

Adolescent and Adult English Learners
A National Profile of Educational and Employment Barriers
and Opportunities

April 2019



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Abstract

Although adolescent and young adult English learners (ELs) ages 14–21 have unique strengths, such as speaking an additional language, some do not complete the education and training necessary to earn a sustainable living wage. The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition and the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education supported two background studies to better understand the unique characteristics and education needs of these EL students. This policy brief synthesizes findings from the two background studies—the 2015–16 National Center for Education Statistics Fast Response Survey *Programs and Services for High School English Learners in Public School Districts: 2015–16* (<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016150.pdf>) and an analysis of data from the *Older Adolescent and Young Adult English Learners: A Study of Demographic, Policies, and Programs* study (2015) (Executive Summary can be found at <https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/older-adolescent-young-adult-ell.pdf>). This brief also presents recommendations about future data collection and reporting to help inform program design and delivery for ELs ages 14–21 across the kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) and adult education systems.

With respect to education at the secondary school level, nearly two-thirds of public school districts with high school grades reported enrolling high school ELs in their district, serving a total of 774,500 high school ELs. However, there also are many ELs in the broader group of 14- to 21-year-olds who are not enrolled in any secondary or postsecondary education—about 13 percent of 14- to 18-year-old ELs (102,000 individuals) reported not being enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education programs, while more than half of 19- to 21-year-old ELs (56 percent) were not enrolled in any education program (376,000 individuals; Velez et al., 2015). Accordingly, in the United States, there are about 212,000 14- to 21-year-old ELs who are not currently enrolled in school and who never obtained a high school degree.

In terms of employment, in the United States, there are about 202,000 16- to 21-year-old ELs who are not enrolled in school and are not employed. However, this rate of unemployment among out-of-school individuals is similar to or lower than that of non-ELs. Adolescent and adult EL earnings are slightly higher than those of their non-EL peers at similar levels of education attained. For ELs ages 16–21 with less than a high school degree, annual mean earnings were \$13,900; among those with a high school degree, annual mean earnings were \$13,500; and for those with some college, annual mean earnings were \$14,200.

To better support ELs ages 14–21 in attaining the levels of education and training required for employment that is fulfilling and provides family-sustaining wages, it is important to fully understand the education and employment trajectories of these students, the challenges to providing them with adequate supports and services, and promising policies and practices. Recommendations for future data collection and reporting derived from study findings include exploring primary outcome variables by additional demographic variables; extending the study to other age groups; following students longitudinally to better understand trajectories; and collecting additional information through interviews, focus groups, and surveys to help develop federal, state, and local policies. Examples of topics that might be explored using these methods include communication between districts and ELs and their families related to enrollment in academic, career, and technical programs; characteristics of EL high school dropouts who eventually earn a high school credential; instructional challenges and supports for ELs currently enrolled in high school; and barriers to enrollment of ELs ages 18–21 in programs that provide pathways to graduation and career and technical training.

Introduction

This policy brief provides information related to the demographic characteristics, education enrollment, education attainment, and employment status of English learners (ELs) ages 14–21 as well as the services currently offered by the K–12 and adult education systems to these adolescent and young adult ELs. The goal of the brief is to synthesize information from two reports funded by the U.S. Department of Education (ED), and to offer recommendations about future data collection and reporting to help inform program design and delivery for ELs ages 14–21, across the K–12 and adult education systems.

As noted in one of the reports the focus on 14–to 21-year-old ELs as a cohort is important for several reasons. Increasing numbers of ELs in this age group are turning to adult education programs to earn a high school degree and obtain job and language skills, in part because of interruptions to their formal education. In addition, this is the age at which adolescents and young adults are gaining education and labor market experiences that will impact their future status as productive members of a working society.

Adolescent and young adult ELs have unique strengths: They speak an additional language or languages and have other assets, including content area knowledge and skills acquired in their first language, such as the ability to read and solve math problems. However, more rigorous academic standards, coupled with more demanding academic language, have raised the bar for high school graduation, making it more difficult for ELs who enter U.S. schools at the secondary level to pass state reading/language arts and mathematics assessments (e.g., Linqanti, Cook, Bailey, & MacDonald, 2016). For the small percentage of ELs who are parents (6 percent), 47 percent are single parents, which poses an additional challenge with regard to education and employment.

Results from the American Community Survey (ACS), collected by the U.S. Census Bureau, document a major challenge facing young ELs and the programs that serve them; many ELs have lower school enrollment than non-ELs. About 13 percent of 14- to 18-year-old ELs and 56 percent of 19- to 21-year-old ELs are not receiving any formal schooling. Among those not enrolled, more than half in the younger cohort and over a third in the older cohort did not complete a high school credential¹. Even fewer ELs transition to postsecondary education (37 percent of ELs ages 19–21 attend an institution of higher education (IHE) compared with 56 percent of non-ELs). Because research suggests that jobs that pay family-sustaining wages require at least some postsecondary education, these statistics are disconcerting (Wrigley, 2015).

In light of the education and employment outcomes for ELs in this age group, ED's Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) and Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) supported two studies to better understand the unique characteristics and education and job training situations of adolescent and young adult ELs ages 14–21. The first report, *Programs and Services for High School English Learners in Public School Districts: 2015–16*, focused on high school ELs who are served in the K–12 education system or are seeking to newly enroll in public school districts. It was based on selected findings from a 2015–16 National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey, collected through the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS). The FRSS is designed to collect information on targeted issues from nationally representative samples of districts, schools, or teachers. The second report, *Older Adolescent and Young Adult English Learners: A Study of Demographic, Policies, and Programs*, focused on the broader population of ELs ages 14–21 who are (a) enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education, (b) employed, or (c) out of school and not in the workforce. This report was designed to document the education, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors related to the high school performance and education and career needs of ELs ages 14 through 21. This 12-month study was commissioned by OCTAE between September 2014 and September 2015 to analyze data from the ACS. Please see Appendix A for a description of the methodology employed in each report.

This policy brief synthesizes findings from these two reports. The brief also recommends additional data that might be collected in the K–12 and adult education systems to inform programming and service delivery.

Although there is some overlap across the two reports—both document education enrollment and attainment—The ACS report reports on findings related to demographics and employment and family status for ELs ages 14–21, both ELs enrolled in secondary and postsecondary education and those who are not enrolled but are employed full time, part time, or not working. The ACS data often report findings separately for the two age groups—ELs ages 14–18 and ages 19–21. The reader also should keep in mind that “English learner” is defined differently in each data set—by a self-reported measure in the ACS data and by district identification in the NCES FRSS data. To orient the reader to the key areas of overlap and differences across the two studies, Table 1 summarizes some of the main features of each of the studies, organized by data, sample, and outcome or indicator. “Indicator” refers to a characteristic (e.g., demographic, instructional) that was the subject of the study.

Table 1. Overview of Two Studies Synthesized in This Policy Brief

	<i>Programs and Services for High School English Learners (2016)</i>	<i>Older Adolescent and Young Adult English Learners: A Study of Demographic, Policies, and Program (2015)</i>
Data		
Data source	National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System 2015–16 survey (2016)	American Community Survey (ACS) 2013 census data, including historic trends. The study used a three-year pooled sample of ACS data combining observations from the 2011, 2012, and 2013 survey years. (2015)
Sample		
Definition of English learner (EL)	Identified by the district participating in the survey	A self-reported measure in the ACS data asking respondents who speak a language other than English at home how well they speak English ⁱⁱ
Age of EL population studied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High school ELs in K–12 schools • ELs ages 18–21 seeking to newly enroll in the school district 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ELs ages 14–21 enrolled in secondary and postsecondary education • Reported for ELs ages 14–18 and 19–21 • ELs who are not enrolled but are employed full time, part time, or not working
Outcome or Indicator		
Outcomes examined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education enrollment • Secondary enrollment • High school instructional programming and supports for ELs enrolled in K–12 schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education enrollment and attainment • Secondary enrollment • Employment and family status • Household income • Occupation
Select indicators examined	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Types of information provided to ELs ages 18–21 seeking to newly enroll in the district • Use of technology as an instructional tool • Availability of alternate and flexible educational programming • Availability of native language informational and instructional materials • Use of native language for ELs’ content instruction and for instructional support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size of EL population • Length of residency • Age at arrival • Nativityⁱⁱⁱ • Geographic mobility • Demographic characteristics • Characteristics of students who drop out of high school

Findings

The following selected findings are organized into four categories: (a) demographics, (b) education enrollment and attainment, (c) high school instructional programming, and (d) employment and family status. The policy brief closes with recommendations and a brief conclusion.

Demographics Related to the EL population Ages 14–21

The following section reports select demographic findings of an analysis of the ACS data and a Fast Response Survey conducted by the Department of Education. As summarized in Table 1, the ACS data provide information on the most recent U.S. Census estimate of the size of the adult EL population, including historic trends. However, because ELs were such a small fraction of the overall population, the study used a three-year sample of ELs, combining observations from the 2011, 2012, and 2013 survey years, thus creating a sample of more than 9 million observations.

The data also include information about individual characteristics of the adult EL population, the length of residency and age at arrival for adult ELs born outside of the United States, and geographic mobility. The NCES FRSS survey did not collect this information. Selected demographic findings are as follows:

- ***Size of the EL population.*** The ACS data estimate that more than 25 million ELs were in the United States as of 2013. Nationwide, there are nearly 1.5 million 14- to 21-year-old ELs. That number includes about 779,000 who are ages 14–18 and 675,000 who are ages 19–21.
- ***Trends in the size of the EL population.*** Between 1990 and 2000, there was an increase in the size of the EL population for both ages 14–18 and 19–21, although there is variation in trends across states.^{iv} However, the ACS data showed a decline in the size of this EL population between 2000 and 2013.^v
- ***Gender and race/ethnicity.*** ELs ages 14–21 are 55 percent male (800,000 individuals), 15 percent white (218,000), 5 percent black (73,000), 37 percent Hispanic (538,000), and 18 percent Asian (262,000).
- ***Poverty level:*** About one in five ELs ages 14–18 (19 percent) live below the poverty line. About one in three ELs ages 19–21 (29 percent) live below the poverty line.
- ***Nativity and citizenship.***
 - 14- to 21-year-old ELs: Broken down by age group:
 - About 43 percent of 14- to 21-year-old ELs are U.S.-born
 - 8 percent are naturalized citizens, and the rest are not U.S. citizens
 - 19- to 21-year-old ELs: Broken down by age group:
 - About 32 percent of ELs are U.S.-born
 - 14 percent are naturalized citizens, and the rest are not U.S. citizens
- ***Length of residency.*** Among non-native ELs in both age groups (14–18 years old and 19–21 years old), about one in five have lived in the United States for more than 10 years. Among non-native ELs ages 14–18, more than half (57 percent) were older than 10 when they arrived in the United States. Among non-native ELs ages 19–21, more than three quarters (77 percent) were older than 10 when they arrived.

- **Geographic mobility.** ACS data suggest that relatively small percentages of adolescent and young adult ELs had moved from within a state, between states or from abroad to the United States within the previous 12 months. Only about 1 in 10 ELs (11 percent) ages 14–18 and about 1 in 5 ELs (18 percent) ages 19–21 had reported moving within the state in the previous 12 months. Two percent of ELs ages 14–18 and 3 percent of ELs ages 19–21 had reported moving between states in the previous 12 months. Seven percent (ages 14–18) and 10 percent (ages 19–21) of ELs had reported moving from abroad within the previous 12 months. Eighty percent of ELs ages 14–18 and 69 percent of ELs ages 19–21 reported no move at all during the previous 12 months.

Educational Enrollment and Attainment

The NCES FRSS data include enrollment information on ELs at the secondary level. The ACS data include ELs’ overall level of educational attainment and secondary and postsecondary enrollment.

Selected findings related to educational enrollment and attainment are as follows:

- Level of secondary school enrollment for ELs ages 14–21
 - Nearly two thirds of public school districts with high school grades reported enrolling high school ELs in their district, serving an estimated total of 774,500 high school ELs.
 - The size of the high school EL population was roughly evenly distributed across districts: 28 percent of districts served 1–3 high school ELs, 22 percent of districts served 4–10 ELs, 27 percent served 11–50 ELs, and 23 percent of districts served more than 50 ELs.
 - Although the definition of ELs in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) includes students ages 3–21, in practice, few ELs ages 18–21 newly enroll in districts.^{vi} For example, 43 percent of districts reported never enrolling ELs in this age group, 34 percent reported “rarely” enrolling ELs at this age, 15 percent reported “sometimes,” and 6 percent reported “often” enrolling 18- to 21-year-old ELs.
- Information provided to ELs ages 18–21 seeking to enroll in U.S. high schools for the first time
 - When older ELs (ages 18–21) seek to enroll in U.S. high schools for the first time, districts reported providing information to students about the following educational programs and services: regular academic programs (75 percent of districts provided this information), district career and technical education (53 percent), an alternative school or a program for at-risk students (49 percent), General Equivalency Diploma (GED) programs offered by other providers (45 percent), career or technical training offered by other providers (42 percent), and free or low-cost English classes (41 percent).
 - Fewer districts provided information about enrollment in district-run GED programs (27 percent of the districts) and district newcomer programs (11 percent). However, this could be an artifact of what programs are available in the districts; program availability was not queried.
 - » The most common factors that districts considered when providing programmatic guidance to ELs ages 18–21 seeking to newly enroll in high school include the length of time needed to accrue sufficient credits to graduate (42 percent of districts reported considering this factor “to a major extent”), the student’s ability to meet high school graduation requirements in content area classes (41 percent), and age of the student (38 percent).

- » Just more than one third of districts (34 percent) reported considering a student’s English proficiency level “to a major extent” when providing programmatic guidance to ELs ages 18–21 seeking to newly enroll in high school. Less than one third of districts considered the student’s ability to pass state tests required for graduation (27 percent), the student’s limited or interrupted formal education (25 percent), or the student’s native language literacy (18 percent) when providing programmatic guidance.
- Numbers and percentages of ELs ages 14–21 not enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education compared with non-ELs
 - About 13 percent of 14- to 18-year-old ELs (102,000 individuals) reported not being enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education. By comparison, 6 percent of non-ELs in this age group were not enrolled in any education program.
 - More than half of 19- to 21-year-old ELs (56 percent) were not enrolled in any education program (376,000 individuals). By comparison, 40 percent of non-ELs this age were not enrolled in any education program.
- Level of educational attainment for ELs ages 14–21 compared with non-ELs
 - In the United States, there are approximately 212,000 14- to 21-year-old ELs who are not currently enrolled in school and who never obtained a high school degree.^{vii}
 - Among ELs ages 14–18 not currently enrolled in education (about 13 percent of all 14- to 18-year-old ELs), 60 percent had not attained a high school degree, 39 percent had attained a high school degree,^{viii} and 2 percent had attended some college. By comparison, among non-ELs in this age group who were not currently enrolled in education (about 6 percent of all 14- to 18-year-olds), 43 percent had not attained a high school degree, 55 percent had attained a high school degree, and 2 percent had enrolled in some college.
 - Among 19- to 21-year-old ELs not currently enrolled in education (about 56 percent of all 19- to 21-year-old ELs) 40 percent had not attained a high school degree, 50 percent had attained a high school degree, and 10 percent had attended some college. By comparison, among non-ELs in this age group not currently enrolled in education (40 percent), 14 percent had not attained a high school degree, 68 percent had attained a high school degree, and 17 percent had enrolled in some college.
- Characteristics of ELs who drop out of high school compared with dropouts who are not ELs
 - EL high school dropouts have characteristics different than those of non-EL dropouts regarding gender, race/ethnicity, and disability status. Relative to non-EL high school dropouts, ELs who leave high school before graduating are more likely to be male (64 percent vs. 59 percent). Regarding race/ethnicity, EL high school dropouts are more likely to be Hispanic^{ix} (48 percent vs. 9 percent white, 2 percent black, 5 percent Asian, and 36 percent other) whereas non-EL dropouts are predominately white (47 percent white, 22 percent black, 15 percent Hispanic, 1 percent Asian, and 14 percent other). Regarding disability status, there are lower percentages of EL dropouts with a disability (5 percent) compared with non-EL dropouts with a disability (14 percent).^x There is little difference between ELs and non-ELs in the percentage of high school dropouts whose income is below the poverty line (40 percent vs. 41 percent).

Types of Instructional Services and Supports Provided to High School ELs

The NCES FRSS report by includes detailed data on the types of instructional services and supports provided to high school ELs. The report presents findings on the types of EL instructional programs,

newcomer supports, use of technology, alternate educational programs, and use of ELs' native language—both in the instructional setting and for communication purposes (e.g., translating and interpreting information). The ACS survey was not designed to collect this information. Selected findings related to high school instructional programming are as follows^{xi}.

- Types of EL instructional supports and services^{xii} and use of native languages to provide these supports^{xiii}
 - The most common instructional supports that districts offer to high school ELs are English as a second language (ESL) provided in scheduled class periods (68 percent of districts), ESL as push-in or pull-out instruction (61 percent), and sheltered English or content instruction (47 percent). About one third of districts (33 percent) provided instructional support by a paraprofessional who does not speak the ELs' native language.
 - Very few districts offer bilingual programming or support of any type. Among the districts surveyed, 8 percent provided bilingual instruction for ELs in content classes, 3 percent provided two-way bilingual education or dual-language programming for ELs and English-proficient students in content classes, and about one third of districts (31 percent) provided instructional support by a paraprofessional who speaks the ELs' native language. Among city districts, more than half provided paraprofessionals who speak the ELs' native language.^{xiv}
 - Very few districts reported using native language instructional supports for ELs in their district. Seventy-eight percent of districts reported not using the native language in content instruction for any students and 44 percent reported not using the native language as an instructional support.
 - Districts commonly provided translation services in the most common native languages of ELs for printed materials (87 percent) and interpreters for school meetings (92 percent), but only about half of the districts or fewer reported providing translated information about the district's academic programs (51 percent) or career and technical programs (41 percent).
- **Newcomer supports.** Less than one in five districts (16 percent) reported offering a newcomer program. Of those that offer a program, more than half (52 percent) of the programs are designed to serve ELs with limited or interrupted formal education.
- **Use of technology.** Districts were surveyed on the types of online or computer-based programs used to support high school ELs instructionally. Districts that had high school grades and high school English learners reported high school ELs worked with on-line or computer-based programs in various areas to address their needs. They reported primarily using online or computer-based technology to support ELs' English language acquisition (58 percent), English language and literacy instruction (56 percent), and content instruction (47 percent). Fewer of these districts reported using technology for native language support in content instruction (25 percent) or study skills (22 percent).
- EL enrollment in alternate education programs^{xv}
 - The most common alternate or flexible education programs that districts reported some or most of their ELs participating in include tutoring (51 percent), career and technical training (42 percent), remediation classes (41 percent), and credit recovery courses/programs (30 percent). Fewer districts reported ELs participating in summer school (26 percent) and mentoring programs (21 percent).
 - There are some supports that very few ELs access^{xvi}—many districts reported that, no ELs participated in summer school (40 percent), district-administered GED courses (86 percent), alternative programs for at-risk students (61 percent), or mentoring (54 percent).

- Moreover, less than half of districts reported having programs and services designed specifically for high school ELs in the following areas: tutoring (43 percent of districts), summer school (18 percent), credit recovery courses or programs (13 percent), mentoring programs (14 percent), and distance education courses or programs (4 percent).

Employment Status, Earnings, Occupations, and Family Status

The ACS data provide information on adolescent and adult ELs' employment status (for those enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education and those not enrolled), earnings, occupations, and family status. The FRSS survey was not designed to report on employment and family status. Selected findings related to employment and family status are as follows:

- Employment status for ELs not enrolled in secondary and postsecondary schools
 - In the United States, there are approximately 202,000 16- to 21-year-old ELs who are not enrolled in school and are not employed. However, this rate of unemployment among out-of-school individuals is similar to or lower than that of non-ELs.
 - Among nonenrolled 16- to 18-year-old ELs, about 57 percent are not employed (51,000 individuals), whereas another 13 percent are employed only part time (12,000 individuals). By comparison, 64 percent of nonenrolled 16- to 18-year-old non-ELs are not employed and 20 percent are employed only part time.
 - Among ELs ages 16–18 not enrolled in middle or high school, 26 percent of males reported being employed full time (compared with 11 percent of non-EL males in this group) and 11 percent of females reported being employed full time (compared with 6 percent of non-EL females in this group).
 - Among nonenrolled 19- to 21-year-old ELs, about 40 percent are not employed (151,000 individuals), while another 15 percent are employed only part time (56,000). By comparison, 42 percent of nonenrolled 19- to 21-year-old non-ELs are not employed and another 23 percent are employed only part time.
 - Among ELs ages 19–21 not enrolled in postsecondary education, 52 percent of males reported being employed full time (compared with 23 percent of females), 14 percent of males reported part-time employment (compared with 17 percent of females), and 34 percent of males and 60 percent of females reported not working.
- Level of work for ELs enrolled in secondary and postsecondary schools
 - The percentage of working students is higher for 19- to 21-year-old ELs enrolled in middle or high school (29 percent for EL males; 24 percent for EL females) than for 16- to 18-year-old ELs enrolled in middle or high school (11 percent for EL males and 13 percent for EL females).
 - Very few ELs ages 16–18 enrolled in middle or high school are working (10 percent of males and 12 percent of females work part time, and 1 percent of each group works full time). For males and females ages 16–18 who are enrolled in middle or high school, ELs are less likely to work than non-ELs (89 percent of EL males are not working vs. 83 percent of non-ELs males not working ; 87 percent of EL females are not working vs. 79 percent of non-EL females not working).
 - Among males ages 19-21, 11 percent of enrolled EL males work full time (compared with 8 percent of non-EL enrolled males) and 18 percent of enrolled EL males work part time (compared with 19 percent of non-EL enrolled males). Among females, 6 percent of enrolled EL females work full time (compared with 6 percent of non-EL enrolled females) and 18

- percent of enrolled EL females work part time (compared with 20 percent of non-EL enrolled females).
- Among ELs ages 19–21 who are enrolled in postsecondary education, about 10 percent of males and females are employed full time, and more than a quarter of each group are employed part time.
- Earnings^{xvii}
 - ELs ages 16–21 who are employed full time have mean yearly earnings of \$16,500 (median earnings are \$15,400), which are comparable with the yearly mean earnings of non-ELs working full time (who have mean earnings of \$16,800 and median earnings of \$15,200).
 - ELs ages 16–21 who are employed part time have mean yearly earnings of \$6,300 (median earnings are \$4,500), which are higher than those of non-ELs who are employed part time (who have mean earnings of \$5,800 and median earnings of \$4,200).
 - Adolescent and adult EL earnings are higher across two levels of education attained. For ELs ages 16–21 with less than a high school degree, mean earnings are \$13,900 (compared with \$10,000 for non-ELs^{xviii}); among those with a high school degree, mean earnings are \$13,500 (compared with \$12,200 for non-ELs). However, for ELs with some college, mean earnings are \$14,200 (compared with \$14,500 for non-ELs).
 - Occupations
 - Smaller percentages of ELs are in occupations^{xix} that pay above the mean wage, compared with industries that pay above the mean wage: 6 percent of 16- to 18-year-old ELs and 6 percent of 19- to 21-year-old ELs work in above-mean-wage-paying occupations, compared with 27 percent of 16- to 18-year-old ELs and 33 percent of 19- to 21-year-old ELs who work in above-mean-wage-paying industries.
 - By comparison with ELs, slightly greater percentages of 16- to 18-year-old non-ELs are in above-mean-wage occupations (8 percent) and lower percentages are in above-mean-wage industries (17 percent). The same pattern holds for 19- to 21-year-old non-ELs: Slightly greater percentages of non-ELs are in above-mean-wage occupations (10 percent) and lower percentages are in above-mean-wage industries (24 percent).
 - Industries in which more than 10 percent of ELs ages 16–21 in the sample are employed include the food preparation- and serving-related occupations (19 percent), sales and related occupations (15 percent), and office and administrative support (11 percent). These industries also are the top three employers of non-ELs ages 16–21: food preparation- and serving-related occupations (21 percent), sales and related occupations (20 percent), and office and administrative support (14 percent).
 - Family status
 - ELs ages 14–21 are more likely than non-ELs peers to be parents (6 percent vs. 4 percent).
 - Among 14- to 21-year-old ELs who are parents, ELs are more likely to work full time than non-ELs (28 percent vs. 24 percent) and are less likely to work part time (14 percent vs. 22 percent).
 - ELs ages 14–21 who are parents are twice as likely to be single parents as their non-EL peers (47 percent vs. 24 percent).

Recommendations

Based on these two studies, this brief offers recommendations about future data collection and reporting related to EL high school students enrolled in K–12 schools and those ages 18–21 seeking to newly enroll in the districts, as well as ELs ages 14–21 enrolled in secondary and postsecondary education, and those who are not enrolled but are employed full time or part time, or not working. These recommendations are aimed at collecting additional information to enable a better understanding of the education and employment trajectories for this group of students and the personal and institutional challenges they face. Additional information may help inform program design and delivery across the K–12 and adult education systems.

Explore Primary Outcome Variables by Additional Demographic Variables

Please note that the education outcomes in the reports are summarized separately by sex, but they also could be summarized by other variables, such as race, country of origin, time in U.S. schools and age of entry, language(s) spoken at home, and level of language proficiency. Likewise, employment outcomes are currently calculated separately by sex and enrollment, but they also could be disaggregated by the other demographic variables included in the report.

Extend Studies to Other Age Groups

The upper age for ELs in both studies is 21. Extending studies to include ages 22–30 would make possible comparisons between the current samples and samples of ELs who have had more time to complete their education and participate in the workforce.

Follow Students Longitudinally to Better Understand Trajectories

Both reports provided useful snapshots of the demographic characteristics, education enrollment, education attainment, and employment status of ELs ages 14–21 as well as the services currently offered to them by school districts and adult education systems. However, neither report collected longitudinal data that would enable a better understanding of how outcomes evolve over time for ELs ages 14–21. Especially useful would be longitudinal studies that continued to track ELs who attain English language proficiency.

Collect Additional Information Through Interviews, Focus Groups, and Surveys to Help Inform Federal, State, and Local Policies

Additional data collected through interviews, focus groups, and surveys would help elucidate the factors that influence the education and employment trajectories of these students as well as obstacles and best methods related to school completion and workforce success. Although most of the examples that follow are focused on trajectories and obstacles across the various topics, it would be important to find out about practices, programs, and policies that support ELs in graduating from high school and continuing with education and training opportunities that lead to work that is personally fulfilling and provides family sustaining wages. Examples of topics that might be explored using these methods follow.

Communication Between Districts and Families. The FRSS survey reports that districts commonly provide translation services in the most common native language(s) of ELs for printed materials (87 percent) and interpreters for school meetings (92 percent), but only about half of the districts or fewer reported providing translated information about the district’s academic programs (51 percent) or career and technical programs (41 percent). Surveys, interviews, and focus groups might be used to collect

information related to obstacles to communication between districts and ELs ages 14–21 and their families, and methods that have been used by districts that enhance communication.

Characteristics of EL High School Dropouts Who Eventually Obtain High School Credentials. It was found that 40 percent of non-enrolled ELs never completed a high school degree compared with 14 percent of non-enrolled non-ELs

The report also highlights the importance of collecting longitudinal data on the characteristics of EL high school dropouts who eventually earn a high school credential and what steps they took to complete this credential. It would be very interesting to understand how the population of former ELs varies from the population of current ELs and what steps former ELs took to improve their English skills. In addition, it would be interesting to investigate how outcomes of ELs are evolving over time. For instance, there is a large population of EL high school dropouts, but perhaps, over time, some of them eventually earn a GED or other high school equivalency credential. It would be interesting to know the characteristics of EL high school dropouts that eventually earn a high school credential and what steps they take to complete this credential.

Instructional Challenges and Supports for ELs Currently Enrolled in High School. The NCES FRSS survey collected information on the type of instructional supports provided to high school ELs. It is important to learn more about why so few ELs participate in programs that might enhance learning and support higher rates of high school completion. Many districts surveyed reported that no ELs participated in district-administered GED courses (86 percent), alternative programs for at-risk students (61 percent), mentoring (54 percent) or summer school (40 percent of districts).

Moreover, less than half of districts have programs and services designed specifically for high school ELs in the following areas: tutoring (43 percent of districts), summer school (18 percent), credit-recovery courses or programs (13 percent), mentoring programs (14 percent), and distance education courses or programs (4 percent).

Regarding language instruction education programs, not all districts reported ESL support during scheduled class periods (68 percent of districts), ESL as push-in or pull-out instruction (61 percent), and sheltered English for content instruction (47 percent). Even fewer districts offered bilingual programming or native language support of any type to secondary school ELs.^{xx}

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups might be used to collect information to better understand why so many ELs do not participate in programs that might enhance learning and support graduation from high school. It may be that districts do not offer these programs, but other reasons include lack of communication about the availability of programs, communication in a form/format not comprehensible to ELs and their families, and programs not designed for ELs, especially those with more limited proficiency in English or with too many credits to accrue to graduate in in the allotted amount of time. Regarding levels of proficiency, a recent National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report (NASEM, 2017) notes that adolescent ELs often do not have access to the core curriculum, electives, and Advanced Placement classes required for secondary success because they are locked into non-credit-bearing English language development classes. Other reasons for lack of school enrollment may be related to the need to provide child care or to work. Regarding supports for young adults, in light of the skills and knowledge needed for high-demand careers and jobs of the future, experts recommend integrating skills needed for transitioning successfully to postsecondary education and employment into every level of adult education instruction, including beginning ESL classes that are focused primarily on language instruction (Parrish & Johnson, 2010; Parrish, 2015).

Barriers to Enrollment of ELs Ages 18–21 in Programs That Provide Pathways to Graduation and Career and Technical Training. Collecting information about pathways to graduation and career and technical programs is important because the FRSS reports that very few ELs ages 18–21 had enrolled in district high schools within the last 12 months from the time the survey was conducted—most districts never enrolled ELs (43 percent) or rarely enrolled these students (34 percent), with fewer districts sometimes (15 percent) or often (6 percent) enrolling ELs of this age group.

The FRSS reports that when providing information to older ELs seeking to enroll in high school about the best education options for them, districts reported focusing on the length of time needed to accrue sufficient credits to graduate (42 percent considered this factor “to a major extent”), the student’s ability to meet high school graduation requirements in content-area classes (41 percent), and the age of the student (38 percent). Districts considered the student’s English proficiency level (34 percent), the student’s ability to pass state tests required for graduation (27 percent), the student’s limited or interrupted formal education (25 percent), and the student’s native language literacy (18 percent) less frequently.

According to the results of the survey, districts may not be providing information about all assistance available to older ELs at risk of not graduating. Findings from this report show that when guiding older ELs (ages 18–21) about education options, districts most commonly provided ELs information about regular academic programs (75 percent). However, fewer districts reported providing students with information about district career and technical training (53 percent), alternative schools or programs for at-risk students (49 percent), GED programs offered by other providers (45 percent), career or technical training offered by other providers (42 percent), and free or low-cost English classes (41 percent). Even fewer districts provided information about district-run GED programs (27 percent) and district newcomer programs (11 percent).

Taken together, these findings suggest that districts are considering individual student characteristics when providing information about education options, but not all districts are providing ELs with information about the full range of education options, including alternative pathways to a high school diploma and career and technical training.

Surveys, interviews, and focus groups could be used to explore why districts are not providing this information to students. It is possible that this type of programming is not offered and/or the programs are not considered appropriate for some students. Ideally, some studies would be longitudinal, enabling researchers to continue to track ELs after they become proficient in English. As an example, highlight the potential usefulness of a longitudinal study to get a better sense of long-term employment outcomes of slightly older ELs and former ELs. The finding that ELs have equivalent, if not slightly better, yearly earnings than non-ELs cannot be used to predict future earnings.

Summary and Conclusions

This synthesis paints a picture of a diverse adolescent and adult EL population, with varying levels of education attainment and employment needs. The present document synthesizes two studies based on nationally representative data sets. The FRSS report explored the secondary education programs that are available for ELs ages 14–21, including ELs who may not be able to earn a high school diploma within four years. The intent of the survey was to obtain a better understanding of the unique characteristics of this population as well as the features of secondary school language education policies and programs that serve them. The ACS report analyzed data from the ACS collected by the U.S. Census Bureau to create a detailed profile of the education, linguistic, and socioeconomic factors that are directly related to the education and career needs of ELs ages 14–21.

To better support ELs ages 14–21, it will be important to more fully understand the education and employment trajectories of these students as well as challenges to providing adequate supports and services. Concurrently, learning about successful policies and practices will be essential to help ensure that more ELs graduate from high school, attain levels of education and training required for careers that are fulfilling, and find employment that provides family-sustaining wages.

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Appendix A. Overview of Report Methodology

This appendix provides an overview of the methodology employed in each of the two studies of nationally representative data sets on adolescent and adult English learners (ELs) described in this brief. The reader should access the original reports for more details on the methodology employed in each report.

Velez, E., Silvia, S., & Tolbert, M. (2015). *Older adolescent and young adult English learners: A study of demographics, policies, and programs*. Unpublished report.

Overview. The focus is on the broader population of ELs ages 14–21 who are (1) enrolled in secondary or postsecondary education, (2) employed, or (3) out of school and not in the workforce.

Data Source. American Community Survey (ACS).

Method. Collected annually by the U.S. Census Bureau, ACS data provide detailed information about the American people and the workforce. At the time of the study, 2013 was the most recent ACS survey for which results were available. Every year, about 3 million household surveys are administered, which represents a 1 percent random sample of American households. For the purposes of the study, the researchers defined ELs as individuals who self-reported that they spoke English less than “very well.” To increase the number of ELs in the sample, the researchers pooled observations from the 2011, 2012, and 2013 surveys.^{xxi} The study analyzed ACS data for ELs ages 14–18 and 19–21 related to demographic characteristics, education attainment outcomes, employment outcomes, and family status. There were 629,300 respondents ages 14–18, of whom 23,000 were classified as ELs. There were 385,000 respondents ages 19–21, of whom 17,300 were classified as ELs. The authors are careful to note that the study is descriptive and none of the findings in the report are meant to suggest a causal relationship (e.g., a figure showing that ELs are more likely to be high school dropouts than non-ELs does not indicate that being an EL *caused* more students to drop out).

Cautions. As reported by the authors (pp. 74–75), this study has several important limitations that should be noted. The authors note: “The American Community Survey (ACS) uses a self-reported (or household-reported measure of English ability. Individuals were not tested to assess their English ability level, so there may be bias in the measure of English ability. Additionally, the ACS only provides a broad set of outcome measures. For educational outcomes, the ACS includes information on current enrollment and highest level of education completed but does not provide more detailed information on specific educational skills, nor does it include any educational assessment data. Likewise, the employment measures do not provide any longitudinal individual-level data and only include employment status, earnings, and occupation/industry at one point in time, which makes it impossible to assess the individual respondent’s economic trajectory in the future.”

Programs and services for high school English learners in public school districts: 2015–16 (NCES 2016-150). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016150.pdf>

Overview. This FRSS report focuses on ELs who are served in the K–12 education system or who are seeking to newly enroll in public school districts. More specifically, the report is based on findings from the Fast Response Survey System (FRSS). The FRSS is a survey system designed to collect small amounts of issue-oriented data from a nationally representative sample of districts, schools, and teachers, with minimal burden on respondents and within a relatively short period of time. This report presents data on programs and services for high school ELs, including instructional approaches, newcomer programs,

online or computer-based programs, and programs or services (e.g., tutoring) designed specifically for high school ELs. The report provides findings on the use of native language(s) for content instruction, instructional support, materials, and services. Data are presented about the information that districts provide about educational programs or services to ELs ages 18–21 seeking to newly enroll in the district as well as the factors that districts consider when providing information about these programs and services to ELs in this group.

Data Source. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) 2015–16 survey, *Programs and Services for High School English Learners*.

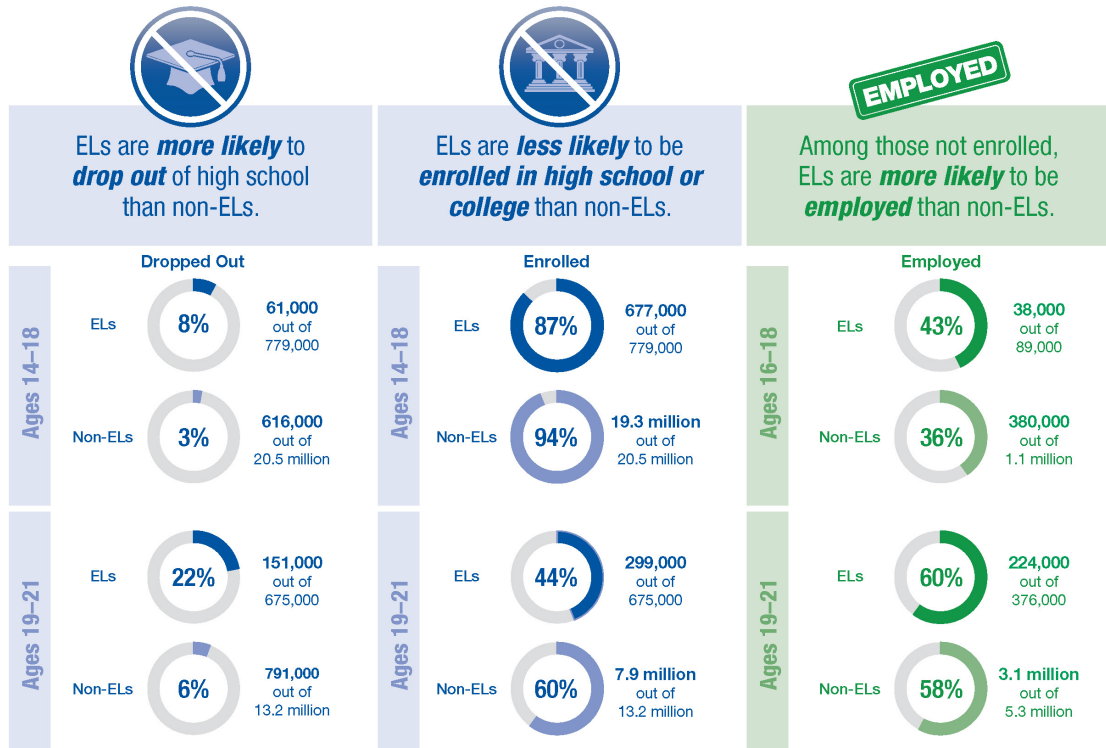
Method. To minimize the response burden, participants are asked a small number of questions. The survey discussed by the FRSS was sent in fall 2015 to 1,700 traditional public school districts with high school grades, across 50 states and the District of Columbia. The response rate was 89 percent, resulting in a sample of 1,480 school districts.^{xxii} The study surveyed district administrators on the types of instructional supports and services offered to high school ELs; it used the federal definition for ELs^{xxiii} and focused on those in the K–12 education system.

Cautions. The authors note the following (p. 1): “Because the purpose of the study is to introduce new NCES data from the survey through tables containing descriptive information, only selected national findings are presented. These findings have been chosen to demonstrate the range of information available from the FRSS study rather than to discuss all of the data collected; they are not meant to emphasize any particular issue. Readers are cautioned not to make causal inferences about the data presented here. The findings are based on self-reported data from public school districts. Many of the variables examined are related to one another, and complex interactions and relationships have not been explored.”

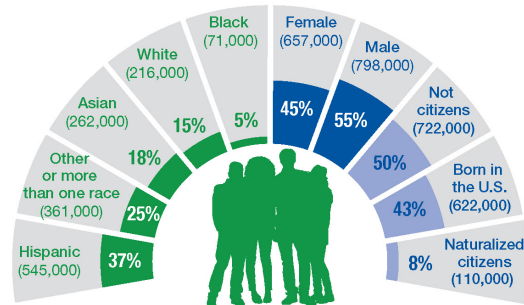
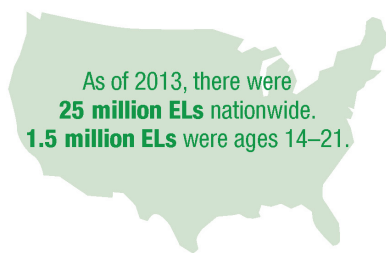
Appendix B. Education and Employment Characteristics of ELs Ages 14–21

Education and Employment Characteristics of English Learners Ages 14–21 in the United States

English Learners (ELs) have considerably **lower** education attainment than non-ELs but are **more likely** to be employed.



Demographics of ELs ages 14–21



These findings are from an analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data on English Learners (ELs) that was completed in 2015 to inform the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) and Office of English Language Acquisition (OELA) as the offices seek to strengthen and expand educational and technical assistance services to meet the educational needs of this population. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011–2013 American Community Survey (ACS). Data from IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota, www.ipums.org. Note: Employment data on those less than 16 years of age were not collected in the ACS. The percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding. Percentages are calculated on unrounded counts of individuals.

A cautionary note: “The American Community Survey (ACS) uses a self-reported or household-reported measure of English ability. Individuals were not tested to assess their English ability level, so there may be bias in the measure of English ability.

Endnotes

ⁱ High school credentials refer to valid certificates students receive for graduating from high school, for example high school diplomas or high school equivalency diplomas, such as general equivalency diplomas (GEDs).

ⁱⁱ The ACS survey question asks respondents who reported speaking a language other than English at home to rate how well they speak English. Respondents choose between “speak very well,” “speak well,” “speak not well,” and “does not speak English”. All respondents who reported that they spoke English less than “very well” are considered to be ELs. The head of household completes the survey for all members of the household.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Nativity” refers to country of birth.

^{iv} It is suggested future research explores whether there is any relationship among changes in the labor market, political landscape, or federal and state resources for education, support, and employment services, and fluctuations in the U.S. population of adult ELs.

^v It should be noted that school-based data sources, such as the U.S. Department of Education’s ED Data Express, show a consistent number of ELs between 2007–08 and 2012–13.

^{vi} The NCES FRSS survey did not include information on the proportion of ELs ages 18–21 who seek to enroll in high school compared with the proportion who enroll.

^{vii} The report does not specify whether “high school degree” also includes those who obtained a high school credential through an alternate source, such as through the GED track.

^{viii} Further clarification is needed from the report authors on the population of 14- to 18-year-old ELs who were not enrolled in school but obtained a high school degree.

^{ix} By comparison, 38 percent of 14- to 18-year-old ELs and 37 percent of 19- to 21-year-old ELs reported they were Hispanic..

^x There is no evidence in the report to suggest that under-identification plays a role in ELs dropping out of school. Questions about over- and under-identification of ELs with disabilities are complex. Umansky, Thompson, & Diaz (2017) found that “whereas current EL students are overrepresented in special education at the secondary level, students who enter school as ELs are significantly underrepresented in special education overall and within most disability categories”.

^{xi} It is not clear from the reporting of the NCES FRSS the extent to which districts provided multiple supports to high school ELs.

^{xii} The definitions for EL programs that were defined in the questionnaire are provided here. “**Bilingual education/instruction for English learner students only:** An educational program/instructional approach in which English and the students’ native language are used to provide content instruction to classes of English learner students. **Two-way bilingual education/dual-language program for English learners and English proficient students:** Also known as two-way immersion programs, two-way or dual-language programs provide instruction using both English and a non-English language to classes that include both English learner and English proficient students. **English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction:** ESL programs (also known as English language development (ELD)) provide instruction that focuses on the structure and use of the English language, using carefully articulated English language instruction designed to meet the needs of students at various levels of English proficiency. ESL instruction may be provided in regularly scheduled class periods, or as push-in instruction (the ESL instructor works with students within an ongoing content class) or as pull-out instruction (students move out of an ongoing class for an ESL session). **Sheltered English/content instruction:** Sheltered instruction refers to regular grade-level instruction in core content areas that is provided in English through instructional strategies that make the academic content accessible to English learner students while also assisting them to acquire academic English.” (p. B-7).

^{xiii} The definitions for use of ELs’ native language for instruction that were defined in the questionnaire are provided here. “**Use of the native language for content instruction:** The student’s native language is used as the language for presenting new academic concepts and introducing new academic skills. **Use of the native language for instructional support:** The student’s native language is used to provide clarification of instruction in contexts where the teacher uses English as the primary language for presenting new academic concepts and introducing new academic skills.”, p. C-4).

^{xiv} Currently, many states use the term “home language” rather than “native language.”

^{xv} Programs queried in the FRSS include summer school, remediation classes, credit recovery courses or programs, flexible schedules (e.g., shortened day, evening or Saturday classes), alternative schools/programs for at-risk

students, career and technical training, distance education courses or programs, district-administered GED courses, tutoring, and mentoring programs.

^{xvi} It is not clear whether lack of EL enrollment merely reflects availability of district programs. The survey did not first query districts on what programs were offered in their district before querying them about EL enrollment in those programs.

^{xvii} Findings are reported in constant 2014 dollars. In 2014, the federal poverty guideline was \$11,670 for one person and \$23,850 for a four-person family. For more information on federal poverty guidelines, see <https://aspe.hhs.gov/2014-poverty-guidelines>.

^{xviii} The ACS analysis suggested that the finding that ELs with less than a high school degree earn slightly more than those with a high school degree may be due to additional years of labor market experience because they left school earlier.

^{xix} It is less clear how industry data translate into actual earnings given that there are a wide range of earnings within an industry. For example, the hospital industry employs janitors, X-ray technicians, nurses, and doctors, among other employees.

^{xx} ESL instruction may be provided in regularly scheduled class periods, or as push-in instruction (the ESL instructor works with students within an ongoing content class) or as pull-out instruction (students move out of an ongoing class for an ESL session). Sheltered instruction refers to regular grade-level instruction in core content areas that is provided in English through instructional strategies that make the academic content accessible to EL students while also assisting them to acquire academic English (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

^{xxi} To report trends in the size of the EL population over time, the authors relied on another form of the ACS—administered every 10 years by the U.S. Census Bureau—the Decennial U.S. Census for 1990 and 2000.

^{xxii} Approximately 40 school districts that originally received the survey were ineligible, resulting in about 1,670 eligible districts. Of the 1,670 eligible districts, 1,480 districts responded to the survey.

^{xxiii} Under the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA) amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act*, (NCLB) the law in place when the survey was administered, ELs were referred to as “limited English proficient” [LEP] students. LEP students were defined as individuals ages 3 through 21 enrolled in or preparing to enroll in the K–12 education system, who were not born in the United States or whose native language is a language other than English, and whose difficulties speaking, reading, writing, or understanding the English language were potentially sufficient to deny the individual (1) the ability to meet state academic achievement standards (2) the ability to successfully achieve in mainstream classrooms where English is the language of instruction, or (3) “the opportunity to participate fully in society.” “The LEP definition also includes students who are Native American, Alaska Native, or a native resident of the outlying areas, who come from an environment where a language other than English has had a significant impact on the student’s English proficiency; and migratory students whose native language is not English and who are from a non-English-dominant environment (ESEA as amended by NCLB Section 9101(25)).” The ESSA amendments to the ESEA retained this definition but changes the term “LEP” to “EL”.