



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

### CENSUS OVERVIEW

According to the U.S. Census' American Community Survey (ACS), in 2023 [13.6%](#) of the civilian population reported having some form of disability.<sup>1</sup> There are also considerable differences in disability reporting by race/ethnicity, with American Indian and Alaska Native (15.9%), Black (15.0%), and non-Hispanic White (14.6%) populations the most likely to report having a disability. Asian (8.4%) people are the least likely to report having one. Among the 40.5 million people who are 25 or older and report having a disability, [8.6 million](#) (21.2%) held a bachelor's degree or higher in 2023, up from [15.1%](#) in 2013. However, this is considerably lower than the rate of 38.7% among the population of 195 million people who did not report a disability in 2023.

### ENROLLMENT

The [National Center for Education Statistics](#) defines students with disabilities as those who report deafness or serious difficulty hearing; blindness or serious difficulty seeing; serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition; or serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.<sup>2</sup>

- In the 2019-20 academic year, the following groups reported having a disability:
  - [21%](#) of all enrolled undergraduates and [11%](#) of all enrolled graduate students
  - 28% of undergraduate student veterans and 20% of graduate student veterans
  - 24% of Native American, 23% of Pacific Islander, 21% of white, 22% of Hispanic, 18% of Black, and 14% of Asian undergraduates
- There is a discrepancy between the rate of students reporting having a disability, and the rate of students registering with their campus disability center.
  - In 2019-20, on average, 8% of students registered as having a disability with their institution<sup>3</sup>:
    - 10% at non-profit institutions, 7% at for-profit institutions, and 7% of students at public institutions

### FINANCIAL AID

- According to the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, [58%](#) of students who reported having a disability received some form of Title IV financial aid in the 2019-20 academic year, compared to 54% of students who did not report having a disability.
  - [45%](#) of students with a disability received a Pell grant, compared to 39% of students who did not report having a disability.
  - [36%](#) of students with a disability received a federal student loan, similar to all students.

<sup>1</sup> The ACS lists hearing, vision, cognitive, ambulatory, self-care, and independent living difficulties as disabilities.

<sup>2</sup> Eligible conditions such as "serious learning disability, depression, ADD, or ADHD" were included in the NPSAS-16 question on disabilities but were removed in NPSAS-20.

<sup>3</sup> Based on authors' calculations of the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

- Among students with a disability who received federal Title IV aid, the [average amount](#) received was \$8,499, and \$8,782 for students without a disability.
  - The average Pell grant amount for students with a disability was \$4,035.
  - The average Federal student loan amount for students with a disability was \$8,181.

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- According to the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, [23%](#) of undergraduates who reported a disability in 2012 graduated with a bachelor's degree by 2017.
  - 38% of undergraduates who did not report a disability in 2012 graduated with a bachelor's degree by 2017.

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- According to the Baccalaureate & Beyond study, ten years after receiving a bachelor's degree, graduates with a disability who reported having an income averaged a gross income of [\\$69,064](#), and an average gross income of \$77,008 for graduates without a disability.
- Wealth accumulation can be [measured](#) differently from income. Ten years after graduating:
  - [55%](#) of graduates with a disability and 63% of graduates without a disability reported owning a home
  - [80%](#) of graduates with a disability and 87% of graduates without a disability had some form of a retirement account

## POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- According to the National Center for College Students with Disabilities, students with disabilities identified the following barriers to access and participation on campus:
  - [Being unaware](#) of their campus disability resource office and its services, challenges navigating campus procedures, and inadequate accommodations
  - Classroom and instructional environment barriers including faculty unaware of disability accommodations, faculty who push back against accommodations, and instructors who do not respond to requests for accommodations
  - Campus access and support issues including uneven, poorly marked walkways, buildings with external stairs but no ramp, and gaps in programs and services
  - [Students](#) with disabilities were less likely to feel welcome on campus or supported by their institution than students without disabilities
- [Students](#) with disabilities were more likely to experience financial hardships and food and housing insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic than students without disabilities.
- [70%](#) of students with mental health disabilities were not registered to receive accommodations on campus.
  - One-third of students with mental health disabilities stated they were not aware they were eligible for accommodations.

## DATA SOURCES

[American Community Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, February 2025.

[Baccalaureate & Beyond Survey](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

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

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

[Mental Health America](#). 2021.

[National Center for College Students with Disabilities](#). 2021.

[Student Experience in the Research University \(SERU\) Consortium](#). 2020.