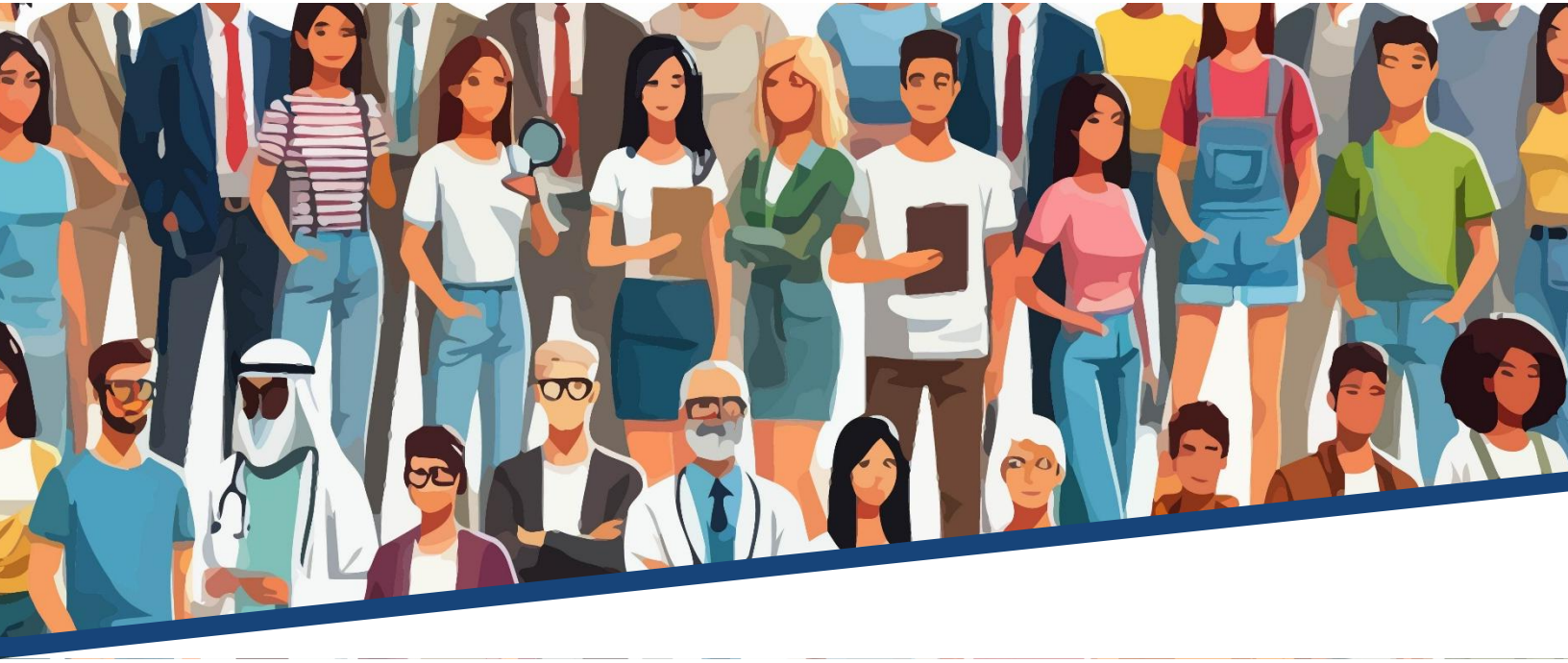

Who Are Washington's Adult Learners?

Demographic and Economic Profiles of Adults Not Enrolled in Postsecondary Education

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Washington Student Achievement Council

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Acknowledgements

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Preface

Washington aims to ensure that 70 percent of adults ages 25 to 44 hold a postsecondary credential. Achieving that goal requires an understanding of who has and has not earned a postsecondary credential, what barriers exist for individuals who have not earned one, and what conditions might support their success.

This report contributes to that understanding by examining the demographic and economic characteristics of Washington adults ages 25 to 44 who are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education. Using 2024 American Community Survey data, the analysis highlights differences in educational attainment across gender, race/ethnicity, household structure, language, income, occupation, employment status, and region. The findings provide context for the diverse experiences of adult learners and identify populations that may benefit from targeted outreach, resources, and policy support.

The report also reflects the Washington Student Achievement Council's (WSAC) role in informing statewide strategic planning, research, and policy development. A deeper understanding of the realities facing adults who balance work, family responsibilities, and other life circumstances can help policymakers, educators, workforce partners, and community organizations design more effective pathways to educational attainment, expand opportunities, and reduce barriers for learners across Washington.

Executive Summary

Washington's long-term economic growth and workforce resilience depend on increasing postsecondary attainment among working-age adults. But a substantial share of adults ages 25 to 44—the core of the state's labor force—remain disconnected from education and training pathways. Many are balancing work, family responsibilities, and financial constraints while navigating uneven access to programs and support services. Understanding who these adults are, where barriers are most concentrated, and which groups show the greatest potential for reengagement is essential to advancing the state's 70% attainment goal and ensuring that economic mobility is broadly shared.

Using 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS), this report examines the demographic, economic, and geographic characteristics of Washington adults ages 25 to 44 who are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education. The analysis highlights how educational attainment intersects with income, employment, family structure, occupation, and region, revealing both persistent inequities and high-impact opportunities for targeted policy and programmatic action.

Key Findings

- **Nearly half of Washington adults ages 25 to 44 who are not enrolled in education lack a postsecondary credential**, limiting access to higher-wage, high-growth occupations.
- **Adults with children, rural residents, and adults of color face the largest postsecondary attainment gaps**, reflecting persistent structural barriers related to time, cost, and access.
- **Postsecondary credentials are strongly associated with economic stability:** Adults with an associate degree or higher earn more than twice the median wages of adults with no postsecondary education and are significantly more likely to be employed.
- **Adults without credentials are concentrated in lower-growth and declining occupations**, including office administration, sales, and transportation, increasing their vulnerability to economic disruption.
- **Adults with some college but no degree represent a high-impact reengagement opportunity**, as research shows that with targeted outreach and support, they are significantly more likely than other adults to reenroll and complete a credential.

Structural Barriers

Research shows that adults with lower levels of income and education participate in learning at lower rates—not because of a lack of interest, but because of structural barriers such as cost, time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to flexible programs. While some participation gaps have narrowed in recent years, the narrowing has largely been driven by declining participation among traditionally advantaged groups rather than increased engagement among adults furthest from opportunity.

This report analyzes 2024 American Community Survey data on educational attainment among Washington adults ages 25 to 44 who are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education. In the context of the state's 70% attainment goal, the analysis examines how educational pathways shape economic and demographic outcomes for working-age adults.

For this analysis, adults are grouped into three attainment levels—associate degree or higher, some college but no degree, and no postsecondary education—to examine differences in income, employment, household structure, and demographic characteristics. Comparing these groups highlights patterns with important implications for economic mobility and equity, particularly for adults of color, rural learners, and parents. These findings are intended to inform policies and practices that reduce barriers and expand access to credential pathways.

Reengagement Opportunity

Recent research provides important lessons for Washington's efforts to reengage adults without postsecondary credentials—particularly those with some college, no degree. Evidence from programs such as REACT in Florida, California Reconnect, and the National Student Clearinghouse's *Some College, No Credential* report consistently shows that adults who have stopped out recently (that is, who last enrolled four to five academic terms prior to the start of an academic year) are significantly more likely to reenroll and complete a credential, making them a strong target for statewide outreach.

Geographic and Occupational Risk

There are also opportunities to engage working adults, expanding learning and upskilling opportunities for adults in low-wage, low-skill jobs, who are among the least likely to participate in education or training.

