

Workforce & National Security
**Country of Origin of
the DoD-Supported
Foreign-Born Workforce**

America's growing defense science and engineering demographic base, and how a narrow set of source countries, along with a steady shift toward U.S. citizenship, are reshaping it.

National Survey of College Graduates
2017 – 2023 Cycles · Published August 2026

August 2026

First published in 2026 by NDIA's affiliate, the Emerging Technologies Institute. 2101 Wilson Blvd, Suite 700, Arlington, VA 22201, United States of America. (703) 522-1820.

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Key Takeaways

#1

The DoD-supported foreign-born workforce has grown to more than **156,000 individuals** as of 2023, an increase of roughly 17% since 2017.

#2

A small set of countries consistently supplies the most foreign-born talent to DoD-funded projects: **India, China, Germany, the Philippines, and Vietnam.**

#3

Across the two most recent survey cycles (2021 and 2023), **India was the single largest country of origin** for foreign-born individuals working on DoD-funded projects.

#4

Foreign-born individuals are more likely to be naturalized U.S. citizens when performing defense work (**79.4%**) than in the broader commercial science and engineering workforce (63.1%).

#5

The **naturalization rate is rising**, and **naturalized citizens account for essentially all of the workforce's net growth** since 2017.

Methodology

How these estimates were built

Figures 1 through 8 draw on data from the biennial National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG),¹ which characterizes the United States' college-educated population with particular attention to the science and engineering workforce. The survey samples individuals living in the U.S. during a roughly six-month collection period² who hold at least a bachelor's degree and are younger than 76; the 2023 cycle had a sample of approximately 161,000 respondents.

The National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES) assigns each respondent a final analysis weight (WTSURVY)³ that reflects the respondent's probability of selection together with adjustments for nonresponse and under-coverage. Applying these weights allows a relatively small set of survey responses to represent the full target population, so the figures in this brief are estimates of population-wide totals rather

than counts of individual respondents. The values reported here should therefore be read as estimates rather than exact figures.

For this analysis, country or economy of origin refers to an individual's place of birth. The NSCG variables used in this brief include:

FSDOD	Whether the individual's work is supported⁴ by the DoD
CTZN	Citizenship or visa status
CTZFOR	Visa type for non-U.S. citizens
VSATP	Visa type (work; study/training; dependent; other)
WTSURVY	Final survey weighted value

01 — Naturalization Trends

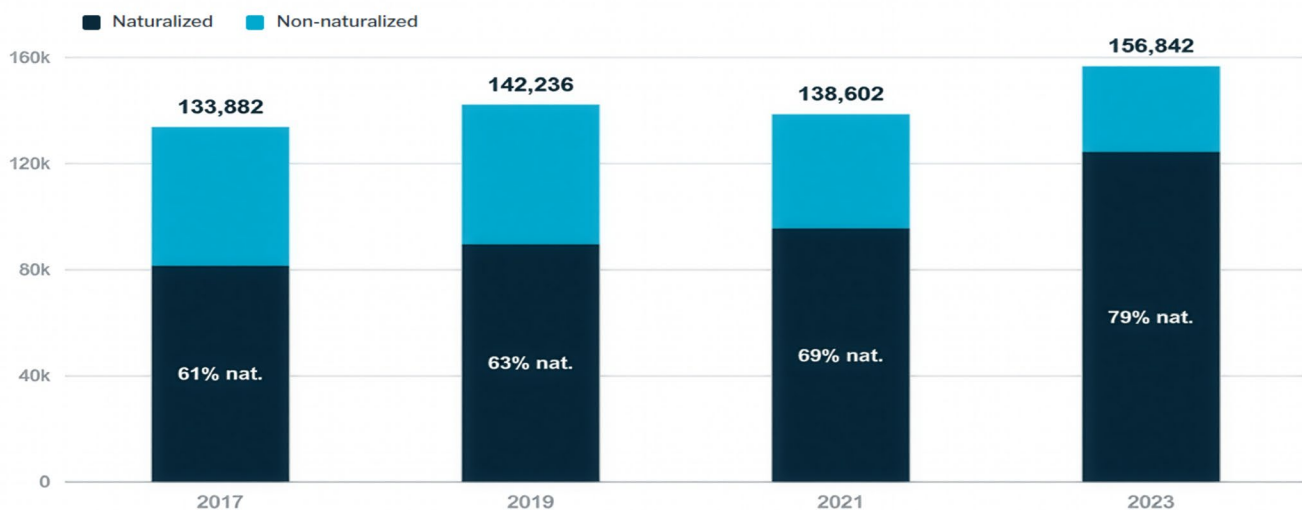
Naturalization among consistently represented countries of origin, 2017 – 2023

