

Immigrant Workers

Vital to the U.S. COVID-19 Response, Disproportionately Vulnerable

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Executive Summary

With the COVID-19 virus spreading rapidly within the United States, workers in several key industries are at the frontlines of keeping U.S. residents healthy, safe, and fed. This includes not only doctors and nurses, but also the custodians who are cleaning hospital rooms, checkout clerks at grocery stores and pharmacies, scientists racing to develop treatments and a vaccine, and the people who grow, harvest, and transport food across the country. Immigrant workers are over-represented in a number of these occupations that are vital in the fight against the coronavirus. While the foreign born represented 17 percent of the 156 million civilians working in 2018, they accounted for larger shares in some frontline occupations: 29 percent of physicians, 38 percent of home health aides, and 23 percent of retail-store pharmacists, for example.

Immigrant workers are also over-represented in some of the non-frontline industries that are being devastated as more people follow social distancing guidelines and more states and cities issue shelter-in-place orders. Travel restrictions, orders limiting the operation or mandating the shutdown of restaurants and bars, and the closure of businesses deemed nonessential have already led to mass lay-

offs. In just the first week of serious social distancing measures across the country, some 3.3 million new unemployment claims were filed—a rate that while unprecedented in U.S. history is likely only the tip of the iceberg.¹ Immigrant workers are over-represented in many of the hardest-hit industries: hotels and restaurants, cleaning services for now-shuttered office buildings, and personal services such as in-home child care and hair and nail salons. The economic pain brought by this sudden and dramatic economic contraction will bring hardship to millions of Americans in the coming weeks and months. For many immigrant workers, the hardship will be exacerbated by limited access to safety-net systems and to federal relief, both for those who are legally present and those who are unauthorized.

The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates 6 million foreign-born workers are employed in vital, frontline industries; another 6 million work in some of the industries hardest hit by the fight against COVID-19.²

The first section of this fact sheet reviews the roles immigrant workers serve in industries at the frontlines of the COVID-19 response. The second section discusses the jobs immigrant workers fill within industries that are laying off large numbers of workers.

1 Immigrant Workers in Industries Vital to Pandemic Response

Immigrant workers (meaning those who were born outside the United States, regardless of whether they have since become naturalized citizens, are legal permanent residents, lack legal status, or are temporary workers) make up about 17 percent of civilians working.³ But they are over-represented in some of the industries that are vital to the coronavirus response—comprising 22 percent of scientific researchers, some of whom may be working on treatments and a vaccine, and 34 percent of those providing vital transportation within urban centers. And they work at high rates within some of the occupations within the health-care field. Overall, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) finds that 6 million

foreign-born workers make up 19 percent of the U.S. workers in such frontline industries. The section below details the occupations filled by immigrant workers within some of these broad industries.

A. Health Care

Within health-care and social service industries, immigrant workers make up disproportionate shares of those in certain occupations. For example, the foreign born comprise 29 percent of physicians, 22 percent of nursing assistants, 29 percent of housekeepers, and 24 percent of janitors and building cleaners in the health-care industry.⁴ They are also 38 percent of home health aides and 25 percent of personal care aides, who care for aging and disabled patients in their homes. Such workers must place their own health at risk to travel to and visit their clients amid the coronavirus outbreak.

TABLE 1
Workers in Industries Vital to the COVID-19 Response, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Share
Health Care and Social Services	18,721,000	3,099,000	17%
Essential Retail and Wholesale: Groceries, pharmacies, and gas stations	5,196,000	924,000	18%
Manufacturing: Food, medicine, soap/cleaning agents	2,703,000	695,000	26%
Transportation: Truck, rail, and water	2,228,000	385,000	17%
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting	1,957,000	536,000	27%
Transportation: Bus, metro, and taxi drivers	1,110,000	380,000	34%
Postal Service	690,000	93,000	13%
Scientific Research and Development	671,000	146,000	22%
Total Workers in Industries Vital to the COVID-19 Response	33,277,000	6,259,000	19%
Total Civilian Workforce	155,716,000	27,124,000	17%

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) tabulations of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), accessed March 19, 2020, through Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas, and Matthew Sobek, "IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 [dataset]."

