



# Postsecondary National Policy Institute

## Rural Students in Higher Education

### CENSUS OVERVIEW

In 2023, there were 45.8 million people (13.8% of the entire U.S. population) living in rural areas.\*<sup>1</sup> Among the population aged 25 or over, 21.4% of the rural population had earned a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>1</sup> This rate is up from 17.7% in 2013, but falls well below the rate of 36.4% for the non-rural population.<sup>1</sup>

### ENROLLMENT

- The number of rural students filling out the FAFSA increased by 3% from 2022 to 2023.<sup>2</sup>
- 54.8% of rural high school graduates in the graduating class of 2023 enrolled immediately in college compared to 63.9% of suburban and 59.3% of urban high school graduates from that year.<sup>3</sup>
- 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.<sup>4</sup>
- 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.<sup>4</sup>
  - Compared to the national estimates, rural students are overrepresented in public four-year institutions and underrepresented in for-profit institutions.<sup>4</sup>
- 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.<sup>4</sup>
  - 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.<sup>4</sup>

### FINANCIAL AID

- 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.<sup>4</sup>
- 40.5% of rural students reported being offered any type of loan for postsecondary expenses, compared to 39.5% of the overall student population.<sup>4</sup>
- On average, among students who borrowed any loan, rural students borrowed \$7,005 in their first year compared to \$6,354 nationally.<sup>4</sup>
- On average, among students who received any grant aid, rural students received \$7,864 in their first year compared to \$8,460 nationally.<sup>4</sup>

\*Rural areas are defined by the ERS. Using Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) from 2013, the ERS defines rural as all non-metropolitan counties.<sup>5</sup>

## COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- 38.6% of surveyed rural high school graduates in the class of 2017 completed a college degree within six years of graduation compared to 37.6% of urban high school graduates and 47.0% of suburban high school graduates.<sup>3</sup>
- 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.<sup>3</sup>
  - 11.1% of rural students, 14.3% of urban students, and 16.8% of suburban students graduated with STEM degrees within six years.<sup>3</sup>
- Among STEM graduates, rural students (29.1%) and suburban students (24.0%) were most likely to major in biological and agricultural sciences, while urban students (23.9%) were most likely to major in social science fields.<sup>3</sup>

## EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- In 2022, bachelor's degree recipients in rural areas earned a median of \$50,815, compared to \$58,565 for non-rural bachelor's degree recipients.<sup>1</sup>
- Rural bachelor's degree recipients earned a median of \$16,045 more than rural high school graduates, while the difference for non-rural earners was \$21,186.<sup>1</sup>

## DATA SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> [American Community Survey](#) & [Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, April 2025.

<sup>2</sup> [FAFSA Tracker](#). National College Attainment Network, January 2025.

<sup>3</sup> [High School Benchmarks 2023](#). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, September 2024.

<sup>4</sup> [High School Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

<sup>5</sup> [Rural-Urban Continuum Codes](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture, January 2025.