



New York City's Uneven Recovery: Foreign-Born in the Workforce

Highlights

- In 2023, nearly 61 percent (1.8 million) of the City's 3 million foreign-born working-age population was in the labor force, excluding those with jobs in the informal economy.
- More than half (59 percent) of the 1.8 million foreign-born workers citywide in 2023 were classified as U.S. citizens by naturalization and the remainder were classified as noncitizens. Nationally, 49 percent were classified as U.S. citizens.
- In 2023, foreign-born citizens in the City were the only group to see their unemployment rate fall below the 2019 level, whereas noncitizens experienced a twofold increase to 7.1 percent.
- A disproportionate number of deportations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and changes to temporary protected status beginning in 2017, followed by the pandemic, led to slower immigrant labor force growth citywide than nationally.
- Some native-born workers aged 55 and over left the labor force as they amassed greater wealth during the pandemic than their foreign-born counterparts, who are still employed or looking for work.
- The foreign-born labor force in the City is concentrated in sectors that pay less than the total private sector, such as health care and social assistance and accommodation and food services.
- In New York City, foreign-born workers made up nearly 49 percent of the self-employed population whereas nationally, they made up only 23 percent in 2023.

The foreign-born or immigrant population has long been a critical contributor to New York City's economic growth, both as part of the workforce and as a source of entrepreneurialism, enhancing the productivity of existing businesses and creating jobs by forming new businesses. In 2023, New York City's 1.8 million foreign-born workers aged 16 years and older made up 44.3 percent of the total labor force, more than double the share nationally at 18.6 percent. The City's foreign-born workers contributed \$383 billion to the real gross City product based on the latest available data in 2022.¹

Immigrants' contributions to economic growth have continued despite changes to federal immigration policy that began in 2017. Shifting economic conditions and more restrictions prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a sustained decline in the immigrant population through 2021. Between a peak in 2015 and the trough in 2021, the number of foreign-born workers citywide fell by almost 12 percent and was still 0.6 percent lower by 2023. Nationally, foreign-born workers declined by a relatively small percentage in 2020, but otherwise grew robustly, by 18.5 percent, between 2015 and 2023.

Self-employment is also prevalent among foreign-born workers, who make up a meaningful share of all self-employed New Yorkers. As the local foreign-born worker population continues to regain its size and workforce participation, the City must carefully monitor key demographic and economic data to understand and address the barriers that segments of this group face in continuing to contribute to and power the economy. However, a strong local recovery will ultimately depend on the federal government's ability to pass meaningful immigration reform.

Foreign-Born Workforce Recovers After Decline Due to Federal Policy

Foreign-born workers historically experienced greater labor force participation rates (those working or actively seeking work as a share of the working age population) than native-born workers, both in the City and nationally.² However, restrictive federal immigration policy before and during the COVID-19 pandemic reduced the number of immigrant workers more significantly in the City than in the nation, affecting workforce participation differently (see Figure 1).³

Foreign-born workers were hit hard by the pandemic, facing a 13.6 percent unemployment rate in 2020 (see Figure 2). The pandemic impacted certain face-to-face industry sectors more than those that could operate remotely, having an outsized effect on foreign-born workers who tend to work in those industries in greater numbers.

Among foreign-born workers, noncitizens, meaning those who are not naturalized American citizens, have yet to fully recover their 2019

FIGURE 2
Unemployment Rates for Native-Born and Foreign-Born Workers in New York City

