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Latino Working Class: America's Economic Engine

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Latinos* are essential to the U.S. economy and the future of America's working class, yet too often, their economic realities are overlooked in policymaking and misrepresented in public discourse.

To better understand the Latino working class, UnidosUS commissioned Population Reference Bureau (PRB) to conduct research at a moment when economic and affordability issues are driving national policy debates and shaping the political landscape.

Of the 48.8 million Latino adults in the United States, roughly 4 out of 5 (38.5 million or 79%) are part of the working class, according to the latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau.¹ That's nearly equal to the entire population of California. These working-class Latinos are America's teachers, firefighters, retail and hospitality workers, health care and support workers. They are parents and grandparents supporting millions of children. Latinos are also the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. workforce, projected to make up 78% in the next decade.²

Despite their essential contributions to industries that power our economy — from construction and infrastructure to critical jobs staffing hospitals, schools, food service and production — Latino working-class families continue to face wage stagnation,³ rising costs of living⁴ and barriers to benefits such as retirement savings, health insurance and paid family leave.^{5,6}

Our Bipartisan Poll of Hispanic Voters showed that the cost of living and jobs remain the top concerns, underscoring how deeply questions of wages, job security, housing and health care resonate in our community.⁷ Latino voters cite low wages and a lack of good benefits, such as paid family leave and retirement savings, as their top job-related concerns. This research series aims to provide rigorous, data-driven insights to dispel misconceptions, highlight the resilience and diversity of Latino working families and inform solutions that strengthen the economy for everyone.

Defining the Latino Working Class

UnidosUS and PRB define the working class using a blended approach that combines educational attainment (individuals ages 25 and older with less than a bachelor's degree) and income (adults ages 18 and older living in families with incomes below 300% of the poverty line).^{**} However, the idea of the "working class" has always been broader than income or credentials. It is also a social and political category, defined by the shared experiences of those who rely on wages to survive, who often lack the wealth or security that buffers others from economic shocks and whose voices are too often underrepresented in public discourse.

*The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout our materials to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

**Data in this brief is based on PRB's analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (Annual Social and Economic Supplement), unless noted otherwise.

¹ PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (2025 Annual Social and Economic Supplement), accessed November 4, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.

² U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, "Latina Workers Are Playing a Growing Role in the U.S. Economy But Continue to Face Barriers to Economic Security" (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, 2022), https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/eee40829-6c42-4bcd-8e2b-e9def42e3ed2/final2-brief-on-latina-workers.pdf.

³ Francisca M. Antman, Brian Duncan and Stephen J. Trejo, "Hispanic Americans in the Labor Market: Patterns Over Time and Across Generations," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2023): 169–98, <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.37.1.169>.

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index – September 2025 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2025), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cpi.pdf>.

⁵ Hawkins, Devan, "Disparities in Access to Paid Sick Leave During the First Year of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine* 65, no. 5 (May 2023): 370–77, <https://doi.org/10.1097/JOM.0000000000002784>.

⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2023 (USDOL-24-2564) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2024), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf>.

⁷ UnidosUS, "Latino Voters Sound Alarm Over Lack of Congressional Oversight; GOP Largely Blamed for Government Shutdown," UnidosUS.org, November 3, 2025, <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/latino-voters-sound-alarm-over-lack-of-congressional-oversight-gop-largely-blamed-for-government-shutdown>.

For Latino families, this perspective deeply matters. To be “working class” is not only about economic standing, but also about the social networks that sustain their family members, neighborhoods where they live, policies that shape their opportunities and political narratives that often misrepresent their views and needs. Understanding this group in a holistic way helps define the Latino working class as both a statistical classification and as a community with a large and shared stake in our nation’s future.

Similarly, the idea of a “Latino community” is not a fixed or uniform category. It encompasses people from many nations of origin, cultural backgrounds and migration experiences. Many Latinos were born in the United States while others arrived more recently. The majority of Latinos — 8 out of every 10 — are citizens with legal status, while others are undocumented.⁸ The population is also young: A Latino who is a citizen and eligible voter turns 18 years old every 30 seconds.⁹

What connects these diverse experiences of the Latino working class in the United States are shared languages, many types of cultural ties and a collective pursuit of economic mobility and belonging. In this sense, neither “Latino” nor “working class” represents a single, exact measure, but both describe groups bound by common conditions and aspirations. This series seeks to illuminate these connections while also recognizing the wide range of identities and stories that make up the Latino working class.

