE 2: IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR DATA. FULL-TIME WORKERS IN NORTH CAROLINA EARNING OVER \$31,000, THAT IS: MORE THAN 2/3 OF THE MEDIAN FOR FULL-TIME WORKERS.

Among Asian American and Pacific Islanders, a nearly equal share of U.S.-born women (68 percent) and men (67 percent) earn middle- and upper-wages. Seventy-eight percent of immigrant AAPI men are in these categories, as are 67 percent of immigrant AAPI women.

Also notable is the gap in earnings between white men and white women. Whether U.S.-born or immigrants, the share of workers making middle- or upper-wages is more than 6 percentage points higher for men in both cases. This gendered gap in wages is even greater among immigrant Latinx men and women (15 percentage points), immigrant Asian and Pacific Islander men and women (11 percentage points), immigrant Black men and women (11 percentage points), and U.S.-born Native Americans (13 percentage points).

The Divisions Are Starkest in Upper-Wage Occupations

Figure 1 looks at all workers who earned at least \$31,000 — combining the middle- and upper-wage categories. Figure 2 zooms in to look just at those North Carolina workers in the upper-wage range: people who earned at least \$93,240 between 2016 and 2021.

The economic disparities in the share of people earning upper-wage incomes are even starker. White and AAPI men stand out most significantly, particularly those who are immigrants. Among U.S.-born workers, about one-fifth of white (20 percent) and AAPI (23 percent) men make more than \$93,000. Among

immigrants, the rates are even higher, with 36 percent of foreign-born white men and 38 percent of foreign-born AAPI men earning upper wages. No other groups in our analysis approach this level of concentration in upper-wage jobs.

Upper-wage earners in North Carolina: Those making over \$104,000

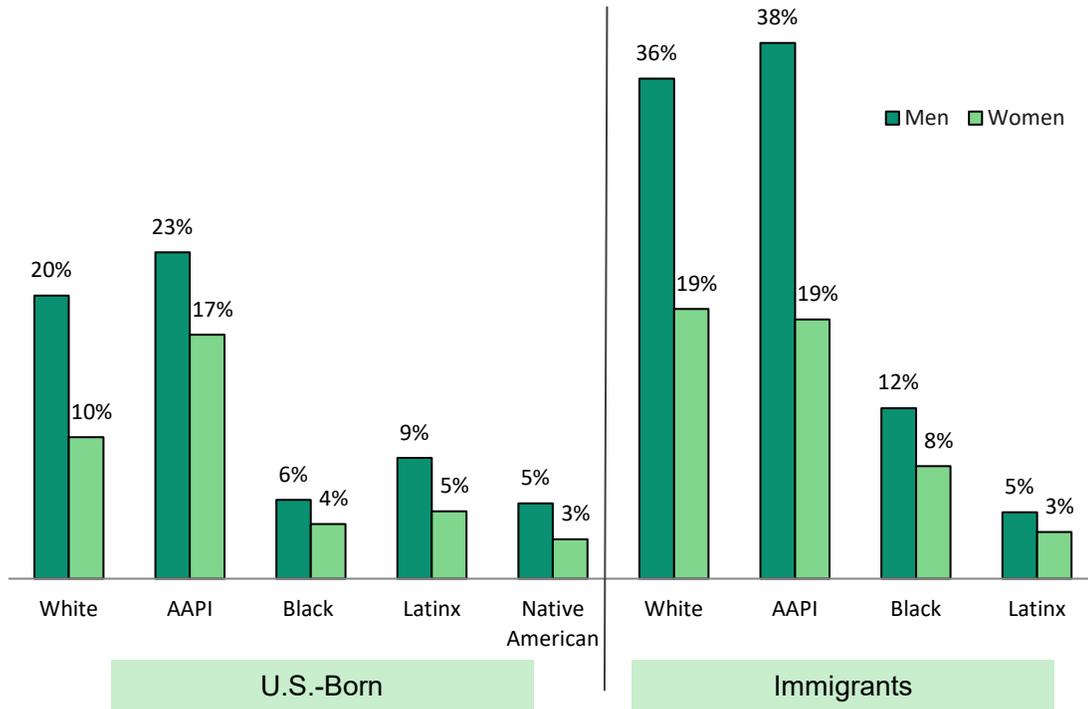


FIGURE 3: IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR DATA. FULL-TIME WORKERS EARNING OVER \$93,000, THAT IS: MORE THAN DOUBLE THE NATIONAL MEDIAN FOR FULL-TIME WORKERS.

Foreign-born white and AAPI women come closest to this level of concentration in the upper-wage category at 19 percent, followed by U.S.-born AAPI women (17 percent) and immigrant Black men (12 percent). 10 percent or less of workers in all other groups earn high wages, including 4 percent of U.S.-born Black women, 3 percent of U.S.-born Native American women, and 3 percent of immigrant Latinx women who are at the intersection of racial and gender bias, and have the worst economic outcomes overall on in the American economy.