TABLE 2

Ten Largest Occupations in the Health-Care and Social Services Industries, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Share
Registered Nurses	2,985,000	472,000	16%
Nursing Assistants	1,363,000	301,000	22%
Personal Care Aides	1,138,000	289,000	25%
Licensed Practical and Licensed Vocational Nurses	815,000	124,000	15%
Physicians	808,000	233,000	29%
Medical and Health Services Managers	648,000	89,000	14%
Medical Assistants	497,000	78,000	16%
Home Health Aides	476,000	182,000	38%
Social Workers, not otherwise classified	425,000	41,000	10%
Receptionists and Information Clerks	410,000	45,000	11%
All Workers in Health-Care and Social Services	18,721,000	3,099,000	17%

Note: Tables 2-5 and 7-9 list the number of workers by occupation *within a given industry*. Many occupations span several industries, so the number listed for an occupation within one industry does not represent the full number of workers in that occupation across the U.S. workforce.

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS, accessed March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

B. Essential Retail and Wholesale: Grocery Stores, Pharmacies, and Food Wholesalers

Immigrants represent large shares of the workers who are keeping essential businesses such as grocery stores and pharmacies open amid the crisis. These retail workers have faced long, stressful shifts as Americans stock up on food and medicine, quickly emptying store shelves. And retail workers are often in close contact with large numbers of customers, placing them at risk of contracting COVID-19 themselves. Within essential retail businesses, immi-

grant workers form particularly high shares of pharmacists (23 percent), butchers and meat processors (23 percent), and drivers (21 percent). Foreign-born workers are also key in the food wholesale process, comprising 68 percent of those who grade and sort agricultural products and 42 percent of food packers and packagers.

Immigrants represent large shares of the workers who are keeping essential businesses such as grocery stores and pharmacies open amid the crisis.

TABLE 3

Ten Largest Occupations in Frontline Retail and Wholesale Industries, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Share
Cashiers	1,122,000	182,000	16%
First-Line Supervisors of Retail Sales Workers	685,000	112,000	16%
Stockers and Order Fillers	407,000	55,000	13%
Manual Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers	355,000	53,000	15%
Pharmacy Technicians	271,000	36,000	13%
Customer Service Representatives	209,000	29,000	14%
Driver/Sales Workers and Truck Drivers	197,000	41,000	21%
Pharmacists	188,000	43,000	23%
Retail Salespersons	130,000	23,000	17%
Butchers and Other Meat, Poultry, and Fish Processing Workers	121,000	27,000	23%
All Workers in Essential Retail	5,196,000	924,000	18%

Note: Tables 2-5 and 7-9 list the number of workers by occupation *within a given industry*. Many occupations span several industries, so the number listed for an occupation within one industry does not represent the full number of workers in that occupation across the U.S. workforce. For example, “Manual Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers,” listed in this table, also appears in tables 4 and 9, which cover manufacturing and building services industries, respectively.

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

C. *Manufacturing*

In addition to food, U.S. residents are also amassing supplies of soap and other cleaning solutions to keep their hands and environments virus-free, and are stockpiling medicines to treat ongoing health conditions as well as the symptoms of COVID-19.

Immigrants represent 26 percent of the workers who manufacture food, medicine, and soap/cleaning supplies. In these industries, they are 50 percent of hand packers and packagers, 42 percent of operators running packing and filling machines, 39 percent of other food processing workers, and 38 percent of bakers.

TABLE 4

Ten Largest Occupations in Essential Retail and Wholesale Industries, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Share
Packaging and Filling Machine Operators and Tenders	180,000	75,000	42%
Managers, not otherwise classified	146,000	26,000	18%
Food Processing Workers, All Other	138,000	54,000	39%
First-Line Supervisors of Production and Operating Workers	118,000	28,000	23%
Manual Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers	117,000	32,000	27%
Miscellaneous Production Workers, including Equipment Operators and Tenders	110,000	30,000	27%
Bakers	100,000	38,000	38%
Sales Representatives, Wholesale and Manufacturing	91,000	10,000	10%
Driver/Sales Workers and Truck Drivers	81,000	15,000	18%
Packers and Packagers, Manual	80,000	40,000	50%
All Workers in Manufacturing of Food, Medicine, and Soap/Cleaning Agents	2,703,000	695,000	26%

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

D. Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting

Immigrants are, of course, a very large part of the workforce in the agricultural sector responsible for planting, growing, raising, harvesting, and process-

ing the country's food. The foreign born account for 27 percent of all workers in agricultural, forestry, fishing, and hunting industries. They are 73 percent of hand packers and packagers, 62 percent of agricultural graders and sorters, and 32 percent of supervisors.

