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**Immigrants in the Washington DC Metropolitan  
Area Labor Market**

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**IMMIGRANTS<sup>1</sup> IN THE WASHINGTON DC METROPOLITAN AREA LABOR MARKET**

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**Highlights of the Report**

- **The majority of the foreign-born population in the Washington DC metro area is from Latin America and Asia. However, compared to the national average, the African and Asian-born immigrant communities are highly represented in the region.**

Forty percent of the region's foreign-born population is from Latin America, followed by Asia (36 percent), Africa (14 percent), and Europe (9 percent).

- **About 40 percent of the DC metro area's foreign-born population arrived in the US in the last decade (2000s). The median length of stay in the US for foreign-born individuals living in this region is 13 years.**

However, only three percent of the region's immigrants have arrived directly from abroad within the last year; eight percent relocated into the region from other locations in the US over the last year; and 89 percent have been living in the region since at least one year ago. About 45 percent of the region's immigrants are US citizens by naturalization.

- **Immigrants in the Washington DC metro area tend to have lower levels of education than the native-born population. However, the region has a very high share of college-educated immigrants compared to the rest of the county.**

Of the region's foreign-born population aged 25 years or over, 22 percent has less than a high school diploma (native population: six percent), and 40 percent has a bachelor's degree or higher (native population: 49 percent). About 40 percent of the region's foreign-born population has limited English proficiency.

- **Immigrants are overly represented in the DC metro area's labor force, especially as self-employed and private sector workers.**

In 2010, about 1.2 million of the Washington DC metro area's population is foreign-born, accounting for 21 percent of the region's total population, 26 percent of the working age population, 27 percent of the labor force, and 28 percent of the employed population. About one third of the region's private sector and self-employed workers is foreign-born.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper defines immigrant to be an individual born abroad to non-US citizen parents. The words "immigrant" and "foreign-born" are used interchangeably and include all individuals who meet this definition regardless of immigration status.

- **Immigrant workers are concentrated in different industries than native-born workers.**

The region's foreign-born workforce is overly represented in the Construction and in the Recreation and Hospitality industries, as compared with the native-born population. Foreign-born workers are less likely to work in the Professional and Science and Technology Services, Public Administration, and Educational Services sectors compared to native-born workers.

- **Immigrants' total earnings are lower than that of native workers, on average, but there are considerable differences depending, for example, on the immigrants' place of origin.**

The region's foreign-born population generates a total income of about \$45.4 billion, or 20 percent of the region's total income. It is responsible for \$41.4 billion of earnings, or 21 percent of the region's total earnings. The foreign-born population generates \$1.8 billion of self-employment income, or 23 percent of the region's total self-employment income.

The median annual full-time, year-round earnings of immigrant workers is about \$42,000, below the \$65,000 average for their native-born counterparts. The median household income for households with a foreign-born head is about \$71,700, compared with \$88,000 for the native-born households.

Asian- and European-born immigrant households have median earnings and median incomes similar to that of the native-born. Latin American-born immigrants have median earnings about half of the native-born figure and their median household income is only two-thirds of that for the native-born.

#### **A Note about the Data**

This report uses data from the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS). Because the ACS is a survey based on a sample of the US population, these figures are estimates rather than actual values. Therefore, differences among figures should be read with caution since sampling and non-sampling errors account for a portion of these differences.

## I. Introduction

During the decade 2000-2010, among all US metropolitan areas, the Washington DC metro area experienced the largest percentage point increase in its share of immigration population.<sup>2</sup> More than 1.2 million of the region's 2010 population is foreign-born, accounting for 21 percent of the region's total population, 26 percent of the working age population, 27 percent of the labor force, and 28 percent of the employed population.

Among all immigrants in the metro area, about 45 percent are US citizens by naturalization, and the other 55 percent are non-citizens (including legal permanent residents and temporary residents). The large and growing foreign-born population not only produces a dramatic change in regional demographic and residential location patterns, but it also brings changes in the region's economy.