Equity and Systems Alignment

The barriers, opportunity, and risks highlight the need for intentional strategies to empower low-wage workers, rural learners, parents, and adults of color to build skills and advance.

Washington's path to reaching its 70% attainment goal depends on reengaging the adults identified in this analysis, especially those without credentials and those with some college but no degree. The data shows that adults without postsecondary credentials are more likely to be in lower-wage, less stable jobs, while those with credentials see clear gains in earnings and employment. At the same time, attainment gaps are most pronounced for adults with children, rural residents, and adults of color, pointing to where barriers are most concentrated. Adults with some college but no degree stand out as a key opportunity group, as—with the right support—they are more likely than others to return and complete their degrees. Expanding flexible, affordable pathways and targeted outreach, particularly for these groups, can help more adults complete credentials, strengthen workforce resilience, and ensure that progress toward the state's attainment goal is equitable.

Introduction

In 2013, the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) set a statewide goal: by 2023, 70% of Washingtonians ages 25 to 44 would hold a postsecondary credential. This report uses 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) data to examine the progress made toward that goal. While Washington has not yet reached 70% attainment, a renewed focus on adult learners—both their enrollment and completion—can help move the state closer.

Demand for postsecondary education continues to grow. The Center on Education and Workforce at Georgetown University projects that by 2031, 72% of jobs in the United States will require education or training beyond high school (Carnevale, Smith, Van Der Werf , & Quinn, 2023). In Washington, holding postsecondary credentials is increasingly the baseline for obtaining living-wage jobs, and employers regularly cite talent shortages as a constraint on growth. As older, more educated workers retire, increasing postsecondary attainment among working-age adults is critical to maintaining a strong and resilient workforce.

The economic benefits of postsecondary education are clear. In Washington, adults with a bachelor's degree or higher earn substantially more and experience lower unemployment than those with only a high school diploma (Monear, Kwakye, Lundrgren, & Byrne, 2023). Each additional level of education is associated with higher earnings and greater economic stability, underscoring the value of postsecondary credentials for individuals and for the state economy.

At the same time, participation in education and training is uneven. Research from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that adults with lower levels of education and income are much less likely to participate in learning, even when they are motivated to do so (OECD, 2025). Structural

For this analysis, adults are grouped into three educational attainment levels: associate degree or higher, some college but no degree, and no postsecondary education. An estimated 1,016,749 Washington adults fall into the latter two categories. In other words, they have not earned an associate degree or higher. Of these adults, 850,203 have a high school diploma or equivalent as their highest level of education completed reported in the ACS.

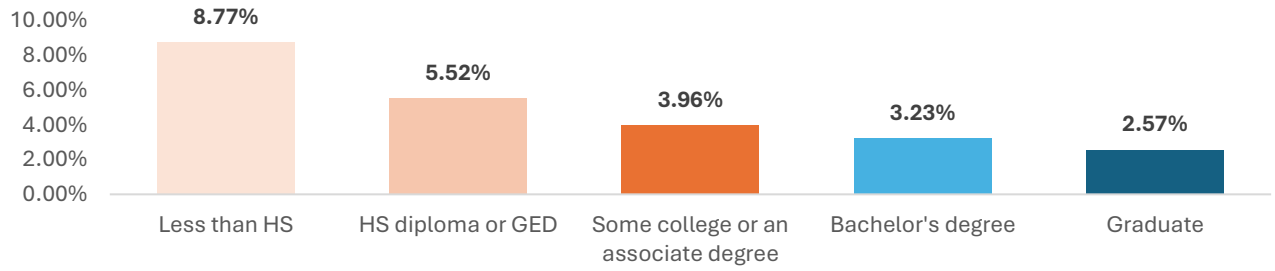
It is important to note that the ACS does not capture all forms of postsecondary education and training. Some adults in these categories may have completed a short-term certificate, workforce training, or an apprenticeship program, but these credentials and programs are not reflected in the educational attainment data used for this report. Thus, the counts and percentages of adults who have completed valuable postsecondary education or training are an under-estimation.

barriers—including cost, time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and limited flexible options—continue to limit access.

Expanding postsecondary attainment is also key to advancing equity. Increasing access to and completion of credentials can help reduce persistent disparities in employment and wages across racial and economic groups. While some gaps have narrowed, the narrowing may reflect declining participation among more advantaged groups rather than broad-based progress. For example, women in Washington are now more likely than men to hold an associate degree or higher, a pattern that aligns with declining male enrollment (Huynh & Byrne, 2026).

Figure 1. Unemployment Rate in Washington by Education Level (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: The rate of unemployment decreases with higher levels of educational attainment.

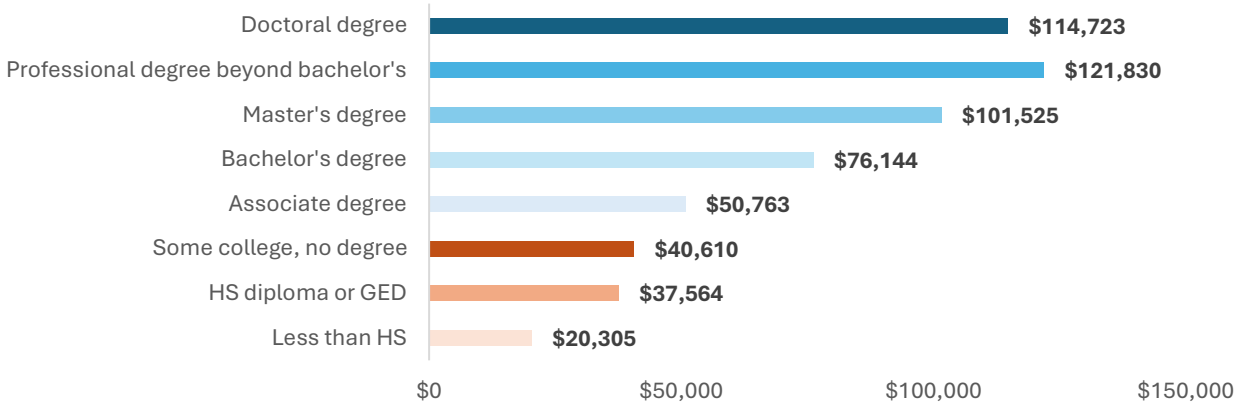


Source: WSAC calculation of American Community Survey 2024 PUMS 1-Year Data, Washington employment status by educational attainment

Education pays off—for both individuals and the state. Individuals with postsecondary credentials tend to earn higher median wages. Figure 1 shows a strong connection between attainment and economic stability. The rate of unemployment for adults with less than a high school diploma is nearly 9%, while adults with some college or an associate degree have a much lower unemployment rate: close to 4%. With each increasing level of educational attainment, the rate of unemployment is lower.

Figure 2. Median Wage in Washington by Educational Attainment (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: The median wage increases with each education attainment level.

