

Undocumented Students in U.S. Higher Education



Acknowledgments

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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 close to 600 college and university presidents and chancellors of public and private colleges and universities, enrolling over five million students in 42 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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Introduction

Undocumented students are a vital part of the U.S. higher education system and the broader American economy. As students, researchers, and campus leaders, they contribute to academic life; beyond campus, they play an increasingly important role in addressing workforce needs across the country.

Communities nationwide continue to face labor shortages in healthcare¹ and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields.² Undocumented students,³ including those eligible for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA),⁴ are pursuing degrees and credentials in these high-demand sectors, positioning themselves to help fill persistent skills gaps while supporting their families, communities, and local economies.

The economic contributions of undocumented students are already substantial. DACA-eligible individuals alone generate billions in household income each year and contribute significantly to federal, state, and local taxes, while also sustaining local businesses through their everyday spending.⁵ Many have also worked in essential roles, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscoring their importance to both economic resilience and community wellbeing.⁶ Undocumented students and graduates contribute as entrepreneurs and taxpayers, advancing economic prosperity even when they face constraints on their postgraduate professional pathways.

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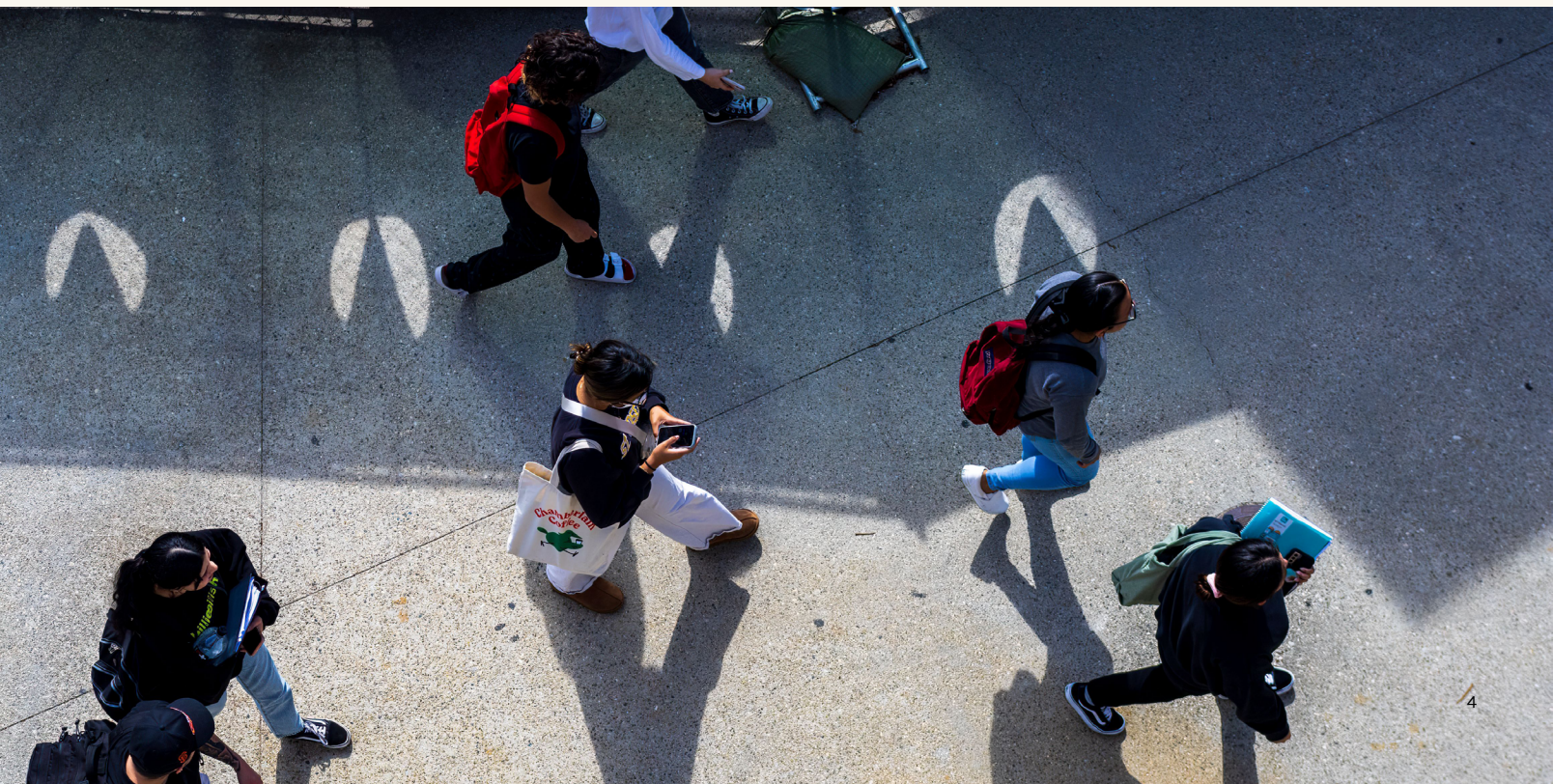
Recent policy changes at state and federal levels introduce new barriers that limit opportunities for undocumented individuals, both with and without DACA. Heightened federal immigration enforcement, ongoing uncertainty around DACA—including longer wait times for DACA recipients to receive their renewals⁷—and federal challenges to state-level tuition,⁸ financial aid, and professional licensure policies are narrowing pathways for undocumented students nationwide.⁹ These developments threaten a crucial talent source and undermine the work of higher education to meet the country's workforce needs.

