

A row of colorful silhouettes of diverse people walking from left to right. The silhouettes are in various colors including teal, pink, light blue, orange, and purple. Some are holding books or papers, and one is pointing at a device.

Invisible Education Equity Gaps

ACT[®] Center for
Equity in Learning



Introduction

The racial makeup of the United States is rapidly changing. By 2050, it is expected that Whites will make up less than half of the total population in the U.S. Such a dramatic shift indicates that examining our demographics must be central to how we prioritize education in our country. Even more pressing, in light of our nation's rapidly changing demography, we must address the education equity gaps that already exist. How can we do this? With better and more nuanced data.

Education data is often collected and reported using broad racial categories including: Black, Latino, White, American Indian and/or Alaska Native (AI/AN), and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI). These oversimplified racial categories have led to the harmful oversight of many underserved ethnic student groups, many of whom are among the most in need of recognition and resources. For example, the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) population includes nearly 50 ethnic subgroups that have different education trajectories. These broad racial categories do not reflect important differences in language, immigration status, and generational status. We can better represent the changing composition of the U.S. by breaking down, or disaggregating, education data into more precise ethnic subgroups and categories. In so doing, these data can unmask equity gaps, and give a more accurate picture of the education landscape in the U.S.—ultimately helping underserved groups of students by ensuring that resources are directed to those with the greatest needs.

The Racial Heterogeneity Project (RHP): Implications for Educational Research, Practice, and Policy

A recent report by the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education at the University of California, Los Angeles, with support from ACT Center for Equity in Learning, looks at the importance of data disaggregation and provides recommendations for education advocates, practitioners and policymakers. The Racial Heterogeneity Project aims to address:

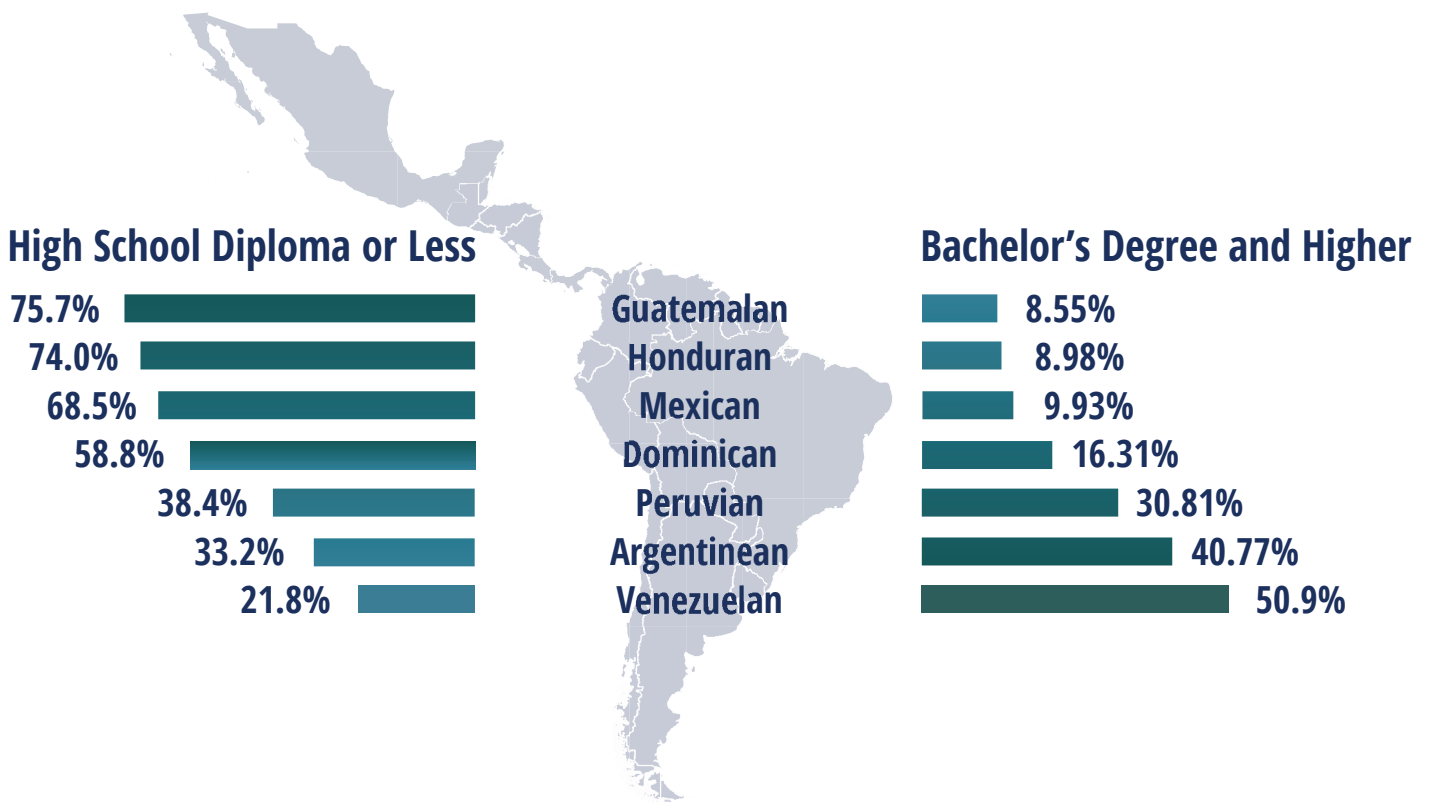
- ⦿ how the current, broad racial categories are a unique challenge for each racial/ethnic subpopulation
- ⦿ how inaccurate data practices hinder the ability for practitioners and policymakers to understand and respond to the unique needs of each racial/ethnic population
- ⦿ approaches and strategies that should be considered to better support each racial/ethnic population
- ⦿ implications for policy and practice to better understand and respond to racial heterogeneity.