TABLE 5

Ten Largest Occupations in Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting Industries, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Share
Agricultural Workers, not otherwise classified	752,000	364,000	48%
Farmers, Ranchers, and (not otherwise classified) Agricultural Managers	554,000	36,000	6%
First-Line Supervisors of Farming, Fishing, and Forestry Workers	68,000	21,000	32%
Driver/Sales Workers and Truck Drivers	56,000	10,000	18%
Logging Workers	41,000	2,000	5%
Fishing and Hunting Workers	32,000	5,000	16%
Graders and Sorters, Agricultural Products	22,000	14,000	62%
Animal Caretakers	22,000	3,000	12%
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, except Legal, Medical, and Executive	18,000	2,000	10%
Miscellaneous Production Workers, including Equipment Operators and Tenders	17,000	4,000	21%
All Workers in Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, and Hunting Industries	1,957,000	536,000	27%

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

2 Immigrant Representation in Hard-Hit Industries

Immigrants are also over-represented in some of the industries that are now seeing huge declines in demand due to efforts to slow the spread of the pandemic. With state and local governments urging people to engage in social distancing and limit trips outside the home, and some governments mandating the closure of “nonessential” businesses, economic activity has drastically slowed—hitting some industries particularly hard. Restaurants and bars around the country are either closing entirely or scaling back dramatically as they move to takeout services only. The entire travel industry has seen mass cancellations and has been laying off workers.

Stores other than grocery stores and pharmacies are shutting their doors for an unknown period. People are avoiding (or are barred from accessing) services that bring them into close contact with others, such as haircuts, manicures, and massages. And with so many Americans either working from home or unemployed—and wishing to avoid contact with others—many households are letting go of in-home help such as housecleaners and child-care workers. MPI finds that 20 percent of the U.S. workers in vulnerable industries facing massive layoffs are immigrants. These 6 million individuals are coincidentally about the same number as the immigrant workers in industries vital to the coronavirus response, meaning that collectively 12 million foreign-born workers are at the leading edge of the response to and impacts from the pandemic. The jobs filled by immigrant workers within some of the industries facing mass job loss are detailed here.

TABLE 6

Workers in Industries Facing Major Layoffs Due to the COVID-19 Economic Downturn, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Share
Accommodation and Food Services	11,494,000	2,536,000	22%
Nonessential Retail	7,221,000	1,048,000	15%
Personal Services and Private Households	3,758,000	1,112,000	30%
Arts and Entertainment	3,436,000	418,000	12%
Building Services	1,527,000	584,000	38%
Nonessential Transportation: Air Travel, Sightseeing, Couriers, Messengers	1,525,000	240,000	16%
Travel Assistance	331,000	63,000	19%
Total in Industries Facing Major Layoffs	29,291,000	6,000,000	20%
Total Civilian Workforce	155,716,000	27,124,000	17%

Note: Nonessential retail includes clothing, shoe, jewelry, sporting goods, book, department, office supply, and other stores that have largely been closed as part of the response to COVID-19.

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

A. *Accommodation and Food Services*

Facing a spate of international traveler restrictions and sharply curbed domestic demand, airlines are cutting flights and hotels and other temporary rental lodging are facing empty rooms and, as a result, reduced need for staff. A growing number of bars and restaurants in many parts of the United States

have cut staff or simply opted to close altogether, as their business has been put on hiatus or sharply curtailed. Within the broad accommodation and food services industry, immigrants are substantial shares of workers within particular occupations. The foreign born represent 52 percent of maids and cleaners in this industry, 38 percent of chefs and head cooks, 30 percent of cooks, and 22 percent of food preparation workers.

TABLE 7

Ten Largest Occupations in Accommodation and Food Services Industries, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Percent
Waiters	2,083,000	362,000	17%
Cooks	1,784,000	536,000	30%
Food Service Managers	942,000	204,000	22%
Cashiers	813,000	151,000	19%
Food Preparation Workers	761,000	167,000	22%
First-Line Supervisors of Food Preparation and Serving Workers	483,000	84,000	17%
Bartenders	392,000	35,000	9%
Fast Food and Counter Workers	391,000	48,000	12%
Chefs and Head Cooks	378,000	143,000	38%
Maids and Housekeepers	372,000	193,000	52%
Total Accommodation and Food Services	11,494,000	2,536,000	22%

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

B. *Personal Services and Private Households*

The personal and private household services industries are also seeing jobs disappear in large numbers. These industries include in-person services, such as

manicures and massages that people opt to avoid when finances are tight. Immigrants make up a full 30 percent of workers in these industries, including 78 percent of manicurists and pedicurists, 63 percent of maids and housekeepers, 52 percent of laundry and dry-cleaning services, and 46 percent of parking attendants.