Who Are Undocumented Students in Higher Education?

An estimated **525,000** undocumented students are enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, representing **2.4 percent** of all postsecondary students, according to the American Immigration Council's analysis of the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS). This marks a modest increase from the 510,000 undocumented students estimated in the 2023 ACS.

At the same time, the share of students eligible for DACA continues to decline. Approximately 129,900 undocumented students (24.7 percent of the total undocumented student population) are DACA-eligible, down from earlier estimates. This reflects a structural constraint in the program: the fixed 2007 arrival cutoff excludes most current, traditional-aged undocumented college students, regardless of how long they have lived in the United States.

Some DACA-eligible individuals have been unable to apply for the program due to ongoing litigation. In January 2025, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that portions of DACA are unlawful, but it limited the scope of its decision to Texas pending further litigation,¹⁰ preserving the current DACA program nationwide for the time being. The ruling allows current DACA recipients in all states, including Texas, to continue renewing their DACA status and work authorization while the case proceeds through the courts. Following the Fifth Circuit's March 2025 mandate remanding the case to the district court, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) stated that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should eventually resume processing initial DACA applications, although implementation details in Texas may differ.



However, as of the publication of this report, no new initial DACA applications have been processed, and the district court has not yet issued an implementation order. FWD.us, an immigration and criminal justice policy group, estimates that approximately 400,000 DACA-eligible individuals have been unable to apply for the program due to this pause.¹¹ It is likely that an even smaller portion of the 129,000 DACA-eligible students enrolled in higher education are active DACA recipients, meaning less than one quarter of all undocumented students in higher education have access to DACA benefits, such as work authorization and protection from deportation.

Undocumented students with DACA have faced escalating threats, despite making good-faith efforts to maintain eligibility, renew their applications, and contribute to the U.S. economy. Reports of hundreds of DACA recipients and other Dreamers—undocumented immigrants who entered the United States as children—facing detention and deportation highlight the instability facing this population and demonstrate the importance of identifying a permanent legislative solution.¹² Recent guidance on deferred action issued by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) also signals a potentially more restrictive approach to how USCIS may exercise discretion when adjudicating DACA requests.¹³

A close look at the age of arrival of the undocumented population emphasizes the importance of including young and adolescent arrivals when considering future policies.

Undocumented students are not a monolithic group. While a majority arrived in the United States as children or adolescents, a substantial share arrived as young adults and are balancing school with work and family responsibilities. Of the undocumented college students, women make up a slight majority (54.5 percent).

UNDOCUMENTED AND DACA-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS BY AGE OF ARRIVAL, 2024

Age of Arrival	Undocumented Postsecondary Students	Share of Undocumented Postsecondary Students	DACA-Eligible Postsecondary Students	Share of DACA-Eligible Postsecondary Students
Child (Infant- 9 yrs)	146,726	27.9%	108,052	83.2%
Adolescent (10 – 18 yrs)	193,601	36.9%	21,859	16.8%
Young Adult (19-20)	44,913	8.6%	NA	NA
Adult 21+	139,767	26.6%	NA	NA

The DACA program demonstrates that providing undocumented individuals with access to work authorization and relief from deportation leads to educational attainment and postgraduate success. Legislation that codifies and extends these benefits could support access to professional fields—fields where the United States has a need for workers—for a large number of students and graduates.

