

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

How Many Students Are in U.S. Colleges and Universities,
and Who Are They?



Acknowledgements

Steven Hubbard, Ph.D. is Senior Data Scientist at the American Immigration Council where he conducts research and data visualization projects related to immigration. Most recently, he was a Zolberg Fellow at The New School and International Rescue Committee where he conducted research on Syrian refugees living in Jordan. With a deep interest in photography, he recognizes the importance of visualization to communicate complex data problems and facilitate data driven decision making. Hubbard has over 20 years of experience in college teaching, research, and administration at New York University, The University of Iowa, and Hamline University. Dr. Hubbard started his professional career as a city planner for local governments in rural southwest Iowa.

Miriam Feldblum is co-founder and executive director of the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration. She previously served as vice president for student affairs, dean of students, and professor of politics at Pomona College, and as special assistant to the president and faculty research associate at Caltech. A national expert on the intersection of immigration and higher education and author of *Reconstructing Citizenship: The Politics of Nationality Reform and Immigration in Contemporary France*, Miriam has written extensively on undocumented, international, and refugee students, immigration policy and higher education, and highly skilled labor in the United States. She received a BA in political science from Barnard College, and MA, MPhil, and PhD in political science from Yale University. She is a non-resident fellow at the Migration Policy Institute.

About the Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration

The nonpartisan, nonprofit [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#) brings college and university presidents and chancellors together on the immigration issues that impact higher education, our students, campuses, communities and nation. We work to support undocumented, international and refugee students, and advance forward-looking immigration policies and practices at the federal level, in our states, and across our college campuses. The Alliance is composed of 550+ college and university presidents and chancellors of public and private colleges and universities, enrolling over five million students in 43 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico.

About the American Immigration Council

The American Immigration Council works to strengthen America by shaping how America thinks about and acts towards immigrants and immigration and by working toward a more fair and just immigration system that opens its doors to those in need of protection and unleashes the energy and skills that immigrants bring.

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Executive Summary

With communities across the country experiencing critical workforce gaps in healthcare, education, and other sectors, including STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math), the enrollment trends of undocumented students in U.S. colleges and universities are noteworthy. Undocumented students, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, are studying to fill severe skills shortages in those fields, positioning themselves to better support their families and communities, as well as the regional and national economies. In 2021, DACA eligible—individuals who meet the criteria to apply for the DACA program—had a total household income of \$20.9 billion and paid \$4.9 billion in federal, state, and local taxes, leaving them with \$16.1 billion to spend at local businesses. Many worked in essential jobs that helped communities during the public health and economic crises stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic.

An analysis of the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS)¹ finds that more than 408,000 undocumented students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, comprising 1.9 percent of all college students in the country. This estimate represents a decrease of 4.2 percent from 2019, when 427,000 undocumented students were enrolled.² The drop likely reflects overall enrollment decline due to the pandemic and economic pressures, as well as factors that specifically impact undocumented individuals, such as the continued legal challenges to DACA.

The number of students with DACA or who are DACA-eligible also continue to decline, from 182,000 in 2019 to 141,000 in 2021, making up only one-third of undocumented students and 0.7 percent of all college students.³ One of the primary factors contributing to the smaller population of DACA or DACA-eligible students is the program's lack of updates to include individuals who arrived in the U.S. after 2007, which is the specified eligibility date. Consequently, if someone arrived in the U.S. at the age of 4 in 2008, they would be of college age but not eligible for DACA.

While most undocumented students pursuing postsecondary education in the United States do not have DACA, the vast majority, accounting for three out of four undocumented students, came to the U.S. at a young age. These students, commonly known as Dreamers, have grown up in American neighborhoods and attended American schools. The undocumented students who came as adults have lived in the U.S. for an average of eight years.

Undocumented students represent a heterogenous population in higher education, reflecting the broad range and overall diversity of first-generation immigrants in the United States. Forty-six percent of undocumented students are Hispanic, 27 percent are AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander), close to 14 percent are Black, and 10 percent are white. Undocumented students include immigrant youth and adults at public and private institutions of higher education.