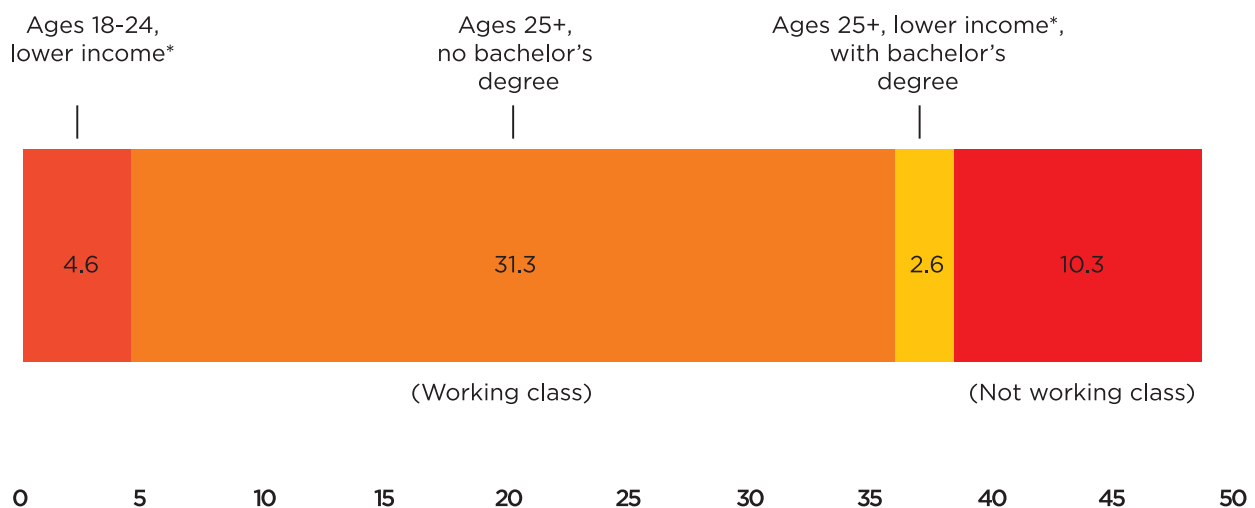
The series will feature three briefs:

- *Latino Working Class: America’s Economic Engine*, which provides a demographic snapshot and highlights key subgroups.
- *The Latino Working Class at Work*, which explores jobs, wages and workplace conditions.
- *Costs of Living and Livelihood Among the Latino Working Class*, which examines housing, health care, debt and wealth.

Together, these briefs provide a clear and comprehensive picture of Latino working-class life today, laying the groundwork for U.S. policies that advance economic equity, opportunity and prosperity.

A Demographic Portrait of the U.S. Latino Working Class

**U.S. Latino Adults by Working Class Status,
(Numbers in Millions), 2024**



*Lower income = Less than \$96,000 for a family of four, or below 300% of the poverty line.
Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

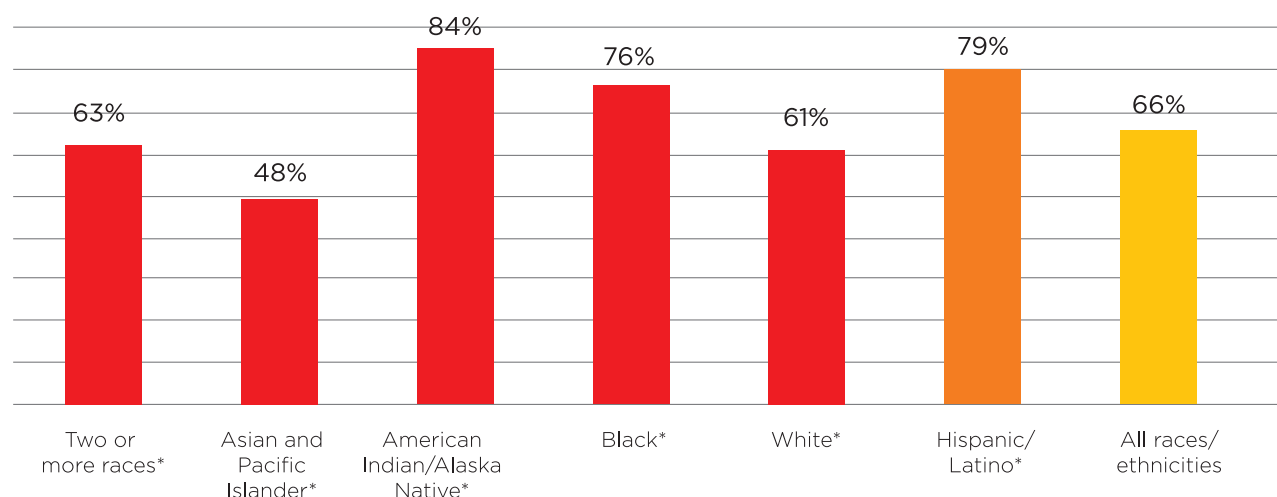
⁸ UnidosUS, Statistics About the U.S. Latino Population, UnidosUS.org, accessed November 4, 2025, <https://unidosus.org/facts/statistics-about-latinos-in-the-us-unidosus>.