Breakdown of the Undocumented Student Population

Region and Country of Origin

Undocumented students reflect the full diversity of the U.S. immigrant population. While Mexico remains the single largest country of origin (30.2 percent), students come from across the globe, with significant representation from Asia, the Caribbean, South America, and Africa.

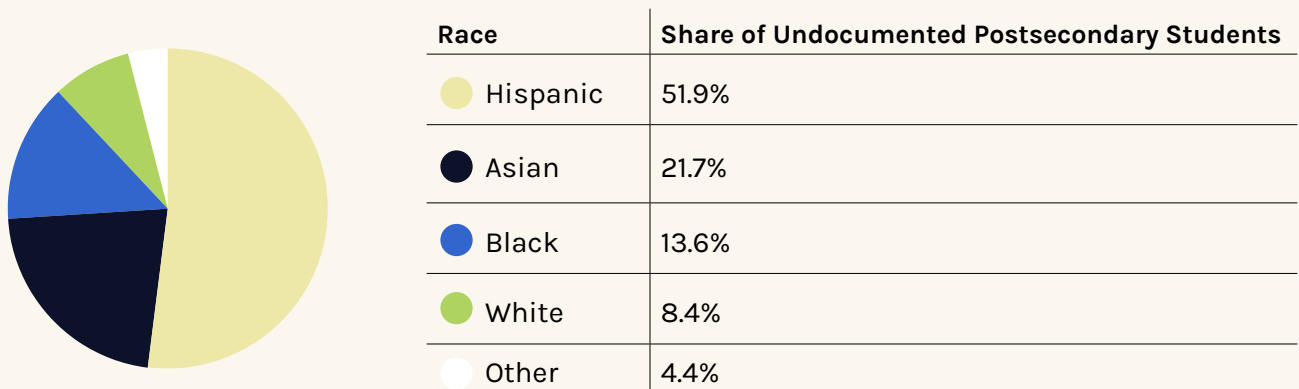
UNDOCUMENTED COLLEGE STUDENTS BY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN, 2024

Birth Country	Population	Share of Country by Origin
Mexico	158,489	30.2%
China	26,638	5.1%
India	22,141	4.2%
Haiti	19,007	3.6%
El Salvador	16,167	3.1%
Venezuela	15,321	2.9%
Colombia	14,998	2.9%
Philippines	14,949	2.8%
Brazil	13,549	2.6%
Guatemala	12,218	2.3%
Cuba	12,159	2.3%
Korea	10,692	2.0%
Vietnam	10,515	2.0%
Nigeria	10,257	2.0%
Canada	9,726	1.9%
Honduras	7,935	1.5%
Dominican Republic	7,819	1.5%
Jamaica	7,343	1.4%
Peru	5,607	1.1%

Race and Ethnicity

The undocumented student population in higher education is racially and ethnically diverse, reflecting broader shifts in immigration patterns to the United States in recent decades.¹⁴ While a slight majority (51.9 percent) of undocumented college students identify as Hispanic, nearly half identify as non-Hispanic, including 21.7 percent as Asian, 13.6 percent as Black, and 8.4 percent as white, along with a smaller share identifying as multiracial or another race.