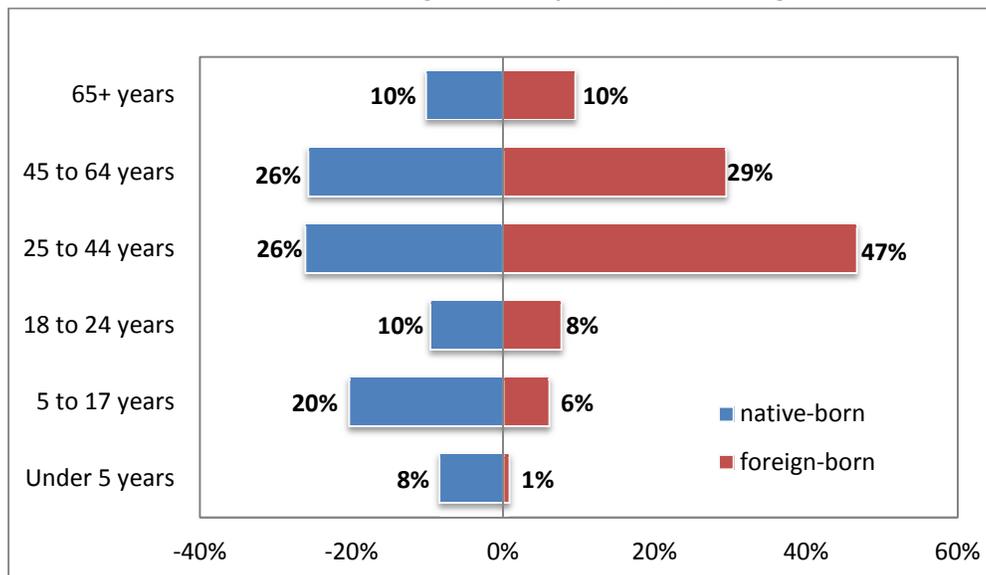
## II. Who are the immigrants?

### A. Basic Demographic Description

The immigrants in the region have a very close sex balance (males: 49 percent; women: 51 percent) compared with the native-born (48 percent and 51 percent, respectively).

The age distribution, however, is very different. As Figure 1 shows, the region's immigrant population is disproportionately concentrated in the age bracket of 25-44 years: 47 percent versus 26 percent for the native-born population.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Age Distribution of Native-born and Foreign-born Populations, Washington DC Metro Area, 2010**



Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

<sup>2</sup> Singer, Audrey, and Jill Wilson. *Immigrants in 2010 Metropolitan America: A Decade of Change*. Brookings Institution, October 13, 2011. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2011/10/13-immigration-wilson-singer>.

Immigrants in the Washington DC area are overly concentrated in the working age brackets 25 to 44 and 45 to 64 years (76 percent of the total foreign-born population) compared with the native born (52 percent). The median age of the foreign-born population in the Washington DC metro area is 41.1 years, very similar to the national foreign-born average of 41.4 years, but older than their regional native-born counterparts (34.7 years).

Part of the region’s age discrepancy between foreign-born and native-born is explained by the fact that many children of immigrants were born in the US and therefore are included in the native-born statistics. In the DC metro area, 30 percent of the native-born children less than 18 years old have at least one foreign-born parent.

Immigrants tend to live in larger households and families than native-born individuals; however, their household and family sizes are smaller than the foreign-born average in the US. The median household and family size of immigrant-headed households and families is 3.2 persons and 3.6 persons, respectively. Both of these figures are larger than the native-born counterparts in this region (2.4 and 3.0, respectively), but smaller than the national immigrants’ medians (3.5 and 3.9 respectively).

*B. Ethnic Composition*

The Latin American-born community accounts for 40 percent of the region’s foreign-born population, followed by the Asian-born (36 percent), the African-born (14 percent), and the European-born (nine percent). Figure 2 shows that compared with the national average, immigrants of African and Asian origin are over-represented in the Washington DC metro area, while immigrants of Latin-American and European origins are under-represented when compared with the national figures.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth, 2010**

<b>Region</b> (Unit: percentage)	<b>US</b>	<b>DC Metro Area</b>
<b>Latin America</b>	53.1	39.9
<b>Asia</b>	28.2	35.8
<b>Europe</b>	12.1	9.2
<b>Africa</b>	4.0	13.6
<b>Other</b>	2.6	1.5
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

*C. Immigration Patterns and Domestic Mobility*

The foreign-born population in the Washington DC metro area is composed of 45 percent naturalization citizens and 55 percent non-citizens. The proportion of naturalized citizens in the region is similar to the national average. The ACS data do not provide more detailed information within the non-citizen group, such as how many non-citizens are legal permanent residents.