Black and Latinx Workers Trapped in Low-Wages Jobs

Working full time and earning under \$31,000 per year leaves many workers in every demographic group struggling to make ends meet. There are, however, clear race, gender, and immigration components that contribute to who is mostly likely to be in these low-wage jobs in North Carolina.

Foreign-born white men (18 percent) are the least likely to be trapped in low-wage work. Among white people in North Carolina, whether immigrants or U.S.-born, the share in middle-wage jobs is similar across gender and nativity, ranging from 46 percent for white immigrant men to 59 percent for white U.S.-born

women. The significant difference among white Americans is that far fewer white women earn upper wages, while more earn low wages.

The economic disparities in favor of white men are even more drastic when we consider race as a variable. The percentage of men of color who earn less than \$31,000 annually in North Carolina is much closer to that of immigrant workers than U.S.-born workers. For example, 41 percent of U.S.-born Black men earn low wages, as do 46 percent of U.S.-born Latinx men. About 6 percent of U.S.-born Black men in the United States make more than \$93,000 along with 9 percent of U.S.-born Latinx men.

Women of color face even more economic struggles than their male counterparts (Figure 3). Black and Latinx women are all more likely to earn low wages (42 percent each) and less likely to fall into the upper-wage category. Only 4 and 5 percent, respectively, of U.S.-born Black and Latinx women are in upper-wage jobs.

Low-wage workers in N.C: Getting by on under \$35,000 per year

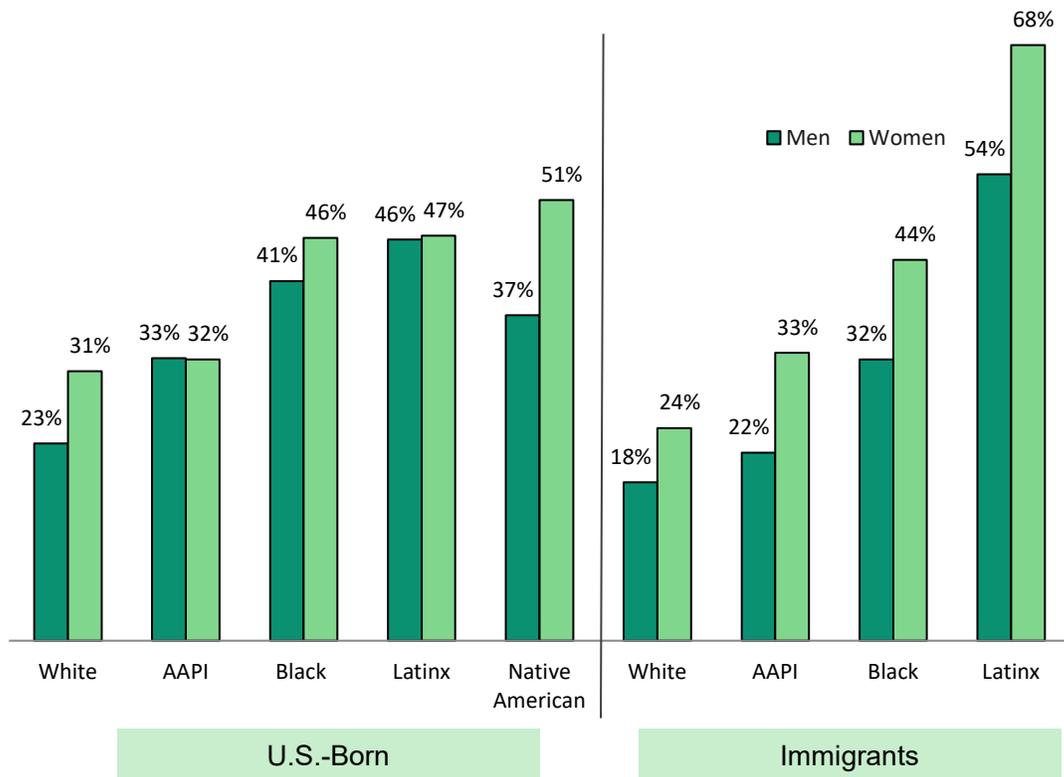


FIGURE 4: IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE ANALYSIS OF 2021 AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY 5-YEAR DATA. FULL-TIME WORKERS EARNING UNDER \$31,000, THAT IS: LESS THAN 2/3 THE MEDIAN FOR FULL-TIME WORKERS.