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Increasing undocumented students’ access to U.S. higher education would result in reduced high school dropout rates, increased college enrollment, higher student achievement, and greater economic contributions.⁴ Receiving a postsecondary credential or attending some college increases one’s earning potential, as college and university graduates earn higher incomes and experience lower unemployment rates.

In light of the economic contributions Dreamers already make, and the future talent and workforce potential represented by this student population, the new estimates underscore why Congress must pass legislation that offers Dreamers a permanent legislative fix, one that allows them to work and study without fear of deportation and creates a path to permanent residency and U.S. citizenship. The data also highlights the importance of lowering barriers to college and career access for these students.

While a growing number of states **have extended** tuition equity and licensure eligibility to some undocumented students, many states have not.⁵ To fully leverage the contributions of undocumented students, state legislatures should expand access to in-state tuition, state financial aid, occupational licensure, and driver’s licenses to their state’s undocumented students. These policies would strengthen their economic recovery efforts. In 2021, households led by undocumented individuals contributed \$30.8 billion in total taxes, including \$18.6 billion in federal income taxes and \$12.2 billion in state and local taxes. In pursuing higher education and careers, undocumented students are helping drive our country’s future and economic competitiveness.

FIGURE 1

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education, 2019 and 2021

	Population, 2019	Share of All College Students, 2019	Population, 2021	Share of All College Students, 2021
Undocumented	427,000	2.0%	409,000	1.9%
DACA-Eligible	182,000	0.8%	141,000	0.7%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

When Did Undocumented Students Enrolled in Higher Education Come to the U.S.?

Most undocumented students who are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities arrived in the country as young children or adolescents and attended primary and/or secondary school in the United States. Among DACA-eligible students in colleges and universities, close to nine out of ten (85.2 percent) arrived as young children (ages 0-9), while the rest (14.8 percent) arrived as adolescents (ages 10-16). Among all undocumented students, over one-third (34 percent) arrived before age 10, while 42.2 percent came between the ages of 10 and 16 (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students By Age of Arrival, 2021

Age of Arrival	Share of Undocumented Postsecondary Students	Share of DACA-Eligible Postsecondary Students
Child	34.0%	85.2%
Adolescent	42.2%	14.8%
Adult	23.8%	NA

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Undocumented adult learners who arrived in the U.S. as older adolescents or adults are also part of the undocumented student population. They also aim to make valuable contributions to their communities. On average, undocumented college students who arrived in the U.S. as adults have lived in the country for approximately eight years.

Undocumented Students in Higher Education by State

As with the overall undocumented population, undocumented students in higher education are concentrated in a small number of states. Three-quarters of undocumented students come from 12 states (see Figure 3), and most of those hail from four states: California, Texas, Florida, and New York. Still, a significant number of undocumented students—more than 95,000—live in other U.S. states. The same holds true for DACA-eligible students. While most are in the same top four states—California, Texas, Florida, and New York—more than 66,000 are in other parts of the country.

FIGURE 3

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education, 2021

State	Undocumented Postsecondary Students	Share of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	DACA-Eligible Postsecondary Students	Share of DACA-eligible Students in Postsecondary Education
California	83,000	2.8%	38,000	1.3%
Texas	59,000	3.3%	20,000	1.1%
Florida	40,000	3.1%	8,000	0.6%
New York	30,000	2.2%	9,000	0.6%
Illinois	20,000	2.5%	8,000	1.1%
New Jersey	19,000	3.1%	*	0.8%
Maryland	12,000	2.7%	*	0.7%
Georgia	12,000	1.7%	*	0.8%
Virginia	11,000	1.7%	*	0.4%
Washington	10,000	2.3%	*	0.5%
Arizona	10,000	2.1%	*	1.1%
Pennsylvania	*	1.1%	*	*
Massachusetts	*	1.2%	*	*
Michigan	*	1.0%	*	*
North Carolina	*	0.9%	*	0.4%
Colorado	*	1.6%	*	0.9%
Indiana	*	1.2%	*	*
Utah	*	1.7%	*	*
Ohio	*	0.7%	*	*
Connecticut	*	1.6%	*	*
Oregon	*	1.7%	*	*
Nevada	*	2.0%	*	*
Kansas	*	1.9%	*	*
Missouri	*	0.7%	*	*

* Sample size is too small to report for the state.