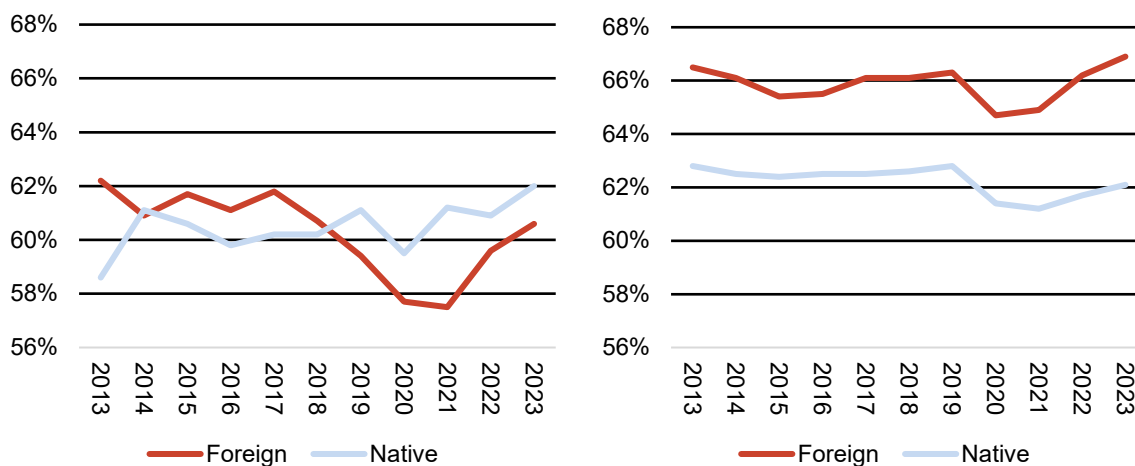
	Native	Foreign		
		All	Naturalized citizens	Non citizens
2019	4.6%	3.3%	3.2%	3.5%
2020	11.7%	13.6%	13.8%	13.4%
2023	6.0%	4.6%	2.8%	7.1%
2019 to 2023	1.4	1.3	-0.4	3.6

Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force. 2019 to 2023 refers to difference in percentage points and may be subject to rounding.
Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

unemployment rate (see call-out box on next page for more details on this population).⁴

The varied recovery by geography may have to do with the birthplace of immigrants residing there. In 2015, the largest share of immigrants to the City came from Asia at 29 percent, while the largest share to the U.S. overall came from

FIGURE 1
Labor Force Participation by Nativity Status in New York City (left) and United States (right)



Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force.
Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

Who Are Noncitizens?

More than half (59 percent) of the 1.8 million foreign-born workers citywide in 2023 were classified as U.S. citizens by naturalization. The remaining 41 percent were classified as noncitizens, defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as lawful permanent residents and temporary, humanitarian or unauthorized migrants. Noncitizens may also be undocumented. Nationally, the split was more equal at 49 percent classified as U.S. citizens and 51 percent classified as noncitizens.

It is unclear what effect the influx of asylum seekers to the City since April 2022 has had on the labor force due to difficulties in capturing reliable data on this population.¹ However, compared to citizens and those with clear legal status, this group faces substantially different barriers to entering the workforce including limited visas, lack of recognition of foreign credentials and limited English proficiency.

Mexico at almost 30 percent. By 2023, immigrants from Asia comprised the largest share in both the City and the U.S. overall (see Figure 3).

Visa Issuances Declined Even Before Pandemic

The City may have been particularly impacted by discussions around, and the implementation of, federal immigration policy in 2014. Senate leaders passed a bill tying a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people to border security as House leaders proposed a series of bills to exclude that pathway, ultimately leading to the failure of federal immigration reform.⁵ In 2017, additional actions later sought not only to prevent certain new immigrants from entering the nation but also revoke legal protections for some naturalized citizens already residing here.⁶

Total visa issuances for temporary and permanent stays declined by 19 percent to about 9.2 million nationally between 2015, when visas peaked, and 2019. Temporary visas made up the