TABLE 8

Ten Largest Occupations in Personal Services and Private Household Industries, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Percent
Maids and Housekeepers	392,000	248,000	63%
Manicurists and Pedicurists	250,000	194,000	78%
Hairdressers, Hairstylists, and Cosmetologists	850,000	140,000	16%
Child-Care Workers	231,000	69,000	30%
Personal Care Aides	147,000	45,000	30%
Laundry and Dry-Cleaning Workers	79,000	41,000	52%
Cleaners of Vehicles and Equipment	118,000	36,000	31%
Barbers	123,000	26,000	21%
Massage Therapists	141,000	25,000	18%
Parking Attendants	44,000	20,000	46%
Total personal services and private household	3,758,000	1,112,000	30%

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

C. *Building Services*

With most office workers across the country now working from home, local mandates to close “nonessential” workplaces, and apartment buildings scaling back services for public health reasons, the number

of workers required to staff and clean buildings has been greatly reduced. Immigrants account for 38 percent of all building services workers, including 59 percent of maids and housekeepers, 41 percent of janitors, and 21 percent of maintenance and repair workers.

TABLE 9

Ten Largest Occupations in the Building Services Industry, 2018

	All Workers	Foreign-Born Workers	
		Number	Percent
Janitors and Building Cleaners	723,000	298,000	41%
Maids and Housekeepers	317,000	188,000	59%
First-Line Supervisors of Housekeeping and Janitorial Workers	140,000	36,000	26%
Pest Control Workers	80,000	7,000	9%
Other Installation, Maintenance, and Repair Workers	44,000	9,000	21%
Secretaries and Administrative Assistants, except Legal, Medical, and Executive	15,000	1,000	8%
Managers, not otherwise classified	13,000	3,000	20%
Sales Representatives of Services, except Advertising, Insurance, Financial Services, and Travel	13,000	< 1,000	3%
Manual Laborers and Freight, Stock, Material Movers	11,000	4,000	36%
Laundry and Dry-Cleaning Workers	10,000	2,000	17%
Total Building Services	1,527,000	584,000	38%

Source: MPI tabulation of the U.S. Census Bureau's 2018 ACS accessed on March 19, 2020 through IPUMS.

3 In Hard-Hit Industries, Immigrants Are More Vulnerable

Mass layoffs in industries bearing the brunt of the sharp economic slowdown will have enormous ripple effects across the economy—and on individual households. If the economic dislocation continues for weeks and months, many families will struggle to afford food, medical care, and other necessities, and may fall behind on rent, utility bills, and credit card and car payments.⁵ These hardships will affect millions upon millions of residents, U.S. born and foreign born alike.

This reality is despite urgent government efforts to offer relief, which culminated with Senate passage March 25 of an estimated \$2 trillion pandemic aid package.⁶ Beyond congressional action on a relief

measure, federal, state, and local governments are making other efforts to curb the economic damage.

For example, some localities are barring landlords from evicting tenants and blocking utility companies from disconnecting services for nonpayment.⁷ The federal government is allowing individuals with federal student loans to stop accruing interest and pause payments⁸ and homeowners affected by the economic downturn to have mortgage payments reduced or deferred for a year.⁹ To date, President Donald Trump has signed a bill to expand access to paid family and medical leave and nutrition assistance, and Congress was poised to send the president on March 27 a massive \$2 trillion measure including cash relief payments for most Americans and an expansion of unemployment benefits.¹⁰

Yet immigrant workers have less access to this relief and to existing safety-net programs, and also face additional vulnerabilities. Immigrants facing

layoffs in the hardest-hit industries profiled in this fact sheet have lower incomes and larger families than their U.S.-born peers in the same industries. Thirty-eight percent are in low-income households (with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty line), compared to 30 percent of their U.S.-born counterparts. Twenty-eight percent lack health insurance coverage, which is twice the rate of similar U.S.-born workers. And 38 percent of these immigrant workers have a minor child at home, compared to 23 percent of the U.S.-born workers. Fifty-five percent have limited English proficiency.

The pace and extent the layoffs resulting from the COVID-19 economic downturn will test state and local unemployment systems and federal, state, and local safety nets in unprecedented ways. Noncitizens—who represent more than half of workers in the hardest-hit industries—face restricted access to some of the safety-net programs on offer, ineligible for some, eligible for others. For example, a sizable number of noncitizen workers, including green-card holders, those on a temporary visa, and individuals with Temporary Protected Status (TPS) or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), can access unemployment insurance. And U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has made clear that unemployment insurance does not count in a public-charge test.¹¹ On the other hand, most noncitizens—including unauthorized immigrants, temporary workers, and many of those who obtained green cards within the past five years—cannot access the federal, means-tested benefits that other workers turn to in times of need. These programs include Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, also known as food stamps). SNAP, in particular, was used heavily by struggling families during the 2008-09 recession. Many immigrants will be eligible for the cash relief payments

in the \$2 trillion relief package. But unauthorized immigrants without Social Security numbers and most U.S.-citizen or legal immigrant spouses who file taxes jointly with such unauthorized immigrants would not.