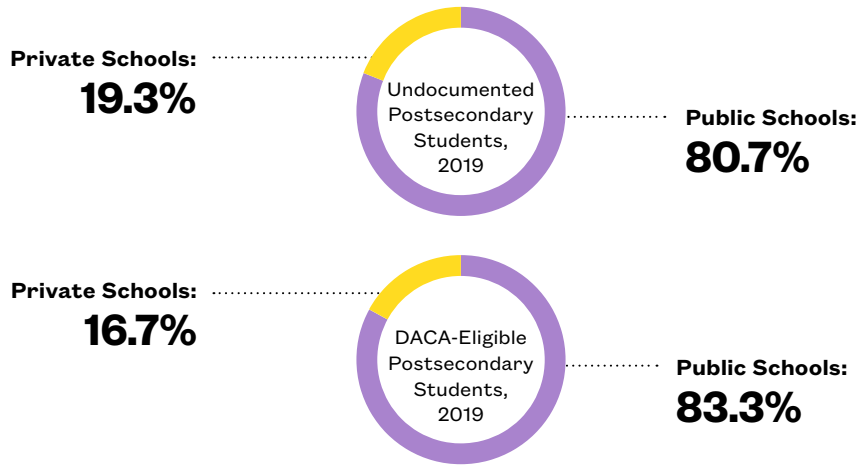
Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Which Schools Do Undocumented Students Attend?

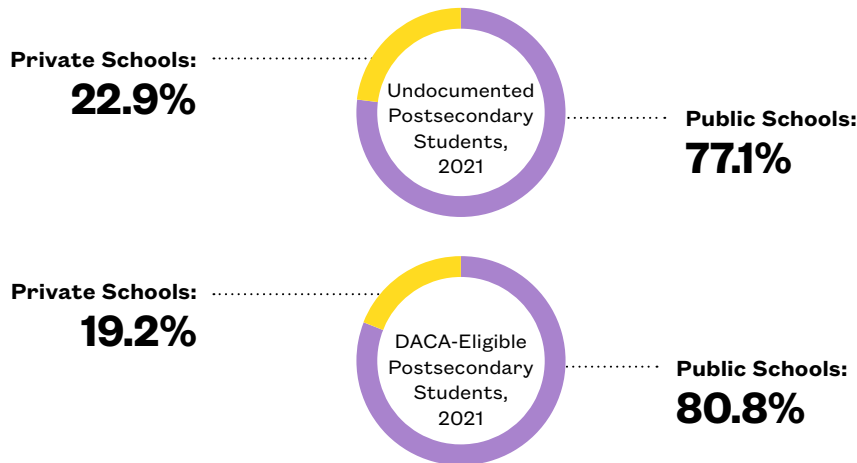
The vast majority (77.1 percent) of undocumented students are enrolled in public two- and four-year colleges and universities, with a significant proportion of these students attending community colleges.⁶ Almost 23 percent of undocumented students are pursuing their education at private colleges and universities. As for DACA-eligible students, 80.8 percent are enrolled in public institutions, while 19.2 percent are studying in private institutions (as shown in Figure 4). The percentage of both undocumented and DACA-eligible students studying in private institutions increased slightly between 2019 and 2021, while the proportion attending public institutions slightly decreased.

FIGURE 4

Share of Undocumented Students in Public and Private Institutions of Higher Education, 2019



Share of Undocumented Students in Public and Private Institutions of Higher Education, 2021



