Fact Sheet

How Many Unauthorized Immigrants Graduate from U.S. High Schools Annually?

By Jie Zong and Jeanne Batalova

Executive Summary

Dating back to 2001 and in nearly every legislative session since, bills have been introduced in Congress that would offer a pathway to legal status to hundreds of thousands of eligible unauthorized immigrants who arrived in the United States as children, provided they earn a high school diploma or its equivalent. Yet to date, despite significant bipartisan support to legalize a population viewed as particularly meritorious, Congress has yet to act.

In 2012, using his executive authority, President Barack Obama launched the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, broadly modeled on DREAM legislation. The program, which the Trump administration has sought since 2017 to terminate, offers work authorization and relief from deportation to unauthorized immigrants brought to the United States as children. As of January 31, 2019, 680,000 people held DACA status—a sizeable share of the close to 800,000 who had DACA applications approved between August 2012, when the program began, and September 2017, when the Trump administration announced its termination. Met with legal challenges, the decision was blocked by several federal courts starting in January 2018. Under the court injunctions, the government is required to continue adjudicating renewal applications from anyone who has previously held DACA benefits. Individuals who have never had DACA cannot apply.

While the legal battle over the existence and scope of the program continues, unauthorized immigrant youth (typically referred to as DREAMers) are graduating every year from high school without access to DACA protections, harming their work prospects and limiting their postsecondary education opportunities. These legal developments beg the question how many of these youth, vulnerable to arrest and removal, graduate from high school annually to face these limited prospects. For years, however, a fresh estimate has been lacking.

An earlier, widely circulated estimate of the number of graduating unauthorized immigrants was based on data from 2000-02. Since then the size and educational profile of the young unauthorized immigrant population in the United States has changed considerably. This fact sheet offers the most recent estimates of this population for the United States and top states.

Drawing on its unique methodology to assign legal status in U.S. Census Bureau data from the American Community Survey (ACS), the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimates that 98,000 unauthorized-immigrant students graduate from U.S. high schools every year—a sizeable increase over the 65,000 estimate that has long circulated. Twenty-seven percent of these graduates reside in California and another 17 percent in Texas.

I. Introduction: Earlier Estimate and a Changing Reality

In 2003, using data from the Census Bureau's 2000-02 Current Population Survey (CPS), Jeffrey Passel from the Urban Institute estimated that roughly 80,000 unauthorized-immigrant children with five or more years of U.S. residence would reach age 18 each year. He also estimated that about 65,000 of these children would graduate annually from high school, based on a graduation rate in the range of 80 percent to 83 percent.[1]

Several important changes in immigration flows and composition as well as U.S. policies have occurred since then. First, the unauthorized population experienced rapid growth in the 2000s, stabilizing after 2007. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) estimated 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants lived in the United States in 2016,[2] compared to 7.5 – 9.5 million in 2002.[3] In 2000, the overwhelming majority of unauthorized immigrants were from Mexico; their share has fallen as more recent arrivals come from more diverse origins, including Central America, Asia, and Africa. Second, high school graduation rates have improved for students from all backgrounds,[4] including Latinos and English Learners (ELs)—two groups that include many unauthorized immigrants.

Moreover, a number of federal and state policies enacted since 2001 have encouraged and supported high school graduation and higher-education enrollment for unauthorized immigrant youth. For instance, at least 20 states—including California, Texas, and New York—as well as the District of Columbia have laws or policies allowing unauthorized immigrants to pay lower, in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities.[5] At the federal level, multiple versions of the proposed DREAM Act, which would provide pathways to permanent residency for unauthorized immigrants who came before age 16, have had built-in incentives for prospective beneficiaries to graduate from high school, as it would be a key requirement for conditional permanent residency eligibility. Similarly, high school graduates are eligible to apply for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which provides legal work authorization and protection from deportation.[6] Having a work permit has allowed DACA recipients not only to work but also to accept better, higher-paying jobs—and in some states even apply for select occupational licenses[7]—if the recipients have graduated from high school or earned higher levels of educational attainment.