⁹ Fernández Campbell, Alexia, “Every 30 Seconds, a Latino Reaches Voting Age. You Read That Right,” *The Atlantic*, August 26, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/08/every-30-seconds-a-latino-reaches-voting-age-you-read-that-right/432627>.

The Racial Composition of the Latino Working Class

Nearly 4 out of 5 (79%) Latino adults are in the working class — more than any non-Hispanic/Latino group except for American Indian/Alaska Native adults (84%), and well above the national average of 66%. Though Latinos make up 18% of all U.S. adults, they account for 22% of America's working class.

Share of U.S. Working-Class Population Ages 18 and Older, by Race/Ethnicity, 2024



*Non-Hispanic

Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

Among the 79% of Latino adults who are categorized as working class, 88% are white, 5% are Black, 3% are two or more races, 3% are American Indian/Alaska Native and 1% are Asian and Pacific Islander. Those who identify as American Indian/Alaska Native comprise of a relatively small share of the U.S. Latino population, yet they have the highest likelihood (84%) of being in the working class, followed by white Latinos (79%) and Black Latinos (76%).

Intersections of Age, Gender and Immigration in the Latino Working Class

The Latino working-class experience is influenced by several intersecting factors including age, gender and personal and familial experiences with immigration. The Latino working class is generally younger than the (non-Hispanic) white working class, with 44% of working-class Latinos under the age of 40, compared with 28% of white working-class adults. But within the Latino population, elderly adults (ages 65 and older) are more likely to be in the working class (88%) than those ages 18 to 34 (71%) and 35 to 64 (83%). This gap across generations reflects the relatively high share of older Latino adults (60%) living in lower-income families or below 300% of the poverty line.*** Older Latino adults and their families rely heavily on Social Security as their primary retirement income but receive lower average benefits due to lifetime earnings disparities, compared with white households with more diverse sources of income.¹⁰

***The corresponding shares for adults ages 18 to 34 and those ages 35 to 64 are 54% and 50%, respectively.

¹⁰ Bravo Morales, Patricia, Samara Scheckler and Jennifer Molinsky, "Cumulative Disadvantage in Hispanic Homeownership: Barriers to Passing Housing Equity to the Next Generation" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2025), <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research-areas/working-papers/cumulative-disadvantage-hispanic-homeownership-barriers-passing>.

The number of Latino men and women in the working class is approximately equal (78% and 80%, respectively). Although Latinas are more likely to have college degrees than their male counterparts, many work in lower-wage jobs with few benefits or opportunities for advancement.^{11 12}

All but 13% of Latino immigrants are part of the working class. Among working-class Latino adults who immigrated to the United States, more than 1 in 3 (35%) are naturalized U.S. citizens. First-generation Latino immigrants face numerous obstacles to completing college and earning middle-class wages, including financial insecurity, limited institutional support, cultural barriers and discrimination in schools and the workforce.^{****}

Almost 3 of every 4 (70%) U.S. born Latino children of immigrants (second-generation Latinos) are part of the working class. Since second-generation Latino adults are younger, on average, than other generations of Latinos (94% are under the age of 65), they are more likely to have higher employment income. Younger generations of Latinos are also more likely to have a college degree than their parents' and grandparents' generations.

