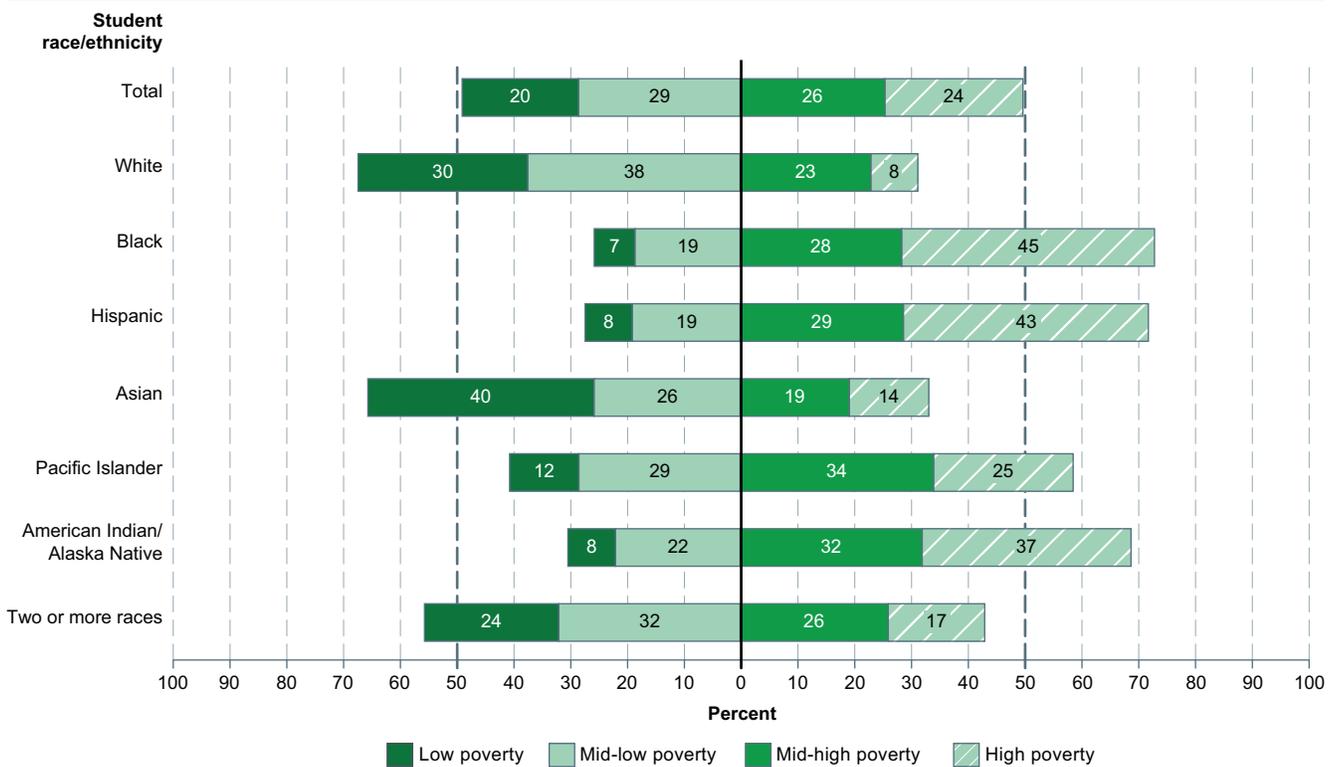# Concentration of Public School Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

In fall 2019, the percentage of students who attended high-poverty schools was highest for Black students (45 percent), followed by Hispanic students (43 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native students (37 percent), and Pacific Islander students (25 percent). This percentage was lowest for White students (8 percent), Asian students (14 percent), and students of Two or more races (17 percent).

In the United States,[1] the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) provides eligible students with free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). The percentage of students in a school who are eligible provides a substitute measure for the concentration of low-income students. In this indicator, public schools[2] (including both traditional and charter) are divided into categories by FRPL eligibility.[3] 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 2019, about 12.3 million students attended high-poverty schools.

