

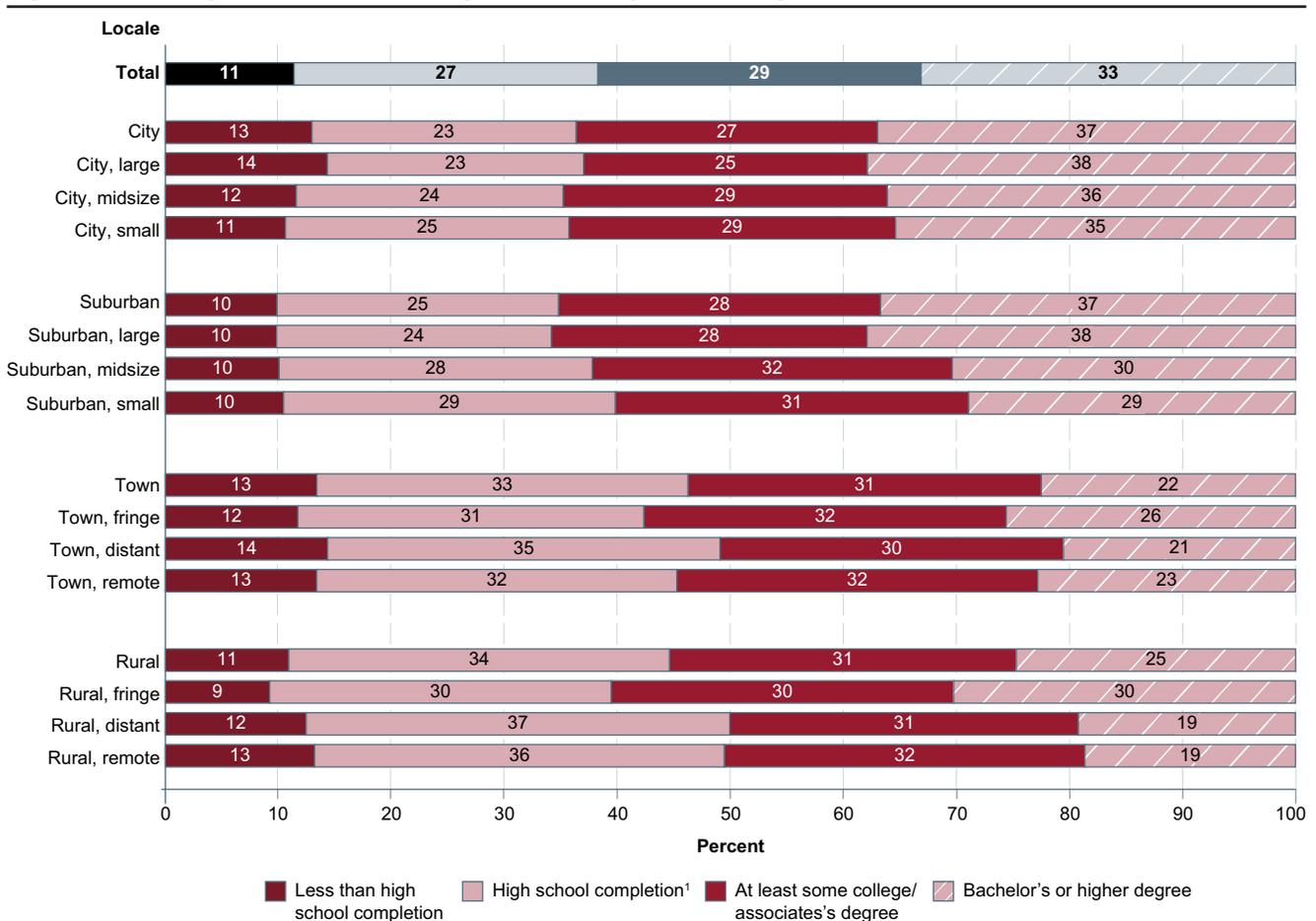
Educational Attainment in Rural Areas

In 2019, a higher percentage of adults age 25 and over in rural areas held a high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment, compared with all other levels of educational attainment.

This indicator examines adults' highest level of educational attainment in the United States. Higher levels of educational attainment are positively correlated with many outcomes, such as employment, earnings, and health.^{1, 2} This indicator focuses on adults age 25 and over.

It presents information for this group of adults overall as well as adults in specific age subgroups. The discussion focuses on both broad locale categories and sublocales.³ Data for this indicator come from the American Community Survey (ACS).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of adults age 25 and over, by locale and highest level of educational attainment: 2019



¹ High school completers include diploma recipients and those completing high school through alternative credentials, such as a GED. May include those who are currently enrolled in college but reported high school completion instead of some college as their highest level of educational attainment.