This generational diversity shows that working-class status among Latinos is not about one group, but rather about obstacles that impact families at every age and stage, such as immigration enforcement, occupational segregation, insufficient workplace protections and lack of access to jobs with good benefits.

Latino Adults in the U.S in the Working Class, by Selected Characteristic, 2024



Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

The Next Generation of the Latino Working Class

More than 55 million children in the United States live with at least one working-class adult, and more than 30% of these young people are Latino, underscoring the central role these families play in shaping the nation's future workforce. The Latino working class is young, growing and multigenerational — spanning first-generation immigrants, U.S.-born parents and the children who will carry this story forward:

- About 16.8 million Latino children live in households with at least one working-class Latino adult.
- About 23%, or 3.86 million, of these children live in working-class families with incomes below \$32,000 per year (below the poverty line for a family of four). These families face limited access to food, housing, health care and other necessities.

^{****}“First-generation” refers to those who have immigrated to the United States from another country; “second-generation” refers to U.S.-born individuals with at least one immigrant parent; “third-generation” refers to U.S.-born individuals whose parents are also U.S.-born.

¹¹ UCLA Latino Policy & Politics Institute, UCLA LPPI Data Brief Examines Latina Education Attainment in the U.S., February 29, 2024, <https://latino.ucla.edu/press/ucla-lppi-data-brief-examines-latina-education-attainment-in-the-u-s>.

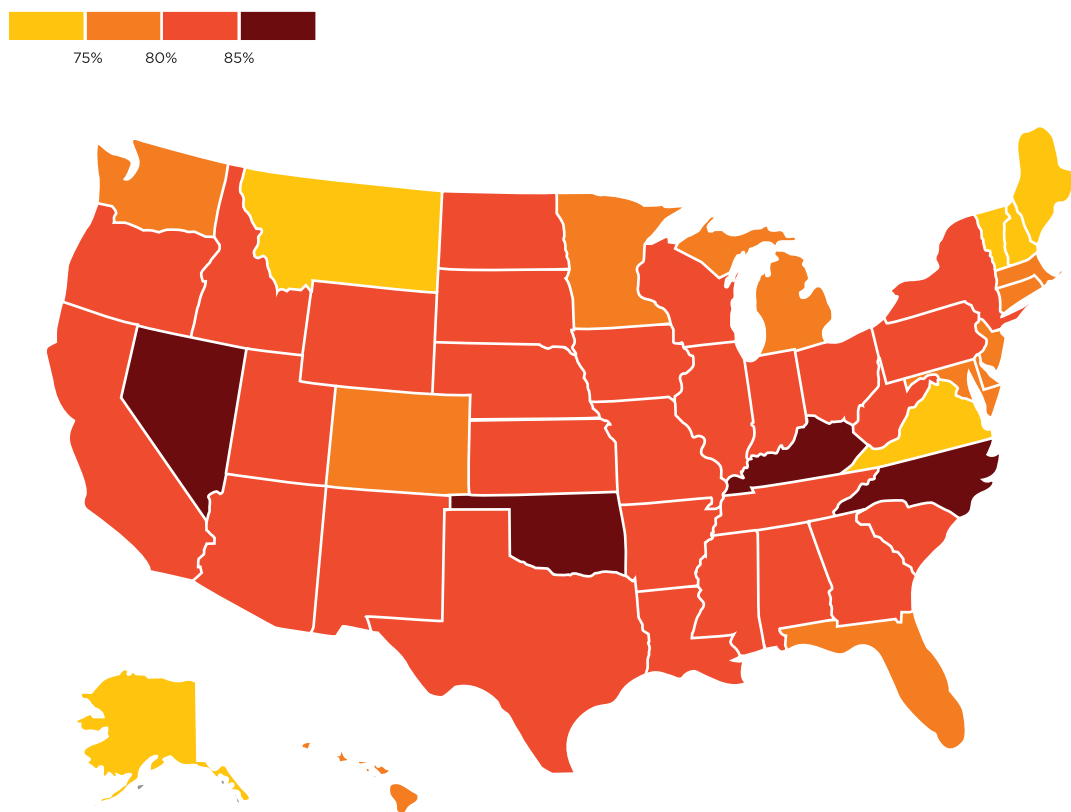
¹² UnidosUS, Making Jobs Work for Latinas, UnidosUS.org, September 2023, <https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/unidosus-makingjobsworkforlatinass.pdf>.

