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Immigrants Strengthen Virginia’s Economy and Communities, New Report Shows

RICHMOND, VA -- Immigrants play an important role in Virginia’s economy. Yet these contributions often are minimized and misrepresented by state and federal lawmakers.

Contrary to some current rhetoric, immigrant households in Virginia frequently have high levels of post-secondary education and bring important skills and experiences that benefit a wide range of Virginia communities, according to a new report by The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis. This report seeks to break through the rhetoric and stereotypes by presenting the most current information and analysis on Virginia’s growing and prosperous immigrant population, while also identifying areas where public policy can dismantle barriers facing Virginia’s diverse immigrant community.

“Too many politicians are using scare tactics and divisive rhetoric about immigrants to advance their own agendas,” said Laura Goren, Institute Research Director and co-author of the report. “The truth is that immigrants make our communities and our economy stronger.”

Among the report’s key findings:

- Virginia immigrants are mostly well educated and have high rates of employment, resulting in high household incomes.
  - Almost three-fourths of foreign-born immigrants in Virginia are working or looking for work.
  - Virginia immigrants are far more likely than their peers in other states to work in white-collar jobs such as the professional, scientific, and management industry.
  - Of the top 10 states with the largest immigrant populations, Virginia leads in the share of foreign-born residents with a bachelor’s degree or higher.
  - In 2017, the median income of immigrant-headed households in Virginia was $77,733, compared to $56,743 for immigrant workers in the U.S. as a whole.

- Immigrants are critical to Virginia’s communities and economy.
  - Foreign-born Virginians are 12.5% of the state population and almost 1 in 4 Virginia children live with at least one foreign-born parent.
  - More than half of Virginia’s immigrants are now U.S. citizens.
  - Economically, immigrants are critical to helping keep traditional commercial districts afloat, making up 34% of all Main Street business owners.
Immigrant communities face challenges as well.

○ Despite generally high levels of educational attainment, typical earnings are lower for immigrants than for U.S.-born workers, and many immigrants are working in jobs that don’t fully use their educational training. Addressing this “brain waste” through policy interventions, such as clearer paths for transferring credentials and combating racial bias, could build more prosperous communities for all.

○ While naturalized immigrants in Virginia have comparable health insurance coverage rates to the U.S.-born population, more than 1 in 3 noncitizen residents lack access to health insurance, even worse than in the country as a whole. Dismantling state-imposed barriers to health care access can help make sure everyone can get the preventative health care they need.

○ Housing costs are also a challenge: Almost a third of Virginia’s immigrants pay more than 30% of their incomes towards housing costs -- a rate considered to make a family “housing cost burdened.” Expanding housing production and preserving affordable housing could help both immigrant and U.S.-born Virginians find affordable places to live.

○ Although the majority of immigrants in Virginia speak English “very well,” only half of noncitizen immigrants in the state do. This can pose challenges for navigating job markets and legal systems that public services could help overcome through language courses and focused outreach.

“Moving at the state and local level to break down barriers and better welcome immigrants into Virginia’s communities and economy is the right thing to do for Virginia’s children and future,” says Goren.


Bonus data: City and county-level tables are available showing the number and share of residents who are foreign-born, showing changes between 2000 and 2017 5-year average data.

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