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 **Extent of Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation Domain**

Disparities in Students' Exposure to Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Segregation

Last Updated: August 2023 | [Suggested Citation](#)

Concentration of Poverty in Schools

In the United States⁹, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides eligible students with free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL)^{10, 11}. The percentage of students in a school who are eligible for FRPL can provide a substitute measure for the concentration of low-income students in the school.¹² In addition to using FRPL data from the 2021–22 Common Core of Data (CCD) “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” the first construct in this indicator uses 2020–21 Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) data to examine differences in the concentration of poverty in schools, by school locale.

In fall 2021, about 10.5 million students attended high-poverty public schools,¹³ and the percentage of public school students in high-poverty schools was lower than the percentage in low-poverty schools (21 vs. 24 percent).

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Differences in Concentration of Poverty in Public Schools by Student Race/Ethnicity

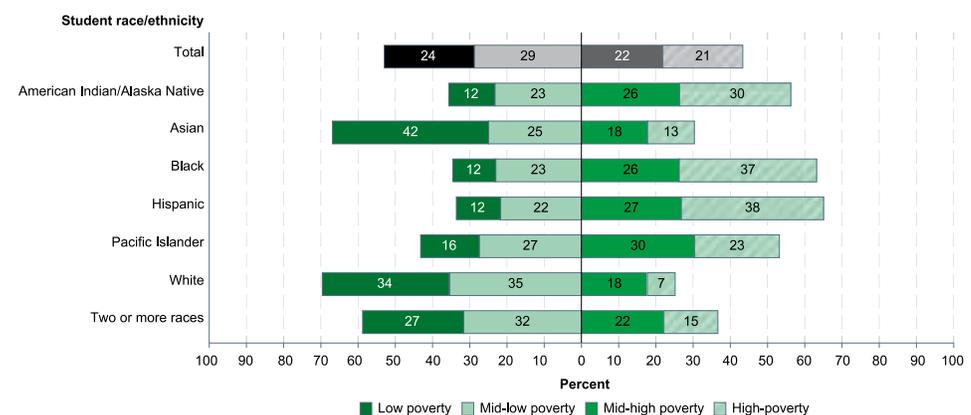
Compared with the national averages, higher percentages of Hispanic, Black, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students attended high-poverty and mid-high¹⁴ poverty schools.

- The percentage of students who attended high-poverty schools was highest for Hispanic students (38 percent), followed by Black students (37 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native students (30 percent), Pacific Islander students (23 percent), students of Two or more races (15 percent), Asian students (13 percent), and White students (7 percent).

At the other end of the school poverty spectrum, a nearly opposite pattern is evident.

- The percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was highest for Asian students (42 percent), followed by White students (34 percent), students of Two or more races (27 percent), Pacific Islander students (16 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native students (12 percent), Hispanic students (12 percent), and Black students (12 percent).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of public school students for each racial/ethnic group, by school poverty level: Fall 2021



NOTE: Data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; mid-high poverty schools are those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; and high-poverty schools are those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL. Data include students whose National School Lunch Program eligibility has been determined through direct certification, which is a “process conducted by the states and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications” (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-report-congress-state-implementation-progress-1>). For more information on eligibility for

FRPL and its relationship to poverty, see the NCES blog post “Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?” The FRPL counts show large shifts in the last several years in some states. Based on state explanations, one reason for these changes was due to the Seamless Summer Option (beginning October 1, 2020), which allowed schools to provide meals to all students, regardless of demonstrated need (<https://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023152>). Data are missing for Alaska. Students in schools with missing FRPL data are not included in this figure. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail does not sum to 100 percent because of rounding and because students in schools with missing FRPL data are not included in this figure. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2021–22; and Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE), “Public School File,” 2020–21. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.60.

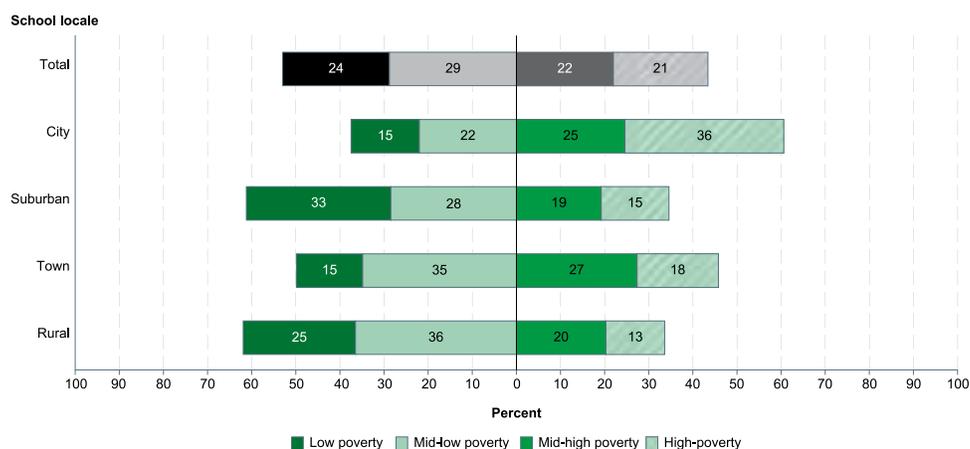
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Differences in Concentration of Poverty in Public Schools by School Locale

The percentage of students attending public schools with different poverty concentrations varied by school locale (i.e., city, suburban, town, and rural).

