Immigrants and racial and ethnic minorities make up an increasing share of the U.S. labor force and child population. Given current disparities in children’s opportunities and intergenerational mobility for children of different backgrounds and the influence parental working conditions can have on children’s development, understanding the distribution of job characteristics and their quality for employed parents from different racial, ethnic, and immigrant backgrounds is important. This article examines 2007–2011 data from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey to determine minority and/or foreign-born parents’ access to jobs that allow them to invest in their children’s development. Specifically, it looks at whether parents’ jobs offer a basic economic security wage, health insurance coverage, and pension plan, because these job characteristics may influence the health, well-being, and resources of working families and children. The analysis reveals that foreign-born, Hispanic, and Black working parents are significantly more likely than U.S.-born, White, or Asian working parents to have a job that pays below the basic economic security wage, does not offer health insurance, and does not offer a pension plan. Foreign-born Hispanic parents in particular are shown to be significantly disadvantaged in the labor market. Findings suggest that without changes to increase parents’ access to jobs with higher wages and benefits, disparities in children’s well-being and development by race and ethnicity and nativity will likely persist.

Data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) have documented the dramatic change in the demographic composition of the U.S. labor force over the last 50 years. With higher birth rates and higher labor force
participation rates, Hispanics have become an increasingly large share of the workforce, accounting for nearly 9.0 percent of the labor force in 1990, 12.0 percent in 2000, and 15.0 percent in 2010 and are projected to account for 19.0 percent in 2020 and 30.0 percent by 2050. The racial composition of the labor force has changed as well. Whites accounted for 78.0 percent of the labor force in 1990, 72.0 percent in 2000, and 67.5 percent in 2010 and are projected to account for only 62.0 percent in 2020. Although immigration rates have slowed since 2005, foreign-born adults still comprised 42.0 percent of total labor force growth between then and 2010 and account for 16.4 percent of the total civilian labor force in the United States in 2012 (up from 5.0 percent in 1970 and 9.0 percent in 1990).

Concurrent with the growing diversity of the labor force is an increase in research to investigate whether and how employment trends and job characteristics differ across race and ethnic groups and between foreign-born and U.S.-born populations. Studies that have focused on employed adults have found evidence of a wide variation in the type of employment, occupations, and job characteristics by race and ethnicity and nativity. Even within education and skill level, wage disparities exist. Until recently, much of this research focused on men and on earnings. Studies of job quality among working parents from a single race, ethnicity, or country of origin exist. However, except for two recent reports (which did not undergo peer review) that examine individual job characteristics (one by Glynn on unadjusted [bivariate] rates of access to paid leave and schedule flexibility and the other by Clemans-Cope et al. on rates of health insurance by firm size and work arrangement and by race and ethnicity, using the 2005 CPS Contingent Work Supplement), few studies of parental job quality focus on race and ethnicity or immigration. To our knowledge, no large sample studies have been conducted that nationally represent employed parents either by race and ethnicity or by immigration status or that nationally represent foreign-born employed parents by subgroup.

This gap in the literature is important because racial and ethnic minorities and foreign-born persons represent an increasing proportion of not only the adult labor force but also U.S. children. In 2011, 43 percent of U.S. children were from a minority group and nearly a quarter lived in families in which at least one parent was born outside the United States. Therefore, the working conditions of minority and foreign-born parents will have an increasing influence on the living conditions, and thus the well-being and development, of U.S. children. In a context of substantial disparities in children’s opportunities and achievement, understanding the characteristics and quality of jobs held by employed parents and their distribution is critical.