



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Rural Students in Higher Education

CENSUS OVERVIEW

According to the U.S. Census and the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service (ERS), in 2021 there were [46 million](#) people (13.9% of the entire U.S. population) living in rural areas.¹ Among the population aged 25 or over, [21.1%](#) of the rural population had earned a bachelor’s degree or higher. This rate is up from [17.2%](#) in 2010, but falls well below the rate of 35.7% for the non-rural population.²

ENROLLMENT

Though there are data on rural postsecondary institutions, there is a significant lack of information on students from rural areas. The most comprehensive data come from two sources: nationally representative longitudinal surveys from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC). NCES data in this factsheet comes from the High School Longitudinal Study (HSLs), which tracked high school freshmen in 2009 into and beyond postsecondary education.³

- The number of rural students filling out the FAFSA [decreased by 18%](#) from 2019 to 2020.
- [According to the NSC](#), 56% of rural and urban high school graduates in the graduating class of 2021 enrolled immediately in college compared to 62% of suburban high school graduates from that year.
- According to the [HSLs](#), 71% of rural high school students had attended college at some point four years after high school, compared to 73% of suburban, 71% of city, and 65% of town-based students.
- Based on the first institution attended, [42.3%](#) of rural students attended public four-year institutions, 37.1% attended public two-year institutions, 15.8% attended non-profit institutions, and 4.7% attended for-profit institutions.
 - Compared to the national estimates, rural students are overrepresented in public four-year institutions and underrepresented in for-profit institutions.
- Rural students were [67.6%](#) white, 11.5% Hispanic or Latino, 10.7% Black, 7.4% more than one race, 2% Asian, 0.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.⁴
 - National estimates from the HSLs, for comparison, show that students overall were 52.9% white, 21.5% Hispanic or Latino, 12.5% Black, 7.7% more than one race, 4.6% Asian, 0.5% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 0.4% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander.

¹ Rural areas are defined by the ERS. Using [Rural-Urban Continuum Codes](#) (RUCC) from 2013, the ERS defines rural as all non-metropolitan counties.

² These rates were calculated by combining American Community Survey data and RUCC.

³ Rurality in HSLs is measured by the geographic location of the student’s high school, based on RUCC.

⁴ American Indian/Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander estimates should be interpreted with caution due to low sample sizes.

FINANCIAL AID

According to the HSLs:

- [46.3%](#) of rural students reported being offered a Pell Grant or some other scholarship or grant aid, compared to 45% of the overall student population.
- [40.5%](#) of rural students reported being offered any type of loan for postsecondary expenses, compared to 39.5% of the overall student population.
- On average, among students who borrowed any loan, rural students borrowed [\\$7,005](#) in their first year compared to \$6,354 nationally.
- On average, among students who received any grant aid, rural students received [\\$7,864](#) in their first year compared to \$8,460 nationally.

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- According to the NSC, 41% of rural high school graduates in the class of 2015 [completed a college degree within six years](#) of graduation compared to 38% of urban high school graduates and 48% of suburban high school graduates.
- Rural students were [less likely](#) to graduate with a degree in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics (STEM) within six years than students from urban or suburban high schools.
 - 12% of rural students, 14% of urban students, and 17% of suburban students graduated with STEM degrees within six years.
- Among STEM graduates, rural students were [most likely](#) to major in biological and agricultural sciences (28%), while urban and suburban students were most likely to major in social science fields (25% and 23%, respectively).

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- In 2021, bachelor's degree recipients in rural areas earned a median of [\\$46,492](#), compared to \$54,089 for non-rural bachelor's degree recipients.⁵
- Rural bachelor's degree recipients earned a median of [\\$14,663](#) more than rural high school graduates, while the difference for non-rural earners was \$19,692.

DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey & Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, February 2023.

[High School Benchmarks 2022](#). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, December 2022.

[High School Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, 2023.

[Rural Education](#). United States Department of Agriculture, 2023.

[Rural-Urban Continuum Codes](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2013.

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

⁵ These rates were calculated by combining American Community Survey data and RUCC.