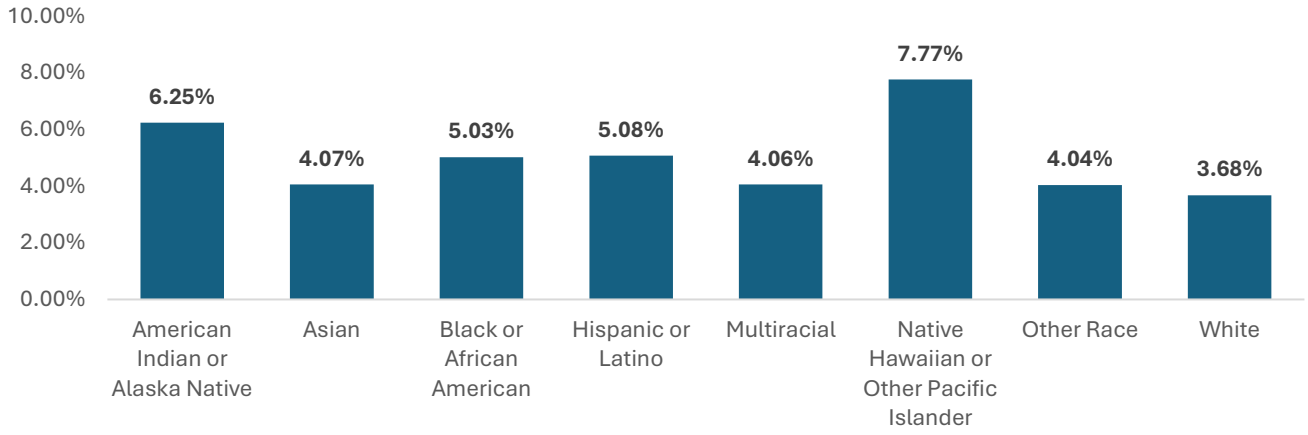


Source: WSAC calculation of American Community Survey 2024 Public Use Micro Sample 1-Year data, Washington annual median wages by educational attainment

Postsecondary attainment is one of the strongest levers for closing economic gaps. The median wage for adults with a bachelor's degree is more than twice the median wage for adults with a high school diploma (Figure 2). In general, higher levels of attainment are strongly tied to higher median wages.

Supporting credential pathways for adults of color, rural learners, and parents ensures that growth in attainment benefits every community. The unemployment rate by race highlights persistent disparities. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (7.77%), American Indian or Alaska Native (6.25%), Hispanic or Latino (5.08%), and Black or African American (5.03%) have higher unemployment rates than Asian adults (4.07%) or White adults (3.68%). Increasing access to and completion of credentials can help reduce the gaps and expand economic mobility.

Figure 3. Unemployment Rate in Washington by Race (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: Underrepresented minority groups like Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American have higher unemployment rates than Asian adults or White adults.



Source: Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

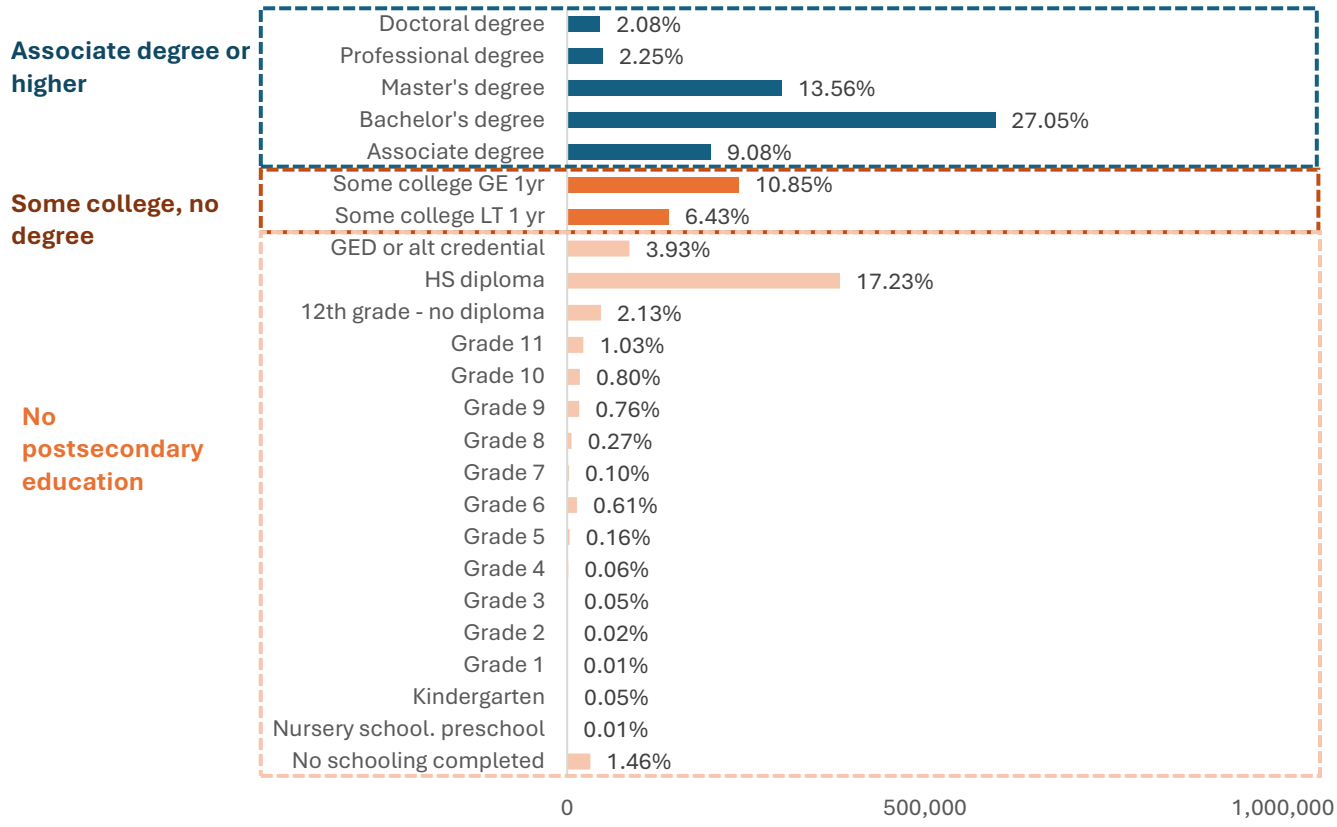
Why focus on adults ages 25 to 44 who are not enrolled?
This group represents working-age adults who are not currently engaged in postsecondary learning. Understanding their characteristics helps the state better understand how to support educational attainment for adults.

Why focus on three education levels?
The report examines adults with an associate degree or higher; some college, no degree; or no postsecondary education. Figure 4 shows how adults with different education levels are categorized from American Community Survey (ACS) data into these groups. Comparing these groups helps identify barriers and opportunities for adults without credentials. For example, the National Student Clearinghouse's *Some College, No Credential* report documents that recent stop-outs (those who last enrolled four to five academic terms prior to the start of an academic year) have notably higher reenrollment and completion rates than adults who have been out of postsecondary education longer (National Student Clearinghouse - Research Center, 2025). The report also finds that "Potential Completers"—students with at least two years of full-time equivalent enrollment before stopping out—are more likely to reenroll and complete a credential after returning. In addition, research from MDRC's REACT study (Magnelia, Rubin, Woo, & Sommo, 2025), California Reconnect (Uriostegui, Davis, Lopez Trujillo, & Vazquez, 2025), and New Jersey's Some College, No Degree (SCND) initiative (McDaniel, Richards, Barefield, Looker, & Dressel, 2025) shows that adults are more likely to reenroll and complete a credential when barriers to returning are reduced. Effective strategies include simplifying

administrative and financial processes, recognizing previously earned credits, and providing targeted outreach and dedicated coaching for recent stop-outs.

Figure 4. Population Distribution in Washington by Education Level (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: Adults with a bachelor's degree and adults with a high school diploma make up the largest shares of adults by education level.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

What profile measures does the report explore?

- Demographics (age, race, gender)
- Family structure
- Household language
- Income and employment
- Occupation
- Region

This report analyzes the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) for Washington State. The findings are intended to inform policies and practices that support adult learners and increase postsecondary attainment.

