

Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

In fall 2021, 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), and Pacific Islander students (23 percent). This percentage was lowest for White students (7 percent), Asian students (13 percent), and students of Two or more races (15 percent).

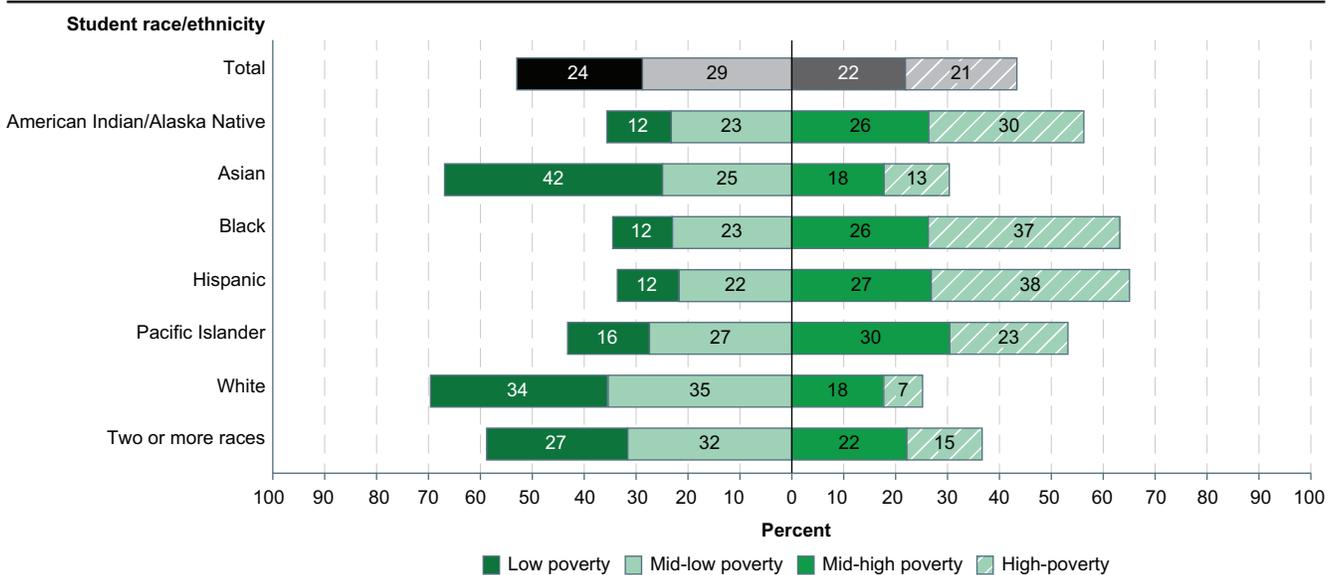
In the United States,¹ the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides eligible students with free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL).² The percentage of students in a school who are eligible for FRPL can provide a substitute measure for the concentration of low-income students in this school.³ In this indicator, public schools (including both traditional and charter) are divided into categories by FRPL eligibility.⁴ 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. In fall 2021, about 10.5 million students attended high-poverty schools.⁵

In fall 2021, the percentage of public school students in high-poverty schools was lower than the percentage in low-poverty schools (21 vs. 24 percent). This was a departure from the pattern observed for most years in the prior decade, when there were higher percentages of public school students in high-poverty schools than in low-poverty schools.^{6,7}

Public School Students Eligible for FRPL by Race/Ethnicity

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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In fall 2021, the percentages of students in high- and low-poverty public schools varied by 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-high⁸ 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).

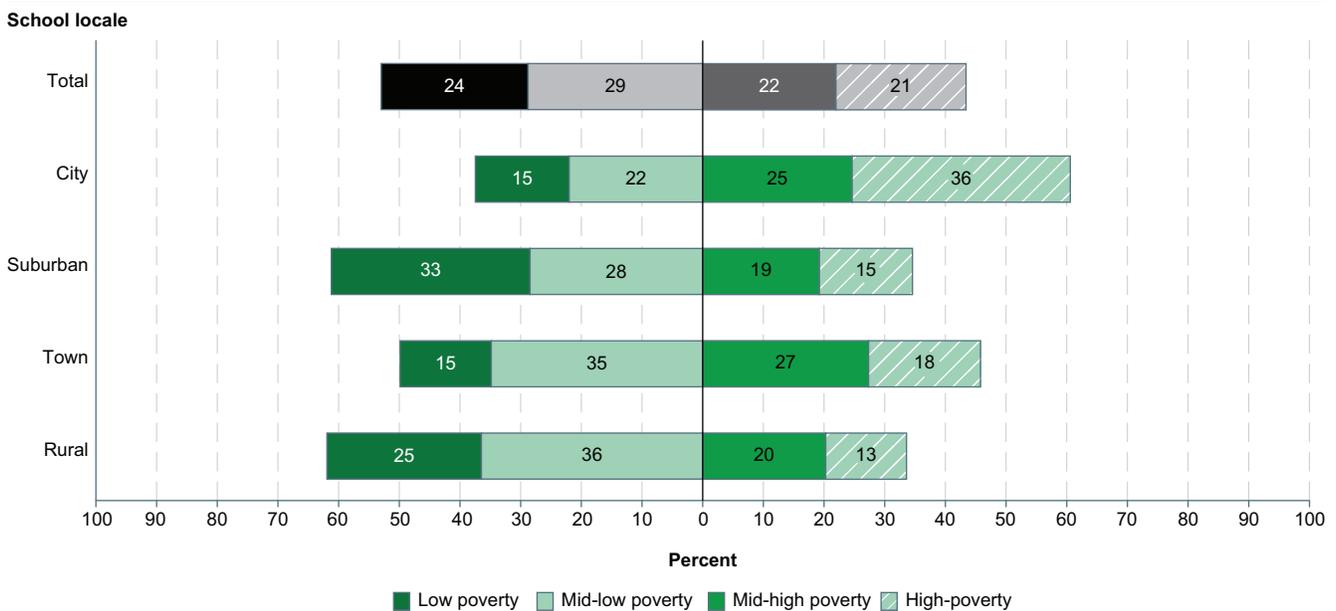
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Conversely, the percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was highest for Asian students (42 percent), followed by

- 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).

Public School Students Eligible for FRPL by Locale

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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The percentage of students attending public schools with different poverty concentrations varied by school locale (i.e., city, suburban, town, and rural).⁹ 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). A higher percentage of students attending city schools than of students attending schools in other locales were in high-poverty schools for all racial/ethnic groups except American Indian/Alaska Native students. Among American Indian/Alaska Native students, 35 percent of those who attended schools in rural areas were in high-poverty schools, which was

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higher than the percentages in other locales who were in high-poverty schools (ranging from 15 to 33 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). 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.

Endnotes:

¹ The United States is defined as the 50 states and the District of Columbia in this indicator.

² 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>.

³ 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?](#)”

⁴ 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.

⁵ Data are missing for Alaska.

⁶ Analysis of the prior decade does not include data for fall 2020.

⁷ 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>).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Data exclude students in schools with missing locale information.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2022*, table 216.60

Related indicators and resources: [Characteristics of Children's Families](#); [Characteristics of Elementary and Secondary Schools](#); [Mathematics Performance](#); [Reading Performance](#)

Glossary: Free or reduced-price lunch; Locale codes; National School Lunch Program; Public school or institution; Racial/ethnic group