II. New Estimates at National Level and for Top States

Prior research demonstrates that both unauthorized and legally present students from similar sociodemographic backgrounds face the same barriers to high school completion and have similar graduation rates; their legal-status differences have a larger impact on college enrollment.[8]

At the same time, race, ethnicity, and age at arrival have important implications for high school graduation. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that four-year high school graduation rates[9] vary significantly by race/ethnicity. In school year (SY) 2016-17, the graduation rates of Asian/Pacific Islander and White students (91 percent and 89 percent respectively) exceeded the 85 percent graduation rate for all students.[10] Lower rates were posted by Hispanic (80 percent), Black (78 percent), and American Indian (72 percent) students.[11] Immigrant students who arrived in the United States at age 6 or older are more likely to drop out from high school than those who arrived at younger ages.[12] In addition, immigrant students who arrived at older ages are more likely to be ELs. ELs also have much lower four-year high school graduation rates (66 percent) than students overall. Many unaccompanied minors and young children traveling with families from Central America to seek asylum in the United States are entering U.S. schools at later ages and have interrupted formal educations.[13]

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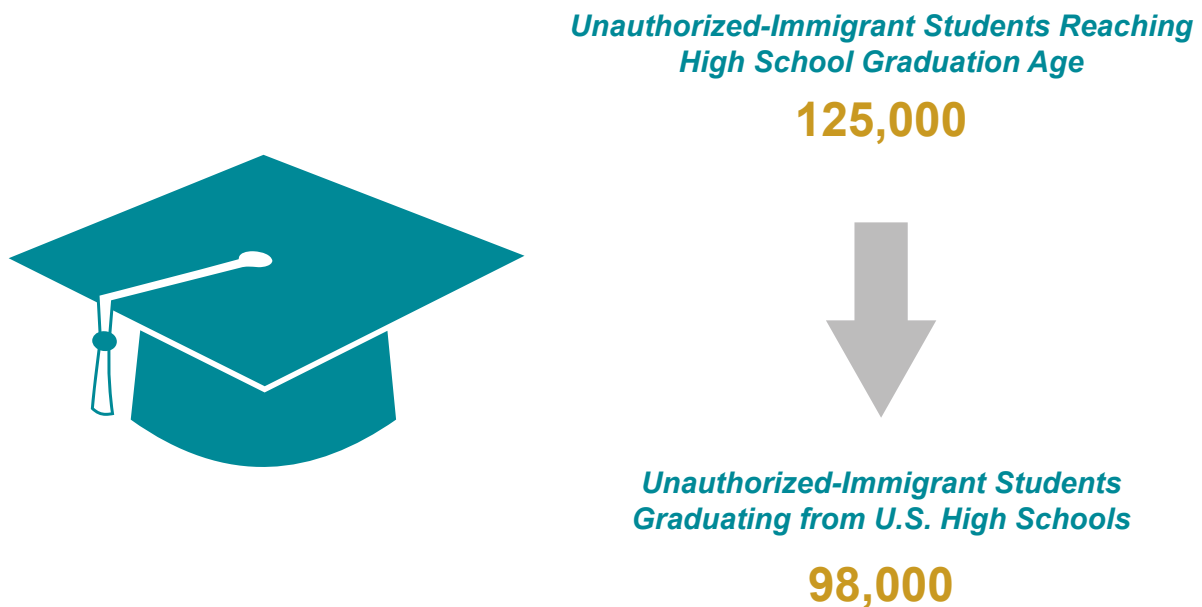They too are more likely to be identified as ELs and to take longer to graduate.

A.   National Estimate

The authors took these differences in graduation rates into account in estimating the number of unauthorized immigrant students graduating from high school. In brief, the authors first estimated the number of unauthorized immigrants (ages 15 to 19) in the United States for at least five years[14] who reached high school graduation age each year.[15] This population numbered approximately 125,000.

The authors then applied respective high school graduation rates by race/ethnicity and EL status from the NCES to the subgroups within the 125,000 population (see Appendix B for details). The resulting analysis reflected that almost 98,000 unauthorized-immigrant students graduate from U.S. high schools every year (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Estimate of Number of Unauthorized Immigrants (ages 15-19) Reaching High School Graduation Age and Those Graduating Annual

Unauthorized-Immigrant Students Reaching High School Graduation Age

125,000

Unauthorized-Immigrant Students Graduating from U.S. High Schools

98,000

Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), with legal-status assignments using a unique MPI methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute. For more on the methodology, see Appendix A; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "Table 1. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographic Characteristics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2016–17," accessed March 20, 2019, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2016-17.asp.

B. Number of Unauthorized-Immigrant Students Graduating in Key States

As with the overall unauthorized-immigrant population, high school graduates without legal status are concentrated in a handful of states (see Table 1). About 27,000 unauthorized-immigrant students graduate from California high schools every year, representing 27 percent of the national total, followed by 17,000 in Texas; 5,000 in Florida; and 4,000 each in New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. In total, the top 15 states shown in Table 1 account for about 81 percent of all unauthorized-immigrant high school graduates.