About 40 percent of the immigrants in the Washington DC metro area arrived in the US in the last decade (2000s). The median length of stay in the US for a foreign-born individual in this region is 13 years. For a citizen by naturalization, the median length of time between entry and naturalization is nine years.

Although immigration is often associated with international mobility, immigrants’ domestic mobility is seldom considered. Of all immigrants living in the Washington DC metro area, eight percent moved from a different location in the US in the last year, 89 percent have been living in the region since at least one year ago, and only three percent arrived directly from abroad within the last year.

For immigrants who moved into the DC metro area from other locations in the US in the last year, the top eight states where they were living one year ago include the non-DC metro parts of VA and MD, CA, NY, FL, TX, NJ, and WV. These states combined account for 90 percent of the immigrants that relocated into the DC metro area from other locations in the US (see Figure 3). However, 47 percent of these movers relocated from non-DC metro parts of VA and 28 percent from non-DC metro parts of MD.

**FIGURE 3**

**Top Eight US States where Washington DC metro area’s Immigrants Lived One Year Ago**

<b>Rank</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Persons</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>1</b>	Non-Metro VA	45,033	47.3
<b>2</b>	Non-Metro MD	26,518	27.9
<b>3</b>	CA	3,502	3.7
<b>4</b>	NY	3,037	3.2
<b>5</b>	FL	2,247	2.4
<b>6</b>	TX	2,153	2.3
<b>7</b>	NJ	1,808	1.9
<b>8</b>	WV	1,105	1.2
<b>Total of top 8 States</b>		<b>85,403</b>	<b>89.7</b>
<b>Total of All US States</b>		<b>95,180</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, PUMS data

For immigrants who have arrived from abroad in the last year, the top ten foreign countries / regions where they were living one year ago are: South Central Asia, China and Hong Kong, India, Germany, Other Africa (other than Eastern, Northern and Western), El Salvador, South America, Western Asia, Vietnam and Korea. The percentage of individuals arriving directly from each country / region in the last year ranges from 8.9 to 3.7. Therefore, no one country significantly dominates the country of origin for new arrivals (see Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4****Top Ten Foreign Countries /Regions where DC metro area's Immigrants Arriving from Abroad Lived One Year Ago**

Rank	Foreign Country	Persons	Percent
1	South Central Asia	3,444	8.6
2	China, Hong Kong & Paracel Islands	3,300	8.3
3	India	3,177	8.0
4	Germany	3,009	7.6
5	Other Africa	2,895	7.3
6	El Salvador	2,304	5.8
7	South America	1,951	4.9
8	Western Asia	1,861	4.7
9	Vietnam	1,660	4.2
10	Korea	1,460	3.7
<b>Total of top 10 Foreign Countries</b>		<b>25,061</b>	<b>62.9</b>
<b>Total of All Foreign Countries</b>		<b>39,867</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, PUMS data

*D. Educational Attainment and English Proficiency*

Having a well-established knowledge-based economy, the Washington DC metro area attracts highly educated and skilled workers from all over the country and the world. The educational attainment levels of the foreign-born population in this region compares somewhat unfavorably with the region's native population. Noticeably, the foreign-born are much more likely to have less than a high school diploma (22 percent of the foreign-born population compared to six percent of the native-born population). The foreign-born population is less likely to have a high school, college or graduate degree compared to their

**FIGURE 5****Educational Attainment, 2010**

Population 25 years and over (Unit: percentage)	US Population	Metro Native Born	Metro Foreign Born:		
			Total	Naturalized Citizens	Non- Citizens
Less than high school graduate	14.4	6.3	21.8	12.8	30.2
High school graduate or equivalent	28.5	20.3	18.1	16.8	19.3
Some college or associate's degree	28.9	24.7	19.7	23.5	16.1
Bachelor's degree	17.7	25.7	20.8	23.9	17.9
Graduate or professional degree	10.4	23.1	19.6	23.0	16.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

native counterparts in the region (see Figure 5). However, compared to the overall US foreign-born population, immigrants in the Washington DC metro area have higher average years of education, but much greater inequality (with larger proportions in the least and the most educated groups).

