

Black Immigrant College Graduates

Where they live and where they work

FELECIA RUSSELL, ANTHONY CAPOTE, SHAMIER SETTLE, AND MELQUIN RAMOS



PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE | ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

ABOUT THE PRESIDENTS' ALLIANCE ON HIGHER EDUCATION AND IMMIGRATION

The nonpartisan, nonprofit Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration brings college and university presidents and chancellors together on the immigration issues that impact higher education, our students, campuses, communities and nation. We work to support undocumented, international and refugee students, and advance forward-looking immigration policies and practices at the federal level, in our states, and across our college campuses. The Alliance is composed of 550+ college and university presidents and chancellors of public and private colleges and universities, enrolling over five million students in 42 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico.



ABOUT THE IMMIGRATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

Immigration Research Initiative is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank on immigrant integration, looking at issues of economic, social, and cultural inclusion of immigrants in the United States. IRI is attentive to how immigrants fare in the United States and to how the receiving communities fare as they change, with particular attention to the implications for race, gender, and income equity.

To cite this brief: The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration and The Immigration Research Initiative. Research Brief, *Black Immigrant College Graduates: Where they live and where they work* (Washington, D.C., and New York, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The Immigration Research Initiative and the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education calculated these estimates using ACS 2022 5-Year micro data. We focused on individuals who identified as Black and said they had at least a bachelor's degree. Immigrants in this data set are defined as anyone living in the United States and born in another country, except if their parents were U.S. citizens when they were born. We distinguish the three types of Black immigrants with college degrees based on how old they were when they entered the United States.

- **Childhood arrivals.** Those who arrived in the U.S. before they were 18, meaning they immigrated as children and were almost surely educated in the United States.
- **International students.** Those who arrived any time between ages 18 and 24, meaning they came to the U.S. around college age and were very likely international students who stayed in the U.S. after graduation.
- **Foreign educated.** Those who arrived at age 25 or older, indicating they likely had finished their college degree before they came to this country.

It's worth noting that many international students do not stay in the U.S. after graduation. Because ACS and Census data do not measure migration out of the United States, it is difficult to estimate a complete count of all Black international students who have earned degrees from American institutions, many now living in other countries.



Introduction

Immigrant Heritage Month¹, celebrated every June, is a time to recognize and honor the numerous contributions that immigrants have made to American society. During this month, there is a spotlight on the diverse traditions, cultures, and stories that immigrants pass on to enrich our communities. Throughout the U.S., immigrants play a key role in shaping our nation's education, economy, history, and many other aspects of life. Although immigrants' presence and contributions should be celebrated daily, this month serves as a reminder of the diversity that has shaped America's past and present.

Often, the broader narrative of immigration within the U.S. centers on the experiences of Latinx immigrants and those of Hispanic origin. Examining the achievements of Black immigrant college graduates prompts necessary conversations about pay equity, inclusion, and belonging, as well as the pivotal role Black immigrants play in the success of America.

This brief focuses on first-generation Black immigrants, that is, individuals born abroad who are currently living in the United States. This work builds upon scholarship that centers Black immigrants in the broader discussion surrounding immigrant populations in the U.S. Related work includes Dr. Felecia Russell's *Amplifying Black Undocumented Student Voices in Higher Education²* which explores the intersections of race, identity, and higher education, as well as a report³ on the importance of fostering inclusion for Black immigrants at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) produced by the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration (PAHEI) in partnership with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP).

This report is based on Immigration Research Initiative (IRI) and PAHEI analysis of the 2022 American Community Survey 5-year data. The ACS does not contain direct information about where graduates received their degrees. To approximate the number of international students, we assumed those who arrived in the U.S. between the ages of 18 and 25 came as foreign students. We assumed that people who arrived in the United States after age 25 completed their degree abroad. And, we presumed that students who arrived in the U.S. as children and have a college degree were immigrants who received their degrees in the United States. Children of immigrants who were born in the United States are not included in this data, since U.S.-born children are not first-generation immigrants. For some data on these second-generation immigrants, we cite a **Migration Policy Institute analysis of the Current Population Survey**, a different Census Bureau survey with a smaller sample size that does allow an analysis of the second generation.



BLACK COLLEGE GRADUATES IN THE U.S.

