

# CRS Report for Congress

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## High School Dropout Rate Calculations

Jeffrey J. Kuenzi  
Analyst in Social Legislation  
Domestic Social Policy Division

### Summary

High school dropout rates continue to be a major concern in the United States. This report outlines several ways in which dropout rates are measured and reported. Each year the U.S. Department of Education (ED) reports on three dropout rates — a status dropout rate, an event dropout rate, and a cohort dropout rate — that are different indicators of the frequency with which students withdraw prior to completing school. High school completion rates, also reported by ED, as well as regional and state data, and the number of dropouts in the U.S. provide other useful perspectives. For information on federal programs for dropouts or students at risk of dropping out, see CRS Report RL30134, *High School Dropouts: Current Federal Programs*. This report will be updated periodically.

### Introduction

The rate at which students finish high school or leave without completing their degree continues to be a major concern in the United States. There are several ways to define and measure dropout rates, depending on the particular question asked and the type of information sought. Typically, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) reports three dropout rates: a status rate, an event rate, and a cohort rate, each providing a different indicator of the frequency of withdrawal from school prior to completion. All three dropout rates are useful, though none alone reflects the full extent of the dropout population.

### National Dropout Rates

Each of the three primary ways in which dropout rates are calculated is reviewed in this section. These dropout rates provide information on national totals, by race/ethnicity, and in the case of the event dropout rate, by family income level. Because of changes in the dropout definition over the years in the U.S. Bureau of the Census's Current Population Survey (CPS), completely comparable data are not available prior to 1994.

An **event dropout rate** identifies the proportion of students who were in grades 10-12 in October of one year and did not either graduate or re-enroll the following October.

The event dropout rate presents a snapshot of what is happening with students in a particular year. However, it is limited because it only reports on individuals during the year immediately after they dropped out.

ED reports the event dropout rate for students age 15-24 in grades 10-12 using CPS data. In this definition, to be considered as having completed high school, an individual could earn a high school diploma or complete an alternative credential, such as a GED.<sup>1</sup> **Table 1** indicates that for 2000, the national event dropout rate was 4.8%,<sup>2</sup> compared to 5.3% in 1994. In 2000, white non-Hispanics had the lowest event dropout rate of 4.1%; non-Hispanic blacks had a 6.1% event rate, and Hispanics had the highest event dropout rate, with 7.4%. In 2000, 10% of students in grades 10-12 from the lowest 20% of the income distribution left school, while 5.2% of students from middle-income, and 1.6% of students from high-income families dropped out.

**Table 1. Event Dropout Rates for Grades 10-12 by Race/Ethnicity and Family Income\*: 1994 and 2000**

|             | Total | White,<br>non-<br>Hispanic | Black,<br>non-<br>Hispanic | Hispanic | Low-<br>income | Middle-<br>income | High-<br>income |
|-------------|-------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------|----------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| <b>1994</b> | 5.3   | 4.2                        | 6.6                        | 10.0     | 13.0           | 5.2               | 2.1             |
| <b>2000</b> | 4.8   | 4.1                        | 6.1                        | 7.4      | 10.0           | 5.2               | 1.6             |

\* Low income is defined as the lowest 20% of all family incomes for the survey year; middle income is between 20% and 80% of all family incomes; and high income includes the top 20% of all family incomes for the survey year.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*. NCES 2002-114, Washington. November 2001. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1994*. NCES 96-863, Washington. July 1996.

A **status dropout rate** shows the proportion of dropouts among all individuals in the population within a certain age range, regardless of when they left school. Thus, it is a more complete measure of the overall dropout rate in the population at large. ED uses the 16-24 year old age range in its estimates of this dropout rate.

ED measures this rate using CPS data for young adults ages 16-24. In 2000, there were 3.8 million individuals, representing 10.9% of the total population within this age range, who had not completed a high school program and who were not currently enrolled in school. **Table 2** shows that Hispanics had significantly higher status dropout rates than

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<sup>1</sup> The General Educational Development (GED) test is the most common form of alternative secondary completion in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Based on CPS data for the period between October 1999 and October 2000. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*. NCES 2002-114. Washington. November 2001. All data presented are from *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000* unless otherwise indicated.

either non-Hispanic whites or non-Hispanic blacks. In 2000, 27.8% of Hispanics ages 16-24 were status dropouts, compared to 6.9% of non-Hispanic whites and 13.1% of non-Hispanic blacks.