Latino Population

With a population of 55.3 million (2014), Latinos are the largest racial group and the second-fastest growing population in the U.S. Despite being labeled as one group, Latinos are made up of dozens of ethnically and culturally diverse subgroups. The Latino category used in the U.S. Census fails to accurately represent this diversity—instead generalizing the Latino experience into one large group.

This is especially problematic when looking at education data. The RHP found 73.1 percent of Latinos earned a high school degree or less and 8.5 percent of Latinos earned a bachelor's degree or higher. A closer look, however, reveals that this attainment data obscures some important differences. For example, more than three-fourths of Guatemalans hold a high school diploma or less, and less than 10 percent hold a Bachelor's degree or higher, while more than 20 percent of Venezuelans hold a high school diploma or less, and 50 percent of Venezuelans hold a Bachelor's degree or higher.

Educational Attainment among Latinos 25 or older, 2011-2013



Source: ACS, 2011-2013

By breaking down the Latino community's education attainment data, the RHP shows the value of data disaggregation by calling attention to education inequities that exist within the Latino community that are otherwise hidden.

This brief is based on the report, *The Racial Heterogeneity Project: Implications for Educational Research, Practice, and Policy*. Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen, Cynthia M. Alcantar, Edward R. Curammeng, Edwin Hernandez, Victoria Kim, Aurdey D. Paredes, Rachel Freeman, Mike Hoa Nguyen, and Robert T. Teranishi, 2017.



Black Population

The Black population accounts for 42 million Americans, which is roughly 14 percent of the American people. Similar to Latinos, the Black community is also made up of people with ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences. The collection of data that can distinguish between U.S.-born Blacks, Black immigrants, different language(s) spoken, and countries of origin is a crucial first step in recognizing this population’s racial diversity and understanding the vast differences in their education outcomes. For example, “while native-born Blacks have a degree attainment rate of 20 percent, foreign-born Blacks have a degree attainment rate of 30 percent.” By unmasking hidden gaps, such as this, the RHP brings attention to the value of disaggregating education data to identify invisible student groups in need of greater support.

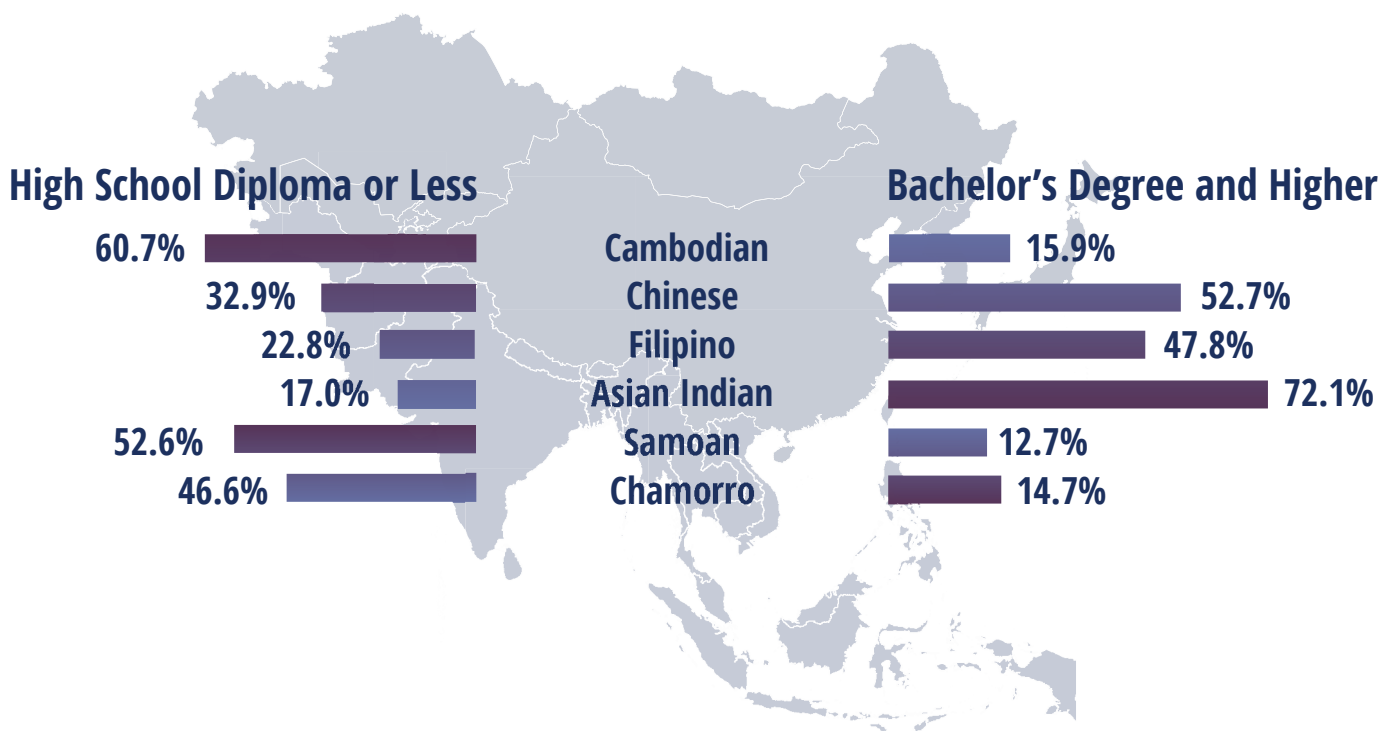
American Indian and/or Alaska Native Population