Children in Latino working-class families face barriers to quality education, good jobs and wealth building opportunities when they reach adulthood. These barriers are rooted in structural inequality, racism, classism and restrictive immigration policies.¹³ But growing up in working-class Latino households also instills powerful values that shape attitudes toward work, family and community. These values include solidarity, perseverance and a belief in the dignity of labor. These experiences form not only economic realities but also cultural foundations as children in the working class learn the value of hard work and the importance of collective responsibility. Recognizing both the challenges and strengths within these families is essential to understanding the future of the Latino working class and of the nation's workforce as a whole.

Differences Across States

There are significant differences in the experiences of Latinos depending on where they live. From 2020 to 2024, the share of working-class Latinos was highest in several states in the South and Southwest (Kentucky, Mississippi, Nevada, North Carolina and Oklahoma). Latinos were least likely to be part of the working class in parts of the Mountain West, Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions (District of Columbia, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Vermont and Virginia). These differences reflect disparities in Latinos' access to education and employment opportunities across states,¹⁴ as well as historical immigration trends and policy decisions that shape how working-class Latinos fare in different parts of the country.

Share of Latino Adults in the Working Class, by State, 2020-2024



Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2021-2025 Current Population Surveys.

¹³ Canizales, Stephanie L., and Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, "Working-Class Latina/o Youth Navigating Stratification and Inequality: A Review of Literature," *Sociology Compass* 16, no. 12 (2022): e13050, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.13050>.

¹⁴ U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee, National and State-Level Data on the Economic Situation of Hispanic Americans, 2022 (Washington, DC: U.S. Senate, 2022), <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/democrats/2022/9/national-and-state-level-data-on-the-economic-situation-of-hispanic-americans-2022>.

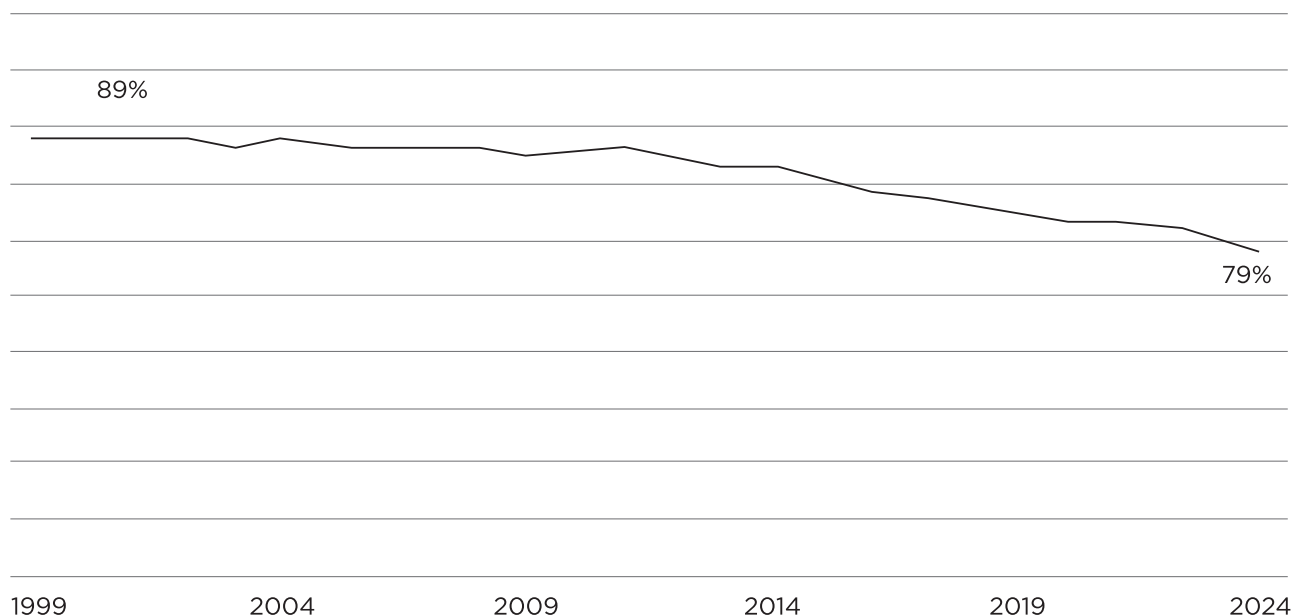
Education, Job Training and Work: A Complex Pathway

For many Latinos, education and job training provide a bridge to opportunity by unlocking career advancement and the chance for a better future.

