



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

RURAL STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the United States, rural, urban, and suburban students enroll in and complete higher education at very different rates, with rural students most often attending and graduating at much lower rates. In rural high schools, students achieve graduation rates similar to their urban and suburban counterparts, but their college enrollment rates are much lower. In 2015, 29% of 18–24-year-olds from rural areas [enrolled](#) in a postsecondary education program compared to 48% from urban areas. That same year, [only 19% of rural adults](#) had a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 33% of their urban peers. Access and affordability contribute to these numbers, but the news is not all bad. The proportion of rural adults with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 5% in 1960 to 20% in 2017.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- Among all those 25 and older in rural areas in 2015, [18% of rural men and 20% of rural women](#) had earned a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 32% of urban men and 33% of urban women.
- Among those 25 and older in rural areas in 2015, white people were [more likely to have earned](#) a bachelor's degree or high school diploma:
 - Twenty percent of white people, 10% of Black people, 10% of American Indian/Alaska Native people, and 9% of Hispanic or Latino people in rural areas [held a bachelor's degree or higher](#).
 - Nine percent of white people, 7% of Black people, 8% of American Indian/Alaska Native people, and 5% of Hispanic or Latino people in rural areas [held an associate's degree](#).
 - Thirty-six percent of white people, 39% of Black people, 37% of American Indian/Alaska Native people, and 30% of Hispanic or Latino people in rural areas [had a high school diploma or equivalent](#).

ENROLLMENT & COMPLETION

- The number of rural students filling out the FAFSA [decreased by 18%](#) from 2019 to 2020.
- [According to the National Student Clearinghouse](#), 29% of rural high school graduates in the graduating class of 2020 enrolled immediately in college compared to 26% of urban high school graduates and 29% of suburban high school graduates from that year.
- Forty-one percent of rural high school graduates in the class of 2012 [completed a college degree within six years](#) of graduation compared to 36% of urban high school graduates and 47% of suburban high school graduates.
- In 2018, urban adults ages 25 and older [were more likely to hold a bachelor's degree](#) than rural adults.
 - Thirty-five percent of urban adults ages 25 and older [held a bachelor's degree or higher](#), while only 20% of rural adults did.
- In 2018, 9% of both urban and rural adults ages 25 and older [held an associate's degree](#).

EARNINGS OUTCOME BASED ON EDUCATION

- In 2017, [median earnings](#) for rural working adults were eclipsed by median earnings for urban working adults at every level of educational attainment.
 - Working adults in rural areas with graduate degrees [earned](#) a median of \$54,513 compared to \$72,348 for those in urban areas.
 - Bachelor's degree holders in rural areas [earned](#) \$42,269 compared to \$54,597 for those in urban areas.
 - Adults with only a high school diploma or equivalency [earned](#) \$29,240 in rural areas compared to \$30,829 for those in urban areas.
 - Adults with less than a high school diploma had median [earnings](#) of \$22,248 in rural areas compared to \$23,158 for those in urban areas.

RESOURCES

[“Education Deserts: The Continued Significance of ‘Place’ in the Twenty-First Century.”](#) *American Council on Education*, 2016.

[“High School Benchmarks 2020 With a COVID-19 Special Analysis.”](#) *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*, January 2021.

[“Serving Rural Students.”](#) *National Association of Colleges and Employers*, May 2018.

[“The Rural-Higher Education Crisis.”](#) *The Atlantic*, September 2017.

[“Rural Education in America.”](#) *National Center for Education Statistics*, 2015.

[“Rural Education.”](#) *United States Department of Agriculture*, May 2020.

[“Rural Education at a Glance: 2020 Edition.”](#) *United States Department of Agriculture*, December 2020.

[“Those Left Behind.”](#) *Center for American Progress*, June 2019.

[“Rural Higher Education: Realities & Opportunities.”](#) *MDRC*, September 2020.

[“Number of rural students planning on going to college plummets.”](#) *The Hechinger Report*, December 2020.

[“The American Communities Report: A New Portrait of Rural America.”](#) *American Communities Project*, September 2019.

[“A big reason rural students never go to college: Colleges don’t recruit them.”](#) *The Hechinger Report*, March 2019.

Updated March 2021