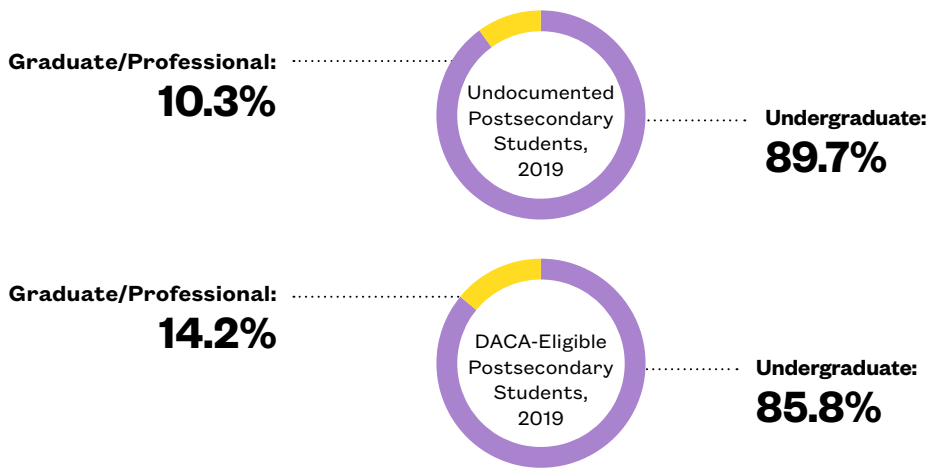
* Private schools include both non-profit and for-profit institutions.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2019 and 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

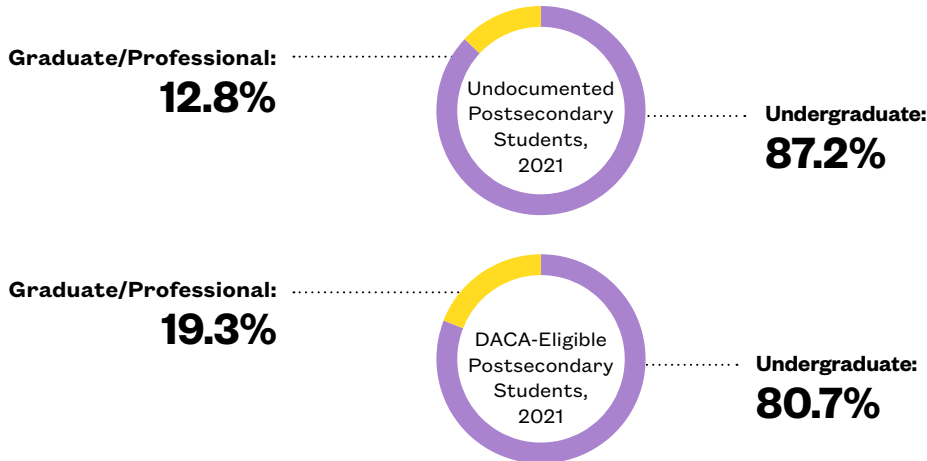
Although the majority of undocumented students are pursuing undergraduate degrees, recent data suggests a significant portion are also pursuing advanced degrees. Specifically, 14.2 percent of all undocumented students were pursuing graduate or professional degrees in 2021, a 3.9 percentage point increase from 2019, when 10.3 percent were. Additionally, 19.3 percent of DACA-eligible students were pursuing graduate or professional degrees, a 6.5 percentage point increase since 2019, when 12.8 percent were (as depicted in Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

Share of Undocumented Students in Undergraduate and Graduate Programs, 2019



Share of Undocumented Students in Undergraduate and Graduate Programs, 2021



Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2019 and 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Many undocumented graduate students hold degrees in STEM fields, which are among the fastest growing sectors in the country. In fact, 33.6 percent of undocumented students and 37.1 percent of DACA-eligible students pursuing advanced degrees have an undergraduate degree in a STEM field. Among all undocumented graduate students with a STEM undergraduate degree, 23.1 percent have a degree in a healthcare-related field. This is an especially important finding given the nation’s increasingly severe shortage of workers across the healthcare industry, from physicians to home health aides. Among graduate students eligible for DACA with an undergraduate degree in a STEM field, 30.5 percent have pursued a degree in a healthcare-related field.