FIGURE 3
Foreign-Born Workers by Birthplace and Geography
Number in thousands

Birthplace	New York City			United States		
	Number, 2015	Number, 2023	Percent Change, 2015 to 2023	Number, 2015	Number, 2023	Percent Change, 2015 to 2023
Other	31.0	15.9	-48.7%	563.8	620.6	10.1%
Central America	66.6	66.7	0.1%	2,291.5	3,061.5	33.6%
Africa	83.6	102.8	23.0%	1,347.5	2,050.6	52.2%
Mexico	105.7	109.8	3.9%	7,857.0	7,840.7	-0.2%
Europe	204.9	213.8	4.3%	2,141.5	2,142.3	0.0%
South America	280.8	275.6	-1.9%	1,887.3	2,992.1	58.5%
Caribbean	525.3	468.4	-10.8%	2,599.5	3,185.9	22.6%
Asia	528.9	563.5	6.5%	7,608.9	9,281.5	22.0%
Total	1,826.9	1,816.4	-0.6%	26,297.2	31,175.2	18.5%

Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force. Other region combines Australia and Canada.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

FIGURE 4**Top 10 Temporary Visa Categories by Issuance in United States**

Category	Number of Visas in 1,000s			Percent Change	
	2015	2019	2020	2015 to 2019	2019 to 2020
Temporary visitor for business	7,199.8	5,297.4	2,164.0	-26.4%	-59.1%
Combination B1/B2 and Border Crossing Card	1,166.7	1,043.0	625.7	-10.6%	-40.0%
Other	698.5	751.8	384.2	7.6%	-48.9%
Student (academic or language training program)	644.2	364.2	111.4	-43.5%	-69.4%
Exchange visitor	332.5	353.3	108.5	6.2%	-69.3%
Combination transit/crew member	280.7	285.5	161.1	1.7%	-43.6%
Temporary worker of distinguished merit and ability	172.7	188.1	125.0	8.9%	-33.6%
Spouse or child of H1B/B1/C, H2A/B, or H3	124.5	126.0	66.3	1.2%	-47.4%
Temporary worker performing agricultural services	108.1	204.8	213.4	89.4%	4.2%
Other foreign government official or employee	100.6	99.1	48.4	-1.4%	-51.2%
Temporary visitor for pleasure	63.4	28.8	5.3	-54.5%	-81.7%
Total	10,891.7	8,742.1	4,013.2	-19.7%	-54.1%

Sources: U.S. Department of State – Bureau of Consumer Affairs; OSC analysis

lion's share at 95 percent in 2015 and fell in number by about 20 percent by 2019. Student visas fell significantly during this period as well. Locally, institutions where international students make up sizable parts of the student population may have been particularly impacted. Such local universities, which rely on tuition and fees from international students, and the local and national economies, to which these students provide billions of dollars in productivity and spending, were also affected.⁷ Contrasting to visas to students, visas to workers performing agricultural services continued to grow as employers aimed to fill critical jobs turned down by domestic workers (see Figure 4).⁸

Permanent visas saw a decline of 13 percent prior to the pandemic between 2015 and 2019. Wide measures were taken during this time to limit new immigrants and revoke legal protections for existing immigrants. However, some policies were more successful than others. In fact,

between 2017 and 2019, employer-sponsored visa issuances actually grew by almost 20 percent to about 29,000. Most of these visas were issued to priority workers excelling in the fields of science, art, education and business; professionals holding advanced degrees; and skilled workers.

Changes to temporary protected status (TPS) during this period likely played a role in the slow labor force recovery citywide. TPS allows migrants from countries that are considered unsafe due to war or natural disaster to live and work in the U.S. on a temporary basis. Beginning late 2017, the federal government terminated TPS for El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Sudan, Nepal and Honduras.⁹ These decisions were especially impactful in New York State and New York City, where many TPS holders from El Salvador, Honduras and Haiti live.¹⁰

In addition to implementing policies to restrict immigration to the U.S., the federal government

sought to remove existing foreign-born residents, which affected those in the City disproportionately. While the Trump presidency began in federal fiscal year (FFY) 2017, the threat of deportation may have preceded actual removals, especially in New York City.¹¹ Between FFY 2016 and 2019, deportations by Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers increased by over 165 percent to nearly 2,800 removals in the City compared to only 11 percent nationwide.¹² Following the onset of the pandemic, deportations declined significantly and remained low in the City in FFY 2023. However, deportations have increased nationally and threaten to destabilize the immigrant workforce locally especially with uncertainty related to the presidential election.