Table 1. Estimated Number of Unauthorized Immigrants Who Graduate from U.S. High Schools Yearly, by State, 2016

State	Number of Graduating Unauthorized-Immigrant Students	State Share of Total Number of Graduating Unauthorized-Immigrant Students (%)
United States	**98,000**	**100**
California	27,000	27
Texas	17,000	17
Florida	5,000	6
New York	4,000	4
New Jersey	4,000	4
Illinois	4,000	4
Georgia	3,000	3
North Carolina	3,000	3
Virginia	2,000	3
Arizona	2,000	2
Maryland	2,000	2
Washington	2,000	2
Colorado	1,000	2
Nevada	1,000	1
Massachusetts	1,000	1
Other	18,000	19

Note: Totals do not add up due to rounding.
Source: MPI analysis of NCES, "Table 1. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographic Characteristics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2016–17;" U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2016 and 2012-16 pooled ACS and the 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI.

III. Conclusion

Unauthorized immigrants who were brought to the United States as children, known as DREAMers, long have been a sympathetic population, with Democrats and Republicans alike proposing solutions since 2001 to address their future even when embroiled in bitter battles over other immigration-related issues. Similarly, administrators and leaders of secondary and higher education institutions, immigrant-rights advocates, state policymakers, and more recently members of the business community have expressed keen interest in DREAMers, viewing them as current and potential students on their campuses, members of the community, and workers. Many embraced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program as one providing temporary relief from deportation and work authorization amid congressional inaction over a more permanent fix. And they have lobbied for the permanent solution of passing DREAM Act legislation that would convey permanent legal status for applicants who meet educational attainment and other criteria.

The decision by the Trump administration to rescind the DACA program in September 2017; subsequent legal challenges to the program's termination; persistent advocacy on DREAMers' behalf, including by DREAMers themselves; and recent introduction in the House of a Democratic marker bill, the *American Dream and Promise Act of 2019*, have kept this population front and center in the immigration debate.

One particular point of interest—how many DREAMers graduate yearly from high school—has long lacked an updated estimate. Using its unique methodology to assign legal status in U.S. Census Bureau data, MPI puts this number at about 98,000, with California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois accounting for 62 percent of these graduates.

DACA, kept alive by court orders for those who have ever been approved under the program, provides protection from deportation and work authorization to nearly 680,000 current beneficiaries.[16] However, the Trump administration will not accept requests from otherwise eligible unauthorized youth who have never held DACA status. That makes many of the 98,000 unauthorized-immigrant students graduating from U.S. high schools ineligible going forward.

While high school graduation represents an important milestone in the lives of many young people, these graduates will be at risk of deportation and will face severely limited opportunities to pursue further work and education.

Appendices

Appendix A. MPI Methodology of Assigning Legal Status to Noncitizen Respondents in the American Community Survey

Because the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask foreign-born respondents on the decennial census or its larger population surveys (including the American Community Survey and Current Population Survey) about their legal or visa status, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) has developed a methodology to assign legal status to noncitizens in these surveys, permitting analysis of the size and characteristics of the unauthorized immigrant population.

Using information from the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), MPI assigns legal status to noncitizens in the American Community Survey (ACS), a survey that is conducted annually. In the SIPP, which is conducted only periodically, noncitizens report whether they have lawful permanent resident (LPR) status—i.e., a green card. Those without LPR status may be recent refugees or asylees who have not yet adjusted to LPR status, temporary visa holders (e.g., students or high-skilled temporary workers such as H-1B visa recipients), or unauthorized immigrants. Mapping characteristics such as country of birth, year of U.S. entry, age, gender, and educational attainment between the two surveys, MPI assigns LPR status to noncitizens in the ACS who have similar characteristics to LPRs in the SIPP, and unauthorized status to those in the ACS with similar characteristics to unauthorized immigrants who were identified by MPI in the SIPP. MPI identifies recent refugees and asylees as those from countries with high shares of refugees and asylees among recent arrivals, and temporary visa holders as those with characteristics in the ACS who have qualifications for student, H-1B, and other temporary classifications. This method, which is based on the statistical process of multiple imputation, was developed by Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University and James Bachmeier of Temple University and refined in consultation with MPI.

For more detail on the methods, see Jeanne Batalova, Sarah Hooker, Randy Capps, and James D. Bachmeier, *DACA at the Two-Year Mark: A National and State Profile of Youth Eligible and Applying for Deferred Action* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2014), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/daca-two-year-mark-national-and-state-profile-youth-eligible-and-applying-deferred-action. These estimates use commonly accepted benchmarks from other research studies to determine the size of the unauthorized population and response rates to surveys. These estimates have the same sampling and coverage errors as any other survey-based estimates that rely on ACS and other Census Bureau data.