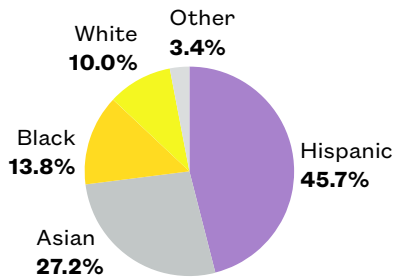
Diversity of Undocumented Students in Higher Education

Undocumented students are a heterogenous population in higher education, reflecting the diversity of first-generation immigrants in the United States. Hispanic students account for 45.7 percent of all undocumented students; Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students account for 27.2 percent; Black students account for close to 14 percent; white students account for about 10 percent; and others, including biracial and multiracial students, account for about 3.4 percent. Among the DACA-eligible student population, 68.8 percent are Hispanic; AAPI students make up 16.5 percent; Black students make up about 5.7 percent; and white students make up 6.6 percent (Figure 6).

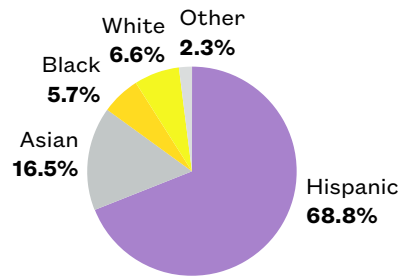
FIGURE 6

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education By Race, 2021

Undocumented Postsecondary Students



DACA-Eligible Postsecondary Students



	Share of Undocumented Postsecondary Students	Share of DACA-Eligible Postsecondary Students
Hispanic	45.7%	68.8%
Asian	27.2%	16.5%
Black	13.8%	5.7%
White	10.0%	6.6%
Other	3.4%	2.3%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

A Decline in Undocumented Student Enrollment Since 2019

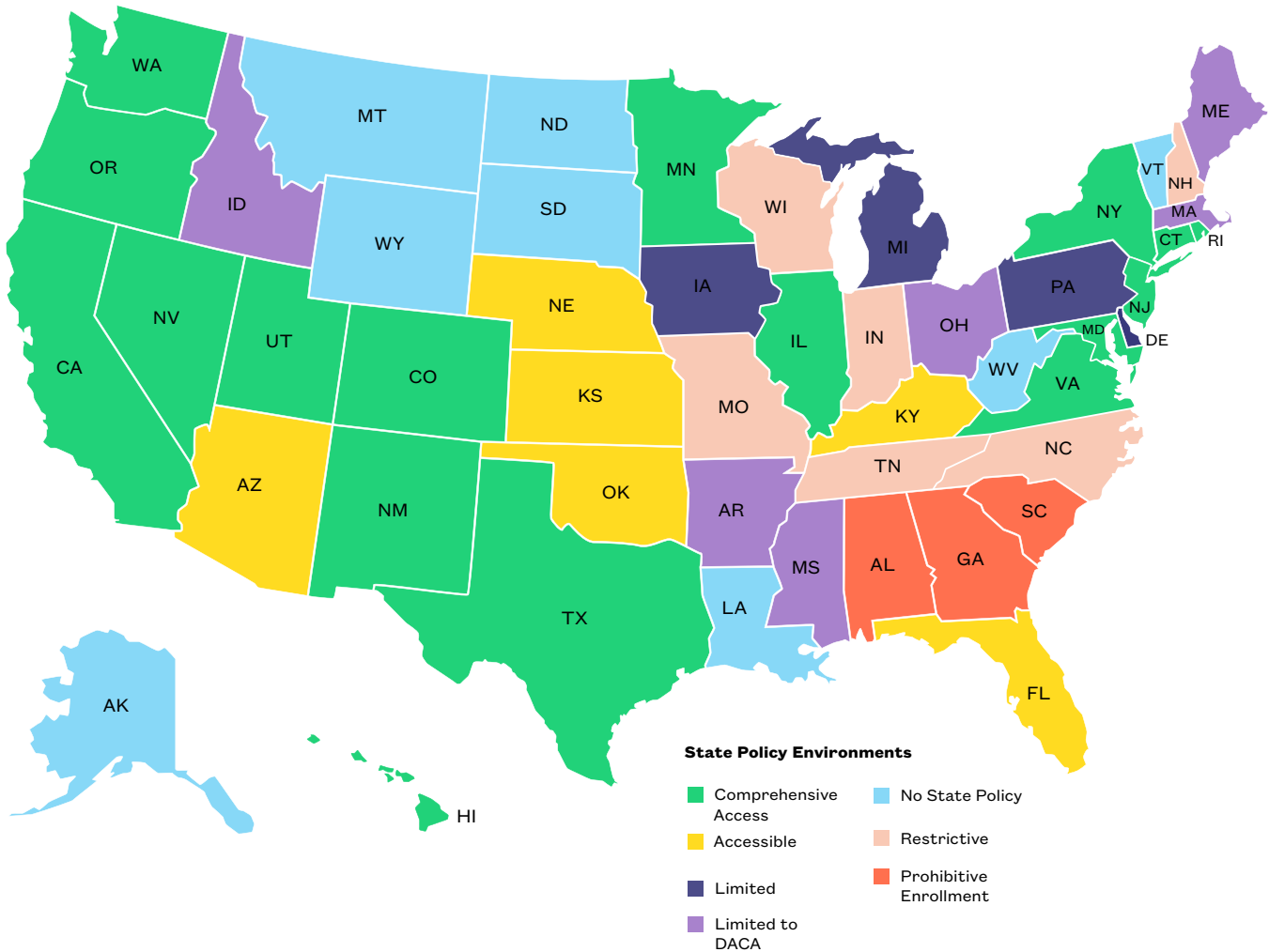
The findings in this report show that enrollment of undocumented students decreased by 4.2 percent between 2019 and 2021,⁷ while the enrollment of DACA-eligible students decreased by 22.5 percent. This drop in the number of undocumented students reflects the overall decline in post-secondary enrollment due to the pandemic that is only now beginning to stabilize, especially at community colleges.⁸ The more significant decline in DACA-eligible students also reflects the 2012 DACA eligibility criteria, which requires applicants to have arrived in the U.S. before June 15, 2007. Many Dreamers in higher education today arrived after the cut-off date. Other factors impacting undocumented students may include the harsh immigration rhetoric and policies of the previous administration; the adjustment of immigration status (especially among DACA-eligible individuals); and the legal challenges facing the future of DACA.