4 Conclusion

The COVID-19 outbreak and the stunningly rapid economic contraction it has brought will strain the health and well-being of workers on the frontlines of the pandemic as well as the economic resources of tens of millions of U.S. workers. Immigrant workers will form a particularly hard-hit group. Access to safety-net services will be thin for a majority of immigrant workers in these frontline industries because they are noncitizens.

The pandemic presents serious questions about the impacts of restricting public health insurance and safety-net programs to some of the most vulnerable immigrants, at a time when it is imperative to prevent *all* residents from becoming ill and transmitting the virus to others. And when the best tool the United States has against the virus is to keep the great majority of workers at home, even at the cost of their incomes and jobs, there are real questions about what standard of living the government should guarantee, and to whom. The economic fates of those with most constrained access to economic supports—unauthorized immigrants—affect not only these immigrants themselves, but also their 2 million U.S.-citizen or lawful permanent resident spouses and their 4.1 million U.S.-citizen children.¹²

How deeply the coronavirus hits communities and how quickly the United States can recover, medically and economically, will depend partly on how the country treats its most vulnerable families, immigrant and U.S. born alike, in this moment of peril.

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Labor, “[Unemployment Insurance Weekly Claims](#)” (news release, March 26, 2020).
- 2 Some industries were not included in this analysis because they are not clearly either a frontline responder to the COVID-19 virus or an industry that figures to be among the hardest hit by the sharp economic slowdown resulting from social distancing and curbs on travel and other activities. For example, some manufacturing may be slowing as consumer demand for nonessential goods dries up, but manufacturing of certain necessities—respirators, masks, toilet paper, and hand sanitizer, among the most visible right now—may be expanding. Child-care workers also fall into a middle ground. Many child-care and early education centers have closed or will do so as families withdraw children or as states mandate their closure. But others are preparing to stay open and are staffed to care for the children of medical professionals and other frontline workers, placing these child-care workers also at the forefront of the coronavirus response.
- 3 U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, accessed March 19, 2020, through Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas, and Matthew Sobek, “[IPUMS USA: Version 10.0 \[dataset\]](#).”
- 4 All data provided in the fact sheet derives from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), unless specified otherwise.
- 5 The Brookings Institution estimates that about 40 percent of U.S. residents lack the finances to weather even a \$400 emergency. See Stephen Roll, Olga Kondratjeva, and Michal Grinstein-Weiss, “[Financial Well-Being: Measuring Financial Perceptions and Experiences in Low- And Moderate-Income Households](#),” Brookings blog, December 13, 2019..
- 6 H.R. 748 - CARES Act, 116th Cong., 2nd sess.
- 7 See, for example, Samantha Fields, “[HUD, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and Growing List of Cities Suspend Evictions because of Coronavirus](#),” Marketplace, March 18, 2020,
- 8 U.S. Department of Education, “[Delivering on President Trump’s Promise, Secretary DeVos Suspends Federal Student Loan Payments, Waives Interest During National Emergency](#)” (news release, March 20, 2020).
- 9 Chris Arnold, “[U.S. Orders up to a Yearlong Break on Mortgage Payments](#),” National Public Radio, March 19, 2020.
- 10 CNN, “[What’s in the \\$2 trillion coronavirus stimulus bill](#),” CNN, March 26, 2020.
- 11 U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), “[Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds](#),” *Federal Register* 84, August 14, 2019, 41292-508.
- 12 Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub, “[Profile of the Unauthorized Population: United States](#),” accessed March 27, 2020; Julia Gelatt and Jie Zong, *Settling In: A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2018).

About the Author



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Dr. Gelatt previously worked as a Research Associate at the Urban Institute, where her mixed-methods research focused on state policies toward immigrants; barriers to and facilitators of immigrant families’ access to public benefits and public prekindergarten programs; and identifying youth victims of human trafficking. She was a Research Assistant at MPI before graduate school.

Dr. Gelatt earned her PhD in sociology, with a specialization in demography, from Princeton University, where her work focused on the relationship between immigration status and children’s health and well-being. She earned a bachelor of the arts in sociology/anthropology from Carleton College.

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