Overall, most workers in the U.S. are in jobs where they make middle-wages and upper-wages, but there are stark differences among diverse groups. Race, gender, and nativity all stand out as significant factors impacting individuals’ economic outcomes in the United States. U.S.-born Black and Latinx workers, as well as foreign-born Latinx workers, are significantly less likely to earn middle- and upper-wages than other workers. Women are also much less likely than men to make a decent wage — in many cases strikingly so. These findings highlight what many Americans, especially women and Black and Indigenous People of

Color, already know to be true from their own experiences. What is important to note is that the impacts of systemic racism, class inequality, misogyny, and nativism are clearly quantifiable and create very real disparities regarding individuals' ability to succeed in the economy.

3. What Low-, Middle-, and Upper-Wage Occupations Look Like In North Carolina

For this analysis we categorize each *occupation* as either low-, middle-, or upper-wage using the state-level criteria (the previous analysis was based on national wages.) In North Carolina, low-wage is under \$31,000 per year (two-thirds of the median), middle-wage is \$31,000 to \$93,000 (double the median), and upper-wage is above \$93,000.⁷ Occupations are categorized as low-, middle-, or upper-wage based on the median wage for immigrants in that occupation.

Low-Wage Work in North Carolina

Among low-wage occupations, by far the most common for immigrants are in service occupations. Some 7,386 work as janitors and building cleaners, with a median wage of \$24,699, and 7,920 as landscapers, with a median wage of \$27,816. Many others work in restaurants, including 8,220 cooks, with a median wage of \$23,961.

More than 4,136 immigrants work in low-wage occupations in the healthcare industry, including 2,817 who work as nursing assistants with a median wage of \$28,607, 666 personal care workers, and 261 home health care aides.

In all, 53,315 immigrants working full-time, year-round are in low-wage service occupations, as are 268,051 U.S.-born workers. Immigrants make up 17 percent of all low-wage service workers, well higher than immigrants' 11 percent share of the labor force overall.

It is difficult to get precise wage data for undocumented immigrants, but there is little doubt that the large majority work in low-wage jobs, or perhaps slightly above the low-wage threshold. There are an estimated 212,500 workers who are undocumented in the North Carolina labor force, according to estimates from the Center for Migration Studies, with a high percentage of them year-round, full-time workers. At a rough estimate, undocumented immigrants may make up around half of all low-wage workers who are immigrants across the United States. Among North Carolina workers who are undocumented, 35 percent work in construction, maintenance, and related jobs; 25 percent in services jobs; 17 percent in production and transportation, 16 percent in managerial and professional specialty occupations; and 8 percent in technical, sales, and administrative support.

Finding Space in the Middle

Immigrants in middle-wage occupations work in a very wide array of positions: nurses, computer programmers, educators, architects, logistics specialists, emergency services staff, and more.

The single most common occupation of immigrants in this middle-wage category is managers. There are 28,026 immigrants in the state working as managers in a broad range of fields. In fact, 9 percent of all middle-wage managers in North Carolina are immigrants. Some common middle-wage managerial jobs for immigrants in North Carolina include healthcare managers, financial managers, and food service managers.

IRI's Earning Ranges for N.C. Occupations

Immigration Research Initiative used data from American Community Survey's 2021, 5-year data set to establish our earnings range about the median earnings in N.C. of \$46,600.

Occupations where the median wage for immigrants was less than \$31,000 were defined as low wage. When the median wage for immigrants was more than \$93,000, we defined the job as upper wage.

We defined all jobs with a median wage between \$31,000 and \$93,000 as middle wage.

The median wage for immigrants who work as healthcare managers — of which there are 1,484 — is \$87,485, compared to \$50,303 for 4,146 food service managers.

Immigrants also play a vital role at all levels of the healthcare sector. In terms of middle-wage health care occupations, there are 6,153 immigrants working as registered nurses in North Carolina, with a median immigrant wage of \$69,816 making up 8 percent of all workers in that occupation. There are also 4,377 healthcare technicians and assistants, including 1,008 licensed vocational nurses making a median wage of \$33,158, 689 lab technicians with a median of \$42,195, and 854 pharmacy technicians making just \$32,000 as the median wage.

There are several middle-wage transportation occupations as well. More than 6,997 immigrants work as truck drivers for a median wage of \$39,106. Immigrants account for 7 percent of truck drivers in North Carolina. There are 2,274 industrial truck drivers who are immigrants, earning a median wage of \$32,764, making up 11 percent of all industrial truck drivers.

Another 8,364 immigrants in North Carolina work as retail and sales supervisors (7 percent of the total), and 4,980 work as middle-wage salespeople in a range of industries. This includes 1,995 wholesalers with a median wage of \$49,989, 735 real estate brokers who earn a median wage of \$53,882, and 787 insurance sales agents, for whom the median wage is \$54,606.