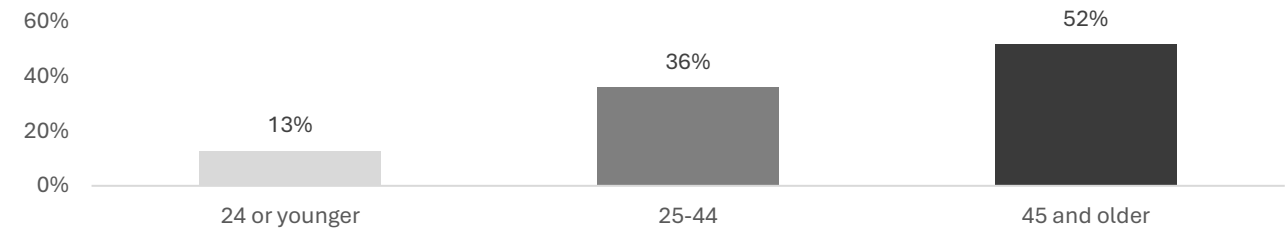
Strengthening pathways for adults to earn credentials is both a workforce necessity and an equity imperative—and a key step toward meeting Washington's attainment goal.

What is the age profile for adults?

Adults ages 25 to 44 years old make up 36% of the population. These working-age adults represent a sizable portion of the population in Washington. Figure 5 shows the population distribution by age group for people not currently enrolled in school.

Figure 5. Population Distribution by Age Group, Not Enrolled

Key takeaway: Adults ages 25 to 44 make up over a third of the state's population who are not enrolled.

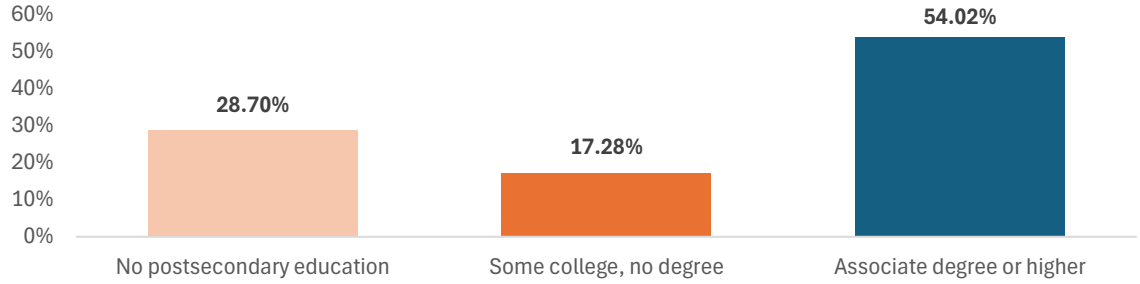


Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

In Figure 6, the population of adults ages 25 to 44 years old who are not currently enrolled is distributed by postsecondary attainment level. Nearly half of these adults have no postsecondary credential, and 28.7% of adults have no postsecondary education at all. Adults with no postsecondary education at all may face more challenges in attaining a degree than adults with some college but no degree. For adults with no credits beyond high school, the cost of obtaining a postsecondary credential is higher and the amount of time it takes to obtain one is also longer. These adults may be interested in programs that have a more immediate return on their time and money invested. But adults with some college, no degree have already invested in education. It could be effective to focus efforts on completions among this group, who still make up a sizable portion of adults without postsecondary attainment.

Figure 6: Population Distribution by Education Level (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: Nearly 46% of adults ages 25 to 44 who are not enrolled do not have a postsecondary credential.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

The median age for working-age adults who are not enrolled is around 35 years old (Table 1). While the range across education levels is small, other demographic characteristics like gender and race vary across education levels, suggesting that supporting adults from traditionally underserved groups in the pursuit of postsecondary education require tailored, strategic approaches.

Table 1. Median Age by Attainment Level (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Attainment Level	Median Age
Associate degree or higher	35
Some college, no degree	34
No postsecondary education	35

Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

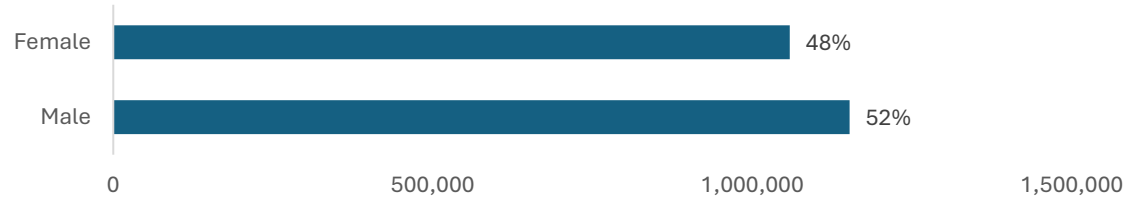
What are the differences in postsecondary attainment by gender?

Men are slightly less likely than women to have postsecondary educational attainment. Gender is one starting point for understanding how educational attainment differs across the adult population. Adult men make up a slightly larger share of working-age adults not currently enrolled in education (Figure 7). Women more often hold a postsecondary credential and are slightly less likely to have some college but no degree (Figure 8).

Data Snapshot

Women have higher postsecondary attainment, while men make up a larger share of working age adults.

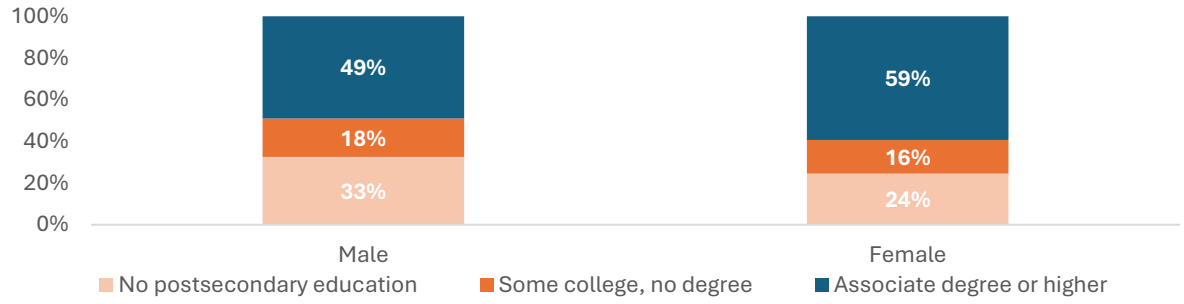
Figure 7. Population Distribution by Gender (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: Men make up a larger share of the population of adults ages 25 to 44 who are not enrolled.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Recent enrollment trends reinforce these differences. Undergraduate enrollment among men has declined or stagnated more than among women, particularly in community and technical colleges (Huynh & Byrne, 2025). At the same time, fields of study and occupations remain highly gender-segregated, shaping both education pathways and labor market outcomes.

Figure 8. Postsecondary Attainment by Gender (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: Women are more likely to have an associate degree or higher.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample

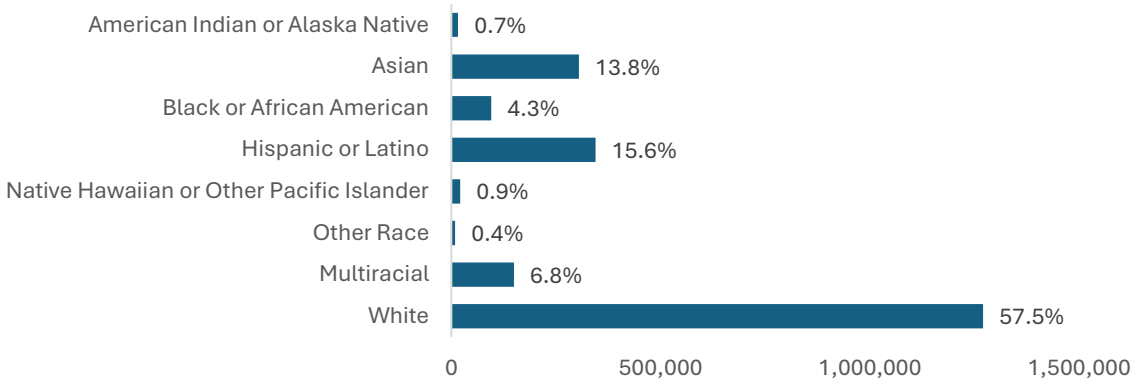
Targeted outreach that reflects these patterns could improve engagement. Messaging aligned with gendered participation patterns in specific programs may strengthen reengagement, particularly in fields where one gender remains underrepresented.