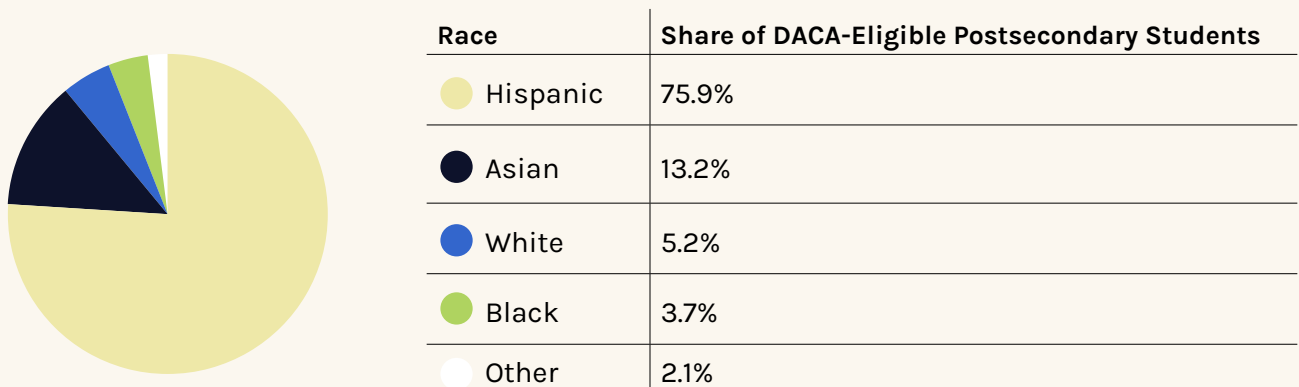
UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, 2024



This distribution underscores an important point: undocumented students are not defined by a single racial or ethnic identity. Instead, they reflect the full diversity of first-generation immigrant communities, with substantial representation from across regions of the world.

By contrast, the DACA-eligible student population is less diverse, with 75.9 percent identifying as Hispanic and smaller shares identifying as Asian, Black, or white. The difference reflects the structure of the DACA program itself. The program's fixed 2007 arrival cutoff includes individuals from earlier migration cohorts, particularly from Latin America, while excluding more recent arrivals from Asia, Africa, and other regions.

DACA-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION BY RACE AND ETHNICITY, 2024

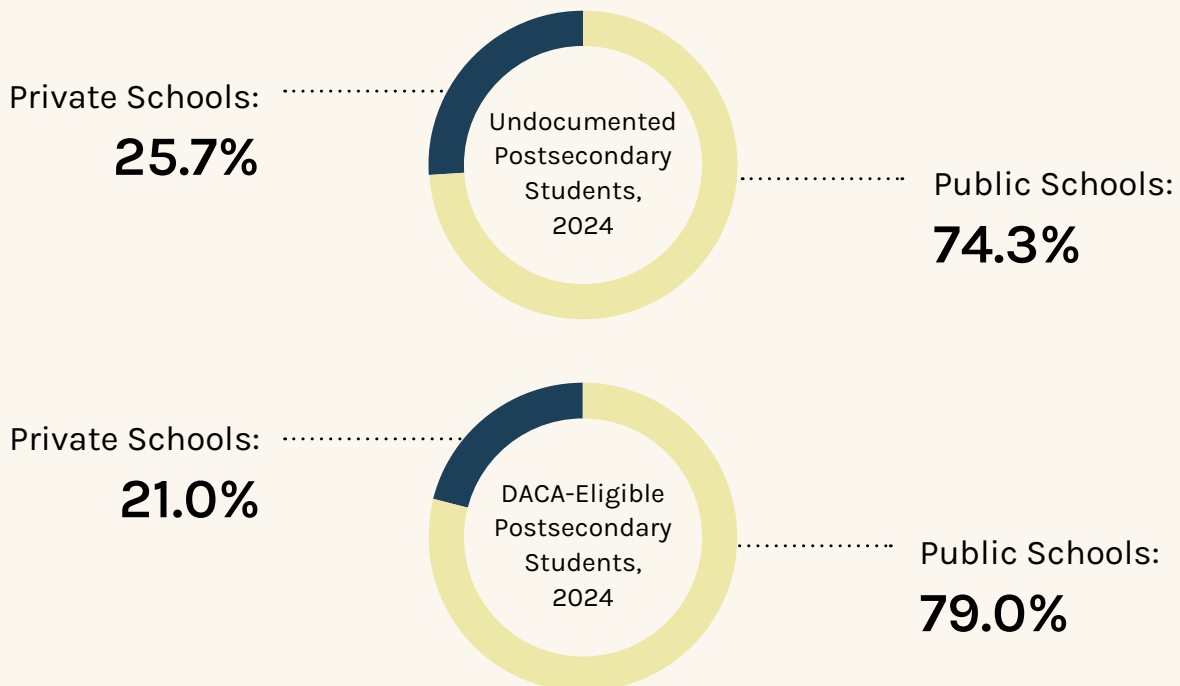


As a result, the diversity of the broader undocumented student population is not mirrored in the DACA and DACA-eligible populations. This divergence highlights how policy design can shape not only access to legal protections, but also which communities are most likely to benefit from them.