The DoD-supported foreign-born workforce expanded over the survey period, though not at a steady pace. Estimated yearly totals were 133,882 (2017), 142,236 (2019), 138,602 (2021), and

156,842 (2023)—a net increase of roughly 17%. The dip in 2021 most likely reflects COVID-19-related disruptions to immigration and survey collection.

Figure 1: Workforce size and citizenship composition, 2017 – 2023

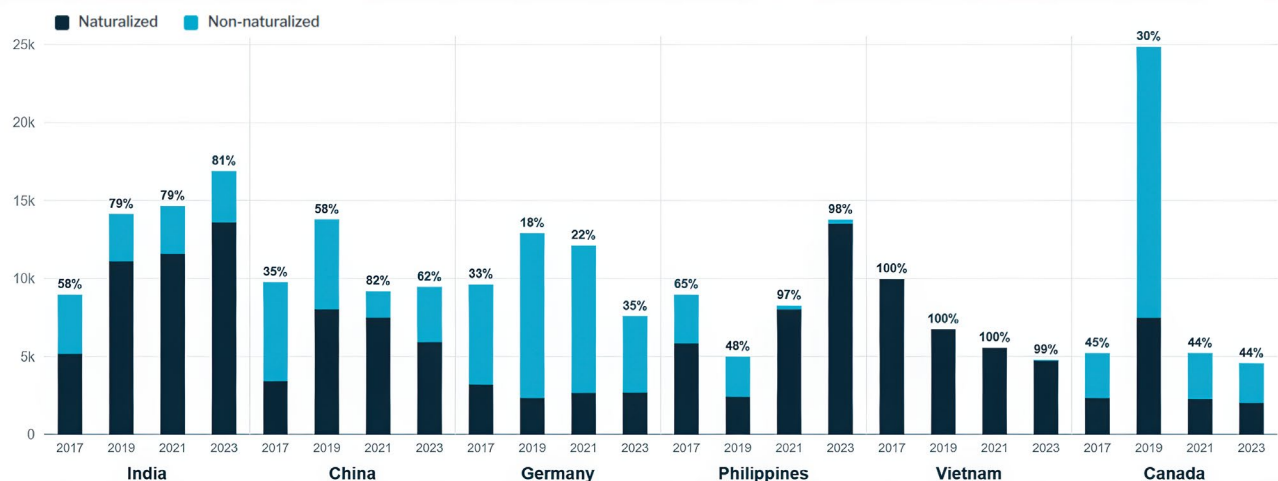
Estimated DoD-supported foreign-born individuals by survey year, split by citizenship status; total above each column.



Source: NSCG public-use data, 2017 – 2023 (author's calculations).

Figure 2: Naturalized vs. non-naturalized shares for the six most recurrent countries of origin

Estimated DoD-supported foreign-born individuals, by country and survey year. The figure above each bar is the naturalized share.



Source: NSCG public-use data, 2017 – 2023 (Author's calculations). Canada's 2019 total reflects a single-cycle survey surge.

Across the six countries of origin that recur most often among the foreign-born population performing work supported by DoD, two naturalization profiles emerge. India and the Philippines show overall increasing naturalization rates, with both also

experiencing growth in the total number of individuals. Germany and Canada have lower naturalization rates, potentially indicating a stronger desire among individuals from India, China, the Philippines, and Vietnam to obtain American citizenship.

02 — Shifting Demographics

Top countries of origin by year, 2017 – 2023

Figure 3: Top five countries of origin by survey year

Foreign-born individuals performing DoD-funded work (estimated counts in parentheses).