What are the differences in postsecondary attainment by race/ethnicity groups?

Underrepresented minority groups have lower shares of postsecondary attainment. Looking at attainment by race and ethnicity helps reveal where opportunity remains uneven. When some communities face greater barriers to completing credentials, the effects extend beyond individual economic mobility to the state's broader talent pool. Closing these gaps strengthens families, communities, and the state's economy.

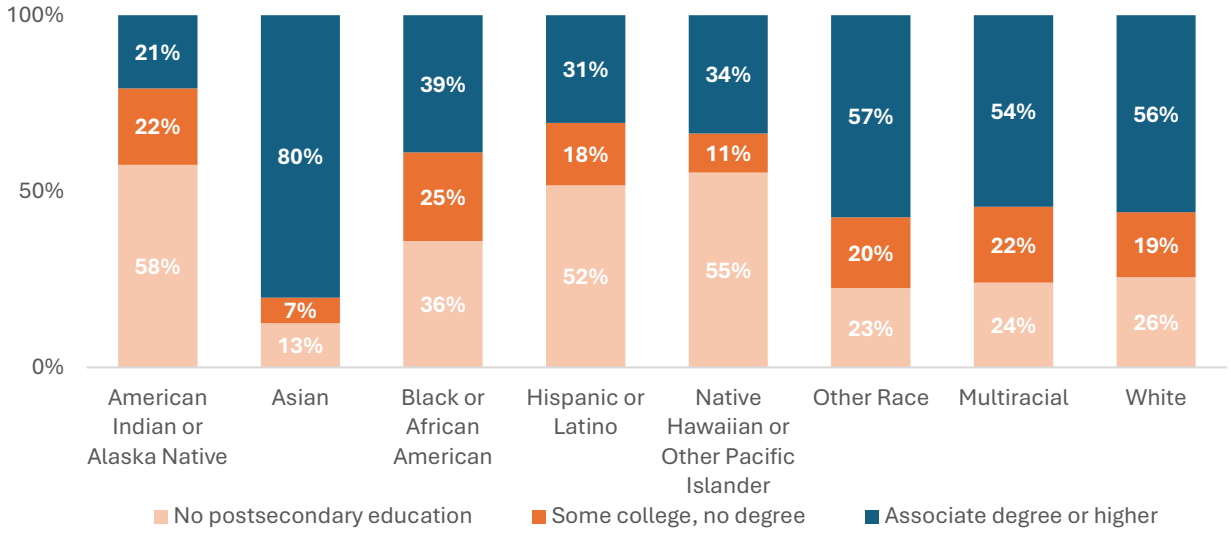
White, Hispanic, and Asian adults make up the largest shares of Washington's working-age population (Figure 9). Significantly, attainment levels differ sharply across groups (Figure 10). Asian adults have the highest share of attainment with an associate degree or higher, while Hispanic and American Indian adults have the largest shares without a postsecondary credential.

Figure 9. Population Distribution by Race (Ages 25 to 44 Years Old, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: White, Hispanic, and Asian adults make up the largest shares of Washington's working-age population.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Figure 10. Postsecondary Attainment by Race (Ages 25 to 44 Years Old, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: Underrepresented minority groups like American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Hispanic or Latino, and Black or African American have lower shares of postsecondary attainment than Asian adults or White adults.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Geography and access shape these disparities. Hispanic and American Indian populations are more concentrated in rural areas, where access to postsecondary institutions and programs is more limited. However, Black and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander adults, more concentrated in urban areas, also show lower attainment than White and Asian adults, indicating that proximity alone does not eliminate barriers.

Efforts to increase attainment must account for structural barriers, including access to institutions, affordability, and the feasibility of completing a credential within specific community contexts. Framing postsecondary education as a pathway to economic mobility requires equal attention to all conditions that enable completion.

How do different family structures compare in postsecondary attainment?

Adults without children in the household have higher postsecondary attainment than most other family structures with children, though those with only children under 6 have the highest rates. Family structure shapes adults' time, resources, and availability to pursue education. Recognizing how attainment differs for adults with and without children helps target supports that enable more families to benefit from postsecondary opportunities.

International evidence on adult learning reflects this pattern: adults with lower incomes, lower educational levels, and caregiving responsibilities—such as parents of young children—participate in continuing education at significantly lower rates than their peers, largely because of time constraints, cost, and limited access to flexible programs and childcare (Sekmokas, et al., 2024).

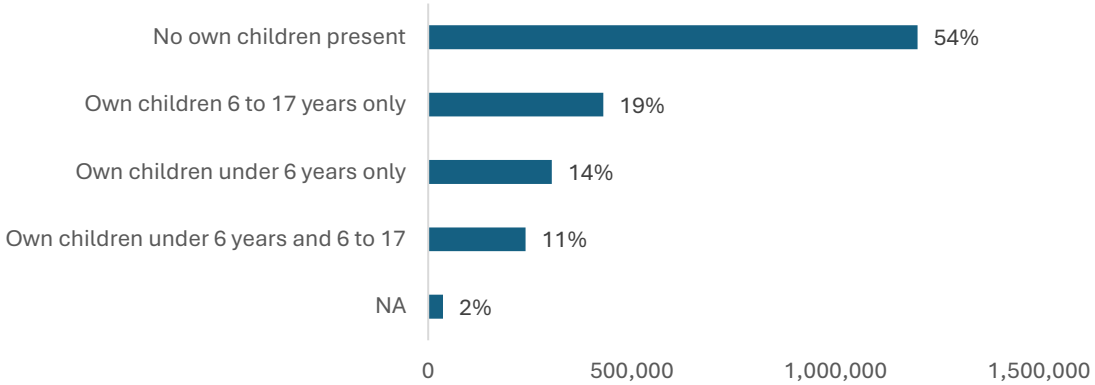
Data Snapshot

Postsecondary attainment differs greatly by family structure type. Adults with children have lower postsecondary attainment.

Among Washington adults ages 25 to 44, household and family structures vary widely, from households without children, to families with children in various age ranges (Figure 11). Nearly half of adults ages 25 to 44 are raising children (44%). Their ability to pursue or complete postsecondary education is directly influenced by family responsibilities, childcare access, and work demands. Understanding household patterns helps identify which adults face the most structural barriers to postsecondary attainment.

Figure 11. Population Distribution by Presence of Children in the Household (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: 44% of adults ages 25 to 44 who are not enrolled have their own children present in the household.