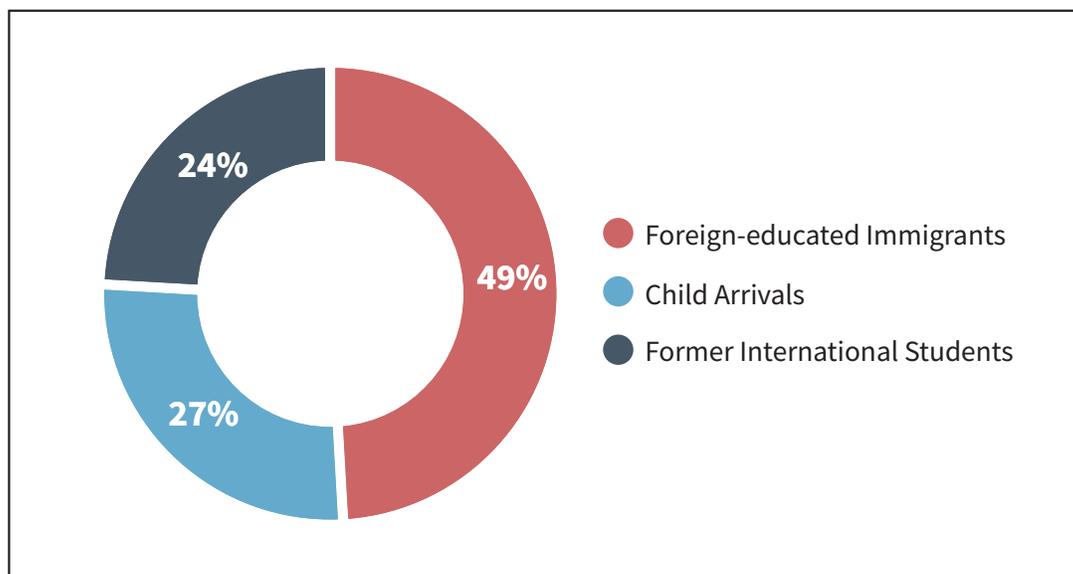
As of 2022, there are 5.3 million Black college graduates in the United States. Of these graduates, U.S.-born Black graduates account for 82 percent, and Black immigrants account for 18 percent. More than one in three Black immigrants in the U.S. who are older than 25 have at least a college degree. There are 976,000 Black immigrant college graduates in the United States labor force. Of this number, 267,500 arrived in the U.S. as children (that is, before the age of 18), and 474,400 were educated abroad (arriving after age 25, when most have already earned their degrees), and 234,100 were former international students (having arrived between ages 18 and 25 and stayed in the United States) (*see table 1*). These numbers suggest that Black foreign-educated immigrants make up the largest share of this group at 49 percent, followed by child arrivals at 27 percent, and former international students at 24 percent (*see figure 1*). Black immigrant graduates are so important to the immigrant heritage narrative because they are often an afterthought, yet, they contribute significantly to U.S. higher education. The rate at which Black immigrants hold college degrees makes it reasonable to expect that they have a significant impact on the higher education sector and the U.S. economy at large.

TABLE 1: 18% OF ALL BLACK COLLEGE GRADUATES IN THE U.S. ARE IMMIGRANTS

	NUMBER
U.S.-Born	4,400,000
Immigrants	976,000
Child Arrivals	267,500
Foreign-Educated	474,400
International Students	234,100
TOTAL	5,376,000

Source: Immigration Research Initiative analysis of ACS 2022 5-Year Data. Totals may not sum due to independent rounding.

FIGURE 1: BLACK COLLEGE GRADUATES IN THE U.S.



Source: Immigration Research Initiative analysis of ACS 2022 5-Year Data.

