

Trends in High School Dropout and Completion Rates in the United States: 1972-2008

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/dropout08/index.asp>

Introduction

Dropping out of high school is related to a number of negative outcomes. For example, the median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who had not completed high school was roughly \$23,000 in 2008.¹ By comparison, the median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who completed their education with at least a high school credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, was approximately \$42,000. Over a person's lifetime, this translates into a loss of approximately \$630,000 in income for a person who did not complete high school compared with a person with at least a high school credential (Rouse 2007).² Among adults ages 25 and older, a lower percentage of dropouts are in the labor force compared with adults who earned a high school credential. Among adults in the labor force, a higher percentage of dropouts are unemployed compared with adults who earned a high school credential (U.S. Department of Labor 2010). Further, dropouts ages 25 or older reported being in worse health than adults who are not dropouts, regardless of income (Pleis, Lucas, and Ward 2009). Dropouts also make up disproportionately higher percentages of the nation's prison and death row inmates.³ Comparing those who drop out of high school with those who complete high school, the average high school dropout is associated with costs to the economy of approximately \$240,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, higher rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on welfare (Levin and Belfield 2007).⁴

This report builds upon a series of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports on high school dropout and completion rates that began in 1988. It presents estimates of rates in 2008, provides data about trends in dropout and completion rates over the last three and a half decades (1972–2008),⁵ and examines the characteristics of high school dropouts and high school completers in 2008. Four rates are presented to provide a broad picture of high school dropouts and completers in the United States, with the event dropout rate, the status dropout rate, the status completion rate, and the averaged freshman graduation rate each contributing unique information.

- The **event dropout rate** estimates the percentage of high school students who

left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a high school diploma or an alternative credential (e.g., a GED). This report presents a national event dropout rate for students attending both public and private schools using the Current Population Survey (CPS), and state event dropout rates for public high school students using the Common Core of Data (CCD).⁶ Event dropout rates can be used to track annual changes in the dropout behavior of students in the U.S. school system.

- The **status dropout rate** reports the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential. The rate is calculated using CPS data. It focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues.
- The **status completion rate** indicates the percentage of individuals in a given age range who are not in high school and who have earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential, irrespective of when the credential was earned.⁷ The rate is calculated using CPS data. It focuses on an overall age group as opposed to individuals in the U.S. school system, so it can be used to study general population issues.⁸

The **averaged freshman graduation rate** estimates the proportion of public high school freshmen who graduate with a regular diploma 4 years after starting 9th grade. The rate is calculated using data from the CCD. It focuses on public high school students as opposed to all high school students or the general population and is designed to provide an estimate of on-time graduation from high school. Thus, it provides a measure of the extent to which public high schools are graduating students within the expected period of 4 years.