Naturalized citizens in the region have a very similar educational attainment distribution compared to the region's native population. Non-citizens are much more likely to have less than a high school degree. About 30 percent of non-citizens in the region have less than high school diploma. The non-citizen group is a highly heterogeneous group, including government representatives, temporary workers (both high and low skilled), foreign students, and unauthorized immigrants.

About 60 percent of the region's foreign-born population over five years old are native English speakers or report speaking English "very-well", while nationally, only 48 percent of the foreign-born population over five years old speak English only or "very-well".

### **III. Immigrants in the Washington Metropolitan Area's Economy**

#### *A. Labor Force Participation*

Immigrants are over represented in the Washington DC metro area's working age population and workforce. While the immigrant population accounts for 21 percent of the region's total population, they account for 26 percent of the working age population, 27 percent of the labor force, and 28 percent of the employed population.

Immigrants in the DC metro area have greater labor force participation rates than the native-born population. The proportion of the working age population<sup>3</sup> in the labor force is 83 percent for the immigrant population and 80 percent for the native-born population. Among the immigrant population, labor force participation rates differ by citizenship status. Naturalized citizens have a labor participation rate of 88 percent, above that for both the overall immigrant population (83 percent) and that for non-naturalized citizens (80 percent).

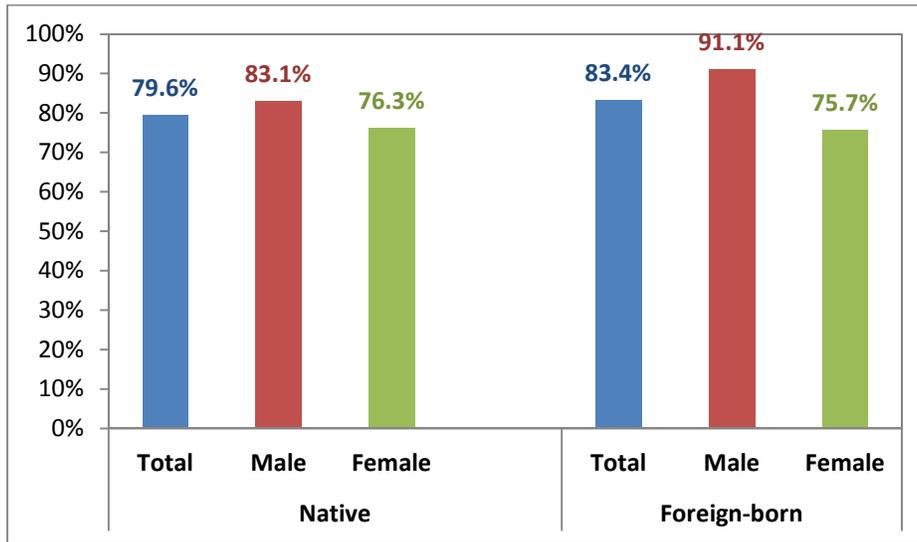
The greater immigrant labor participation rate vis-à-vis the native population holds true for men but not for women (see Figure 6). In the DC metro area, immigrant men have a labor force participation rate of 91 percent, considerably greater than that for native-born men (83 percent); but immigrant women have a labor force participation rate of 76 percent, similar to that for native-born women.

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<sup>3</sup> Population age 16 to 64 years.

**FIGURE 6**

**Labor Force Participation Rate by Gender and Nativity, Washington DC Metro Area, 2010**



Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

**B. Class of Workers**

As Figure 7 shows, immigrant workers are primarily employed in the private-sector (76 percent) or self-employed (nine percent). These two classes of workers account for 85 percent of the immigrant workers but only 71 percent of the native-born workers. Thus, the region’s immigrant workers are less likely to hold government jobs; 29 percent of the native-born workers in the DC metro area work for the government (either at the Federal, State or Local level), whereas only 15 percent of the region’s foreign-born workers do so.