KEY FINDINGS



NEARLY 1 IN EVERY 5 BLACK COLLEGE GRADUATES ARE FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS

5.3M

BLACK COLLEGE GRADUATES IN THE UNITED STATES



82%
U.S. BORN

18%
IMMIGRANTS



AS OF 2022, NUMBER OF BLACK IMMIGRANT COLLEGE GRADUATES WORKING IN THE UNITED STATES



BLACK COLLEGE GRADUATES WORK ACROSS THE ECONOMIC SPECTRUM



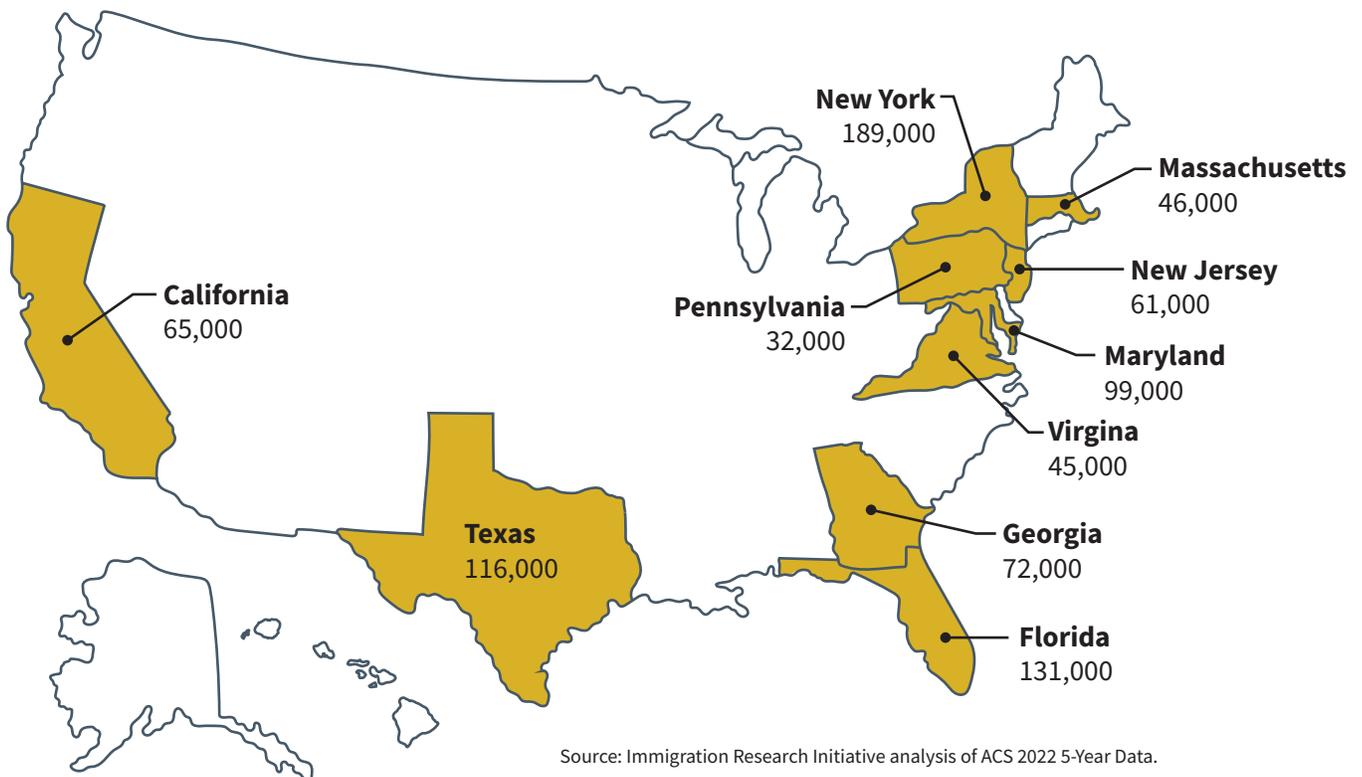
The most common jobs for Black immigrants with college degrees are in healthcare, education, and business. Many earn high wages, and the majority are in either middle- or upper wage jobs, but many still earn low wages (defined as under two-thirds of the overall median wage for full-time workers).



WHERE ARE BLACK IMMIGRANTS LOCATED?

According to the Migration Policy Institute, Black immigrants in the U.S. are from many different countries within Africa and the Caribbean, such as Jamaica (17 percent), Nigeria (8 percent), and Ethiopia (6 percent).⁵ However, Black immigrant college graduates live throughout all 50 states. However, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of all Black immigrant college graduates live in ten states: **New York, Florida, Texas, Maryland, Georgia, California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania** (see figure 2). Black immigrants may be more likely to live in states where immigrants already make up large shares of the population. Many of these states also have favorable educational policies, such as in-state tuition or tuition assistance for immigrants who are undocumented. See the Higher Ed Immigration Portal⁶.

