



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Immigrant Students in Higher Education

CENSUS OVERVIEW

In 2021, immigrants made up [13.6%](#) of the overall population in the United States,¹ a slight increase from [12.9%](#) in 2011. In 2021, 13.5 million U.S. adults aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher were born abroad, comprising 17% of all U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. College attainment rates for immigrants in the U.S. increased 6.5 percentage points between 2011 and 2021, a similar rate for all U.S.-born citizens.

ENROLLMENT

- In 2015–16, first-generation immigrant students made up [9.3%](#) of all undergraduates, compared to 8.8% in 1999–2000.²
 - In the same time period, the proportion of second-generation immigrant students enrolled as undergraduates increased from 10.3% to 20.6%, and the proportion of third-generation or higher students declined from 81% to 70.1%.
- In 2021, 39.1% of the foreign-born resident 18–24-year-old population were [enrolled](#) in college compared to 38.1% of the population overall.
- First-generation immigrant students are [overrepresented](#) in the public two-year sector.
 - In 2015–16, 41.9% of first-generation immigrant students attended public two-year institutions, compared to 37.1% of second-generation and 34.1% of third-generation or more students.
- First- and second-generation immigrant students are much [more likely](#) to enroll at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) than other students.
 - 35.7% of first-generation and 38.5% of second-generation students enroll at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), compared to 16.9% of third-generation or more students.

FINANCIAL AID

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), [52.6%](#) of first-generation, 55.7% of second-generation, and 56.5% of third-generation or more immigrant students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid in the 2015–16 academic year.
 - [43.8%](#) of first-generation, 44.1% of second-generation, and 38.7% of third-generation or more immigrant students received a Pell Grant in the 2015–16 academic year.
 - [26.4%](#) of first-generation, 32% of second-generation, and 40.7% of third-generation or more immigrant students received a federal student loan in the 2015–16 academic year.
- Among students who received federal Title IV aid, the [average amount](#) received in 2015–16 by first-generation immigrant students was \$7,762, compared to \$8,164 for second-generation and \$8,791 for third-generation immigrant students.

¹ The U.S. Census Bureau obtains immigration data from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). DHS defines immigrants as individuals not born in the United States with permanent legal residence in the United States.

² In the NPSAS, first-generation immigrant means the student was born outside of the U.S.; second-generation immigrant means one or both parents were born outside the U.S.; third-generation or more includes all other students.

- For first-generation immigrant students, the average Pell Grant received in 2015–16 was \$3,919, compared to \$3,910 for second-generation and \$3,643 for third-generation immigrant students.
- For first-generation immigrant students, the average federal loan amount received in 2015–16 was \$8,294, compared to \$8,236 for second-generation and \$8,373 for third-generation immigrant students.

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- According to the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS), [32.8%](#) of first-generation, 34.8% of second-generation, and 37.4% of third-generation or more immigrant students who entered postsecondary education in 2011–12 attained a bachelor’s degree by June 2017.
- In 2021, [18.5%](#) of foreign-born residents aged 25 and older had obtained an associate degree or attended some college, compared to 30% of their peers born in the U.S. The following groups [obtained](#) a two-year degree or attended some college in 2021:³
 - 27.8% of immigrants from Oceania
 - 26% of immigrants from Canada
 - 25.7% of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa
 - 24.3% of immigrants from South America
 - 23.8% of immigrants from Europe
 - 19.8% of immigrants from Eastern and Southeastern Asia
 - 19.4% of immigrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa
 - 16.9% of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean
 - 9.9% of immigrants from Central and Southern Asia
- In 2021, [33.8%](#) of foreign-born residents aged 25 and older had obtained a bachelor’s or higher, compared to 35.3% of their peers born in the U.S. The following groups [obtained](#) a bachelor’s degree or higher in 2021:
 - 71.9% of immigrants from Central and Southern Asia
 - 52% of immigrants from Canada
 - 50.8% of immigrants from the Middle East and Northern Africa
 - 47.5% of immigrants from Eastern and Southeastern Asia
 - 46.5% of immigrants from Europe
 - 43.9% of immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa
 - 38% of immigrants from Oceania
 - 36.8% of immigrants from South America
 - 13% of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- According to the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B), ten years after receiving a bachelor’s degree, first-generation immigrant graduates who reported income averaged a gross income of [\\$80,224](#), compared to \$75,923 for second-generation and \$76,110 for third-generation or more immigrant graduates.
- Wealth accumulation can be [measured](#) differently from income. Ten years after graduating:
 - [56%](#) of first-generation immigrant graduates reported owning a home, compared to 56% of second-generation and 65% of third-generation immigrant graduates.
 - 81% of first-generation immigrant graduates had some form of a retirement account, compared to 85% of second-generation and 87% of third-generation immigrant graduates.

³ The author derived these regions based on the United Nations [standard area code groupings](#).

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- Age of arrival to the U.S. plays a role in educational outcomes of immigrant students: the earlier an individual immigrates, the greater their chance of degree attainment.
 - [47%](#) of all full-time undergraduate students who immigrated to the U.S. prior to age 12 went on to earn a degree, compared to 44% of students who immigrated between the ages of 12 and 17, and 35% of students who immigrated after the age of 18.
- Language can be a barrier for immigrant students.
 - In 2021, [26.4%](#) of the foreign-born population in the U.S. over age 25 reported that they spoke English “not well” or “not at all,” including 10.2% of college-educated foreign-born residents.
- While there is no federal or state law prohibiting an undocumented student from applying to or being admitted to college, undocumented students face unique challenges in pursuing higher education.
 - Undocumented students are [prohibited](#) from receiving federal student financial aid for higher education and in most states they are ineligible to receive state-based financial aid.⁴
- While some schools accept undocumented students, the issue of what tuition price category (in-state vs. out-of-state) undocumented students fall into can create [additional challenges](#) and financial hardships.

DATA SOURCES

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

[Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, April 2023.

[Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, April 2023.

[National Center for Education Statistics](#). New American Undergraduates. November 2016.

[National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, April 2023.

[College Board](#). April 2023.

⁴ Undocumented students are eligible to receive emergency financial aid grants under the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.