Figure 1.   Percentage distribution of public school students for each racial/ethnic group, by school poverty level: Fall 2019
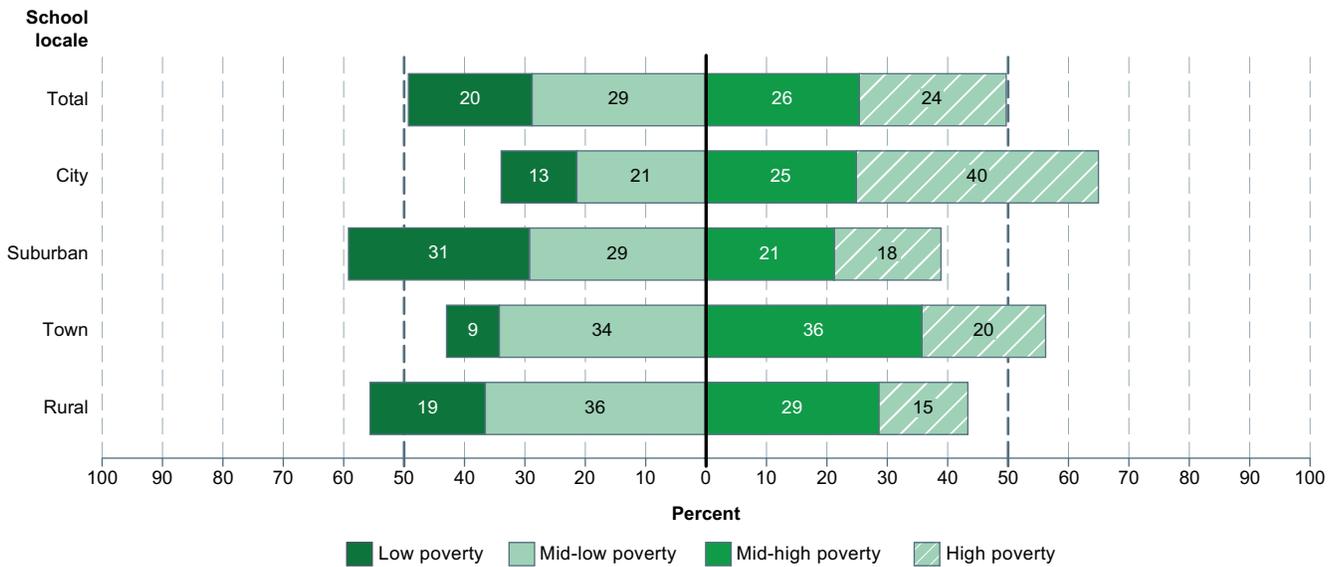

NOTE: Data are for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Low-poverty schools are defined as public schools where 25.0 percent or less of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL); mid-low poverty schools are those where 25.1 to 50.0 percent of the students are eligible for 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 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). 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?" Schools with missing FRPL data are not included in this figure. Race categories exclude persons of Hispanic ethnicity. Detail may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding and because 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," 2019–20; and Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE), "Public School File," 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.60.

In fall 2019, the percentage of public school students in high-poverty schools was greater than the percentage in low-poverty schools (24 vs. 20 percent). Both of these percentages varied by race/ethnicity. Compared to the national average, higher percentages of Black, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander students attended mid-high[4] and high-poverty schools. For example, the percentage of students who attended high-poverty schools was highest for Black students (45 percent), followed by Hispanic students (43 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native students (37 percent),

Pacific Islander students (25 percent), students of Two or more races (17 percent), Asian students (14 percent), and White students (8 percent). At the other end of the school poverty spectrum, a nearly opposite pattern is evident. The percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was highest for Asian students (40 percent), followed by White students (30 percent), students of Two or more races (24 percent), Pacific Islander students (12 percent), American Indian/Alaska Native students (8 percent), Hispanic students (8 percent), and Black students (7 percent).

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of public school students for each school locale, by school poverty level: Fall 2019

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 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). 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?" Schools with missing FRPL data are not included in this figure. Detail may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding and because 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," 2019–20; and Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE), "Public School File," 2019–20. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, table 216.60.

The percentage of students attending public schools with different poverty concentrations varied by school locale (i.e., city, suburban, town, and rural). In fall 2019, about 40 percent of students who attended city schools were in high-poverty schools, which was greater than the percentage who attended town schools (20 percent), suburban schools (18 percent), and rural schools (15 percent). This pattern held across racial/ethnic groups, with the exception of American Indian/Alaska Native students. A higher percentage of American Indian/Alaska Native students attended high-poverty schools in rural

areas (46 percent) than in cities (37 percent) and other locales. Meanwhile, the percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was highest for students who attended suburban schools (31 percent), followed by students who attended rural schools (19 percent), city schools (13 percent), and town schools (9 percent). The percentage of students who attended low-poverty schools was highest for students in suburban areas for all racial/ethnic groups except Asian students. The percentage of Asian students who attended low-poverty schools was highest in rural areas.

Endnotes:

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

[2] In fall 2019, information on school poverty level was not available for less than 1 percent of public school students. This included schools for which information on FRPL was missing and schools that did not participate in the NSLP.

[3] Students with household incomes under 185 percent of the poverty threshold are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch 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 option, some nonpoor children 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.

[4] The percentage of students of Two or more races who attended mid-high poverty schools was also higher than the national average, although both rounded to 26 percent.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2021*, 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