- In fall 2021, about 36 percent of students who attended city schools were in high-poverty schools, which was greater than the percentage among those who attended town schools (18 percent), suburban schools (15 percent), and rural schools (13 percent).
- Thirty-three percent of students who attended suburban schools were in low-poverty schools, which was greater than the percentage for those who attended rural schools (25 percent), city schools (15 percent), and town schools (15 percent).

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of public school students for each school locale, by school poverty level: Fall 2021



NOTE: Data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; mid-high poverty schools are those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL; and high-poverty schools are those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL. Data include students whose National School Lunch Program eligibility has been determined through direct certification, which is a “process conducted by the states and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications” (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-report-congress-state-implementation-progress-1>). For more information on eligibility for FRPL and its relationship to poverty, see the NCES blog post “Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?” The FRPL counts show large shifts in the last several years in some states. Based on state explanations, one reason for these changes was due to the Seamless Summer Option (beginning October 1, 2020), which allowed schools to provide meals to all students, regardless of demonstrated need (<https://ies.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023152>). Data are missing for Alaska. Students in schools with missing FRPL data are not included in this figure. Excludes students in schools with missing locale information. Detail does not sum to 100 percent because of rounding and because students in schools with missing FRPL data are not included in this figure. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” 2021–22; and Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE), “Public School File,” 2020–21. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.60.

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Differences in Concentration of Poverty in Public Schools by Race/Ethnicity and School Locale

The overall patterns by locale discussed above generally held across racial/ethnic groups, with a couple exceptions.

- Among American Indian/Alaska Native students, 35 percent of those who attended schools in rural areas were in high-poverty schools, which was higher than the percentages in other locales who were in high-poverty schools (ranging from 15 to 33 percent).
- Across different racial/ethnic groups, the percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was generally highest for students in suburban areas. However, among Asian and Hispanic students, 54 and 17 percent of students who attended schools in rural areas, respectively, were in low-poverty schools, which was higher than the percentages in other locales.

Racial Segregation Within and Across Schools

Using data from the 2020–21 Common Core of Data (CCD) “Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” the second construct in this indicator examines the racial/ethnic concentration in schools by exploring the extent to which students of different races/ethnicities are enrolled in schools with different levels of minority student enrollment and the extent to which they are enrolled in schools with students of their own race/ethnicity.

- Of the 49.4 million students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in fall 2021¹⁵, 22.4 million were White, 14.1 million were Hispanic, 7.4 million were Black, 2.7 million were Asian, 2.3 million were of Two or more races, 0.5 million were American Indian/Alaska Native, and 182,000 were Pacific Islander.
- Between fall 2010 and fall 2021, public school enrollment decreased among students who were
 - White (from 25.9 million to 22.4 million);
 - Black (from 7.9 million to 7.4 million); and
 - American Indian/Alaska Native (from 0.6 million to 0.5 million).
- In contrast, public school enrollment increased between fall 2010 and fall 2021 among students who were
 - Hispanic (from 11.4 million to 14.1 million);
 - Asian (from 2.3 million to 2.7 million); and
 - of Two or more races (1.2 million to 2.3 million).

Changes in the numbers of enrolled students of different race/ethnicities produced changes in the overall composition of U.S. public school students.

- Looking at the overall racial/ethnic composition of U.S. public school students, between fall 2010 and fall 2021, the percentages of students who were White, Black, and American Indian/Alaska Native decreased (from 52 to 45 percent, 16 to 15 percent, and 1.1 to 0.9 percent, respectively), while the percentage of students who were Hispanic, Asian, and of Two or more races increased (from 23 to 28 percent, 4.6 to 5.4 percent, and 2 to 5 percent, respectively).
- In both fall 2010 and fall 2021, Pacific Islander students made up less than one half of 1 percent of public elementary and secondary enrollment.

Changes in the racial/ethnic composition of public elementary and secondary school enrollment between fall 2010 and fall 2021 differed by state.¹⁶ Compared with fall 2010, the percentage of public school students in fall 2021 who were Black

- was lower by more than 3 percentage points in Tennessee (3 percent), Louisiana (3 percent), South Carolina (4 percent), and the District of Columbia (13 percent);¹⁷
- was lower by 3 percentage points or less in 33 states; and
- was higher by 3 percentage points or less in the 14 remaining states.