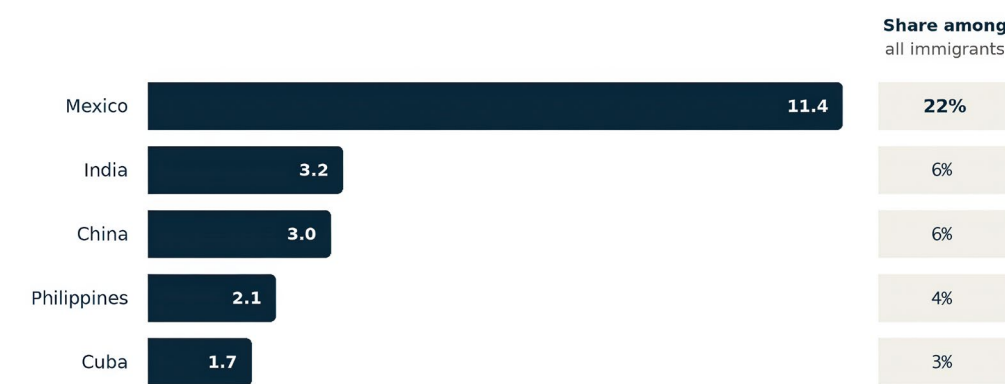
Rank	2017	2019	2021	2023
1	Vietnam (9,951)	Canada (24,855)	India (14,644)	India (16,878)
2	China (9,765)	India (14,123)	Germany (12,096)	Cuba (16,005)
3	Germany (9,596)	China (13,786)	China (9,161)	Philippines (13,780)
4	Philippines (8,953)	Germany (12,892)	Philippines (8,245)	China (9,461)
5	India (8,951)	Vietnam (6,726)	Netherlands (6,607)	Germany (7,581)

Source: NSCG public-use data, 2017 – 2023 (Author's calculations).

From 2017 to 2023, the top five countries of origin show continuity at the core alongside notable turnover at the margins. With the exceptions of China and Cuba, the leading sources are generally allied or friendly nations, and the 2023 top five largely mirror the broader U.S. immigration pipeline—with one striking exception. According to the Pew Research Center, Mexico is the single largest source of immigrants to the United States overall,⁵ yet it ranks tenth among countries of origin for foreign-born individuals performing DoD-funded work (Figure 4). Read alongside Figure 2, Figure 3 highlights that the stable core (India, China, Germany, Philippines) anchors participation while the year-to-year changes are few, including the Netherlands, Cuba, and Vietnam.

Figure 4: Top 5 countries of birth for immigrants living in the U.S. in 2023, in millions

Mexico is the most common birthplace for U.S. immigrants



Source: Pew Research Center

Canada and Cuba are the most volatile, appearing at or near the top only once across all surveyed years. Immigration from Canada accounts for a shrinking share of total migration to the U.S.: In 2019, Canadians constituted roughly 2% of the total U.S.

foreign-born population. Additionally, roughly 50% of Canadian immigrants are naturalized U.S. citizens. NSCG data shows a lower naturalization percentage (approximately 30%) for individuals working on projects supported by DoD than the overall