The Effect of State Immigration Policies on Undocumented Students

While undocumented students face numerous barriers to higher education—ineligibility for federal financial aid being a major one—policy changes at the state level have had a positive impact on their college attendance.^{9,10} In 2001, Texas became the first state to extend access to in-state tuition and some forms of state financial aid to undocumented students based on non-residency requirements, including graduated from high school in Texas or received the equivalent. Since then, a growing number of states have expanded in-state tuition and financial aid to undocumented students.¹¹ In 23 states, undocumented students who meet their state's requirements have access to in-state tuition, and 17 of these states also extend in-state financial aid. In 10 additional states, in-state tuition is available, but access is more limited. Some states, for example, only allow DACA recipients to access in-state tuition. Others may grant in-state tuition only to undocumented students at the institutional or system levels.¹² The remaining states have not passed inclusive policies, with some states, such as Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama, explicitly barring undocumented students from obtaining in-state tuition or even enrolling in certain public institutions.¹³

These state policies impact the ability of undocumented students to access and succeed in higher education.¹⁴ As of June 2023, almost half of the 25 states with the highest undocumented college student populations (listed in this report) do not provide all undocumented students who meet state residency and other non-residency based requirements access to in-state tuition at all public institutions. These states include Georgia, North Carolina, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Indiana, Tennessee, Ohio, and Louisiana.¹⁵ Eleven of the top 25 states do not provide access to state financial aid or scholarships to all undocumented students who meet state residency requirements. These are Florida, Georgia, Arizona, North Carolina, Michigan, Massachusetts, Louisiana, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio.¹⁶

Tuition and Financial Aid Equity for Undocumented Students



There is substantial evidence that policies that expand access to higher education and those that also provide access to state financial aid to undocumented or DACA-eligible students result in higher college enrollment for disadvantaged students while also bolstering local and state workforces.¹⁷ Studies have found that Hispanic non-citizens living in states with accessible in-state tuition policies toward undocumented students were anywhere from 31 percent¹⁸ to 54 percent¹⁹ more likely to be enrolled in higher education than their peers in other states. Research also shows that these policies reduce high school dropout rates among certain immigrant students by as much as 14 percent.²⁰ A 2023 study found that extending in-state tuition to undocumented students in Massachusetts would stem the decline in student enrollment and raise the number of educated workers, while creating new revenues of \$2.6 million to \$3.5 million for the state’s public colleges and universities.²¹

