

Undocumented Students in Higher Education

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

Executive Summary

Undocumented immigrants, including DACA recipients, are integral members of communities across the United States, paying taxes, starting businesses, and serving in key industries, with many on the front lines as essential workers and health professionals battling the COVID-19 pandemic. Hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants are students enrolled in higher education, working to obtain degrees and going on to use those skills as significant contributors to our economy.

New estimates, drawn from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), indicate that **undocumented students account for more than 427,000 or approximately 2 percent of all students** in higher education in the United States. Students with DACA or who are eligible for DACA (referred to as “DACA-eligible”) represent less than half of the undocumented student population, constituting a subset of approximately **181,000 students or 0.8 percent of all students** in higher education. The new estimates are an update to an April 16, 2020 report by New American Economy and the 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?](#)

These findings confirm our understanding of the broader undocumented student population. Most undocumented students pursuing postsecondary education in the U.S. do not have DACA. Undocumented students also represent a heterogeneous population in higher education, reflecting the broad range and diversity of first-generation immigrants in the U.S. Undocumented students include immigrant youth and adult learners, striving to pursue higher education both at public and private institutions and at various academic levels. In their pursuit of higher education, undocumented students actively ready themselves to fill critical skills shortages, including in healthcare, STEM fields, teaching, and business, and become better positioned to support their families, communities, and our regional and national economies.

These new estimates also underscore the urgency for Congress to pass a permanent, legislative solution to protect undocumented students from deportation and ensure they have access to work authorization, as well as a path to U.S. citizenship. State legislatures must also expand access to in-state tuition, state financial aid, occupational licensure, and driver licenses to all undocumented students with state residency. These policies would only strengthen recovery efforts in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Undocumented students contribute immensely to campuses and communities across the country. Their pursuit of higher education is vital to the future of our country and the competitiveness of our economy.

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Why Numbers Are Different From 2018

Comparing last year’s report to this year’s estimates, the undocumented student population decreased by 5.1 percent, and the DACA-eligible student population decreased by 16.2 percent. These declines in undocumented and DACA-eligible student enrollment mirror national trends in migration in the United States. Other factors related to the attrition of undocumented and DACA-eligible college students in post-secondary enrollment include the implementation of [strict immigration policies from the previous administration](#), the [challenging political atmosphere](#), adjustment of status (especially among DACA-eligible individuals), and the rising cost of higher education in the United States. With regard to overall national migration trends, the arrival of new immigrants to the United States has decreased in recent years, and there has been an overall decline in the number of undocumented immigrants. An estimated 10.9 million undocumented immigrants were living in the United States in 2018. By 2019, the undocumented population had declined by 5.6 percent to 10.3 million. Key among reasons for this decrease is the number of Mexican immigrants returning back to Mexico is higher than those migrating into the United States.

Methodology

Using the microdata of the 1-year sample from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS), we first apply the methodological approach outlined by Harvard University economist George Borjas (2016) 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 is 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 New American Economy’s methodology of identifying undocumented and DACA-eligible students can be found in NAE’s methodology report.

Data Charts

CHART 1

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education, 2019

	Number of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Number of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education
United States	427,345	2.0%	181,624	0.8%

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

CHART 2

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education By State, 2019

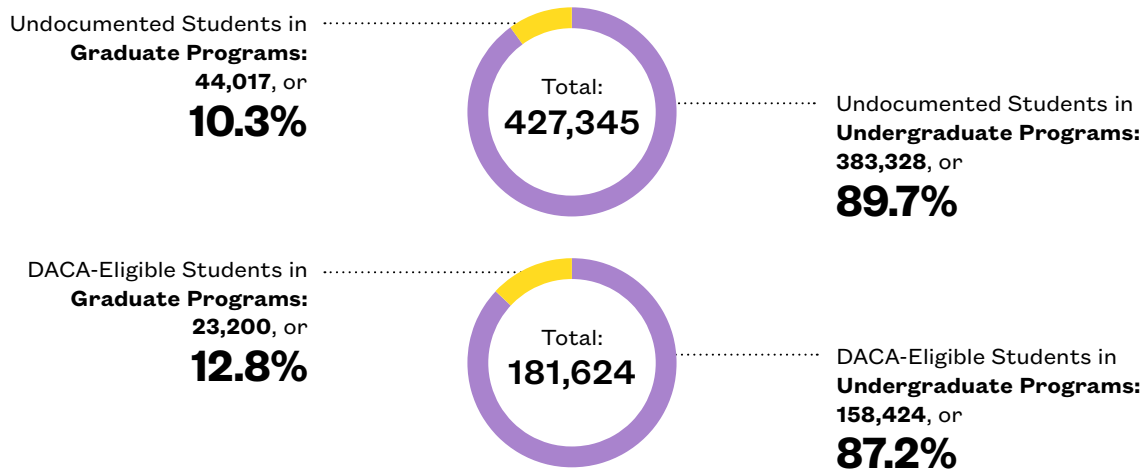
State	Number of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of Undocumented Students in Postsecondary Education	Number of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education	Share of DACA-Eligible Students in Postsecondary Education
California	94,030	3.0%	49,704	1.6%
Texas	58,255	3.1%	30,850	1.7%
Florida	40,152	3.0%	12,161	0.9%
New York	25,296	1.8%	7,932	0.6%
Illinois	17,757	2.1%	8,784	1.0%
New Jersey	17,590	3.0%	*	1.0%
Washington	15,039	3.3%	*	1.5%
Georgia	14,201	2.0%	*	0.7%
Virginia	12,387	2.0%	*	0.8%
Massachusetts	11,632	2.0%	*	0.5%
Maryland	9,730	2.2%	*	0.8%
Arizona	9,480	2.0%	*	1.5%
North Carolina	8,741	1.2%	*	0.6%
Nevada	*	3.7%	*	*
Connecticut	*	2.3%	*	*
Colorado	*	1.8%	*	*
Utah	*	1.8%	*	*
Oregon	*	1.3%	*	*
Indiana	*	1.2%	*	*
Pennsylvania	*	1.1%	*	*
Michigan	*	1.0%	*	*
Ohio	*	0.9%	*	*