Nearly 6.6 million people in the U.S.—two percent of the U.S. population—identify as American Indian and/or Alaska Native (AI/AN). Education data regarding Native Americans has often been aggregated into one category, or entirely omitted, as a result of their small population size. This oversimplification of data misrepresents the complexity and diversity within the Native American population. The single AI/AN racial category often used in education datasets includes 567 federally recognized tribes in the U.S., along with additional tribes recognized by specific states. Similar to the ethnic subgroups within the Latino and Black categories, each tribe has “a diverse set of histories, languages, cultures, and identities.” By disaggregating the AI/AN racial group’s education attainment data, the RHP reveals vast educational disparities across tribal affiliations that are too often overlooked using a single racial category. In addition to tribal affiliation, education outcomes differ regarding the geographic location of schools. For example, Native American 8th grade students who live in the suburbs tend to score higher on math and reading than Native American students who live in urban and rural areas. Better data is needed to illuminate differences in student experiences and outcomes that may relate to tribal affiliation, geographic location, school differences, and other factors that affect student achievement.

Asian American and Pacific Islander Population

Representing more than five percent of the U.S. population, AAPIs are the fastest growing racial group in the U.S. Similar to the other racial categories, the AAPI category represents a range of ethnic groups with different cultural experiences. The 50 ethnic subgroups that make up the AAPI category speak more than 300 different languages. This vast variation within the AAPI population has resulted in education data that far-too-often over-represents, under-represents, and misrepresents ethnic subgroups within the AAPI community. For example, disaggregated data for Asian Indians, Cambodians, Chinese, Filipino, Chamorro, and Samoans shows the differences in education outcomes for these ethnic subgroups.

Education Attainment among AAPIs 25 or older, 2011-2013



Source: ACS, 2011-2013

Policy Implications

What implications does data disaggregation have on U.S. education policy? The U.S. population is made up of a wide range of different ethnic subgroups that speak hundreds of different languages and have vastly different cultural experiences. Even with this diversity, the nation's demography is quickly continuing to change. The RHP demonstrates that the racial categories that we use today fail to accurately represent the diversity that exists across the U.S. This inaccurate representation harms groups of students by concealing education inequities that exist and preventing schools and students from gaining access to much needed resources. Creating policy around data practices that encourage data disaggregation brings attention to the unique experiences and specific education barriers facing different ethnic groups. By improving the quality and accuracy of education data, we can help ensure that underrepresented students have access to the resources they need, and we can develop specific strategies to support the academic success of all students.

The RHP offers three recommendations for education leaders, states, school districts, state and federal education departments, and other education organizations to help achieve this goal. These recommendations include:

- ⦿ create awareness by advocating for a more nuanced perspective of racial minority groups;
- ⦿ collect data in a way that reflects the differences among different racial populations; and
- ⦿ make disaggregated data readily available and easily accessible.

It's critical that we take these actions NOW to ensure that needs assessment, data collection procedures, and data reporting practices are employed accurately and clearly to improve education outcomes for all students, particularly underrepresented students who have otherwise been overlooked.

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ACT[®] Center for Equity in Learning

ACT's Center for Equity in Learning supports research that focuses on closing gaps in equity and achievement. The Center works to produce actionable evidence to guide thought leadership and inform changes in policy and practice that will lead to improved learning and achievement.

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About the Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education

The Institute for Immigration, Globalization, and Education (IGE) conducts multidisciplinary and comparative research to engage with policymakers, practitioners, and institutional leaders. Our research aims to expand opportunities, reduce barriers, and improve the wellbeing of diverse, vulnerable, and marginalized students. This report is closely connected to another IGE project on racial heterogeneity, which is focused specifically on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). The project, *iCount: Equity Through Representation* has released three other reports focused on the importance of and utility for data disaggregation for AAPIs. This report importantly pivots to cross-racial considerations of racial heterogeneity.

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