NOTE: Data are based on sample surveys of the entire population residing in the United States, including both noninstitutionalized persons (e.g., those living in households, college housing, or military housing located within the United States) and institutionalized persons (e.g., those living in prisons, nursing facilities, or other healthcare facilities). To view definitions of each locale, see <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/annualreports/topical-studies/locale/definitions>. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

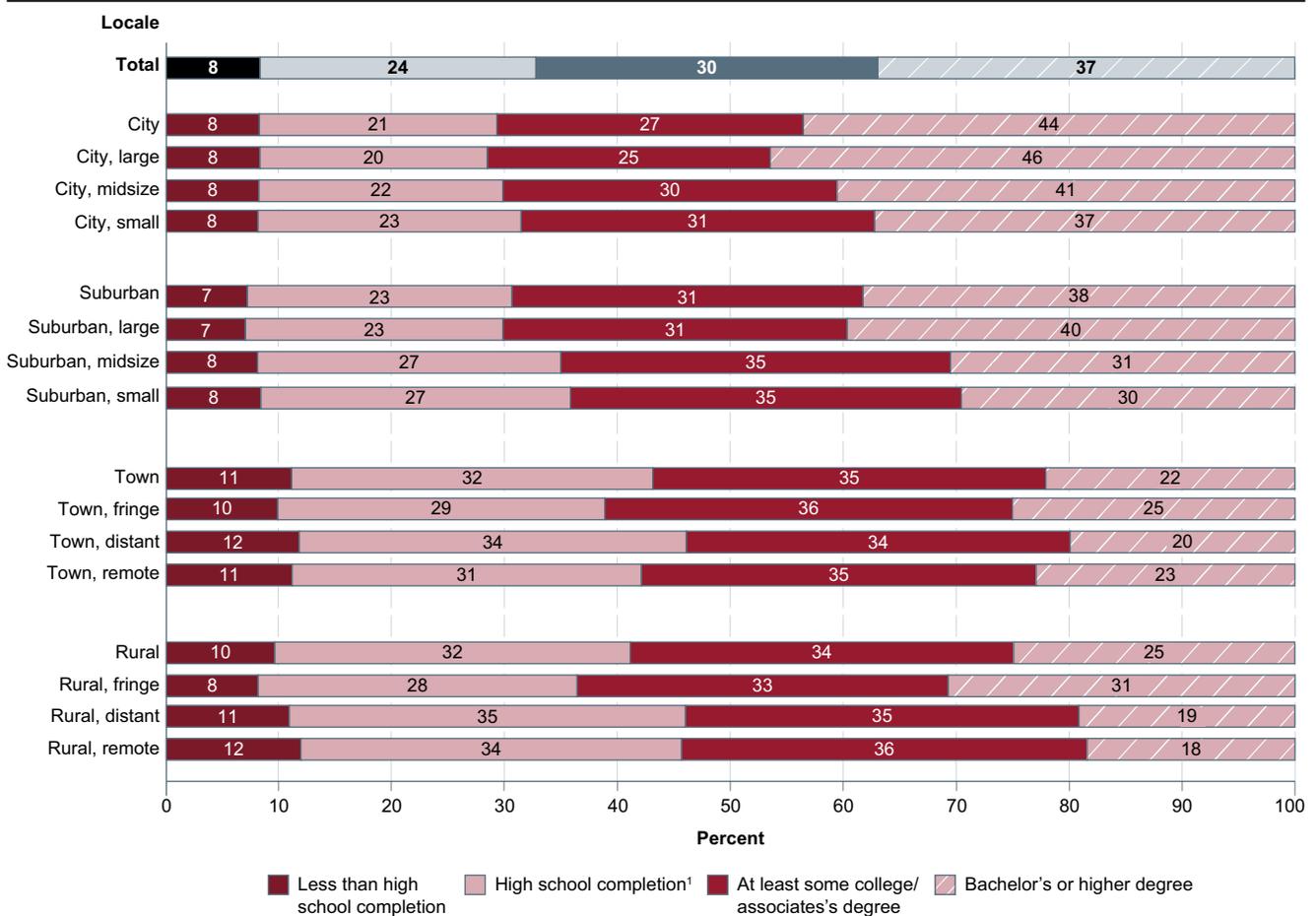
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2019. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 104.25.