**FIGURE 7**

**Employed Population Aged 16 to 64 years by Class of Workers, Washington DC Metro Area, 2010**

Class of Workers (Unit: percentage)	Native Born	Foreign Born:			Share of Foreign-Born of the Region’s Totals
		Total	Naturalized Citizens	Non-Citizens	
<b>Private Sector</b>	63.4	76.0	68.2	82.4	31.7
<b>Self-Employed<sup>(1)</sup></b>	7.2	9.4	11.7	7.5	33.6
<b>Federal Government</b>	17.9	8.3	11.7	5.5	15.3
<b>State Government</b>	2.7	1.9	2.1	1.6	20.7
<b>Local Government</b>	8.8	4.3	6.0	2.9	16.0
<b>Unpaid Family Workers</b>	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.0	40.7
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	---

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

Note: (1) includes own incorporated and own not incorporated businesses

The concentration of immigrant workers in private sector jobs is particularly striking among non-citizens. About 82 percent of the region’s non-citizens have private sector jobs but this figure is only 68 percent for naturalized citizens. In contrast, naturalized citizens show greater concentrations in self-employment (12 percent versus eight percent for non-citizens) and in Government jobs (20 percent versus 10 percent for non-citizens.)

Immigrant workers account for nearly one-third of the DC metro area’s private sector workers and more than one-third of the region’s self-employed. Among the self-employed immigrants, 56 percent are naturalized citizens and 44 percent are non-citizens. Also, the region’s foreign-born individuals that are US citizens by naturalization are more likely to be self-employed than their native counterparts: 12 percent of the region’s naturalized citizens are self-employed, while this figure is only seven percent their native-born counterparts.

### C. Industry Engagements

In the DC metro area, immigrant workers and native-born workers tend to concentrate in different industries (see Figure 8). Immigrant workers are disproportionately concentrated in the Construction sector (11 percent of total immigrant workers versus five percent of native-born workers) and in the

**FIGURE 8**  
**Employed Population Aged 16 to 64 years by Industry, Washington DC Metro Area, 2010**

Industry (Unit: percentage)	Native- Born	Foreign-Born:		
		Total	Naturalized Citizens	Non- Citizens
<b>Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Mining</b>	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.5
<b>Construction</b>	4.9	10.5	5.0	15.1
<b>Manufacturing</b>	3.5	2.9	2.8	3.0
<b>Wholesale trade</b>	1.4	1.2	1.7	0.8
<b>Retail trade</b>	7.6	8.9	8.7	9.1
<b>Transportation, Warehousing, and Utilities</b>	3.5	3.5	4.7	2.5
<b>Information</b>	3.2	2.4	2.4	2.4
<b>Finance and Insurance</b>	3.6	3.8	4.9	2.8
<b>Real estate, Rental, and Leasing</b>	2.2	1.8	1.9	1.6
<b>Professional and S&amp;T Services</b>	17.0	12.4	16.9	8.6
<b>Management Services</b>	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
<b>Administrative Services</b>	3.5	7.2	3.7	10.1
<b>Educational Services</b>	10.1	5.8	7.0	4.8
<b>Health Care and Social Assistance</b>	9.6	11.6	14.4	9.3
<b>Recreation &amp; Hospitality</b>	7.0	13.2	8.7	16.9
<b>Other Private Services</b>	5.4	7.3	7.1	7.5
<b>Public Administration</b>	17.3	7.2	9.9	5.0
<b>Total</b>	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

Recreation and Hospitality sector (13 percent versus seven percent.)

In contrast, 17 percent of the native-born population works in the Public Administration sector (immigrant workers: seven percent), and another 17 percent work in the Professional and Science and Technology Services sector (immigrant workers: 12 percent). Education Services comes third, accounting for 10 percent of the native-born workers (six percent for immigrant workers).

The immigrant workers’ industry breakdown varies considerably by citizenship status. The major industries for non-citizen workers are close to those for the total immigrant workers group—Construction, Recreation and Hospitality, and Administrative Services. Naturalized citizens work primarily in the Professional and Science and Technology Services, Health Care and Social Assistance, and Public Administration sectors, a set of industries similar to those of native-born workers.