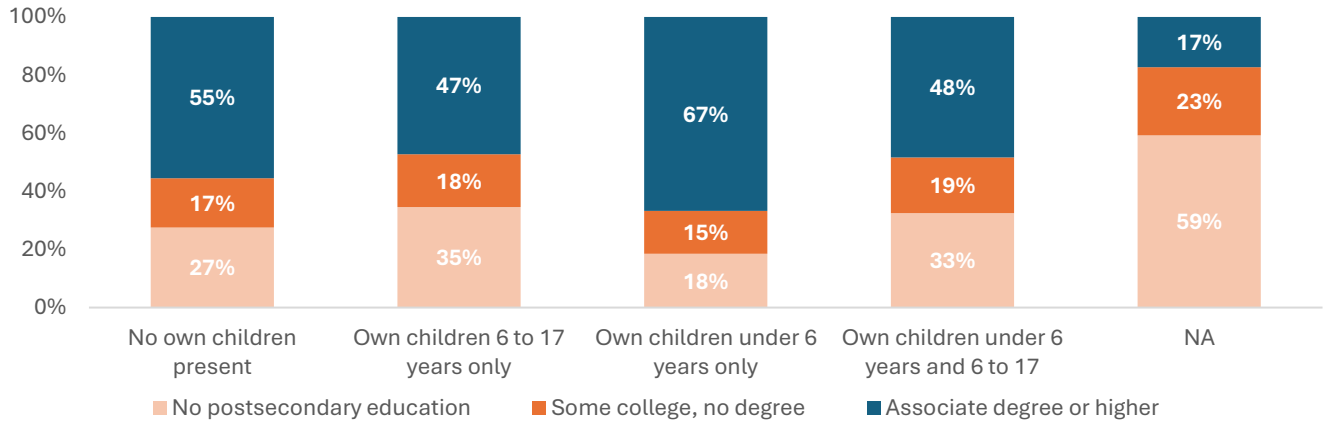


Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)
Note: NA refers to housing units that are group quarters, vacant, or do not contain families.

Adults without children generally show higher rates of postsecondary attainment, while those with children in the household are less likely to hold a credential beyond high school (Figure 12). This gap reflects the competing demands of parenting, employment, and limited time or financial resources for education and training. Single parents often face the steepest barriers to reengaging with postsecondary opportunities.

Figure 12. Postsecondary Attainment by Presence of Children in the Household (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: In general, adults with children present in the household are less likely to have a postsecondary credential.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)
Note: NA refers to housing units that are group quarters, vacant, or do not contain families.

Family responsibilities are a major factor in adults' ability to access and complete education or training. Supporting adults with children through wraparound services (like childcare, transportation, and family-friendly scheduling) is a necessary economic investment that would strengthen the state's talent pipeline. Moreover, increasing postsecondary attainment among parents would benefit multiple generations – the parents earning credentials and their children.

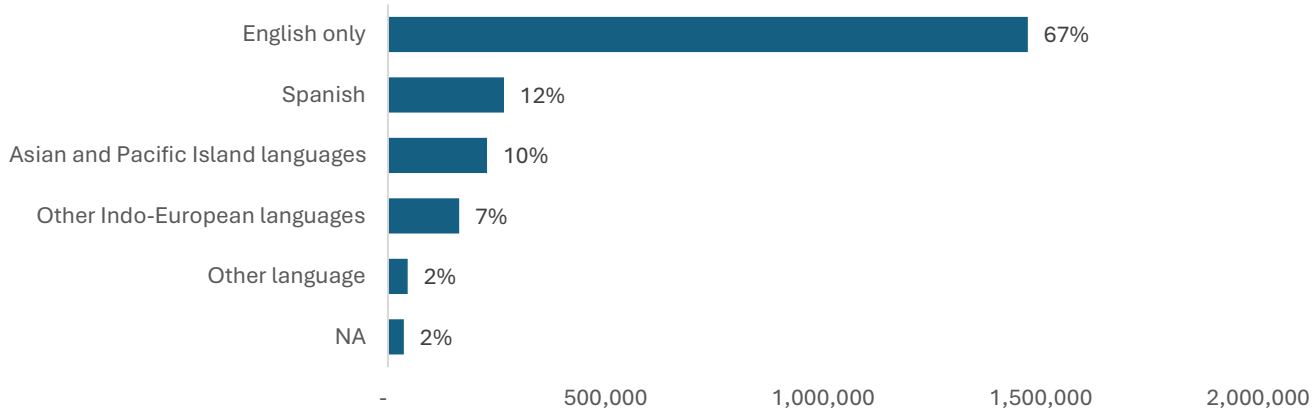
How does household language impact postsecondary attainment?

The postsecondary attainment level in Spanish-speaking households is lower than in households that speak other languages. Examining population distribution and postsecondary attainment by household language helps identify how language access and linguistic diversity influence educational and economic opportunity. Adults in households where English is not the primary language may face additional barriers to information about postsecondary options, financial aid, and workforce training. Understanding the potential barriers allows the state to design outreach and support services that are culturally and linguistically responsive, ensuring equitable access to education and good jobs.

Data Snapshot

There are substantial disparities in postsecondary attainment by household language, with adults in Spanish-speaking households having the lowest postsecondary attainment.

Figure 13. Population Distribution by Household Language (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: After English, Spanish-speaking households make up the largest share of the population for adults.

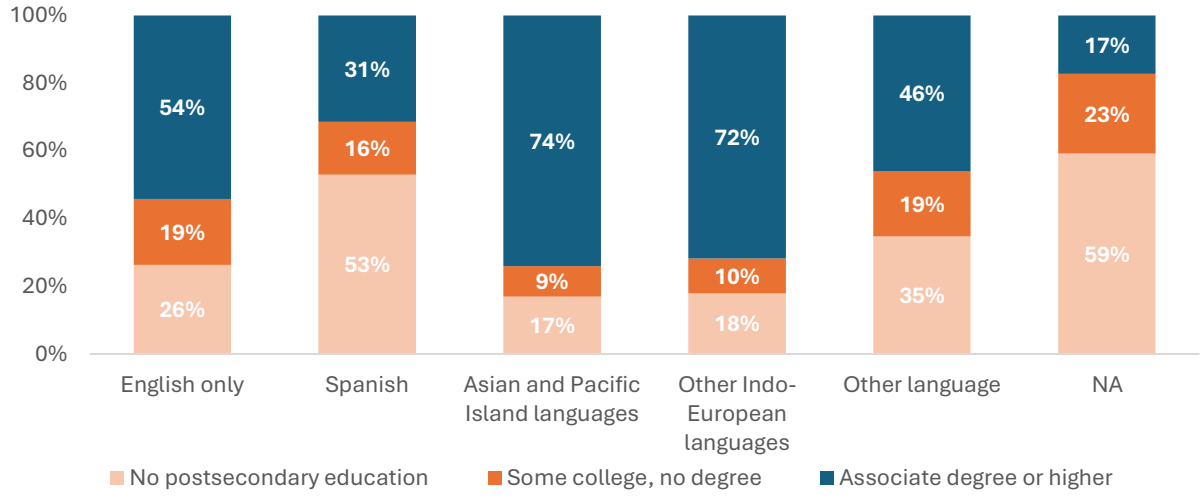


Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)
Note: NA refers to housing units that are group quarters, vacant, or do not contain families.

After English, Spanish and Asian/Pacific Island languages are the most common household languages in Washington (Figure 13). However, adults in Spanish-speaking households are less likely to have postsecondary attainment than adults in English-speaking households, households that speak primarily Asian and Pacific Island languages, and households that speak other Indo-European languages (Figure 14). Notably, adults in Spanish-speaking households are most likely to have no postsecondary education and therefore have a wider gap to bridge than adults with some college but no degree. Adults in households that primarily speak Spanish presumably have the same motivation to upskill but face additional barriers navigating postsecondary systems. Income further shapes these realities by influencing both the decision to return to postsecondary education and the feasibility of pursuing it.

Figure 14. Postsecondary Attainment by Household Language (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: Adults in Spanish-speaking households are less likely to have an associate degree or higher when compared to adults in households where the primary language is English, Asian and other Pacific Island languages, other Indo-European languages, and other languages.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)
Note: NA refers to housing units that are group quarters, vacant, or do not contain families.

What are the differences in postsecondary attainment by income levels?

Data Snapshot

Adults with postsecondary attainment have higher individual wages, household income, and family income than adults without credentials.