Older Foreign-Born Workers Face Different Pandemic Recoveries From Native-Born

Young foreign-born workers experienced the highest unemployment rate among all foreign-born workers in 2023 at 15.4 percent and have yet to fully recover from the pandemic, similar to native-born workers (see Figure 5).¹³ However, older foreign-born workers encountered different

recoveries from their counterparts. While unemployment for all workers aged 25 to 54 has yet to fully recover, foreign-born workers in that age group saw a larger gap of 1.7 percentage points than native-born workers of the same age.

Interestingly, close-to-retirement and retirement-age foreign-born workers more than recovered, while their native-born counterparts continue to face high unemployment. One reason for this difference may have to do with the industry of employment. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of foreign-born workers aged 55 and over in the manufacturing industry in the City more than doubled to about 25,100 as their native counterparts declined in size by half to about 4,400. While the manufacturing labor force aged 55 and over increased in 2020 and 2021 amid the pandemic-led spike in demand for goods, the paths of foreign- and native-born workers in the industry deviated. In fact, native-born workers in other industries such as information, other services and wholesale and retail trade also saw declines in 2022 and 2023 following growth the prior two years.

This apparent shift among older native-born workers could be due, in part, to an accumulation of sufficient wealth during the pandemic that enabled them to leave the workforce. Between 2021 and 2022, total personal income for the native-born population aged 55 and over grew by almost 15 percent to \$78.1 billion compared to only 5 percent to \$46.4 billion for the foreign-born population.¹⁴ While the financial markets rebounded quickly from the pandemic and the securities industry generated record profits, wealth has not been distributed equally, widening a nativity wealth gap that was present even before the pandemic. The securities industry employs a smaller share of immigrants than the total workforce citywide.¹⁵

FIGURE 5
Foreign-born Unemployment Rates by Age Group in New York City

	16-24	25-54	55-64	65+
Foreign				
2019	10.2%	2.8%	4.2%	5.4%
2023	15.4%	4.5%	3.4%	4.9%
Difference, 2019 to 2023	5.2	1.7	-0.8	-0.5
Native				
2019	10.3%	4.0%	3.4%	2.8%
2023	15.9%	4.7%	5.6%	7.0%
Difference, 2019 to 2023	5.6	0.7	2.2	4.2

Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force. Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

FIGURE 6

Foreign-Born Labor Force and Share of Total Labor Force by Industry and Geography, 2023
 Labor Force in thousands

Industry	New York City		United States	
	Foreign-Born Labor Force	Foreign-Born Share of Total Labor Force	Foreign-Born Labor Force	Foreign-Born Share of Total Labor Force
Natural Resources and Mining	0.5	7.2%	595.0	20.0%
Information	21.4	20.6%	473.3	15.4%
Manufacturing	68.9	54.7%	3,180.1	19.8%
Public administration	69.4	42.0%	814.8	10.0%
Other services	111.4	59.9%	1,797.7	22.8%
Financial activities	117.6	31.8%	1,676.5	14.8%
Construction	159.3	69.5%	3,648.5	29.2%
Wholesale and retail trade	166.6	43.6%	3,262.8	15.7%
Transportation and utilities	171.4	65.3%	2,192.5	21.1%
Leisure and hospitality	194.8	43.1%	3,140.7	20.6%
Professional and business services	241.5	35.5%	4,747.4	22.0%
Educational and health services	488.1	43.6%	5,546.8	14.8%
Total	1,810.9	44.4%	31,076.0	18.6%

Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

Foreign-Born Labor Force Concentrated in Lower-Paying and Slower-to-Recover Sectors

In New York City, some industries employ foreign-born workers in greater numbers than native-born workers, whereas nationwide, it is the opposite. In 2023, foreign-born workers in the City made up almost 70 percent of all workers in the construction industry, followed by 65 percent in the transportation and utilities industry compared to much smaller shares nationwide (see Figure 6).