Rising education levels over the past three decades have expanded opportunities and created greater educational diversity within the Latino community. Yet access to higher education remains a challenge for many; affordability, family commitments and other barriers prevent too many Latino students from completing a degree.¹⁵ As a result, Latino workers often enter the labor force earlier than other groups and remain in lower-wage jobs, even as they make vital economic contributions to their households and communities. The path to financial well-being, therefore, requires expanding access to education and skills training while also strengthening labor policy to ensure every job pays enough to sustain a high quality of life.

Today, 1 of every 5 college students in the United States is Latino, and Latino enrollment has surged by 372% between 1990 and 2020.¹⁶ These educational gains have contributed to a 10% decline in the share of Latinos classified as working class during the past quarter century.

Share of Latino Adults in the Working Class, 1999-2024



Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2000-2025 Current Population Surveys obtained from IPUMS USA.

Two-year colleges have also contributed to the rise in educational levels among Latinos and serve as a crucial gateway to higher education for many Latino students who enroll in these institutions at higher rates than other groups. Community colleges, vocational-technical colleges and career colleges expand access to higher education by providing more affordable credentials that are valuable in their own right.

Despite this progress, completion gaps persist: Latinos are 19% less likely than their white peers to graduate with a degree within six years of enrolling in college.¹⁷ Mental health challenges and affordability concerns are key factors, causing many Latinos to leave school before completing their degree.¹⁸

¹⁵ Mora, Lauren, "Hispanic Enrollment Reaches New High at Four-Year Colleges in the U.S., but Affordability Remains an Obstacle," Pew Research Center, October 7, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/07/hispanic-enrollment-reaches-new-high-at-four-year-colleges-in-the-u-s-but-affordability-remains-an-obstacle>.

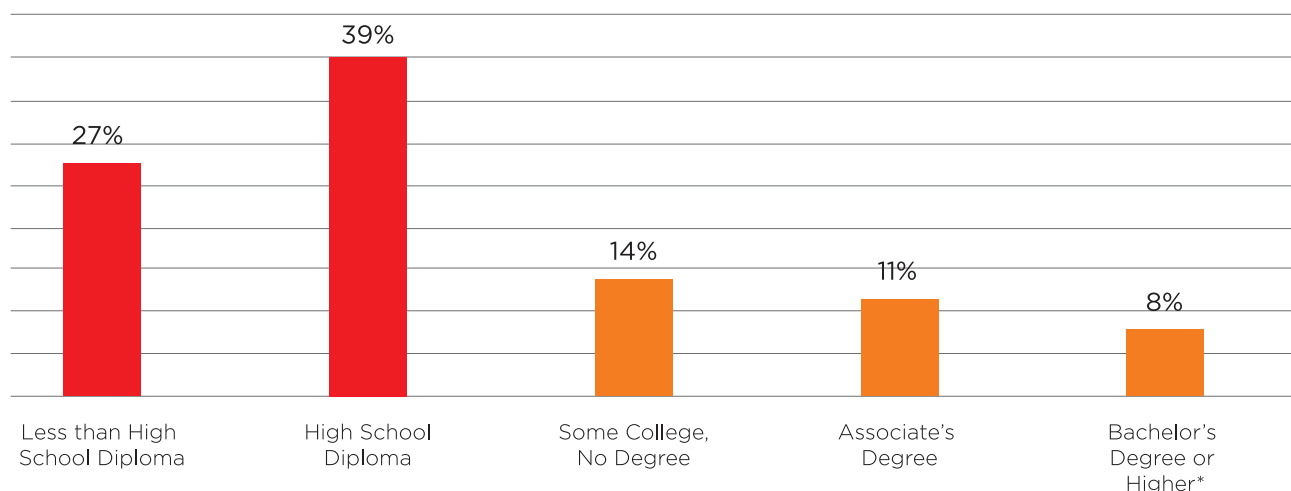
¹⁶ UnidosUS, "A Look into Latino Trends in Higher Education: Enrollment, Completion, & Student Debt," UnidosUS.org, August 2022, <https://unidosus.org/publications/a-look-into-latino-trends-in-higher-education>.