Higher levels of income are strongly tied to higher levels of postsecondary attainment. The income levels for adults vary greatly, ranging from annual wage categories of $0-$15,000 per year up to $400,000-$1,000,000 per year. Income reflects the economic pay-off of postsecondary attainment. Comparing income by attainment level shows that education influences financial stability, workforce participation, and long-term economic growth. The median income levels for individuals, families, and households increase with higher levels of educational attainment (Table 2). Household income includes that of all individuals 15 years old and older living in the household, regardless of whether they are related to each other. Family income includes the income of all family members 15 years old and older living together, with family members being related by birth, marriage, or adoption.

Table 2. Median Incomes by Attainment Level (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

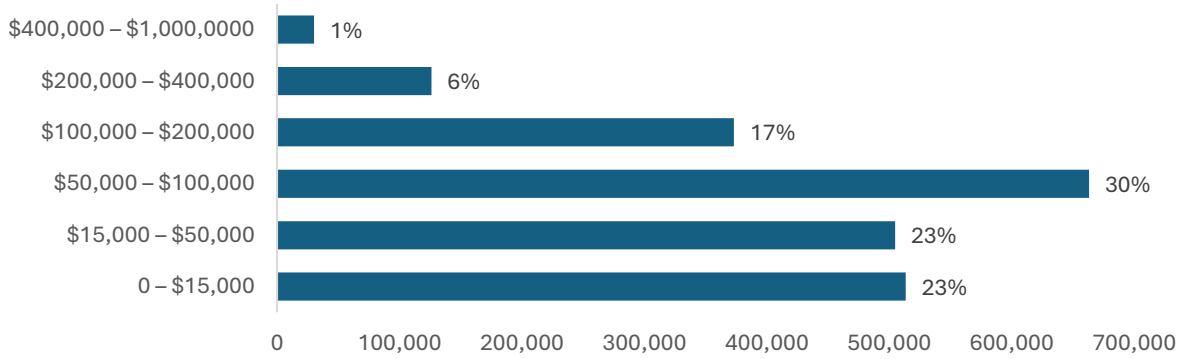
Attainment Level	Median Wages	Median Household income	Median Family income
Associate degree or higher	$79,190	$168,532	$180,207
Some college, no degree	$40,610	$103,860	$104,571
No postsecondary education	$32,488	$98,276	$91,373

Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Nearly a quarter of Washington adults earn between $0 and $15,000 annually, and nearly another quarter earn between $15,000 and $50,000 (Figure 15). Put another way, close to half of Washington's working-age adults earn $50,000 or less in annual wages.

Figure 15. Population Distribution by Wages (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: 46% of adults earn $50,000 or less in individual wages.



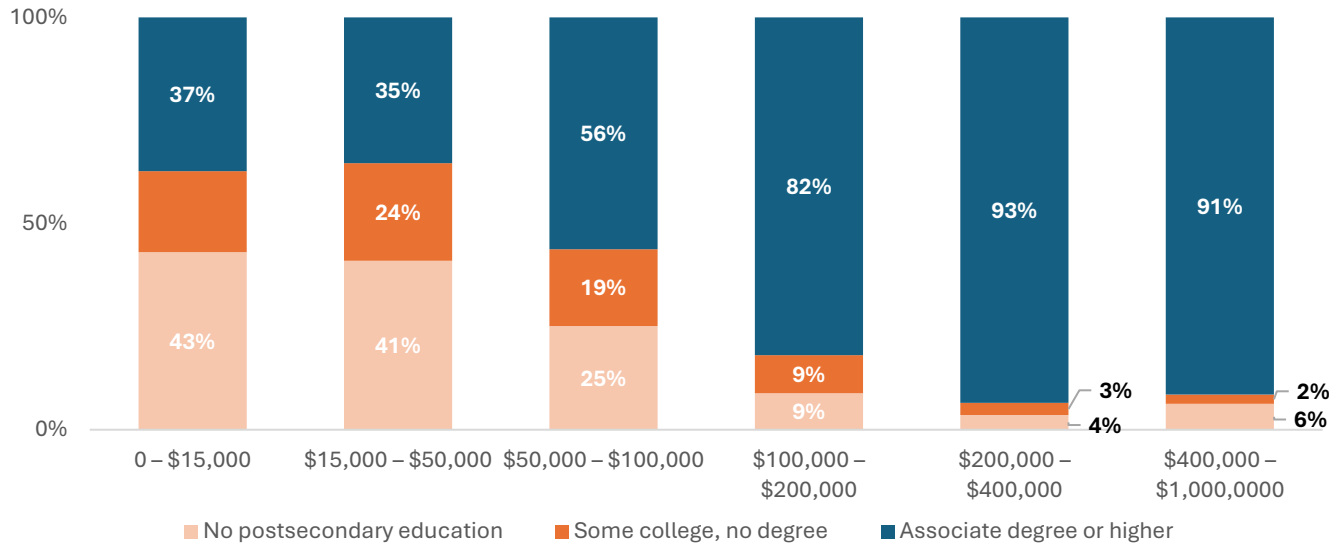
Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Postsecondary attainment shares increase steadily with income (Figure 16). Adults in higher wage brackets are more likely to hold a credential, while those in lower wage brackets are more likely to have no postsecondary education.

This relationship reflects both the economic returns on education for adults with a postsecondary credential and the barriers to entering postsecondary education for adults without a credential. Tuition costs, lost wages during enrollment, and competing financial obligations make it harder for lower-income adults to begin or complete a credential.

Figure 16. Postsecondary Attainment by Wages (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: With each increasing wage category, adults are more likely to have an associate degree or higher.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

What are the differences in postsecondary attainment by occupational fields?

Among the most common occupational fields, higher-growth fields have higher levels of postsecondary attainment. Adults in Washington commonly work in management, computer operations, office administration, transportation, and sales. Higher attainment often opens doors to higher-paying, growth-oriented fields, while lower attainment can limit opportunity. Addressing these gaps supports economic mobility and a more inclusive workforce. Adults without credentials are concentrated in lower-growth occupations, while those with credentials are concentrated in higher-growth fields.