Over the last decade, the City’s foreign-born labor force has concentrated in fewer industries than nationally (see Figure 7). While educational and health services are the most popular industries for foreign-born workers, the share was much larger citywide at 27 percent than nationally at 17.8 percent in 2023. This difference aligns somewhat with total industry trends, as the educational and health services industry made up a larger share of the private sector in the City at 27 percent compared to 22 percent nationwide.

Large shares of the local foreign-born labor force also work in the professional and business services, leisure and hospitality and wholesale and retail trade sectors. In addition to these, the national foreign-born labor force is also concentrated in the construction and manufacturing sectors.

Among the sectors mentioned above, the health services sector faced relatively few pandemic job losses to begin with and has added home health aides and licensed practical nurses.¹⁶ Women, especially women of color, make up a larger share of jobs in this sector than men and have been shown to have a slower unemployment recovery citywide than nationally.¹⁷ However, the other sectors took longer to recover, are still recovering or saw job losses again in 2023 (see [OSC’s dashboard](#) for up-to-date key statistics by industry sector).¹⁸

FIGURE 7

Total Labor Force and Industry Share of Total Labor Force by Industry and Geography, 2023

Total labor force in thousands

Industry	New York City		United States	
	Total Labor Force	Industry Share of Total Labor Force	Total Labor Force	Industry Share of Total Labor Force
Natural Resources and Mining	7.1	0.2%	2,981.1	1.8%
Information	103.7	2.5%	3,080.5	1.8%
Manufacturing	126.0	3.1%	16,085.1	9.6%
Public administration	165.1	4.0%	8,128.5	4.9%
Other services	186.2	4.6%	7,873.3	4.7%
Construction	229.2	5.6%	12,504.3	7.5%
Transportation and utilities	262.3	6.4%	10,374.2	6.2%
Financial activities	369.6	9.1%	11,290.3	6.7%
Wholesale and retail trade	381.8	9.4%	20,784.0	12.4%
Leisure and hospitality	452.2	11.1%	15,243.5	9.1%
Professional and business services	681.1	16.7%	21,588.6	12.9%
Educational and health services	1,118.6	27.4%	37,396.2	22.3%
Total	4,083.0	100%	167,329.6	100%

Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

The sectors where the foreign-born labor force is concentrated tend to pay significantly less than the total private sector. For example, average wages for the health care and social assistance and accommodation and food services industries in 2022 were \$57,709 and \$44,144, respectively. This compared to \$116,753 for the total private sector.¹⁹

Self-Employment Among Foreign-Born Workers Nears That for Native-Born in 2023

Self-employment is one option for foreign-born workers facing challenges navigating the workforce in a new nation and working in lower-paying sectors. One study found these new entrepreneurs often create companies of all sizes and generate jobs as opposed to taking jobs from native-born workers.²⁰

The self-employment trend citywide has paralleled that nationally. Prior to the pandemic in