**Table 2. Status Dropout Rates for Individuals Ages 16-24, by Race/Ethnicity: 1994 and 2000**

|             | Total | White,<br>non-Hispanic | Black,<br>non-Hispanic | Hispanic |
|-------------|-------|------------------------|------------------------|----------|
| <b>1994</b> | 11.5  | 7.7                    | 12.6                   | 30.0     |
| <b>2000</b> | 10.9  | 6.9                    | 13.1                   | 27.8     |

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*. NCES 2002-114, Washington. November 2001.

The **cohort dropout rate** measures dropout rates for a specific group of students over time. This figure answers the question that people usually have in mind when asking how many students drop out of school. ED measures cohort dropout rates by using longitudinal surveys of secondary school students. These data usually provide more background information on the students who drop out than other surveys such as the CPS data. The most recent longitudinal study by ED, the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), began with a cohort of students in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade during the 1987-1988 school year. By August 1994, the overall cohort dropout rate for this group was 7.2%. Other NELS:88 dropout rates were 5.7% for non-Hispanic whites, 8.4% for non-Hispanic blacks, and 14.3% for Hispanics by August 1994.

## Other Relevant Data

**Number of Dropouts.** ED estimates that approximately 488,000 students in grades 10-12 dropped out of school in 2000. This does not take into consideration students in earlier grades who dropped out in that same year, which could add several hundred thousand more to this figure.

**Completion Rates.** High school completion rates offer another perspective. In 2000, ED estimates that 86.5% of all individuals ages 18-24 had received their high school diploma or equivalency certificate (e.g., GED). Among this age group, Hispanics showed the lowest overall high school completion rates, with approximately 64.1%, compared to 91.8% of non-Hispanic whites and 83.7% of non-Hispanic blacks.

**Regional and State Data.** In 2000, the highest status dropout rates were in the southern and western part of the country. In the south, 12.9% of all 16-24 year olds had dropped out, compared to 11.3% in the west, 9.2% in the midwest, and 8.5% in the northeast.

ED has been working with states to develop a national database of school dropouts using the Common Core of Data (CCD) collection. However, as of 2000, nearly half of all states failed to report according to ED standards. Event dropout rates for those states that do report properly are presented in **Table 3**, below. Unlike the national event dropout

rate discussed earlier, these rates are for grades 9-12. Also, these rates count individuals who receive a GED outside of a regular, approved secondary education program as a dropout, while the CPS data counts *all* GED certificate holders as high school completers.

During the 1998-1999 school year, Louisiana (10.0%), Arizona (8.4%), and Nevada (7.9%) had the highest dropout rates among the states reported by ED. The dropout rate for the District of Columbia in that school year was 8.2%. Changes in dropout rates over time have not been tested for statistical significance.

**Table 3. Event Dropout Rates for Grades 9-12, by State:  
1994-1995 through 1998-1999**

| State                  | 1994-1995 | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Alabama <sup>a</sup>   | 6.2       | 5.6       | 5.3       | 4.8       | 4.4       |
| Alaska <sup>b</sup>    | —         | 5.6       | 4.9       | 4.6       | 5.3       |
| Arizona <sup>a</sup>   | 9.6       | 10.2      | 10.0      | 9.4       | 8.4       |
| Arkansas               | 4.9       | 4.1       | 5.0       | 5.4       | 6.0       |
| California             | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Colorado               | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Connecticut            | 4.9       | 4.8       | 3.9       | 3.5       | 3.3       |
| Delaware               | 4.6       | 4.5       | 4.5       | 4.7       | 4.1       |
| District of Columbia   | 10.6      | —         | —         | 12.8      | 8.2       |
| Florida                | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Georgia                | 9.0       | 8.5       | 8.2       | 7.3       | 7.4       |
| Hawaii                 | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Idaho <sup>a</sup>     | 9.2       | 8.0       | 7.2       | 6.7       | 6.9       |
| Illinois <sup>a</sup>  | 6.6       | 6.4       | 6.6       | 6.9       | 6.5       |
| Indiana                | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Iowa                   | 3.5       | 3.1       | 2.9       | 2.9       | 2.5       |
| Kansas                 | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Kentucky               | —         | —         | 9.4       | 5.2       | 4.9       |
| Louisiana <sup>c</sup> | 3.5       | 11.6      | 11.6      | 11.4      | 10.0      |
| Maine                  | 3.4       | 3.1       | 3.2       | 3.2       | 3.3       |
| Maryland <sup>a</sup>  | 5.2       | 4.8       | 4.9       | 4.3       | 4.4       |