Degrees and Programs

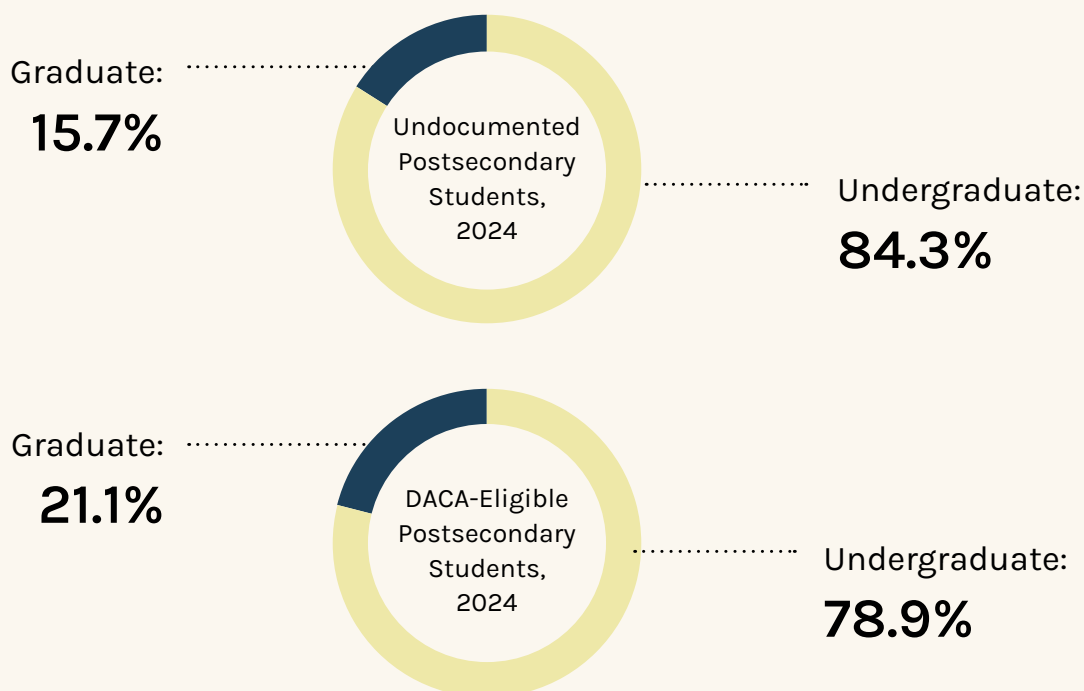
Undocumented students are enrolled across all sectors of higher education, from community colleges to research universities. Public institutions educate nearly three-quarters (74.3 percent) of undocumented students, highlighting the central role of state education systems in providing access. One-quarter (25.7 percent) of undocumented students attend private institutions, including liberal arts, research focused, and faith-based institutions.

SHARE OF UNDOCUMENTED DACA-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION, 2024



Undocumented students pursue a wide range of credentials, from associate degrees to graduate degrees and professional training. While the majority are enrolled in undergraduate programs (84.3 percent), a growing share are pursuing graduate education (15.7 percent)—a notable increase from 10.3 percent in 2019 and 12.8 percent in 2021. This rise points to an important shift: undocumented students are not only accessing higher education but are increasingly continuing beyond initial degrees into more advanced fields of study.

SHARE OF UNDOCUMENTED AND DACA-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS IN UNDERGRADUATE AND GRADUATE PROGRAMS, 2024



Among DACA-eligible students, participation in graduate education is even higher (21.1 percent). Previous research has shown that DACA improved educational attainment among eligible youth by reducing uncertainty and expanding educational and employment opportunities.¹⁵ Taken together, these trends indicate a strengthening pipeline of undocumented students moving into advanced training, including master's, doctoral, and professional degree programs.

This growth has important implications. As more undocumented students enter graduate education, they are preparing for roles in high-skill sectors that require specialized training, including healthcare, education, research, and technical fields. However, barriers to employment authorization, licensure, and legal status continue to shape whether these investments in education are able to translate into full participation in the workforce.