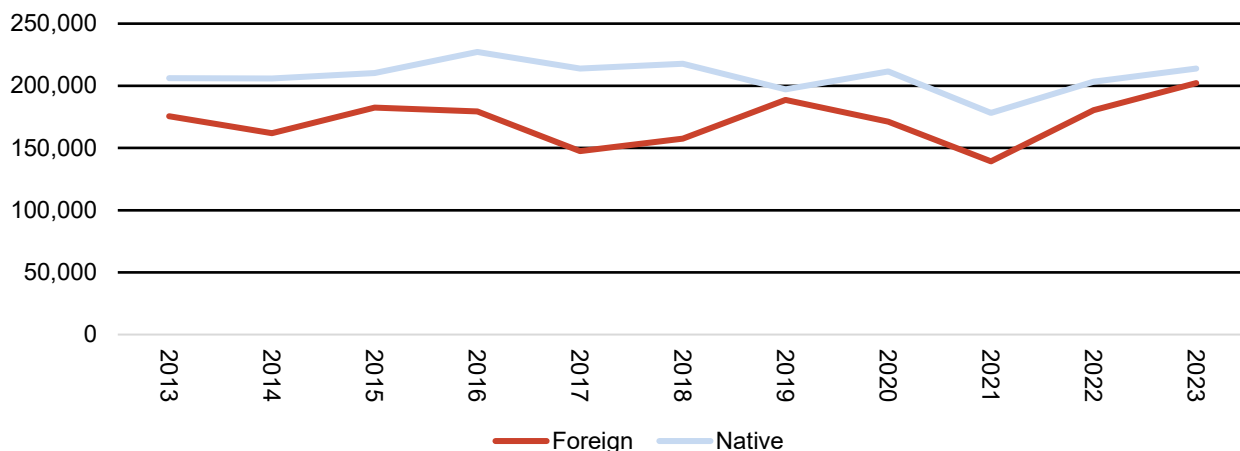
2019, the percentage of self-employed workers in the City (9.5 percent) was below the national share of 9.8 percent.²¹ In 2023, the citywide share of self-employment (10.2 percent) surpassed the national share (10.1 percent) as the share of immigrants in private employment fell amid a still-recovering local economy.

The dynamics of self-employment by nativity status are very different geographically, closely reflecting the share of immigrants in the overall workforce. In New York City, foreign-born workers made up nearly 49 percent of the self-employed population whereas nationally, they made up only 23 percent in 2023.

Over the course of the pandemic, the foreign-born level of self-employment rose significantly to nearly match the native-born level (see Figure 8). Between 2020 and 2023, self-employment among foreign-born workers increased 18.1 percent while that for native-born workers rose by only 1

FIGURE 8

Level of Self-Employment in New York City by Nativity Status



Note: Analysis covers working-age residents in the labor force.
Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey; OSC analysis

percent. The overall increase of the self-employed population is consistent with findings that business formation boomed during the pandemic, particularly in the retail trade sector amid the rise of e-commerce, and the technology sector amid remote work.²²

Among those self-employed, nearly 69 percent of foreign-born workers citywide were unincorporated, meaning they worked for themselves in other legal but less formal enterprises (i.e., gig workers), than those who were incorporated (i.e., those who incorporated their businesses for reasons including tax benefits and opportunities for external funding). Nationally, a smaller share of foreign-born workers were unincorporated at 62.3 percent.

Outlook

The foreign-born workforce has had a tremendous influence on the economic prosperity of New York City, the nation’s most ethnically diverse metropolis. While the foreign-born labor force participation rate declined significantly amid changes to federal immigration policy prior to and during the pandemic, it has since surpassed its pre-pandemic level and is inching closer to the native-born rate.

Within the foreign-born labor force, young workers actively seeking work continue to struggle with double-digit unemployment at over 15 percent, similar to young workers citywide. The City should continue to advertise its enhanced Summer Youth Employment Program, open to residents aged 14 to 24 with work authorization. While not as high, foreign-born workers aged 25 to 54 also face elevated unemployment, which is concerning given historically low unemployment rates among this group. Older foreign-born workers, aged 55 and over, have fully recovered their pre-pandemic unemployment rates but saw a smaller increase in total personal income during the pandemic than their native counterparts, suggesting they may not have the same flexibility to leave the workforce.

As the effects of the pandemic have begun to recede, the influx of asylum seekers has placed additional challenges on the full employment potential of foreign-born workers. The State Department of Labor has identified nearly 40,000 job openings with over 1,000 employers who are willing to hire asylum seekers with legal work status in the U.S. However, it does not keep track of who is hired or for which industries, making it

difficult to understand the effectiveness of the initiative. The State is also offering additional services for entry-level public sector roles geared toward those who have legal work status in the U.S. but may face barriers to finding jobs such as language skills or prior experience.

