

## Contrasting U.S. Immigration Flows: Skilled and Unskilled

John F. Long, USA Demography

[johnlong@usademography.com](mailto:johnlong@usademography.com)

Studies of U.S. immigration should take account of the markedly different origins and characteristics of unskilled and skilled labor. The flow of unskilled labor comes mainly from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean composed of over 38 % with 8 years of schooling or less (compared to only 4 % for the native U.S. population). On the other hand, skilled labor flows come from Europe, Asia, South America, Africa, Australia, and Canada with 50% of immigrants with a college education (compared to only 27 % for the native U. S. population). This paper analyzes these differences using data from the American Community Survey data (as well as from historical census data). Recognition of the marked differences between these two types of flows provides insight into both substantive research and policy questions.

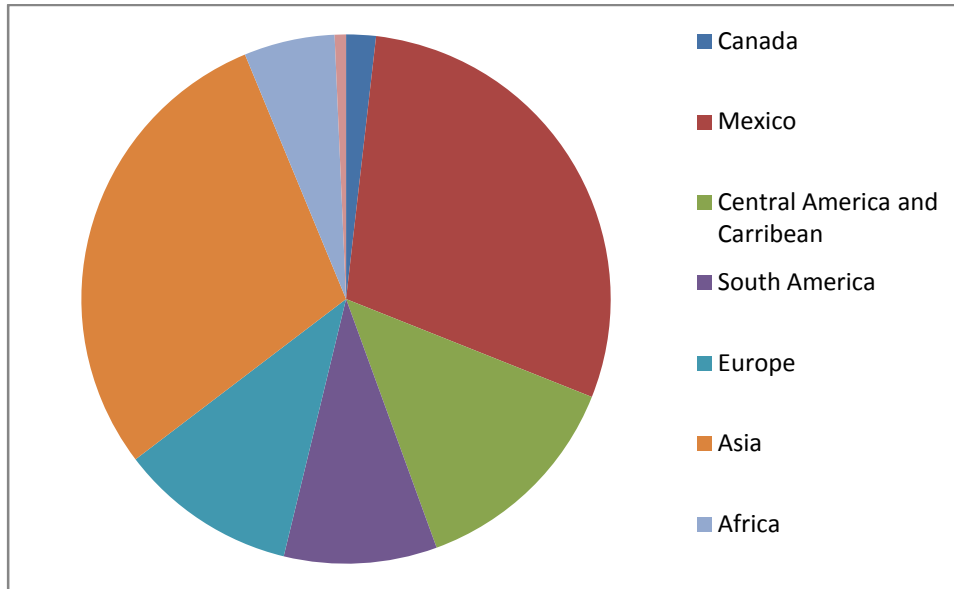
Much of the current discussion about immigration fails to make the distinction about the very different types of immigrant flows. Migrants from within North America make up over half of the large flows of immigrants with limited levels of educational attainment – particularly in the flows from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. On the other hand, migration streams from the rest of the world have heavy concentrations of college graduates. The migrants' resources, needs, and ability to adapt to U.S. society reflect these very different types of flows.

This research used the American Community Survey (ACS) to study immigration to the United States during the 5 years prior to the survey year to study the sources of migration, the educational characteristics of immigrants, and their adaptation to U.S. society by looking at income levels and other social and economic characteristics. The data used in this extended abstract are from the three year ACS compilation of surveys from 2005 through 2008. The large size of the joint sample allows analysis of relatively small immigrant flows. Since this discussion focuses on educational attainment, the data in this abstract are restricted to the population 25 and over at the time of the survey. The migration variable is years in the U.S. as measured by the difference between the year of immigration (as given by the respondent) and the year of the survey. We have taken a five-year interval since that gives a long enough migration period to get substantial flows for small areas while still being relatively current. (In further analysis, before the PAA meeting we intend to analyze the time series of yearly data –including the soon to be released 2008 files to look for changes in migration patterns – particularly as the result of major economic changes that were beginning to be felt in 2008.)

It is the nature of the American Community Survey's multi-year samples that the migration time period is not exact. Rather it is an average of migration during the 2000-2005, 2001-2006, and