Appendix B. MPI Methodology of Estimating the Annual Number of Unauthorized-Immigrant Students Who Graduate from U.S. High Schools

Using MPI's methodology for assigning legal status described in Appendix A and applying it to the 2016 ACS, the authors first estimated the number of unauthorized immigrants (ages 15 to 19) who had lived in the United States for at least five years[17] and who reached high school graduation age every year. This population numbered approximately 125,000.

The authors separated these students into two cohorts: an "on-time graduating" cohort (ages 15 to 17) and a "late-graduating" cohort (ages 18 to 19). The first group was also split into Hispanics, non-Hispanic Asians and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs), non-Hispanic Blacks, non-Hispanic Whites, and non-Hispanic Others.

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Second, the authors applied National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) school year (SY) 2016-17 high school graduation rates by race and ethnicity[18] and English Learner (EL) status to estimate the number of unauthorized immigrant students who are likely to graduate per year in each cohort:

- *"On-time graduating" cohort (ages 15-17).* As shown in Table 2, this cohort was composed of 83,000 Hispanics (82 percent) and 18,000 non-Hispanics (18 percent); two-thirds of students in this cohort in the United States arrived before age 6, which means they are unlikely to be ELs.

  The authors applied the NCES graduation rate for Hispanic students (80 percent) to the 83,000 Hispanic unauthorized immigrant students reaching high school graduation age (see Table 3). They also applied respective high school graduate rates of non-Hispanic AAPIs (91 percent), non-Hispanic Black (78 percent), and non-Hispanic Whites (89 percent) to their estimates of non-Hispanic AAPI, Black, and White unauthorized immigrants. The authors used the total graduation rate of 85 percent in the case of "Other Race" students since NCES does not have this information.

  This resulted in a combined estimate of 85,000 unauthorized Hispanic and non-Hispanic youth under age 18 graduating from high school every year (see Table 3).

- *"Late-graduating" cohort (ages 18-19).* There were approximately 24,000 unauthorized-immigrant students between ages 18 and 19 who would reach high school graduation age every year (see Table A-1). Fewer than half arrived before age 6. They are more likely to be EL students and face steeper barriers to finishing high school than the on-time cohort due to limited English skills and, in many cases, interrupted formal education. The authors applied the 66 percent EL graduation rate to the 24,000 students, resulting in an estimate of 16,000 graduates each year (see Table A-2).

Combining these two cohorts (see far-right column in Table A-2), MPI estimated that almost 98,000 unauthorized-immigrant students graduate from high school in the United States every year.

Table A-1. Hispanic Origin and Age at Arrival of Unauthorized Immigrants Who Are Reaching High School Graduation Age Every Year, 2016

	On-Time Graduating Cohort (ages 15 to 17)	Late-Graduating Cohort (ages 18 to 19)
Total	**101,000**	**24,000**
Ethnicity		
Hispanic	83,000	20,000
Share Hispanic (percent)	82	82
Age at Arrival		
Number who arrived before age 6	67,000	12,000
Share of cohort that arrived before age 6 (percent)	66	49

Notes: This analysis includes unauthorized-immigrant students (ages 15 to 19) who had lived in the United States for at least five years and who are reaching high school graduation age every year. The estimate of the "on-time graduating" cohort is the average of the three ages (15, 16, and 17) of these students; the estimate of the "late-graduating" cohort is the average of two ages (18 and 19) of these students.
Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from pooled 2012-16 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), with legal-status assignments using a unique MPI methodology developed in consultation with James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute. For more on the methodology, see Appendix A.

Table A-2. Estimated Number of Unauthorized Immigrants Graduating from High School Yearly, 2016

	On-Time Graduating Cohort*				Late-Graduating Cohort	Total
	Hispanic	Asian and Pacific Islander	Black	White		
Number of Unauthorized-Immigrant Students Reaching High School Graduation Age Every Year	82,900	9,700	3,300	4,300	23,800	124,700
Graduation Rate (percent)	80.0	91.2	77.8	88.6	66.4	
Number Estimated to Graduate Annually	66,300	8,800	2,600	3,800	15,600	97,900

* "Other Race" students are not shown due to their small sample size. The overall total (far-right column) is based on the information from all students.

Notes: This analysis includes unauthorized-immigrant students (ages 15 to 19) who had lived in the United States for at least five years and who are reaching high school graduation age every year. The estimate of the "on-time graduating" cohort is the average of the three ages (15, 16, and 17) of these students; the estimate of the "late-graduating" cohort is the average of two ages (18 and 19) of these students. The English Learner (EL) graduation rate is not available by race and ethnicity; the authors used the same rate for the late-graduating cohort.