While a portion of the foreign-born population in the City has faced challenges in the traditional workforce, it has embraced entrepreneurialism, creating job opportunities for New Yorkers. Immigrants in New York City are self-employed at a greater rate than nationwide, and greater than their share of the citywide labor force. Still, the road to business ownership is not without hurdles including language and literacy barriers, technological challenges, limited financial literacy and navigating the City's regulatory environment. Government entities should review and assess the effectiveness of existing State and City programs that aim to overcome these barriers considering the changing demographics of the foreign-born working population.

Together with the Department of Youth and Community Development, the Department for the Aging, the Department of Small Business Services and the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, the City must ensure all New Yorkers receive the resources they need, in the manner they require, to succeed in the workforce. Additionally, the State and City should continue to lobby the federal government to hasten work permits, bolster processing at immigration courts and increase federal aid for asylum seekers. Ultimately, the federal government determines immigration policy and therefore has the most control over the workforce composition at the national and local level.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample. Authors aggregated gross domestic product for each of New York City's five counties and derived foreign-born share based on contribution to total personal income.
- ² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey. The Office of the New York State Comptroller (OSC) analyzed annual data aggregated from monthly files of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' Current Population Survey.
- ³ OSC, *NYC's Shifting Population: The Latest Statistics*, Report 15-2024, December 2023, <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/osdc/pdf/report-15-2024.pdf>.
- ⁴ While the noncitizen unemployment rate remains elevated, it is notable that some portion of this group was unable to access unemployment benefits until the creation of the State's \$2 billion Excluded Workers Fund in 2021, which may have led to different timing in the receipt of benefits and therefore, employment choices.
- ⁵ Carl Hulse, "History of Failure on Border Policy Hangs Over Current Push in Congress," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/01/us/congress-border-immigration-history.html>.
- ⁶ New York City Comptroller, *The Demographics of Detention: Immigration Enforcement in NYC Under Trump*, February 21, 2019, <https://comptroller.nyc.gov/reports/the-demographics-of-detention-immigration-enforcement-in-nyc-under-trump/>.
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- ¹⁰ National Immigration Forum, "Fact Sheet: Temporary Protected Status (TPS)," Updated October 3, 2023, <https://immigrationforum.org/article/fact-sheet-temporary-protected-status/>.
- ¹¹ Liz Robbins, "Economic Tsunami: Fearing Donald Trump, Immigrants in New York Spend Less," *The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/23/nyregion/economic-tsunami-fearing-donald-trump-immigrants-in-new-york-spend-less.html>.
- ¹² Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Enforcement and Removal Operations Statistics.
- ¹³ OSC, *New York City's Uneven Recovery: Youth Labor Force Struggling*, Economic Policy Insights, December 2022, <https://www.osc.ny.gov/reports/osdc/new-york-citys-uneven-recovery-youth-labor-force-struggling>.
- ¹⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, 2021 and 2022 American Community Survey 1-year Public Use Microdata Sample.
- ¹⁵ OSC, *The Securities Industry in New York City*, Report 11-2023, October 2022, <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/osdc/pdf/report-11-2023.pdf> and Thomas K. Bauer, et. al, "A Comparative Analysis of the Nativity Wealth Gap," *Economic Inquiry*, Volume 49, Issue 4, October 2011, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1465-7295.2009.00221.x>.
- ¹⁶ OSC, *NYC Health + Hospitals: Nurse Staffing Trends*, Report 2-2024, May 2023, <https://www.osc.ny.gov/files/reports/osdc/pdf/report-2-2024.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ OSC, *New York City's Uneven Recovery: Mothers in the Workforce*, Economic Policy Insights, May 2023, <https://www.osc.ny.gov/reports/osdc/new-york-citys-uneven-recovery-mothers-workforce>.
- ¹⁸ OSC, New York City Industry Sector Dashboards, March 2022, *Arts, Entertainment and Recreation Sector – New York City Industry Sector Dashboards | Office of the New York State Comptroller (ny.gov)* <https://www.osc.ny.gov/osdc/reports/nyc-sectors/arts-entertainment-and-recreation>.
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