Compared with fall 2010, the percentage of public school students in fall 2021 who were Hispanic

- was higher in all 50 states and the District of Columbia; and
- ranged from 1 percentage point higher in West Virginia and Maine to 13 percentage points higher in Hawaii.

Compared with fall 2010, the percentage of public school students in fall 2021 who were White

- was lower in all 50 states;
- ranged from 3 percentage points lower in Hawaii, West Virginia, and Mississippi to 13 percentage points lower in Connecticut and Washington; and
- was 6 percentage points higher in the District of Columbia (13 percent in fall 2021 vs. 7 percent in fall 2010).

Fall 2010 and fall 2021 data on the racial/ethnic composition of public school enrollment are available for some other U.S. jurisdictions as well.

- In fall 2010 and fall 2021, American Indian/Alaska Native students made up 100 percent of public school enrollment among Bureau of Indian Education schools.
- In Puerto Rico, Hispanic students made up nearly 100 percent of public school enrollment in both fall 2010 and fall 2021.
- In the U.S. Virgin Islands, changes in the percentages of public school students who were of each racial/ethnic group were all 1 percentage point or less. In fall 2021, some 77 percent of students enrolled in public school in the U.S. Virgin Islands were Black, and 21 percent were Hispanic. In Guam, the percentage of public school students who were Pacific Islander was about 4 percentage points higher in fall 2021 than in fall 2010 (73 vs. 69 percent).
- In both fall 2021 and fall 2010, Asian students made up about 22 percent of public school enrollment in Guam.
- In the Northern Marianas, the percentage of public school students who were Pacific Islander was about 3 percentage points lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2010 (58 vs. 61 percent), and the percentage who were Asian was about 2 percentage points lower in fall 2021 than in fall 2010 (36 vs. 38 percent). In contrast, the percentage of public school students in fall 2021 who were of Two or more races was about 5 percentage points higher than in fall of 2010 (5 vs. 0.4 percent) in the Northern Marianas.

Differences in Racial Concentration Within and Across Public Schools

Findings in this indicator come from [Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch](#) and [Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools](#) in the *Condition of Education*. For more data regarding the extent of differences in racial, ethnic, and economic concentration at the K-12 and postsecondary levels, see tables [216.50](#), [216.55](#), and [216.60](#) in the *Digest of Education Statistics, 2022*.

⁹ The United States is defined as the 50 states and the District of Columbia in this indicator.

¹⁰ In this indicator, public schools (including both traditional and charter) are divided into categories by free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) eligibility. In fall 2021, information on school poverty level was not available for around 4 percent of public school students. This included students attending schools for which information on FRPL was missing and students attending schools that did not participate in the NSLP. Low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for FRPL. Mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL. Mid-high poverty schools are those where 50.1 to 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL. High-poverty schools are those where more than 75.0 percent of the students are eligible for FRPL.

¹¹ Students in households with incomes under 185 percent of the poverty threshold are eligible for FRPL under the NSLP. In addition, some groups of children—such as foster children, children participating in the Head Start and Migrant Education programs, and children receiving services under the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act—are assumed to be categorically eligible to participate in the NSLP. Data include students whose NSLP eligibility has been determined through direct certification, which is a “process conducted by the states and by local educational agencies (LEAs) to certify eligible children for free meals without the need for household applications” (<https://www.fns.usda.gov/direct-certification-national-school-lunch-program-report-congress-state-implementation-progress-1>). Also, under the Community Eligibility Provision, some children in households with incomes above 185 percent of the poverty threshold who attend school in a low-income area may participate if the district decides that it would be more efficient to provide free lunch to all children in the school. For more information, see <https://www.fns.usda.gov/nslp>.

¹² For more information on eligibility for FRPL and its relationship to poverty, see the NCES blog post “[Free or reduced price lunch: A proxy for poverty?](#)”

¹³ Data are missing for Alaska.

¹⁴ Although the percentage of students of Two or more races who attended mid-high poverty schools was also higher than the national average (though both rounded to 22 percent), the percentage of students of Two or more races who attended high-poverty schools was lower than the national average.

¹⁵ Enrollment counts for individual racial/ethnic groups do not sum to the total here because of rounding. Data for 2021 include imputations for nonreported prekindergarten enrollment in California and Oregon.

¹⁶ Enrollment data for students not reported by race/ethnicity were prorated based on the known racial/ethnic composition of a state by grade to match the state totals. In addition, data include imputations for nonreported prekindergarten enrollment.

¹⁷ Percentage point changes are calculated using unrounded data.

¹⁸ The term “students of color” is used synonymously with “non-White students” in *Digest* tables [216.50](#) and [216.55](#). Students of color include those who are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and of Two or more races.

¹⁹ Data for Two or more races are omitted from this discussion; 99 percent of students of Two or more races were enrolled in schools where less than 25 percent of the students were of Two or more races.

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Suggested Citation

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