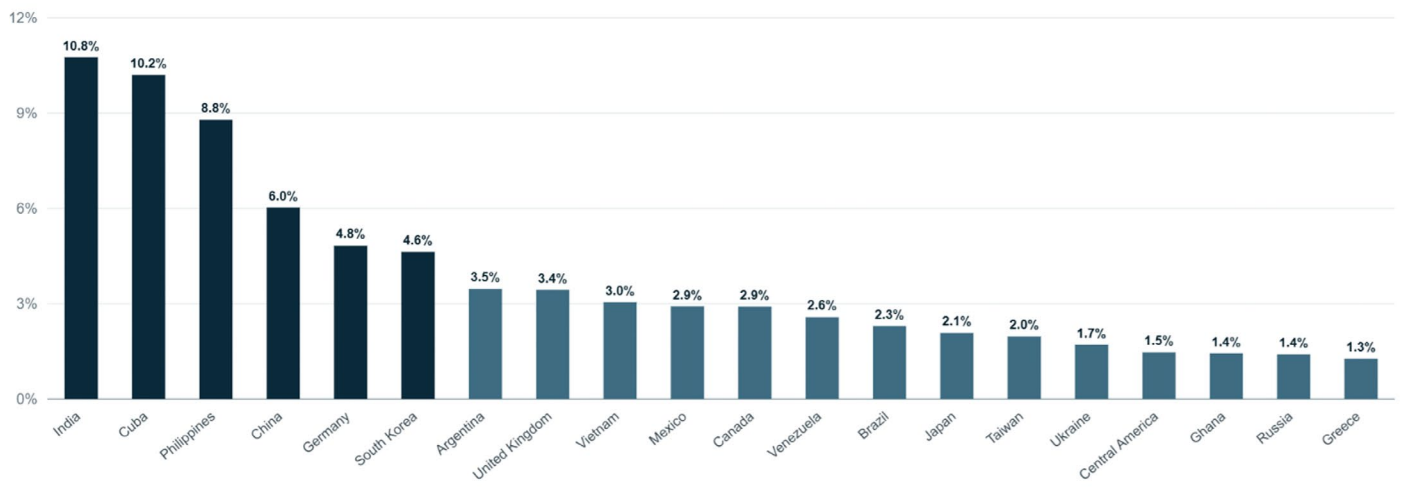
Canadian-born population. Further research is required to understand the factors leading to the sharp increase in the number of individuals born in Canada who were working on projects supported by DoD in 2019.

The spike in the number of individuals from Cuba in 2023 could be indicative of broader immigration factors. According to the Washington Office on Latin America, the U.S. saw a historic

level of migration from Cuba across fiscal years 2022 and 2023, when nearly 425,000 Cuban migrants came to the U.S.⁶ These individuals are reported to have left Cuba due to a combination of economic difficulties and political discontent. The survey results also estimated an extremely high naturalization rate among Cuban immigrants working on defense projects.

Figure 5: Top 20 countries of origin, 2023

Each shown as a share of the foreign-born DoD-supported workforce (estimated total 156,842).

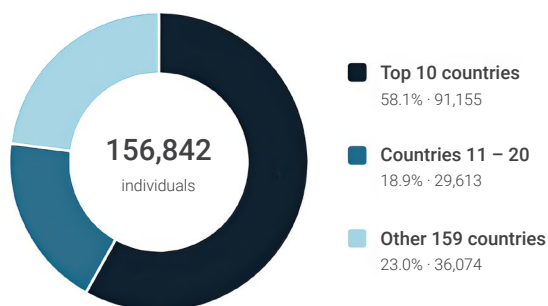


Source: NSCG public-use data, 2023 (author's calculations).

In 2023, the country of origin of foreign-born individuals performing DoD-funded work was steeply concentrated in a small number of sources. The top six countries—India, Cuba, the Philippines, China, Germany, and South Korea—together accounted for roughly 45% of the foreign-born DoD workforce, and the top ten reached about 58%.

Figure 6: Source concentration by country tier, 2023

Across 149 source countries, the top ten largest sources supply over half of the workforce.



