



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Immigrant Students in Higher Education

### CENSUS OVERVIEW

In 2023, immigrants made up [14.3%](#) of the overall population in the United States,<sup>1</sup> a slight increase from [13.1%](#) in 2013. In 2023, 14.8 million U.S. adults aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher were born abroad, comprising 17.6% of all U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. College attainment rates for immigrants in the U.S. increased 6.4 percentage points between 2013 and 2023.

### ENROLLMENT

- In 2019–20, first-generation immigrant students made up [11.4%](#) of all undergraduates, compared to [8.8%](#) in 1999–2000.<sup>2</sup>
  - In the same time period, the proportion of second-generation immigrant students enrolled as undergraduates increased from 10.3% to 22.7%, and the proportion of third-generation or higher students declined from 81% to 65.9%.
- In 2023, 38.1% of the foreign-born resident 18–24-year-old population were [enrolled](#) in college compared to 37.9% of the population overall.
- First-generation immigrant students are [overrepresented](#) in the public two-year sector.
  - In 2019–20, 34.8% of first-generation, 30.3% of second-generation, and 28.4% of third-generation immigrant students attended public two-year institutions.
- First- and second-generation immigrant students are much [more likely](#) to enroll at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) than other students.
  - 35.9% of first-generation and 38.5% of second-generation students enroll at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), compared to 19.6% of third-generation students.

### FINANCIAL AID

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), [53.4%](#) of first-generation, 56.6% of second-generation, and 56.7% of third-generation or more immigrant students received some form of federal Title IV financial aid in the 2019–20 academic year.
  - [44.9%](#) of first-generation, 44.3% of second-generation, and 39.6% of third-generation or more immigrant students received a Pell Grant in the 2019–20 academic year.
  - [25.6%](#) of first-generation, 29.6% of second-generation, and 39.1% of third-generation or more immigrant students received a federal student loan in the 2019–20 academic year.
- Among students who received federal Title IV aid, the [average amount](#) received in 2019–20 by first-generation immigrant students was \$7,805, compared to \$8,305 for second-generation and \$9,014 for third-generation immigrant students.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

- The average Pell Grant received in 2019–20 was \$4,257 for first-generation immigrant students, compared to \$4,329 for second-generation and \$4,012 for third-generation.
- The average federal loan amount received in 2019–20 was \$8,136 for first-generation immigrant students, compared to \$8,741 for second-generation and \$8,563 for third-generation.

## 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 immigrant students who entered postsecondary education in 2011–12 attained a bachelor’s degree by June 2017.
- In 2023, [18.3%](#) of foreign-born residents aged 25 and older had obtained an associate degree or attended some college, compared to 29.8% of their peers born in the U.S.
- In 2023, [34.9%](#) of foreign-born residents aged 25 and older had obtained a bachelor’s or higher, compared to 36.4% of their peers born in the U.S.

## 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.

## 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 2023, [26.8%](#) of the foreign-born population in the U.S. over age 25 reported that they spoke English “not well” or “not at all,” including 8.9% 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 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.<sup>3</sup>

## DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey](#) & [Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, February 2025.  
[Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.  
[Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.  
[National Center for Education Statistics](#). New American Undergraduates. November 2016.  
[National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.  
[National Association for Student Financial Aid Administrators](#). 2023.

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<sup>3</sup> Undocumented students are eligible for emergency financial aid grants under the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund.