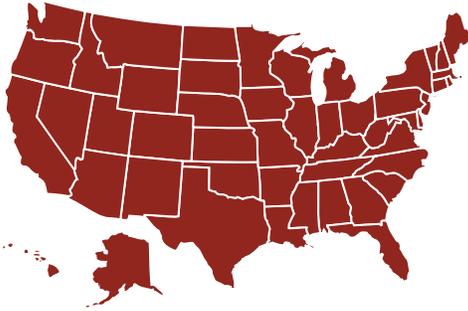


## Issue Brief

## EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES



As of 2009, 34.4% of fourth graders in public schools scored below basic on reading proficiency, and 18.8% scored below basic on mathematics proficiency.

### What is education?

**Educational attainment** is the highest grade of school an individual attends and completes. **Educational proficiency** measures a student's mastery of skills and understanding. High school dropout rates are defined here as the percentage of students in grades nine through 12 who dropped out of school in the past year (*event dropout rate*) or the percentage of 16- to 24-year-olds who are not enrolled and have not yet completed high school (*status dropout rate*).

### How many Americans are affected?

- 8.1% of 16- to 24-year-olds were classified as status dropouts—not enrolled and not having completed high school.
- More than one-third (34.4%) of 4th graders and 26.3% of 8th graders in public schools scored below basic on reading proficiency in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Almost one out of five (18.8%) 4th graders and 28.6% of 8th graders in public schools scored below basic on mathematics proficiency.

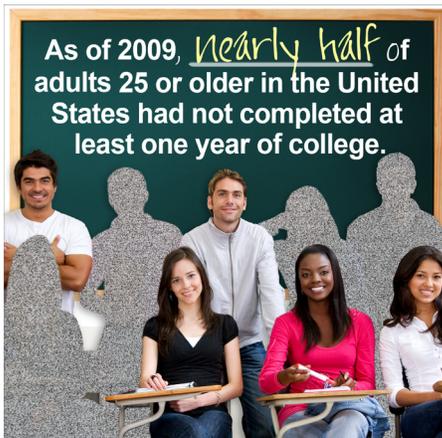
As of 2010, the most current year for which data are available:

- Of adults age 25 and older, 3.0% had completed less than seven years of elementary school.
- One out of eight (12.9%) of adults (age 25 and older)—25.7 million persons—had not completed high school, and 44.1% had not attended one or more years of college.

#### WHAT IS SOCIETAL DISTRESS?

Societal distress describes living conditions that do not satisfy basic human needs, such as food, shelter, health, income, and education.

Visit [www.humanneeds.vcu.edu](http://www.humanneeds.vcu.edu) for more details.

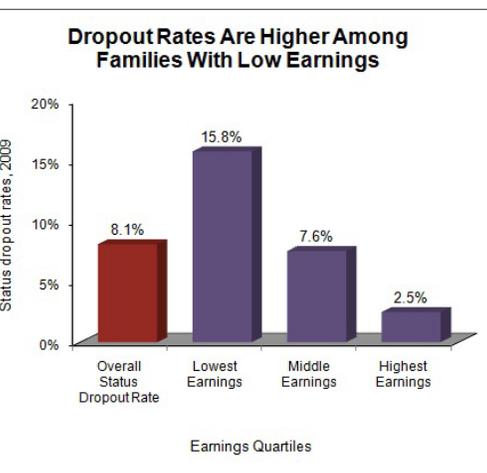


**THE PROJECT ON SOCIETAL DISTRESS** is an initiative of the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Human Needs, which examines the prevalence of societal distress in five domains—food security, housing, health, education, and income—and makes the information available to the public and policymakers. This research effort focuses on presenting accurate data on the number of Americans affected by these conditions and not examining the causes or proposing solutions. The Project on Societal Distress is funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

In 2010, more than one in three Hispanic adults had not completed high school.

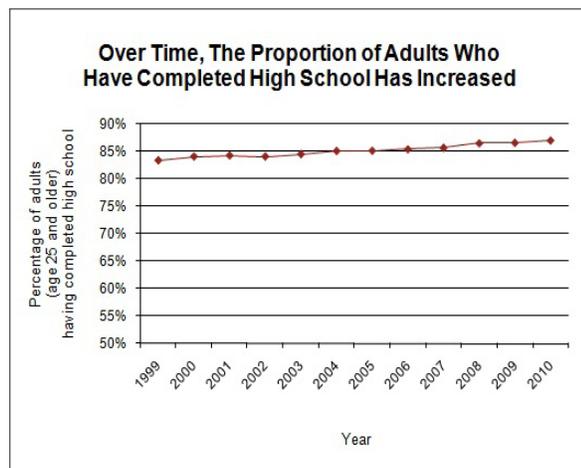
## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Poor education limits future prospects for employment, earnings, housing, and health. It is a growing problem in an era based on a knowledge economy. An inadequate education can perpetuate a cycle of distress for families across multiple generations.



## What are the trends?

Between 1985 and 2010, the percentage of adults age 25 and older who had completed high school increased from 73.9% to 87.1%.



## Who is affected?

**Males:** In 2009, males ages 16 to 24 years were more likely than females to have dropped out of high school (9.1% versus 7.0%).

**Seniors:** In 2009, one out of five (20.5%) seniors (age 65 and older) reported not having completed high school.

**Minorities:** In 2010, the proportion of adults (age 25 and older) with less than seven years of education was 0.7% for whites, 1.8% for African Americans, and 15.4% for Hispanics—22 times the rate for whites.

**The Poor:** In 2009, the status dropout rate was 15.8% among those from families in the lowest income quartile, more than six times the rate among those in the highest income quartile (2.5%).

## SOURCES AND METHODS

The statistics reported here were obtained from the U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics, 2010*, and the U.S. Department of Education, *NAEP Data Explorer*. The data underwent statistical analysis by the research staff of the Virginia Commonwealth University Center on Human Needs. Analytic methods are detailed at [www.humanneeds.vcu.edu](http://www.humanneeds.vcu.edu).

**THE VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY CENTER ON HUMAN NEEDS** ([www.humanneeds.vcu.edu](http://www.humanneeds.vcu.edu)) was chartered in 2007 to provide the public and policymakers with information about the prevalence of societal distress in the United States. Its mission is to document how many Americans confront food insecurity, precarious housing or homelessness, inadequate health and health care, inferior education, and inadequate income/poverty.

For more details, visit [www.humanneeds.vcu.edu](http://www.humanneeds.vcu.edu).