Additionally, there are 4,152 middle-wage architects and engineers in the North Carolina who were born outside of the U.S. (13 percent of the total), as well as 2,985 production supervisors (11 percent of the total), 1,862 aviation and auto repair workers (9 percent), and 863 electrical installers and repairers (6 percent), and 6,150 people working in middle-wage computer science fields (13 percent). Median wages for immigrants in these jobs range from \$31,415 for bus and truck mechanics to \$92,316 for electrical engineers.

There are 13,290 North Carolina middle-wage educators who are immigrants — including school teachers and college professors — making up 9 percent of all the total. Median wages for educators range from \$44,086 for elementary school teachers to \$76,987 for college professors. Immigrants are a disproportionately high share (18 percent) of college professors.

There are also 1,956 artistic designers (9 percent of the total), 1,912 community and social service staff (5 percent), and 1,776 clergy members and religious workers (8 percent). Median wages here are from \$48,769 for clergy to \$77,455 for commercial and industrial designers.

While many immigrants who work in construction are in low-wage jobs as construction laborers, there are also significant numbers in middle-wage construction jobs in the trades, in specialized jobs, or as supervisors. There are 11,418 carpenters who are immigrants, making up 38 percent of all carpenters, with a median wage of \$32,211, along with 2,666 electricians (12 percent with a median wage of \$40,448), and 2,304 plumbers (18 percent with a median wage of \$37,723). With immigrants playing a significant role in many construction jobs, U.S.-born construction workers — often with more established networks, experience on the job, and English-language skills — have been more likely to be construction supervisors. There are 2,631

immigrants in North Carolina who are construction supervisors, making up 13 percent of the total, and earning a median wage of \$43,847.

Immigrants in Upper-Wage Jobs

In North Carolina, upper-wage occupations are those with a median income of \$93,000 or higher, double the overall median wage for full-time workers.

Of the 60,434 immigrants working upper-wage occupations in North Carolina, 23,880 (40 percent) work in computer and science occupations. In fact, immigrants make up 22 percent of all upper-wage computer jobs, including 2,614 computer programmers (24 percent) earning a median annual wage of \$99,737, and 13,425 software developers (34 percent of the total) with a median wage of \$105,857. There are also 323 aerospace engineers (21 percent) for whom the median is \$113,108 and 1,471 industrial engineers (17 percent) with a median wage of \$95,189.

There are also a significant number of immigrants in high-wage healthcare professions, most often as physicians. Immigrants are, in fact, disproportionately likely to be doctors: 17 percent of the physicians in North Carolina are immigrants, contributing to the overall well-being of everyone in the state. The 3,678 immigrants working as physicians go along with 874 pharmacists, 457 dentists, and 265 nurse practitioners. The median wage for immigrants working as physicians is \$231,710 compared to \$117,000 for pharmacists, \$145,185 for dentists, and \$112,715 for nurse practitioners.

Another 21,466 foreign-born Americans work in upper-wage occupations in management, business, and finance. That includes 3,664 chief executives and legislators, accounting for 10 percent of workers in that job category. Hundreds more immigrants work upper-wage jobs as financial sales agents.

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Notes

¹ All data in this report are Immigration Research Initiative analysis based on the 2021 American Community Survey 5-year data. Immigrants here are defined as people born in another country and living in the United States, whatever their immigration status. “Immigrants” includes refugees, asylees, people with green cards, naturalized citizens, people with temporary visas, and immigrants who are undocumented.

² We measure economic output as the immigrant share of total earnings, on the assumption that people are paid in proportion to their economic contribution. In the case of immigrants, and indeed for most workers, this is a conservative estimate since workers are often paid less than a fair share of economic output. Bureau of Economic Analysis shows [North Carolina State GDP to be \\$542 billion in 2021](#).

³ Estimate from the [Center for Migration Studies](#).

⁴ These wage brackets are based on full-time (at least 35 hours/week), year-round (at least 50 weeks/year) wage and salary earnings, or farm or business income. The threshold for middle-earners is extrapolated from the common practice of defining middle class as between two-thirds and twice the median household or family income. See, for instance, the middle-class calculator of the [Pew Research Center](#). To get a better picture of individual workers, IRI looks at a worker’s earnings rather than household or family income.

⁵ While IRI recognizes that gender is not binary and that not all Americans are either men or women, the American Community Survey and U.S. Census Bureau only account for two genders.

⁶ In this analysis, white refers to non-Hispanic white, Black to non-Hispanic Black, Asian to non-Hispanic Asian American and Pacific Islanders—sometimes shortened to AAPI or to “Asian,” and Hispanic or Latinx refers to people of any race who respond to the Census Bureau that they of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

⁷ Note that this analysis considers the median wage for each occupation and then looks at which workers are in these occupations. This correlates closely with, but is not exactly the same as, looking at the median wages for groups of workers.