The 25 States with the Highest Number of Undocumented College Students

State	Policy Environment	Undocumented Student Population	Undocumented Share	DACA Student Population	DACA Student Share
California	Comprehensive Access	83,000	2.8%	38,000	1.3%
Texas	Comprehensive Access	59,000	3.3%	20,000	1.1%
New York	Comprehensive Access	30,000	2.2%	8800	0.6%
Illinois	Comprehensive Access	20,000	2.5%	8400	1.1%
New Jersey	Comprehensive Access	19,000	3.1%	*	0.8%
Maryland	Comprehensive Access	12,000	2.7%	*	0.7%
Virginia	Comprehensive Access	11,000	1.7%	*	0.4%
Washington	Comprehensive Access	10,000	2.3%	*	0.5%
Nevada	Comprehensive Access	*	2.0%	*	*
Oregon	Comprehensive Access	*	1.7%	*	*
Utah	Comprehensive Access	*	1.7%	*	*
Colorado	Comprehensive Access	*	1.6%	*	0.9%
Connecticut	Comprehensive Access	*	1.6%	*	*
Florida	Accessible	40,000	3.1%	7,787	0.6%
Arizona	Accessible	10,000	2.1%	*	1.1%
Kansas	Accessible	*	1.9%	*	*
Pennsylvania	Limited	*	1.1%	*	*
Michigan	Limited	*	1.0%	*	*
Indiana	Restrictive	*	1.2%	*	*
Massachusetts	Limited to DACA	*	1.2%	*	*
Ohio	Limited to DACA	*	0.7%	*	*
North Carolina	Restrictive	*	0.9%	*	0.4%
Missouri	Restrictive	*	0.7%	*	*
Wisconsin	Restrictive	*	0.7%	*	*
Georgia	Prohibitive Environment	12,000	1.7%	*	0.8%

Conclusion

Increasing the number of college graduates serves as a catalyst for community and state economic growth and prosperity. For that reason, 48 states have established goals for postsecondary credential attainment. One goal, for example, is to have 60 percent of state residents earn a postsecondary credential by 2030.²²

To reach these goals and to address acute skills shortages, states and higher education institutions will need to increase the recruitment, support, and retention of immigrant-origin students, including undocumented students. Consider that from 2000 to 2021, first- and second-generation immigrant students accounted for 80 percent of the domestic student enrollment growth at U.S. colleges and universities.²³ Immigrant students—including undocumented students—are crucial to the sustainability of our college campuses, the vitality of our communities, and the prosperity of our national economy.

Methodology

Using the microdata of the 1-year sample from the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS), we first apply the methodological approach outlined by Harvard University economist George Borjas²⁴ to study the subset of the immigrant population that is likely to be undocumented students in postsecondary education. We then use a set of criteria to identify potential international students based on factors such as school attendance, grade level, age, length of stay in the United States, and hours worked, and further exclude them from the group to arrive at our estimates about undocumented students.

Since DACA-eligible students are a subset of the total undocumented student population, we apply the guidelines for DACA from the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to ACS microdata to restrict our data further. Further description of the American Immigration Council's methodology of identifying undocumented and DACA-eligible students can be found in our methodology report of Map the Impact.²⁵

