

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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## THE NARROWING PIPELINE

# The Real Covid-19 Enrollment Crisis: Fewer Low-Income Students Went Straight to College

By *Eric Hoover*

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The figure is startling. This year, 21.7 percent fewer high-school graduates went straight to college compared with 2019, according to a new [report](#) from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. As year-to-year changes go, that's huge.

**“These are really staggering numbers. To see something of this magnitude is frightening.”**

Don't stare only at that top-line number, though. Look at the comparisons between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. You'll see further evidence that the pandemic has hit low-income students, especially those from urban high schools, the hardest.

The report, released on Thursday, provides an early look at how Covid-19 has affected the high-school graduating class of 2020. Earlier this fall, the research center released

a [series of reports](#) examining [enrollment outcomes](#) at two- and four-year colleges, the [most recent](#) of which showed a 13-percent decline in the number of first-time freshmen nationally.

## High-School Student Body Makes a Difference

The number of students who went to college right after high school fell the most from the previous year if they attended high schools whose enrollments were high-poverty, low-income, or largely minority.

(% change from the previous year)

	Fall 2019	Fall 2020	
Low income		-29.2%	-1.2%
Higher income		-16.9%	-3.9%
Low minority		-18.0%	-4.2%
High minority		-26.4%	-1.1%
Low poverty		-16.4%	-3.2%
High poverty		-32.6%	-2.0%
Rural		-18.1%	-4.4%
Suburban		-19.8%	-3.3%
Urban		-25.1%	-1.6%
Overall		-21.7%	-2.8%

Source: [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

The new data provide something different: a preliminary snapshot of which students from which secondary schools ended up enrolling at a postsecondary institution. The research center's findings are drawn from information collected from 2,324 high schools, nearly all of which are public. (These early findings are not drawn from a nationally representative sample of high schools or high-school graduates, the report notes.)

Though Covid-19 had little impact on high-school graduation rates (down 0.1 percent from last year), the steep drop in graduates who enrolled immediately in college was nearly eight times as great as the one-year drop — of 2.8 percent — in 2019. The “immediate college enrollment rate,” the report says, fell to 27.7 percent from 35.3 percent last fall. The sharpest decline was at community colleges (30.3 percent), compared with 28.6 percent at private colleges and 13.8 percent at public ones.

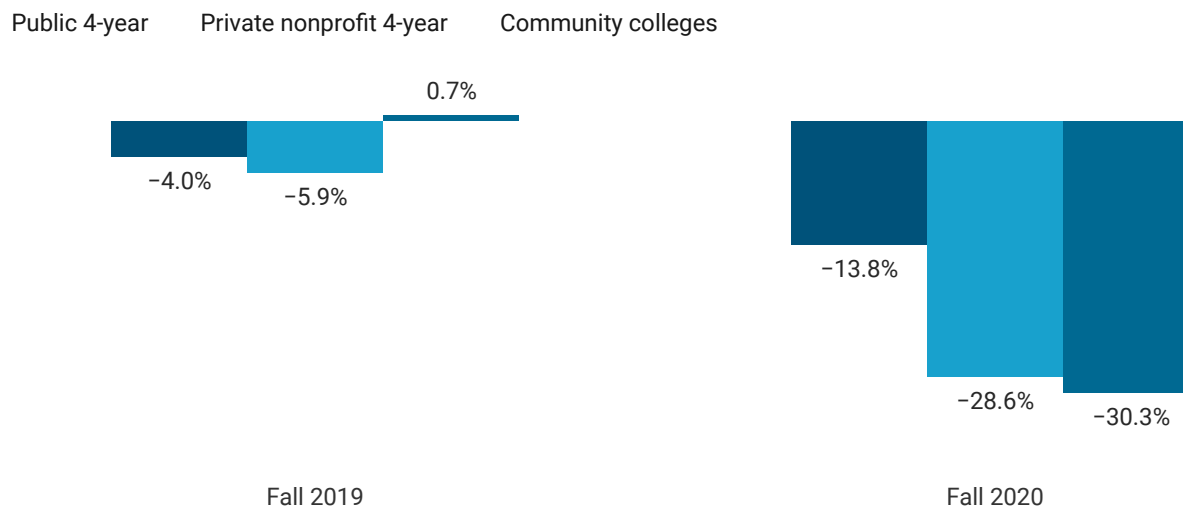
Digging into the numbers reveals some key disparities: There was a 32.6-percent decline for graduates of high-poverty high schools, compared with 16.4 percent for graduates of low-poverty schools (as measured by the prevalence of students eligible for a free or reduced-price lunch program); a 26.4-percent drop at high schools with a high percentage of minority students, compared with 18 percent at schools with a low percentage of minority students; and a 25.1-percent plunge for graduates of urban high schools, compared with 19.8 percent for suburban high schools and 18.1 percent for rural ones.

Across all types of institutions, immediate enrollment of students from low-income high schools fell 29.2 percent, compared with 16.9 percent for graduates of higher-income schools, according to the report. Graduates of low-income schools were less likely to go straight to public institutions than were their peers from higher-income schools (drops of 20.5 percent and 10.7 percent, respectively).

## Journey From High School to College Cut Short

The number of high-school students who immediately enrolled in college dropped across all institution types this fall from the year before, with enrollees at community colleges declining the most.

(% change from the previous year)



Note: For-profit four-year colleges and private two-year colleges are not shown due to their small numbers.

Source: [National Student Clearinghouse Research Center](#) • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

“These are really staggering numbers,” Doug Shapiro, the research center’s executive director, told *The Chronicle* on Wednesday. “To see something of this magnitude is frightening. People talk about a lost generation, and for many of these students, especially the ones from lower-income families who were headed to community colleges, they’re really at risk of falling off the track and never being able to get back on.”

Remember all those predictions about high-school graduates’ taking a gap year and riding out the pandemic by working, or volunteering, or caring for sick penguins in Antarctica? Sure, those teenagers exist.

But all the relatively affluent students who chose to delay their entrance to college shouldn’t worry anyone too much. “Upper-income students who took gap years, they will be enrolled next year,” Shapiro said. “But low-income students are stopping out for very different reasons — for financial reasons, or because they’ve been hit more directly by the health impact of Covid-19. It will be much harder for them to recover.”

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