| State                     | 1994-1995 | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Massachusetts             | 3.6       | 3.3       | 3.4       | 3.2       | 3.6       |
| Michigan                  | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Minnesota                 | 5.2       | 5.2       | 5.5       | 4.9       | 4.5       |
| Mississippi               | 6.4       | 6.2       | 6.0       | 5.8       | 5.2       |
| Missouri                  | 7.0       | 6.5       | 5.8       | 5.2       | 4.8       |
| Montana                   | —         | 5.6       | 5.1       | 4.4       | 4.5       |
| Nebraska                  | 4.5       | 4.5       | 4.3       | 4.4       | 4.2       |
| Nevada                    | 10.3      | 9.6       | 10.2      | 10.1      | 7.9       |
| New Hampshire             | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| New Jersey <sup>a</sup>   | 4.0       | 4.1       | 3.7       | 3.5       | 3.1       |
| New Mexico                | 8.5       | 8.3       | 7.5       | 7.1       | 7.0       |
| New York                  | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| North Carolina            | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| North Dakota              | 2.5       | 2.5       | 2.7       | 2.8       | 2.4       |
| Ohio <sup>b</sup>         | 5.3       | 5.4       | 5.2       | 5.1       | 3.9       |
| Oklahoma <sup>a</sup>     | 5.8       | 5.7       | 5.9       | 5.8       | 5.2       |
| Oregon                    | 7.1       | 7.0       | —         | —         | 6.5       |
| Pennsylvania              | 4.1       | 4.0       | 3.9       | 3.9       | 3.8       |
| Rhode Island              | 4.6       | 4.6       | 4.7       | 4.9       | 4.5       |
| South Carolina            | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| South Dakota <sup>a</sup> | 5.3       | 5.7       | 4.5       | 3.1       | 4.5       |
| Tennessee <sup>a</sup>    | 5.0       | 4.9       | 5.1       | 5.0       | 4.6       |
| Texas                     | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| Utah                      | 3.5       | 4.4       | 4.5       | 5.2       | 4.7       |
| Vermont <sup>a</sup>      | 4.7       | 5.3       | 5.0       | 5.2       | 4.6       |
| Virginia <sup>a</sup>     | 5.2       | 4.7       | 4.6       | 4.8       | 4.5       |
| Washington                | —         | —         | —         | —         | —         |
| West Virginia             | 4.2       | 3.8       | 4.1       | 4.1       | 4.9       |
| Wisconsin <sup>b</sup>    | 2.7       | 2.4       | 2.7       | 2.8       | 2.6       |

| State                | 1994-1995 | 1995-1996 | 1996-1997 | 1997-1998 | 1998-1999 |
|----------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Wyoming <sup>b</sup> | 6.7       | 5.7       | 6.2       | 6.4       | 5.2       |

**Source:** U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 2000*. NCES 2002-114. Washington. November 2001.

<sup>a</sup> States were asked to report on an October through September cycle. However, these states reported on an alternative July through June cycle.

<sup>b</sup> The following states reported data using an alternative calendar in the years indicated: Alaska (1995-1996) and Wisconsin (1997-1998).

<sup>c</sup> Effective in the 1995-1996 school year, Louisiana changed its dropout data collection from school-level aggregate counts reported to districts to an individual student-record system. The apparent increase in the dropout rate is partly due to the increased ability to track students.

**Note:** Of the 37 states and the District of Columbia that reported dropouts in 1998-1999, 27 said that they adhered exactly to the standard Common Core Data (CCD) definition and collection procedures set out by ED.

## Conclusion

These figures present a national picture of high school dropout rates but do not provide any definite answers about trends. According to ED, national high school dropout rates have been declining over the last 2 decades.<sup>3</sup> There is some debate, however, about whether the national dropout rates are in fact declining. Comparability of data and a lack of standardized dropout measures, inaccurate or incomplete reporting by states, and other issues raise questions about the reliability of the national dropout figures available, particularly when looking at the figures over time.

In addition, the data do not necessarily reflect the extent of the dropout problem in some states or local districts. Furthermore, at this point, state and national data are not comparable since the definitions of dropouts differ across the CPS and the CCD, and CCD data are available for just over half the states.

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<sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1998*, p. 6.