FIGURE 2: TOP 10 TOTAL STATES WHERE BLACK IMMIGRANT GRADUATES LIVE



OCCUPATIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF BLACK IMMIGRANT GRADUATES

Impressive numbers of Black immigrants obtain a college degree, but their academic achievements are not always matched by success in the labor market. While it is true that most Black immigrants with college degrees are doing very well, some still lag behind other immigrants and U.S.-born workers. In this section, we examine the economic outcomes for all Black workers with college degrees, both U.S.-born and foreign-born. The total share of Black college graduates with at least a bachelor’s degree represents about 9 percent of all U.S. workers with college degrees, and immigrants account for almost one-fifth of all Black college graduates in the labor force.

The most common job for U.S.-born Black college graduates is as elementary and middle school teachers, earning a median wage of just \$56,000 annually, lower than even the overall median wage for all full-time workers, \$57,000. In all, 23 percent of Black U.S.-born college graduates are educators. Despite the relatively low wages, Black college graduates are providing opportunities to educate the next generation. After teachers, the next most common jobs are: registered nurses (\$75,000), managers (\$107,000), and accountants (\$76,000) (see *table 2*).

Black graduates who are immigrants are most likely to work in Management, Business, and Financial Occupations, with 21 percent of all Black immigrants with at least a college degree working in those professions. However, the most common job for Black immigrants with college degrees is registered nurses, earning a median wage of \$75,000, compared to U.S.-born Blacks who are more commonly employed as educators. **And, while Black immigrants with college degrees are 18 percent of Black workers, they make up 31 percent of all Black workers with a college degree in the healthcare system.** Over 19,000 Black immigrants work as physicians in the United States, with a median wage of \$221,000. While nurses, technicians, and home health aides earn far less, they are among the many immigrants who were considered “essential workers” during the Covid-19 pandemic.

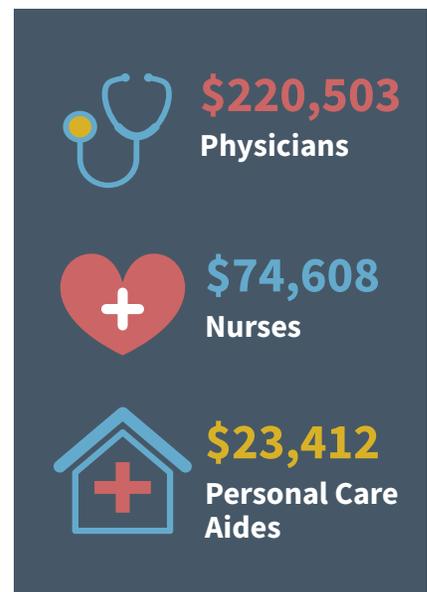


TABLE 2: TOP 10 OCCUPATIONS FOR BLACK IMMIGRANT GRADUATES AND MEDIAN WAGES

OCCUPATION	BLACK IMMIGRANT WORKERS	MEDIAN WAGE
1 Registered Nurses	93,000	\$74,608
2 Accountants and Auditors	34,000	\$75,582
3 Elementary and Middle School Teachers	31,000	\$55,512
4 Other Managers	29,000	\$106,984
5 Postsecondary Teachers	22,000	\$62,973
6 Physicians	19,000	\$220,503
7 Personal Care Aides	19,000	\$23,412
8 Nursing Assistants	16,000	\$28,686
9 Software Developers	15,000	\$122,072
10 Customer Service Representatives	15,000	\$43,246

Source: Immigration Research Initiative analysis of ACS 2022 5-Year Data.

While U.S.-born Black college graduates and Black immigrant graduates are working and paying it forward, they often experience the residual and continued effects of racism. To better understand Black graduates’ economic outcomes, our analysis sorts workers into one of three categories — low, middle, or upper wage — based on the median wage for the jobs they work. Jobs with a median wage for full-time workers of \$37,000 per year or less were defined as low wages, meaning most workers in those occupations make less than two-thirds of the overall median wage for full-time workers. Jobs with a median wage of \$114,000 or higher (two times the overall median) were labeled as upper wage jobs, and all occupations with wages between \$37,000 and \$114,000 were labeled middle wage (see table 3).

TABLE 3: MOST BLACK IMMIGRANTS EARN GOOD WAGES, BUT MANY LAG BEHIND

NATIVITY	LOW WAGE	MIDDLE WAGE	UPPER WAGE	TOTAL
U.S.-Born Total	14%	74%	12%	100%
Immigrant Total	18%	66%	17%	100%
RACE	LOW WAGE	MIDDLE WAGE	UPPER WAGE	TOTAL
All Black Workers	18%	74%	7%	100%
U.S. Born Black Workers	18%	76%	7%	100%
Black Immigrants	22%	69%	9%	100%

Source: Immigration Research Initiative analysis of ACS 2022 5-Year Data.

