Project
Graduation: Latest Snapshot of High-Poverty US Schools


Using as its poverty measure, the percentage of students who are eligible for the National School Lunch Program’s free or reduced-price lunch, NCES reports that nearly one-fifth of all public schools in the U.S.—including nearly 10 percent of public high schools—educate students from high-poverty homes.

The report’s statistics, which are for the 2007-08 school year, demonstrate once again the strong link between poverty and the likelihood students will fail to complete high school.

1. **The number of high-poverty schools has increased.** Seventeen percent of US public schools (16,122 schools) were high-poverty schools; that is, seventy-five percent or more of their students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. This is a five percent increase from 1999-2000 at which time 12 percent of the nation’s schools fit into the high-poverty category.

2. **Cities have the most high-poverty schools.** About 40 percent of city elementary schools were high-poverty schools compared with 15 percent of schools in towns, 13 percent of suburban schools, and 10 percent of rural elementary schools. A similar pattern was found at the secondary level. Twenty percent of secondary schools in cities were high poverty, while only 5 to 8 percent of secondary schools in suburbs, towns, and rural areas fit this classification.

3. **More racial/ethnic minority than white students attended high-poverty schools.** One-third (34 percent) of Black students, and an even higher percentage (40 percent) of Hispanic students, attended high-poverty elementary schools compared to 14 percent of White students. Similarly, in high-poverty secondary schools, only 11 percent of students were White, while 38 percent were Black and 44 percent were Hispanic.

4. **High-Poverty Secondary Schools . . .**

   - **Were about 10 percent of U.S. schools.** Slight more than 2,000 schools, or nine percent, of the nation’s secondary schools, were high-poverty schools.

   - **Graduated less than 70 percent of their seniors.** About 68 percent of 12th-graders in high-poverty schools graduated with a high school diploma compared to 91 percent of 12th-graders in low-poverty high schools.

   - **Experienced a 20 percent decline in graduation rates over the last eight years.** Since 1999–2000, the average percentage of seniors in high-poverty schools who graduated with a diploma has declined by 18 percentage points, from 86 to 68 percent. There was no measurable decline in low-poverty high schools.
• Produced fewer students who attended four-year colleges. Twenty-eight percent of graduates from high-poverty schools attended a four-year college compared with over half (52 percent) of graduates from low-poverty high schools.

• Were located in all regions of the country, with lowest percentage in the Midwest. Twelve percent of all public secondary schools in the West, and 11 percent each of schools in the Northeast and South were high poverty, compared with 5 percent of secondary schools in the Midwest.

• Were concentrated in four states. States with the highest percentages of high-poverty secondary schools were Mississippi (43 percent), New Mexico (34 percent), Louisiana (27 percent), and New York (21 percent).

• Enrolled eight times as many English language learners than low-poverty schools. About 16 percent of students attending high-poverty secondary schools were identified as English language learners compared with 2 percent of students attending low-poverty secondary schools.

5. High-Poverty Elementary Schools . . .

• Were in every region, with the highest percentages in the South and West. Almost one quarter (24 percent) of public elementary schools in both the South and West were high-poverty schools compared with 16 percent in the Northeast and 12 percent in the Midwest.

• Were concentrated in six states. States with the highest percentages of high-poverty elementary schools were Mississippi (53 percent), Louisiana (52 percent), New Mexico (46 percent), the District of Columbia (37 percent), and California (34 percent).

• Enrolled 40 percent of U.S. Hispanic and Black students. Forty-two percent of Hispanic, 40 percent of Black, and 28 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native students were enrolled in high-poverty elementary schools. By comparison, 5 percent of White and 15 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students attended these schools.

• Served high percentages of English language learners. Twenty-five percent of students in high-poverty elementary schools were identified as English language learners compared with 4 percent of students attending low-poverty elementary schools. At the secondary level, about 16 percent of students attending high-poverty schools were identified as English language learners compared with 2 percent of students who attended low-poverty schools.

NOTE: NCES uses U.S. Census geographic regions. Midwest: IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, and WI; Northeast: CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, and VT; South: AL, AR, DE, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, and WV; and West: AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, and WY.