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.
- 2 New American Economy & Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, "Undocumented Students in Higher Education: How Many Students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They?", (March, 2021), <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/research/undocumented-students-in-higher-education-updated-march-2021/>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Guzman, Yazmin Yesenia. "Crossing Educational Borders: The Effects of State Financial Aid on Undocumented Students' Pursuit of Higher Education." MA thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, January 16, 2018. Accessed May 8, 2023. <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/122865/1126541803-MIT.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y>
- 5 Higher Ed Immigration Portal, "Portal to the States," accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/>.
- 6 For instance, an estimated 50,000 to 70,000 undocumented students in California are enrolled in the state's community colleges. For more information, please see: Immigrants Rising et al. "California Community Colleges Dreamers Project: Strengthening Institutional Practices to Support Undocumented Students," (2019), <https://immigrantsrising.org/resource/coc-dreamers-project-full-report/>.
- 7 New American Economy & Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, "Undocumented Students in Higher Education: How Many Students are in U.S. Colleges and Universities, and Who Are They?", (April, 2020), <https://www.presidentsalliance.org/report-undocumented-students-in-higher-education-how-many-students-are-in-u-s-colleges-and-universities-and-who-are-they/>.
- 8 National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Current Term Enrollment Estimates: Fall 2022 Expanded Edition" (February 2, 2023), accessed May 8, 2023, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>.
- 9 Jessica Hernandez-Reyes, Brittani Williams, and Victoria Jackson, "Higher Education Access and Success for Undocumented Students Start with 9 Key Criteria" (Ed Trust, 2023), accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/research/report-higher-education-and-success-for-undocumented-students-start-with-9-key-criteria/>.
- 10 Christian Penichet-Paul (2023). "Eliminating Barriers to a Higher Education for Undocumented Students Is an Urgent Need," accessed May 8, 2023, <https://edtrust.org/resource/eliminating-barriers-to-a-higher-education-for-undocumented-students-is-an-urgent-need/>.
- 11 Details on state policies regarding in-state tuition and financial aid access for undocumented status are available on the Higher Ed Immigration Portal (<https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/>).
- 12 See the table on "Tuition and Financial Aid Equity for Undocumented Students" on the Higher Ed Immigration Portal at <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/>.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Jessica Hernandez-Reyes, Brittani Williams, and Victoria Jackson, "Higher Education Access and Success for Undocumented Students Start with 9 Key Criteria" (Ed Trust, 2023), accessed May 7, 2023, <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/research/report-higher-education-and-success-for-undocumented-students-start-with-9-key-criteria/>.

- 15** Ibid; and see the table, “Tuition and Financial Aid Equity for Undocumented Students” on the Higher Ed Immigration Portal at <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/>, accessed May 8, 2023. In several states, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, undocumented students are eligible for in-state tuition and/or financial assistance at certain institutions, systems, or local levels. See the state pages on the Higher Ed Immigration Portal for more details.
- 16** Ibid.
- 17** Jessica Hernandez-Reyes, Brittani Williams, and Victoria Jackson (2023); Christian Penichet-Paul (2023). “Eliminating Barriers to a Higher Education for Undocumented Students Is an Urgent Need,” accessed May 8, 2023, <https://edtrust.org/resource/eliminating-barriers-to-a-higher-education-for-undocumented-students-is-an-urgent-need/>.
- 18** Neeraj Kaushal, “In-State Tuition for the Undocumented: Education Effects on Mexican Young Adults,” *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (September 29, 2008).
- 19** Stella M. Flores, “State Dream Acts: The Effect of In-State Resident Tuition Policies and Undocumented Latino Students,” *The Review of Higher Education*, 33, 2 (2010).
- 20** Stephanie Potochnick, “How States Can Reduce the Dropout Rate for Undocumented Immigrant Youth: The Effects of In-State Resident Tuition Policies,” *Social Science Research*, 45, (May, 2014): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0049089X13001701>.
- 21** Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, “MTF Conference Preview: In-State Tuition & Financial Aid Eligibility,” (June 22, 2023). https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/230620-In-State-Tuition-Conference-Preview.final_.pdf.
- 22** For more information, please see “A Stronger Nation”, Lumina Foundation, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>.
- 23** Jeanne Batalova and Miriam Feldblum, “Investing in the Future: Higher Ed Should Give Greater Focus to Growing Immigrant-Origin Student Population” (Migration Policy Institute, August 2023).
- 24** George J. Borjas, “The Labor Supply of Undocumented Immigrants,” (NBER, 2016)
- 25** To view the full methodology used to estimate the undocumented and DACA-eligible population, please see: <https://map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/methodology/>

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