Source: MPI analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2016 ACS and the 2008 SIPP, with legal-status assignments by MPI. Four-year high school graduation rates are from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), "Table 1. Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographic Characteristics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2016–17," accessed on March 20, 2019, https://nces. ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2016-17.asp.

State estimates: The authors used the same approach in developing estimates for the top 15 states. The authors used MPI's ACS-based state-level estimates of the total number of unauthorized-immigrant students reaching graduation age every year and applied state-specific high school graduation rates for respective racial/ethnic and EL status groups provided the by NCES.

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Endnotes

1   Jeffrey S. Passel, "Further Demographic Information Relating to the DREAM Act," Urban Institute, October 2003, www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/dream_demographics.pdf.

2   Julia Gelatt and Jie Zong, *Settling In: A Profile of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/profile-unauthorized-immigrant-population-united-states.

3   Passel, "Further Demographic Information Relating to the DREAM Act."

4   *Education Week*, "Data: U.S. Graduation Rates by State and Student Demographics," updated January 29, 2019, www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/data-us-graduation-rates-by-state-and.html.

5   National Immigration Law Center (NILC), "Basic Facts About In-State Tuition for Undocumented Immigrant Students," updated June 1, 2018, www.nilc.org/issues/education/basic-facts-instate/.

6   To be eligible for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, applicants must meet a range of other criteria. See U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), "Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)," updated February 14, 2018, www.uscis.gov/archive/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca.

7   With regard to professional licenses, California, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming allow DACA recipients to obtain them for certain professions. For more, see National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), *Professional and Occupational Licenses for Immigrants* (Washington, DC: NCSL, 2017), www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/professional-and-occupational-licenses-for-immigrants.aspx.

8   Emily Greenman and Matthew Hall, "Legal Status and Educational Transitions for Mexican and Central American Immigrant Youth," *Social Forces* 91, no. 4 (2013): 1475-98.

9   The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defines the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR) as the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. For more, see NCES, "What Is the Difference between the ACGR and the AFGR?," NCES blog post, November 29, 2017, https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/post/what-is-the-difference-between-the-acgr-and-the-afgr.

10 In NCES high school graduation data, race categories refer to non-Hispanic unless specified. Hispanics or Latino of any race are groups into "Hispanics."

11 *Education Week*, "Data: U.S. Graduation Rates by State and Student Demographics."

12 Krista M. Perreira, Kathleen Mullan Harris, and Dohoon Lee, "Making It in America: High School Completion by Immigrant and Native Youth," *Demography* 43, no. 3 (2006): 511-36.

13 Julie Sugarman, *Beyond Teaching English: Supporting High School Completion by Immigrant and Refugee Students* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2017), www.migrationpolicy.org/research/beyond-teaching-english-supporting-high-school-completion-immigrant-and-refugee-students.

14 To develop an estimate consistent with Passel's 2000-02 estimate, the authors excluded from their calculations unauthorized youth who have resided in the United States for less than five years.

15 See Appendix A for a brief description of the Migration Policy Institute's unique methodology of legal-status assignment.

16 USCIS, "Approximate Active DACA Recipients: As of January 31, 2019," updated April 10, 2019, www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/USCIS/Resources/Reports%20and%20Studies/Immigration%20Forms%20Data/All%20Form%20Types/DACA/7._Approximate_DACA_Pending_-_Jan_31_2019.pdf.

17 To develop an estimate consistent with that of Jeffrey Passel, who issued in the most recent earlier estimate of unauthorized immigrants graduating from high school yearly, using 2000-02 data, the authors excluded from their calculations unauthorized youth who have lived in the United States for less than five years. These recent arrivals are unlikely to have spent sufficient time in the U.S. secondary school system to be prepared to graduate on time and are therefore more likely to drop out or take longer to graduate than U.S. students overall whose high school graduation rates are used in MPI's estimations.

18 NCES and school districts typically do not track foreign-born status in ways that permit analysis of graduation rates by nativity. As a proxy, the authors used respective rates of students by race and ethnicity.

About the Authors

Jie Zong is an Associate Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), where she provides quantitative research support across MPI programs. Her research areas include structural and cultural integration of first- and second-generation immigrants, protective factors for children in refugee families, and workforce development in the United States.

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Her areas of expertise include the impacts of immigrants on society and labor markets; social and economic mobility of first- and second-generation youth and young adults; and the policies and practices regulating immigration and integration of highly skilled workers and foreign students in the United States and other countries.

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