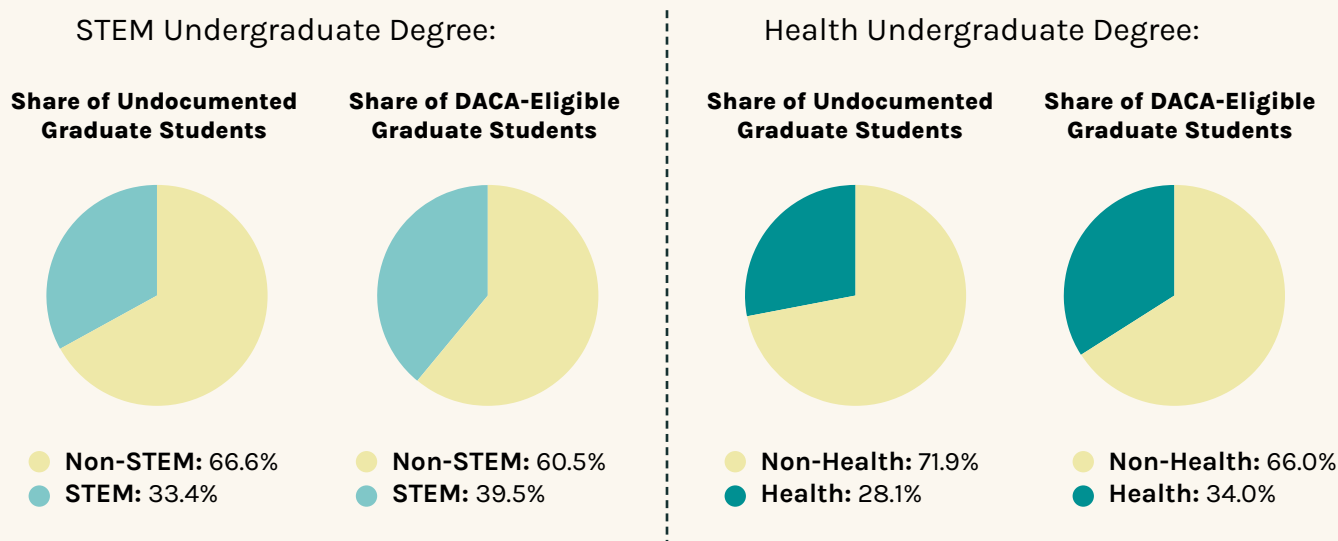
Impact on Science and Innovation

Undocumented students are an important part of the U.S. talent pipeline, particularly in fields where demand continues to outpace supply. Nearly 16.0 percent are enrolled in graduate programs, positioning them to enter high-skill professions that are critical to the nation's economic and social infrastructure.

Among graduate students, many bring strong academic preparation in STEM¹⁶ and health-related fields,¹⁷ both of which are experiencing persistent and worsening workforce

shortages. A substantial share of undocumented graduate students have undergraduate degrees in STEM disciplines, and a notable portion of those degrees are in healthcare-related fields. Among DACA-eligible graduate students, these concentrations are even higher.

SHARE OF UNDOCUMENTED AND DACA-ELIGIBLE GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH STEM AND HEALTH UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES, 2024



These patterns are especially significant given the scale of current workforce gaps. Employers across sectors continue to report difficulty filling specialized roles.¹⁸ Undocumented students are actively training to meet these needs, representing a critical but often underrecognized source of future talent in both technical and care-based professions.

At the same time, barriers to licensure, employment authorization, and legal status limit the ability of many of these students to fully contribute their skills after graduation. As a result, the United States risks underutilizing a population that it has already invested in and that would strengthen key sectors of the economy.

Enrollment by State

Undocumented students are concentrated in a relatively small number of states. California, Texas, Florida, New York, and Illinois account for nearly 55 percent of all undocumented college students.

At the same time, some states have particularly high shares of undocumented students within their college populations, including Florida, Nevada, New Jersey, Texas, and California.

These patterns are shaped not only by student characteristics but also by state policy. Access to in-state tuition, state financial aid, professional and occupational licensure, and driver's licenses can significantly influence whether undocumented students are able to enroll in college, persist through graduation, and transition into the workforce.