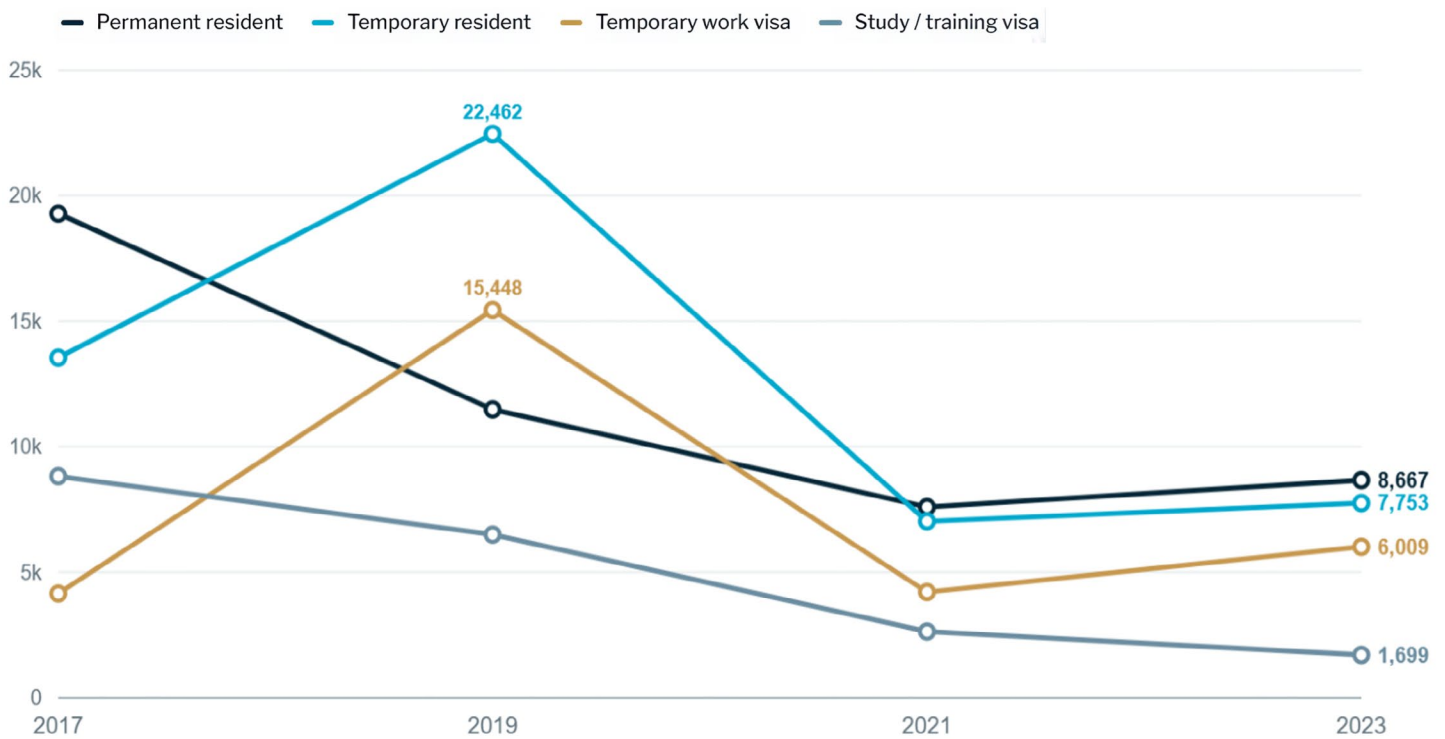
Source: NSCG public-use data, 2023 (Author's calculations); tiers ranked by estimated 2023 count.

The ten largest sources accounted for an estimated 91,155 individuals, while the remaining 139 countries combined contributed 65,687 (41.9%). In other words, more than half of the entire foreign-born DoD workforce is concentrated in just ten source-country categories, and the top twenty account for about 77% of the total. The distribution has a long tail of small contributors, but the workforce is defined far more by concentrated sourcing than by broad international diversity. Workforce patterns, vulnerabilities, and pipeline dynamics are therefore likely to be shaped by a limited number of source-country ecosystems rather than by the full universe of foreign-born populations.

03 — Legal Status

Composition and trends

Figure 7: Non-naturalized legal-status categories by year
Estimated DoD-supported foreign-born individuals, 2017 – 2023.



Source: NSCG public-use data, 2017 – 2023 (Author's calculations).

Figure 8: Legal-status composition: broader workforce vs. DoD-supported subset, 2023
Share of each foreign-born science and engineering population by legal status.

Broader foreign-born S&E workforce



DoD-supported subset



Legend: Naturalized (dark blue), Permanent resident (medium blue), Temporary resident (light blue), Temporary work visa (red), Study / training (grey), Dependent (light grey), Other (white).

Source: NSCG public-use data, 2023 (author's calculations).

Naturalized citizens make up 79.4% of the DoD-funded subset compared with 63.1% of the broader foreign-born workforce in science and engineering, which reflects the importance of U.S. citizenship to defense initiatives.