* Sample size is too small to report for the state

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

CHART 3

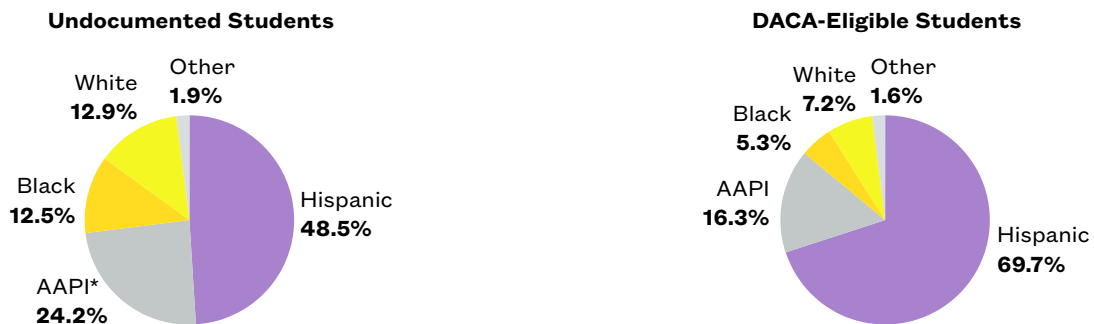
Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Undergraduate and Graduate Programs, 2019



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

CHART 4

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students in Higher Education By Race, 2019



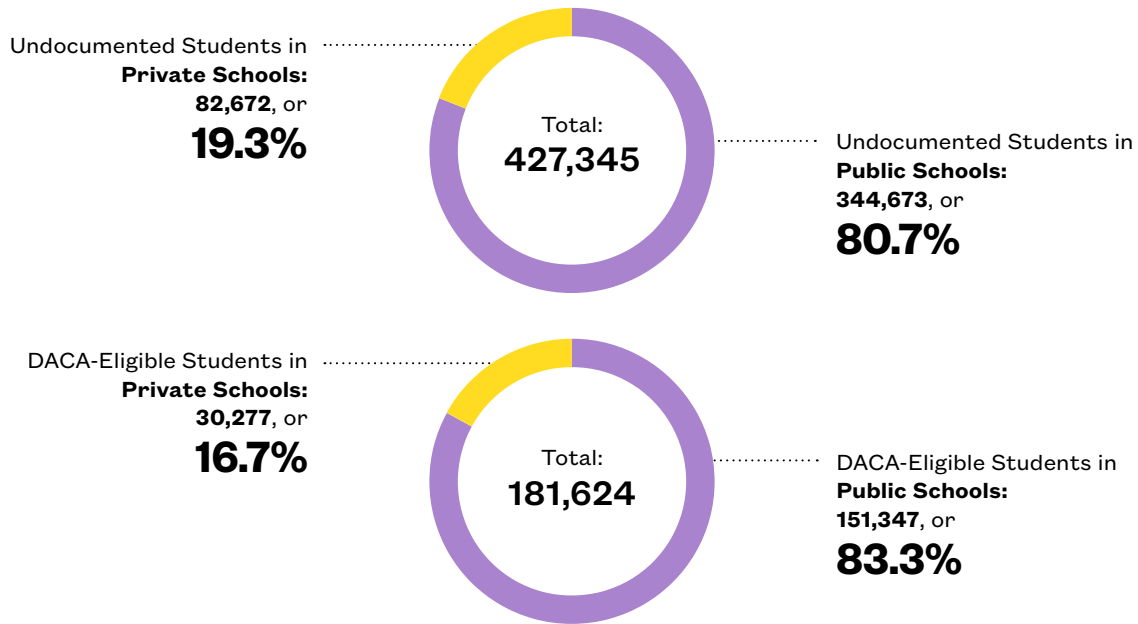
	Undocumented Students	Share of Undocumented Students By Race	DACA-Eligible Students	Share of DACA-Eligible Students By Race
AAPI	103,263	24.2%	29,526	16.3%
Black	53,617	12.5%	9,607	5.3%
Hispanic	207,207	48.5%	126,515	69.7%
White	55,330	12.9%	13,010	7.2%
Other Race/Ethnicity	7,928	1.9%	2,966	1.6%

* Asian American and Pacific Islander

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

CHART 5

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students Enrolled in Public and Private* Institutions of Higher Education, 2019



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

Source: U.S. Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2018 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

CHART 6

Undocumented and DACA-Eligible Students By Age of Arrival, 2019

Age of Arrival	Undocumented Students	Share of Undocumented Students By Age of Arrival	DACA-Eligible Students	Share of DACA-Eligible Students by Age of Arrival
Child (0-12)	192,716	45.1%	165,945	91.4%
Adolescent (13-18)	102,788	24.1%	15,679	8.6%
Young Adult (19-21)	75,129	17.6%	*	*
Adult (22+)	56,712	13.3%	*	*

* To be DACA-eligible, an individual needs to establish that they were brought to the U.S. at age 17 or younger.

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