



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Immigrant Students in Higher Education*

CENSUS OVERVIEW

In 2024, immigrants made up 14.8% of the overall population in the United States, a slight increase from 13.3% in 2014.¹ In 2024, 15.8 million U.S. adults aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher were born abroad, comprising 18.2% of all U.S. adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. College attainment rates for immigrants in the U.S. increased 7.3 percentage points between 2014 and 2024.¹

ENROLLMENT

- In 2019–20, first-generation immigrant students made up 11.4% of all undergraduates, compared to 8.8% in 1999–2000.⁵
 - During the same period, the proportion of second-generation immigrant students enrolled as undergraduates increased from 10.3% to 22.7%, while the proportion of third-generation or higher students declined from 81% to 65.9%.⁵
- In 2024, 37.9% of the foreign-born resident 18–24-year-old population were enrolled in college, compared to 38.6% of the population overall.¹
- First-generation immigrant students are overrepresented in the public two-year sector.⁵
 - 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.⁵
- First- and second-generation immigrant students are much more likely to enroll at Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) than other students.⁵
 - 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.⁵

FINANCIAL AID

- In 2019–20, 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.⁵
 - 44.9% of first-generation, 44.3% of second-generation, and 39.6% of third-generation or more immigrant students received a Pell Grant.⁵
 - 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.⁵
- Among students who received federal Title IV aid, the average amount received in 2019–20 was \$7,805 for first-generation immigrant students, \$8,305 for second-generation students, and \$9,014 for third-generation students.⁵
 - 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.⁵
 - 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.⁵

* 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. 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.

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- 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 2017.³
- In 2024, 17.8% of foreign-born residents aged 25 and older had obtained an associate degree or attended some college, compared to 29.5% of their peers born in the U.S.¹
- In 2024, 35.8% of foreign-born residents aged 25 and older had obtained a bachelor’s or higher, compared to 37.1% of their peers born in the U.S.¹

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- 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.²
- Wealth accumulation can be measured differently from income.⁷ 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.²

POPULATION-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

- The age of arrival in the U.S. affects the educational outcomes of immigrant students: the earlier an individual immigrates, the greater their likelihood of degree attainment.⁴
 - 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 18.⁴
- Language can be a barrier for immigrant students. In 2024, 27.1% of the foreign-born population in the U.S. aged 25 and older reported speaking English “not well” or “not at all,” including 9.9% of college-educated foreign-born residents.¹
- 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.⁶
 - Undocumented students are ineligible for federal student financial aid for higher education, and in most states, they are ineligible for state financial aid.⁶

DATA SOURCES

¹ [American Community Survey & Current Population Survey](#). U.S. Census Bureau, January 2026.

² [Baccalaureate & Beyond Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

³ [Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

⁴ [New American Undergraduates: Stats in Brief](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2016.

⁵ [National Postsecondary Student Aid Study](#). National Center for Education Statistics, November 2023.

⁶ [Tip Sheet for Undocumented Students](#). National Association for Student Financial Aid Administrators, May 2025.

⁷ [Wealth Analysis FAQ](#). Urban Institute, 2021.