¹⁷ UnidosUS, Higher Education, UnidosUS.org, accessed November 5, 2025, <https://unidosus.org/higher-ed>.

¹⁸ UnidosUS, Latinos and Higher Education Survey, UnidosUS.org, October 22, 2024, <https://unidosus.org/publications/latinos-and-higher-education-survey>.

Among the working class, Latinos are less likely than their non-Hispanic white peers to have an associate's degree (11% versus 19%); they are also less likely to have some college experience but no degree (14% versus 23%). About 18% of Latino adults report having one or more professional certifications or occupational licenses, compared with 29% of white adults.¹⁹

Percent of U.S. Latino Working Class Adults Ages 25 and Older by Highest Level of Education, 2024



Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

*To meet the definition of working class, those with a bachelor's degree or higher must have a family income that is less than 300% of the poverty line.

While most college-educated Latinos have higher family incomes, degrees are not a guaranteed path to higher earnings. About 2.6 million Latinos who are ages 25 and older with college degrees (27%) live in lower-income families (income below 300% of the poverty threshold or less than \$96,000 for a family of four). Comparatively, among Latino adults without a bachelor's degree, 59% are in lower-income families. College-educated Latino men, especially first-generation immigrants, face a significant wage penalty within the labor market compared to their white peers with similar qualifications. This penalty persists even after controlling qualifications and other factors. In contrast, both U.S. and foreign-born Latinas who have completed college earn wages comparable to native-born non-Hispanic white women.²⁰

Job skills training offers a strong alternative to college, creating another pathway to well-paying and stable jobs. Evidence shows that 94% of those who complete a registered apprenticeship earn an average annual salary of \$84,000, and a larger share of Latinos are gaining access to these programs.²¹ From 2010 to 2019, the share of registered apprentices who were Latino increased by 148%.²²

The growing number of Latinos pursuing college represents meaningful progress in educational attainment that deserves continued support and investment. Higher education opens important doors and creates pathways to opportunity. At the same time, a strong and fair economy requires multiple pathways toward economic security, including increased access to college education, job training and labor policies that strengthen all jobs.

¹⁹ PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (2024 Basic Monthly Data), accessed November 13, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps.html>.

²⁰ Wang, Sharron Xuanren and Arthur Sakamoto, "Can Higher Education Ameliorate Racial/Ethnic Disadvantage? An Analysis of the Wage Assimilation of College-Educated Hispanic Americans," *SAGE Open* 11, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211009197>.

²¹ ApprenticeshipUSA, Explore Registered Apprenticeship, Apprenticeship.gov, March 2025, <https://labor.maryland.gov/employment/appr/apprweek2025exploreregapprenticeship.pdf>.

²² U.S. Department of Labor, Overview of United States Apprenticeship (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2021), <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/files/20211103-apprenticeship-equity.pdf>.

Valuing the Work That Builds America

Being part of the working class is not synonymous with low wages or instability. It is comprised of the people whose labor keeps the economy running — from construction and care workers to manufacturing, education and logistics workers. What defines the working class is not economic hardship, but the shared experience of relying on wages to live, raising families and contributing to the community.

The Latino working class embodies this resilience, pride and work ethic — all of which have long-defined America's workforce. During the pandemic, Latino essential workers kept hospitals, schools, grocery stores and supply chains running, often at great personal risk. Yet, too often, policy and public discourse have failed to value such contributions. Investing in the Latino working class is a recognition of their potential and an investment in the foundation of the nation's economy.

Building an economy where the Latino working class can thrive means valuing every form of work and ensuring that those who perform these jobs are protected, respected and rewarded. Policies that raise wages, expand benefits and protect workers through fair labor standards, unions and enforcement will help ensure that prosperity is shared and sustainable. The data in these briefs paints a picture of the engine that powers the nation's economy. The Latino working class is dynamic and powerful and deserves policies that will support continued success, benefit our economy and drive the American story forward.