While 14 percent of all U.S.-born people with college degrees fall into the low wage category, 18 percent of Black workers with college degrees — both U.S.- and foreign-born — fall into the low wage category. Even with college degrees, Black folks face significant barriers to economic success beyond those experienced by others. Furthermore, only 7 percent of Black workers with college degrees earn more than \$114,000 per year, the upper wage category, compared to the 12 percent of all U.S.-born workers and 17 percent of all immigrants with college degrees. Why are the discrepancies between these groups so egregious? This shows a significant gap in upward economic mobility that we must address. Recently, the Biden-Harris administration announced an [executive order](#) to streamline access to D-3 waivers and employment-based visas for U.S. college and university graduates, including DACA recipients and other Dreamers. The implementation of this executive action could have a significant positive impact on the prospects for some Black immigrant graduates. To pursue this pathway, employers must sponsor their employees or prospective hires for work visas. Campuses can survey their own employees, including DACA recipients, who may be eligible and interested in this pathway, and share information with their students and alumni. Students should also consult with immigration attorneys to determine whether this pathway might be available to them.



CONCLUSION

It is important to understand the under-recognized role of Black immigrants in the American economic landscape. Black immigrants face a series of intersectional issues that affect their earnings, such as race and immigrant status. To foster greater recognition and support of Black immigrant graduates, we should intentionally include their stories and their contributions when we celebrate Immigrant Heritage Month. Additionally, employers and collegiate institutions need to identify the gaps in economic and social mobility for Black college graduates. As part of the focus on economic mobility, policymakers should propose wage equity solutions for Black immigrants. Finally, we need to amplify the work of Black immigrant graduates to continuously demonstrate their impact.

AUTHORS

FELECIA S. RUSSELL, Director, Higher Ed Immigration Portal

Dr. Felecia S. Russell is the Director of the Higher Ed Immigration Portal at the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. Her research agenda explores the experiences of non-Latinx undocumented students, more specifically Black undocumented students, and the intersections of race and immigration status. Her book, *Amplifying Black Undocumented Student Voices in Higher Education*, which centers her educational journey and a qualitative study exploring the experiences of 15 Black undocumented students was published by Routledge earlier this year. Dr. Russell received a BA in political science from Cal Lutheran, and MPP from Pepperdine University, and Ed.D in higher education from Temple University.

ANTHONY CAPOTE, Immigration Research Initiative

Anthony Capote is a senior data and policy analyst at Immigration Research Initiative, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that looks at immigration issues. Capote has a PhD in sociology from the City University of New York and focuses on using data science to augment our collective understanding of American cultural trends.

SHAMIER SETTLE, Immigration Research Initiative

Shamier Settle is a senior policy analyst at Immigration Research Initiative, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that looks at immigration issues. Shamier holds a Masters of Science in International Economic Policy from the University of Westminster and a Bachelor's degree in Economics and International Affairs from George Washington University.

MELQUIN RAMOS, Data Research Consultant

Melquin Ramos serves as a data and research consultant at the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. Melquin works as an independent consultant in the field of international education in the areas of research, writing, and analysis; data management; virtual exchange; study abroad; and international programming. He previously served as a visiting fellow at the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean located in Santiago, Chile. Melquin holds a master's in organizational leadership from the George Washington University and a bachelor's in criminology and criminal justice from the University of Maryland, College Park.

DESIGN & PHOTOGRAPHY

Graphic design and layout: [Stacie Clark Design](#)

Photography: [iStockphoto](#)

ENDNOTES

1. Ama Akato, June 2024, Moving the Culture, Shaping our Future. I Stand With Immigrants Report. Available [here](#).
2. Dr. Felecia S. Russell, Amplifying Black Undocumented Student Voices in Higher Education, April 2024, Routledge, Available [here](#).
3. India Heckstall, Christian Collins, Felecia Russell, and Melquin Ramos, February 2024, Fostering Inclusion for Black Immigrant Students at HBCUs, Available [here](#).
4. U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) October 2022. Migration Policy Institute. Available [here](#).
5. Valerie Lacrte, February 2022, Black Immigrants in the United States Face Hurdles, but Outcomes Vary by City, Available [here](#).
6. Higher Ed Immigration Portal, Available [here](#).