UNDOCUMENTED AND DACA-ELIGIBLE STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION BY STATE, 2024

State	Number of Undocumented College Students	Share of College Student Population	Number of DACA Eligible College Students	Share of DACA Eligible College Students
California	102,227	3.4%	38,770	1.3%
Texas	69,993	3.6%	20,451	1.0%
Florida	60,065	4.3%	6,952	0.5%
New York	29,609	2.2%	5,771	0.4%
Illinois	24,921	3.0%	8,396	1.0%
New Jersey	22,372	3.7%		0.4%
Georgia	16,306	2.3%		0.4%
Massachusetts	15,511	2.7%		0.3%
Washington	15,216	3.3%		0.5%
North Carolina	14,102	2.0%		0.6%
Pennsylvania	12,992	1.6%		
Arizona	11,845	2.4%		0.8%
Maryland	11,282	2.6%		0.6%
Virginia	9,803	1.6%		
Ohio	7,924	1.2%		
Colorado	6,681	1.8%		
Connecticut	6,584	2.5%		
Nevada	6,550	3.8%		
Michigan	6,185	1.0%		
Utah	5,853	2.0%		
New Mexico		2.9%		
South Carolina		1.2%		
Oklahoma		1.0%		
Missouri		1.0%		
Kentucky		1.0%		
Tennessee		1.1%		
Alabama		1.1%		
Indiana		1.6%		
Iowa		1.6%		
Minnesota		1.8%		
Hawaii		1.9%		
Oregon		2.2%		

Recent policy changes in high immigrant-enrolling states like Florida and Texas may affect future college enrollment and educational opportunities for undocumented students. As of the publication of this report, the Department of Justice has filed lawsuits challenging tuition equity policies in 14 states.¹⁹ This includes Texas, which has also enacted new lawful presence requirements that prevent undocumented graduates from obtaining professional licenses, effectively shutting off career pathways for students who have earned degrees at local institutions.²⁰ Meanwhile, Florida rescinded its longstanding tuition equity policy, abruptly curtailing access for thousands of current and prospective students.²¹ Proposed regulations could bar undocumented students in Florida from enrolling in certain state colleges and universities.²² Such policy shifts compound the effect of federal and state-level efforts to restrict opportunities for students.

Over time, these shifts may have broader implications for postsecondary enrollment, workforce participation, and state economic development. As states shift from policies that support inclusion and economic mobility and toward systems that restrict access to academic and professional opportunities, they risk reducing workforce participation and undermining their own long-term economic growth. As a result, states that introduce restrictive policies may see reductions in academic performance, increases in food and housing insecurity, and changes in degree attainment and local workforce participation in future years

Policy Environment

The 2024 ACS data reflect a rapidly evolving policy landscape. Three dynamics are especially important:

1. DACA's narrowing reach

The program's fixed eligibility window means that fewer students qualify each year, even as new cohorts graduate from U.S. high schools. Ongoing litigation and delayed renewal processing adds greater uncertainty for current recipients.

2. Federal attacks on tuition equity policies and state-level retrenchment

Recent rollbacks of in-state tuition access in several states, largely due to lawsuits brought by the U.S. Department of Justice combined with state actions to end access, represent a significant break from two decades of gradual expansion.²³ These changes directly affect affordability and access for thousands of students. The effects of these policy shifts are compounded by other efforts to restrict access to programs and services that support students' academic success.²⁴

3. Intensified enforcement climate

Increased immigration enforcement can deter enrollment and disrupt students' ability to pursue and complete degrees. School districts across the country continue to report declines in immigrant student attendance,²⁵ which research has linked to the federal administration's immigration enforcement and deportation efforts.²⁶

However, states that maintain or expand inclusive policies continue to demonstrate measurable student benefits, including higher educational attainment and stronger workforce outcomes.²⁷

Conclusion

Undocumented students are deeply embedded in the fabric of U.S. higher education and the future workforce. They pursue demanding academic paths, contribute to campus life, and prepare for careers in fields critical to the nation's economic and social wellbeing.

As policymakers debate the future of immigration, higher education, and workforce development, the direction of policies affecting undocumented students will have far-reaching consequences. Decisions about access to higher education and career pathways will shape not only the futures of individual students, but also the ability of the United States to educate, train, and retain needed talent.

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