



Postsecondary National Policy Institute

Rural Students in Higher Education*

CENSUS OVERVIEW

In 2024, 69.9 million people (20.5% of the U.S. population) lived in rural areas.¹ Among the population aged 25 or over, 27.2% of the rural population had earned a bachelor's degree or higher.¹ This rate is up from 21.2% in 2014, but falls well below the rate of 39.4% for the non-rural population.¹

ENROLLMENT

- The number of rural students filling out the FAFSA increased by 13.5% from 2024 to 2025.²
- 53.2% of rural high school graduates in the graduating class of 2024 enrolled immediately in college, compared to 63.4% of suburban and 59.5% of urban high school graduates from that year.³
- According to the High School Longitudinal Study, in 2016, 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.⁴
- 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.⁴
 - Compared to the national estimates, rural students are overrepresented in public four-year institutions and underrepresented in for-profit institutions.⁴
- 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.⁴
 - 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.⁴

FINANCIAL AID

- In 2016, rural students who borrowed any student loan took out an average of \$7,005 in their first year, compared with \$6,354 nationally.⁴
- Among students who received grant aid, rural students received an average of \$7,864 in their first year, compared with \$8,460 nationally.⁴

*Rural areas are defined by the Economic Research Service (ERS). Using Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) from 2013, the ERS defines rural as all non-metropolitan counties.⁵

COMPLETION/DEGREE ATTAINMENT

- 39% of surveyed rural high school graduates in the class of 2018 completed a college degree within six years of graduation, compared to 37.4% of urban high school graduates and 46.4% of suburban high school graduates.³
- 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.³
 - 11.6% of rural students, 14.4% of urban students, and 16.8% of suburban students graduated with STEM degrees within six years.³
- Among STEM graduates, biological and agricultural sciences were the most popular majors for rural (28.3%), urban (23.9%), and suburban (23.8%) high school graduates.³

EARNINGS AND WEALTH

- In 2024, bachelor's degree recipients aged 25 and over in rural areas earned a median of \$65,516, compared to \$71,074 for non-rural bachelor's degree recipients.¹
- Rural bachelor's degree recipients earned a median of \$23,643 more than rural high school graduates, while the difference for non-rural earners was \$30,712.¹

DATA SOURCES

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

² [FAFSA Tracker](#). National College Attainment Network, January 2026.

³ [High School Benchmarks 2024](#). National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, September 2025.

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

⁵ [Rural-Urban Continuum Codes](#). U.S. Department of Agriculture, January 2026.