In 2019, a higher percentage of adults age 25 and over in rural areas held a high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment,⁴ compared with all other levels of educational attainment. Specifically, 34 percent of adults in rural areas had a high school degree, compared with 31 percent of adults who had some college education or an associate’s degree, 25 percent who had a bachelor’s or higher degree, and 11 percent who had less than a high school degree. In contrast, higher percentages of adults in cities and suburban areas held a bachelor’s or higher degree as their highest level of educational attainment compared with all other levels of educational attainment. A higher percentage of adults in towns also held a high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment compared with all other levels of educational attainment. Other variations in educational attainment by locale existed as well. Specifically, the 25 percent of adults in rural areas who had earned a bachelor’s or higher degree was lower than the 37 percent of adults in both

suburban areas and cities with this level of educational attainment. Additionally, 31 percent of adults in rural areas had completed at least some college or an associate’s degree. This was higher than the corresponding percentages in suburban areas (28 percent) and cities (27 percent).

These data also enable comparisons among sublocales. In 2019, adults age 25 and over in remote rural areas generally had lower levels of educational attainment than did adults in other sublocales. For example, 13 percent of adults in remote rural areas had not completed high school. This was higher than the percentages for 8 of the 11 other sublocales, not including large cities, distant towns, and remote towns. Additionally, 19 percent of adults in remote rural areas had earned a bachelor’s or higher degree. This was lower compared with the percentages for all other sublocales, which were as high as 38 percent in large cities and large suburban areas.⁵

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of adults ages 25 to 34, by locale and highest level of educational attainment: 2019



¹ High school completers include diploma recipients and those completing high school through alternative credentials, such as a GED. May include those who are currently enrolled in college but reported high school completion instead of some college as their highest level of educational attainment.
 NOTE: Data are based on sample surveys of the entire population residing in the United States, including both noninstitutionalized persons (e.g., those living in households, college housing, or military housing located within the United States) and institutionalized persons (e.g., those living in prisons, nursing facilities, or other healthcare facilities). To view definitions of each locale, see <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/annualreports/topical-studies/locale/definitions>. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded data. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), 2019. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 104.25.

These data also enable comparisons by locale and age subgroup. The five age subgroups that will be discussed are ages 25 to 34, ages 35 to 44, ages 45 to 54, ages 55 to 64, and age 65 and over. Similar to the results for adults age 25 and over, completion of a bachelor's or higher degree was less common for adults in rural areas in all five subgroups than for their city and suburban counterparts. In all five subgroups, a lower percentage of adults in rural areas had earned a bachelor's or higher degree compared with adults in cities and suburban areas. For example, among adults ages 25 to 34, some 25 percent of those in rural areas had a bachelor's or higher degree, compared with 44 percent of those in cities and 38 percent of those in suburban areas. Additionally, in all five subgroups examined, the percentages of adults in rural areas who had completed high school as their highest level of educational attainment were higher than those of adults in cities and suburban areas. For example, among adults ages 25 to 34, some 32 percent of those in rural areas had completed high school as their highest level of educational attainment. This was higher than the percentages in cities (21 percent) and suburban areas (23 percent).

Endnotes:

¹ Irwin, V., Zhang, J., Wang, X., Hein, S., Wang, K., Roberts, A., York, C., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., and Parker, S. (2021). *Report on the Condition of Education 2021* (NCES 2021-144). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

² Cohen, A.K., and Syme, S.L. (2013). Education: A Missed Opportunity for Public Health Intervention. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(6): 997-1001.

³ Please visit NCES's [Education Across America](#) website for the definition of locale.

Results for adults in remote rural areas were similar. For example, in 2019, for three subgroups (i.e., adults ages 25 to 34, ages 55 to 64, and age 65 and over), the percentages of adults in remote rural areas who had a bachelor's or higher degree were lower than the corresponding percentages for all other sublocales, except distant rural areas. For the other two subgroups (i.e., adults ages 35 to 44 and ages 45 to 54), the percentages of adults in remote rural areas who had a bachelor's or higher degree were lower than the corresponding percentages for all other sublocales. Additionally, among adults ages 25 to 34, a higher percentage of adults in remote rural areas had a high school degree as their highest level of educational attainment (34 percent) compared with the percentages in most other sublocales. Only two exceptions to this pattern existed. One was for distant rural areas, where a higher percentage of adults age 25 and over had completed high school as their highest level of educational attainment (35 percent). The second exception was for distant towns, where no measurable difference existed.

⁴ High school completers include diploma recipients and those completing high school through alternative credentials, such as a GED, and may include those who are currently enrolled in college but reported high school completion instead of some college as their highest level of educational attainment.

⁵ While the percentages of adults in remote rural areas and distant rural areas who had a bachelor's degree appear to be similar when rounded (i.e., 19 percent), there was a difference in the unrounded percentages (18.6 percent for remote rural areas vs. 19.2 percent for distant rural areas).

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2020*, table 104.25

Related indicators and resources: [Educational Attainment of Young Adults](#) [*Condition of Education*]

Glossary: Associate's degree; Bachelor's degree; Educational attainment; High school completer; Locale codes