The gap likely reflects two filters operating in sequence. First, International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) and related export-control regimes restrict most DoD-relevant technical work to “U.S. persons”—citizens and permanent residents—which alone removes the bulk of visa holders.⁷ Second, security clearances generally require evidence of U.S. citizenship, which further filters within the U.S.-persons pool toward naturalized citizens specifically.⁸ These two factors together explain the asymmetric drop-off: permanent residents shrink rather than disappear, as they remain eligible for unclassified, ITAR-controlled work,⁹ while visa holders fall to near-zero as ITAR’s “U.S. persons” requirement excludes them entirely. Dependent and other visa categories,

which carry tighter work restrictions even outside DoD contexts,¹⁰ fall to zero or near-zero, consistent with a categorical legal eligibility restriction rather than market demand impediments.

By mapping the countries of origin for both naturalized and non-naturalized individuals performing DoD-supported work, this research aims to help policymakers strengthen the U.S. STEM workforce from a position of informed strength. This matters across the full scope of the defense research enterprise: According to the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, DoD allocates 54% of its fundamental research funds to universities, 22% to its own labs, 15% to industry, 5% to other nonprofits, and the remaining 4% to state, local, and foreign governments.¹¹ As the Pentagon and its industry and academic partners implement new research security guidelines, anticipating threats and adapting to immigration trends will be essential to ensuring these policies align with Department goals.

Notes & Sources

- 1 Nat’l Ctr. for Sci. & Eng’g Stat., U.S. Nat’l Sci. Found., *2023 National Survey of College Graduates: Public Use Data File* (rev. Sept. 2025) (author’s calculations); see also NCSES, *NSCG 2023: Methodology Report*, NCSES 25-006 (2025).
- 2 The 2023 data collection period ran approximately six months, from May 25 to November 20, 2023.
- 3 Each respondent receives a final analysis weight (WTSURVY) reflecting the probability of selection together with adjustments for nonresponse and undercoverage, so that weighted responses estimate totals for the full target population. For a more in-depth explanation of how NSCG determines its weighted values, please visit the 2023 methodology page: <https://ncesdata.nsf.gov/surveys/national-survey-college-graduates/2023#methodology>
- 4 The term “supported” is not defined in NSCG’s methodology and therefore does not specify the funding pathways for the sponsored work. For the purpose of this brief, “supported” is defined as work that is funded by the Department of Defense.
- 5 Kramer, Stephanie, and Jeffrey S. Passel. “Key Findings About U.S. Immigrants.” *Pew Research Center*, 21 Aug. 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/08/21/key-findings-about-us-immigrants/>
- 6 Team WOLA. “Five Key Trends in Cuban Migration in 2023.” *Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)*, 20 Dec. 2023, <https://www.wola.org/analysis/developments-cuban-migration-2023/>
- 7 International Traffic in Arms Regulations, 22 C.F.R. pts. 120–130 (2024); see also 22 C.F.R. § 120.62 (2024) (defining “U.S. person” to include U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents and limiting the export of controlled technical data to such persons absent a license).
- 8 Exec. Order No. 12,968 § 3.1(b), 60 Fed. Reg. 40,245, 40,250 (Aug. 2, 1995) (“Eligibility for access to classified information shall be granted only to employees who are United States citizens...”); see also 32 C.F.R. pt. 147 (2024) (National Security Adjudicative Guidelines); U.S. Dep’t of Def., Manual 5200.02, Procedures for the DoD Personnel Security Program (PSP) (Apr. 3, 2017).
- 9 22 C.F.R. § 120.62 (2024) (including lawful permanent residents within the “U.S. person” definition, which permits access to ITAR-controlled unclassified technical data without an export license).
- 10 8 C.F.R. § 214.2 (2024) (setting forth conditions of stay and work authorization restrictions for nonimmigrant classifications, including H-4, F-2, and J-2 dependents); see also Immigration and Nationality Act § 101(a)(15), 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(15) (2018).
- 11 National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics. “Data Explorer: R&D Activity, R&D Performer.” *National Science Foundation*, ncesdata.nsf.gov/explorer/datatables?superTopic=R%26D%20Activity&topic=R%26D%20Performer&page=1.





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