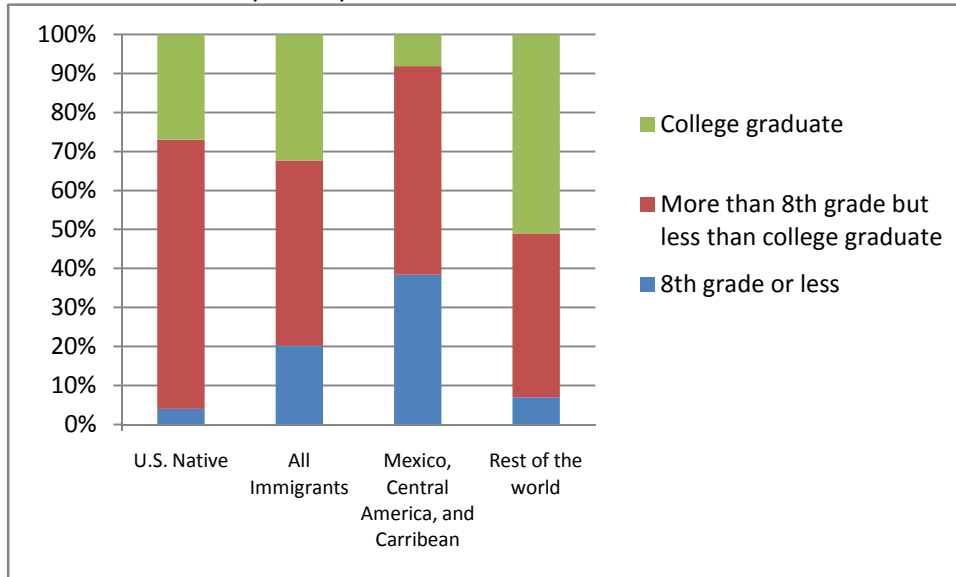
2002-2007 periods. In any case, for any individual immigrant the relevant migration period is the five years prior to his or her interview. Using these definitions, the 2005-2007 ACS counted 4.6 million immigrants age 25 or over. As the pie chart shows, about 43 percent of these immigrants came from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean with 57 percent from the rest of the world. Roughly 30 percent were from Asia with another 10 percent each from South America and Europe.

Distribution of 5-year immigrants of 25 years of age by region: ACS 2005-2007.



As we have said, one of the main differences between these flows is the level of educational attainment in the flows from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean shows substantially higher levels of people with 8 years of education or less compared to the native U. S. population. That can be seen in the following graph along with the fact that immigrants from the rest of the world have higher levels of educational attainment than the U.S. as evidenced by the fact that a majority of immigrants in those flows are college graduates (as compared to less than 30 percent in the U.S. native population). See following page.

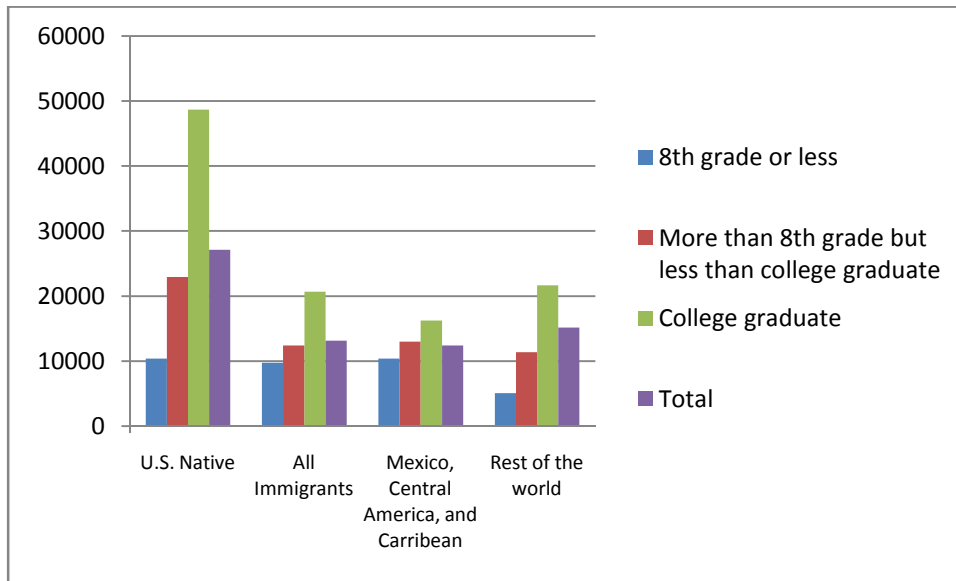
Educational attainment of persons 25 and older for native-born and immigrants over the prior 5 years: American Community Survey 2005-2007.



As the map on the last page shows, these differences in educational attainments are extremely geographically specific . Sending countries with large percentages of the population with a primary education of less are concentrated in the countries just south of the U.S. border. Only a few countries outside of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean have more than 15 % or more of their immigrant flows to the U.S. with a primary education or less. Countries such as Somalia, Laos, Vietnam, and Bosnia have a history of refugee movements to the U.S. Most of the other national migration streams have much higher levels of educational attainment with many countries (shown in light or dark blue) having higher percentages of college educated populations in their streams than that of the native U.S. population.

These differences in the relative educational attainment of differing immigration flows also are evident in the social and economic characteristics of immigrants when they are settled in the U.S. Although these are recent migrants with less than five years in the U.S., there are already differences evident in their economic characteristics. While neither of the two sets of immigrants have income levels as high as the U.S. native population. Those from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean have lower median incomes – in part because of their lower levels of education.

Medial Income by Migrant Origin and Educational Attainment: ACS 2005-2007.



The final paper will explore these differences in more detail both by country of origin and specific migrant characteristics. The availability of the 2006-2008 ACS will also permit a deeper exploration of changes in the flows and their characteristics with changing economic conditions.

Map of Education Level by Counties of Origin for Immigrants 25 years of age or over: ACS 2005-2008.

