



Undocumented Immigrants in Construction

By Nicole Prchal Svajlenka February 2, 2021

Across the country, 5 million undocumented immigrants are working alongside their neighbors to keep the country safe amid a global pandemic—including nearly 1.6 million immigrants who are working in construction.¹ These workers are building and maintaining critical infrastructure projects, such as those needed to expand Americans' increased need for both health care throughout the pandemic and reliable internet access. Construction has continued on bridges and facilities to generate renewable energy in order to keep our roads accessible and electricity on. Construction workers have also continued to ensure that Americans have safe and secure housing.

TABLE 1
Largest occupations for undocumented workers in construction

Title	Number of undocumented workers	Share of workforce that is undocumented
Construction laborers	445,800	23%
Carpenters	225,600	19%
Painters and paperhangers	167,300	29%
Roofers	75,600	32%
Drywall installers, ceiling tile installers, and tapers	55,800	38%
Automotive service technicians and mechanics	50,300	8%
First-line supervisors of construction trades and extraction workers	47,500	7%
Electricians	42,600	5%
Brickmasons, blockmasons, stonemasons, and reinforcing iron and rebar workers	38,700	25%
Plumbers, pipefitters, and steamfitters	38,000	7%
Carpet, floor, and tile installers and finishers	34,800	24%
Other managers	27,000	5%
Heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration mechanics and installers	23,600	6%
Construction equipment operators	23,500	7%
Construction managers	20,500	3%

Source: Center for American Progress analysis of pooled 2018 and 2019 1-year American Community Survey microdata, accessed via Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2016, 2017, and 2018 and 2019 American Community Surveys: 1-year estimates" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2020), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>.

As the country looks to the future and charts a course for economic recovery, it is also important to recognize the outsize contributions to the economy provided by construction—and, in particular, residential construction. Dollars spent in residential construction have some of the highest rates of return for U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) and boost tax revenue.² Home ownership is also a notable way for individuals and families to build wealth, which can put people on a stronger and more resilient foundation when future challenges arise.³

For state-level data on the family members and economic contributions of undocumented workers by sector, please see [“Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic’s Front Lines: A Look at Certain Sectors.”](#)⁴

Notable occupations

- Undocumented immigrants make up a disproportionate share of the construction workforce, and undocumented workers are disproportionately likely to work in construction. One in 5 undocumented workers are employed in a construction-related sector; more than 1 in 10 construction workers are undocumented—double the rate of workers as a whole.

Family members

- Undocumented workers in the construction sector are family to 681,000 undocumented spouses and minor children. Extending protections to these individuals is necessary to maintain family unity and ensure that they can do this important work without fear and uncertainty surrounding their loved ones.

Economic and fiscal contributions

- Each year, these undocumented workers and their households pay \$12.9 billion in federal tax contributions and \$7.7 billion in state and local taxes. These households hold \$60.7 billion in spending power.
- These workers’ employers annually contribute payroll taxes totaling \$4.4 billion to buoy Social Security and Medicare.
- Undocumented immigrants working in the construction sector own 393,500 homes, paying \$3.6 billion in mortgage payments and \$11.6 billion in rental payments annually.

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Endnotes

1 Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, “Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic’s Front Lines: Immigrants Are Essential to America’s Recovery” (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2020), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2020/12/02/493307/protecting-undocumented-workers-pandemics-front-lines/>. Estimates presented in this fact sheet are based on CAP analysis of pooled 2018 and 2019 1-year American Community Survey microdata, accessed via Steven Ruggles and others, “Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, U.S. Census Data for Social, Economic, and Health Research, 2018 and 2019 American Community Surveys: 1-year estimates” (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2020), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa>. The construction sector includes workers reporting employment in either a construction occupation or the construction industry. See CAP report for occupation and industry codes.

2 Stephen S. Fuller, “The Contribution of Residential Construction to the U.S. Economy” (Washington: Leading Builders of America, 2020), available at <https://leadingbuilders.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Residential-Construction-Economic-Study-5-2020.pdf>.

3 Neil Bhutta and others, “Changes in the U.S. Family Finances from 2016 to 2019: Evidence from the Survey of Consumer Finances,” *Federal Reserve Bulletin* 106 (5) (2020): 1–42, available at <https://www.federalreserve.gov/publications/files/scf20.pdf>.

4 Nicole Prchal Svajlenka, “Protecting Undocumented Workers on the Pandemic’s Front Lines: A Look at Certain Sectors,” Center for American Progress, February 2, 2021, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/?p=495017>. For downloadable state-level data on undocumented workers in construction, see Center for American Progress, “State-level data on undocumented workers in construction industries and occupations,” available at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/content/uploads/2021/01/29060910/StateDataConstruction.xlsx> (last accessed February 2021).