Twelve percent of self-employed immigrants are in the Other Private Services sector,<sup>4</sup> followed by Construction (11 percent), Health Care and Social Assistance (11 percent), and Real Estate, Rental and Leasing (nine percent.)

*D. Income and Earnings*

Though immigrants are more likely to be in labor force than the native born, their income<sup>5</sup> and earnings tend to be lower. Despite accounting for 28 percent of the employed population, the Washington DC metro area’s immigrant population generates only 20 percent of the region’s total income (about \$45.4bn in 2010 dollars) and 21 percent of the region’s total earnings (or \$41.4bn). Although immigrants account for 34 percent of the region’s self-employed, they are responsible for about 23 percent (\$1.8bn) of the region’s self-employment income.

As Figure 9 shows, the median annual full-time, year-round earnings is about \$42,000 among immigrant population living in the DC metro area, below the \$65,000 figure for the region’s native-born population.

**FIGURE 9**

**Median Household Income and Median Earnings for the US and the Washington DC Metro Area, 2010**

Income and Earnings	Metro Native Born	Metro Foreign Born	Metro Foreign Born by Region of Birth:			
			Latin America	Asia	Europe	Other <sup>(2)</sup>
<b>Median Household Income</b>	\$88,000	\$71,700	\$60,000	\$92,000	\$92,500	\$68,000
<b>Median Earnings<sup>(1)</sup></b>	\$65,000	\$42,000	\$30,000	\$60,000	\$70,000	\$45,000

Notes: (1) Full-time, year-round workers; (2) Africa, North America, and Oceania.

Source: US Census Bureau, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

<sup>4</sup> The Other Private Services sector includes activities such as: (1) repair and maintenance (cars, equipment, and appliances); (2) laundry and dry-cleaning; (3) barber shops; (4) personal care services (e.g., beauty salons, nails salons); (5) funeral homes; (6) business and professional organizations; (7) labor unions; and (8) religious organizations.

<sup>5</sup> Income includes earnings and all other sources of income as, for example, interests, dividends and profits, or property income.

Within the immigrant population, median earnings vary considerably depending on the immigrants' world region of birth. The median earnings of Asian- and European-born immigrants are close to the native-born median earnings and about twice as much as the median earnings for the Latin American-born community.

The median household income for the foreign-born population is about \$71,700, also below the \$88,000 median household income for the native-born population. Again, the picture is very different depending on the immigrants' world region of birth. The Asian- and European-born communities have a median household income of about \$92,000, slightly above that of native-born households and about one-third higher than the median household income for the DC metro area's Latin American-born community.

#### **IV. Conclusion and Future Study Directions**

This working paper highlights two major findings regarding the DC metro area's immigrant population. The first finding is that the region's foreign-born population is substantially different from its native-born counterpart in many aspects. Overall, the foreign-born population in the region is more likely to have no high school diploma. They have higher labor participation rates, higher self-employment rates, lower median earnings and median household income, and are employed in different industry sectors than the native-born population.

The second major finding is that the DC metro area's immigrant population is a very heterogeneous group and it is misleading to draw conclusions about this population without differentiating by region of origin or citizenship status, for example. Substantial differences exist among the foreign-born population in terms of educational level, earnings, income, and industries engagement, depending on the immigrants' country/region of origin and citizenship status.

Some of the findings from this research suggest interesting research questions for future study. First, the domestic migration behavior of foreign-born population is seldom discussed in immigration or migration studies. However, being a major domestic migration epicenter itself, the Washington DC metro area may also serve as an attractive secondary destination for immigrants. Immigrants may be drawn to the DC metro region for more stable employment opportunities or to take advantage of established and expanding social networks and greater social diversity and growing immigration communities. How the region attracts existing immigrants from other parts of the country is a topic worth more attention.

Second, because small businesses and incorporated and non-incorporated self-employed persons play an important role in creating and retaining local jobs, it would be interesting to further understand the economic contribution of the region's self-employed immigrants. This paper finds that about one-third of the region's self-employed are foreign-born. But, how many jobs do they create, both directly and indirectly? How much value do they add to the region's gross product, both directly and indirectly? To answer these questions, a more in-depth analysis of the economic impact of these self-employed immigrants is needed.