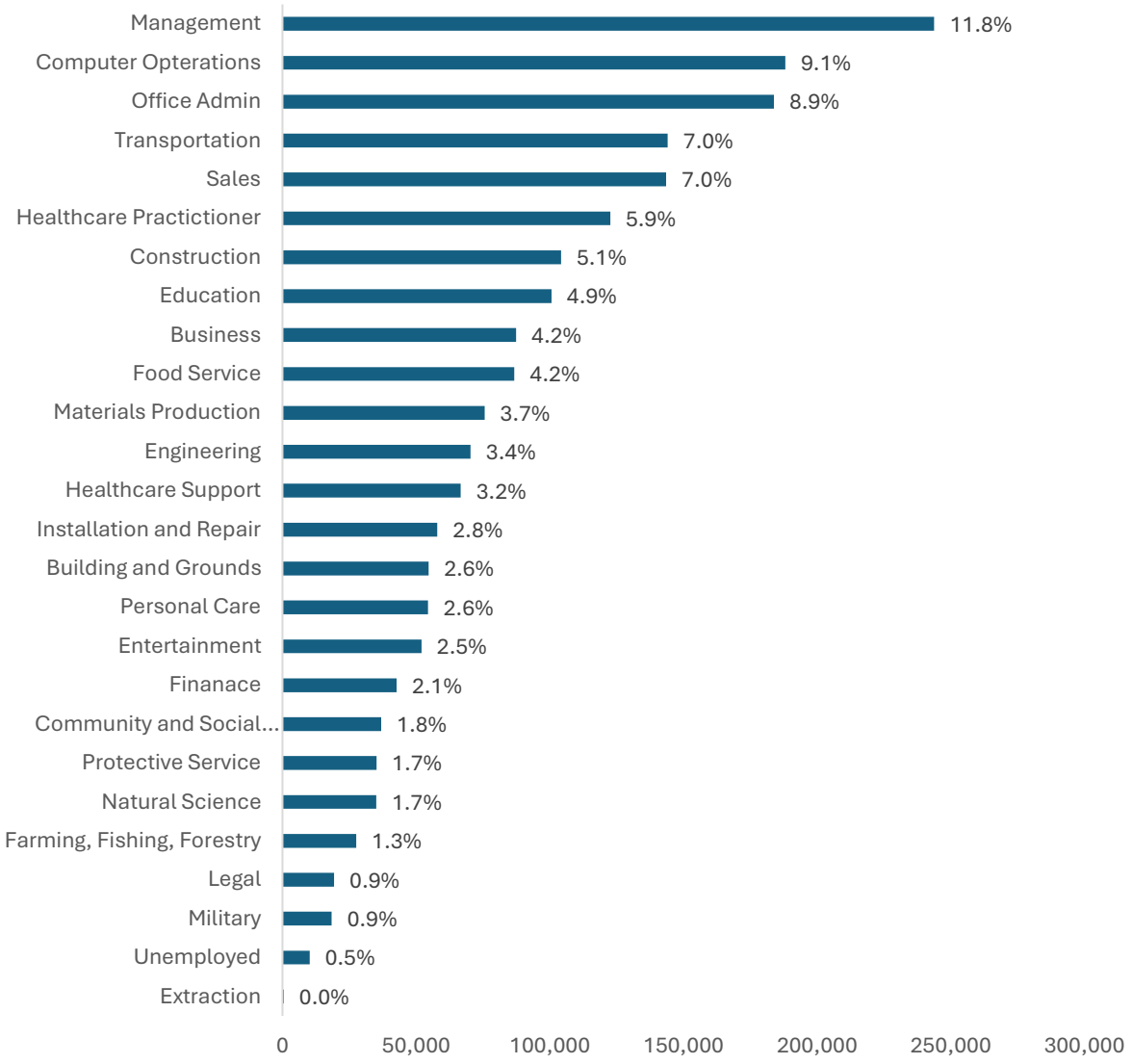
The largest occupational groups include management (11.8%), computer operations (9.4%), office administration (9.1%), sales (7.0%), and transportation (7.0%) (Figure 17). Findings from WSAC's Higher Education & Labor Market report show that Washington workers with postsecondary credentials are more likely to be employed in occupations with higher projected demand and wages, whereas adults without credentials are concentrated in fields with lower pay and more limited growth (Monear, Kwakye, Lundrgren,

Data Snapshot

Higher-growth occupations, such as management and computer operations, employ more adults with an associate degree or higher.

& Byrne, 2023). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlook Handbook projects that overall employment in management and computer operations occupations is projected to grow faster than the average of all occupations in the next decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2025). Overall employment in transportation and material moving occupations is projected to grow at the same rate as the average for all occupations, while employment in office administration and sales occupations is projected to decline over the next decade.

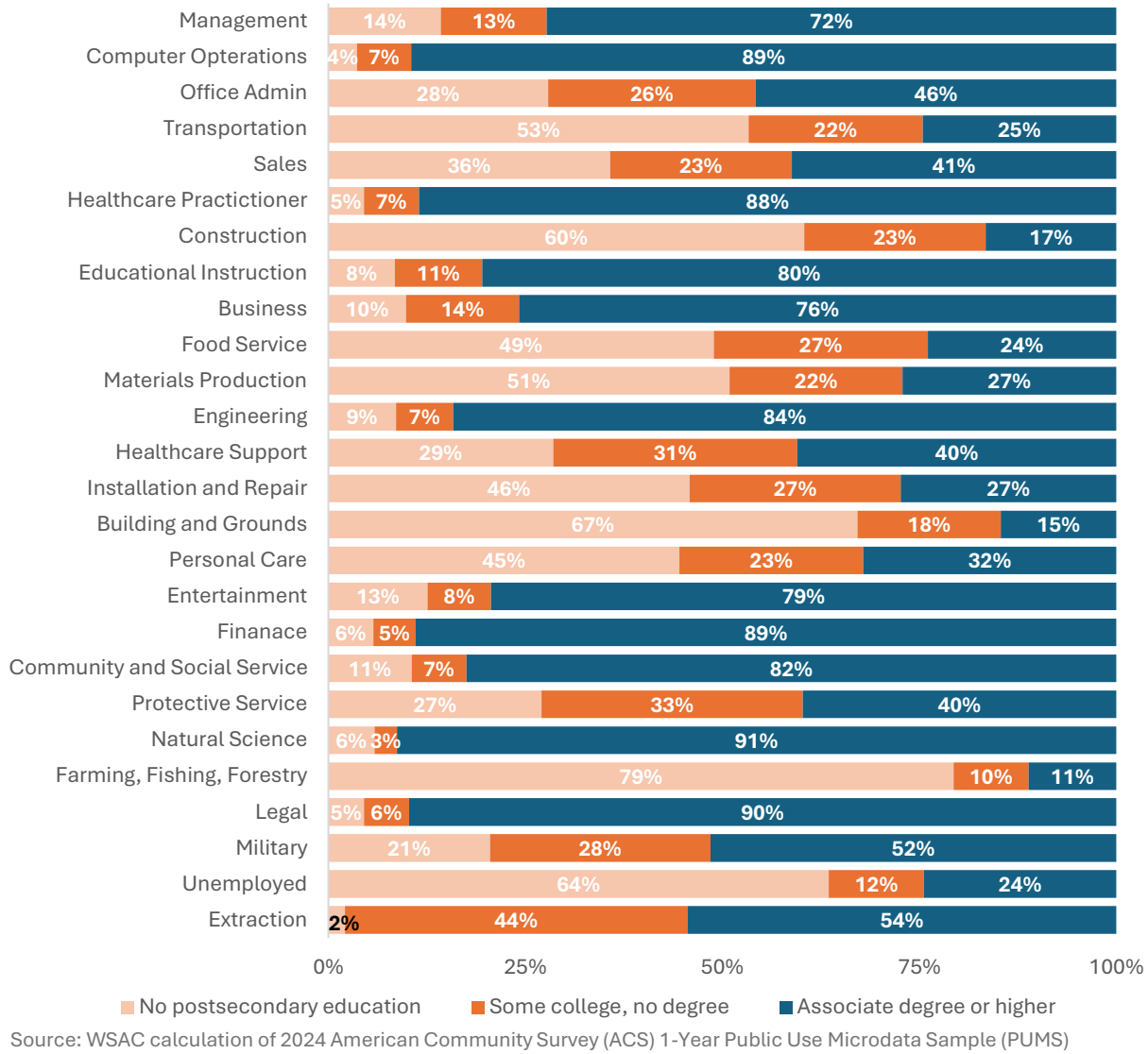
Figure 17. Population Distribution by Occupation (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: The top categories by share of occupation include management, computer operations, office administration, transportation, and sales.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Higher-growth occupations, such as management and computer operations, employ larger shares of adults with an associate degree or higher (Figure 18). In contrast, office administration, sales, and transportation—fields with slower or declining growth—employ larger shares of adults with lower attainment levels. The combination of slowed growth and lower educational attainment shares in these occupations may indicate that adults working in these fields are prime candidates for upskilling and educational reengagement.

Figure 18: Postsecondary Attainment by Occupation (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: Adults working in management and computer operations occupations are more likely to have an associate degree or higher compared to adults working in office administration, transportation, or sales.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Additionally, adults who pursue and complete an associate degree or higher are likely in a

better position to land roles in occupations with projected growth, like management or computer operations. As a result, focusing on increasing the attainment level for adults in Washington may lead to more Washingtonians being prepared to work in roles with growing job demands.

How does postsecondary attainment impact employment status for adults?

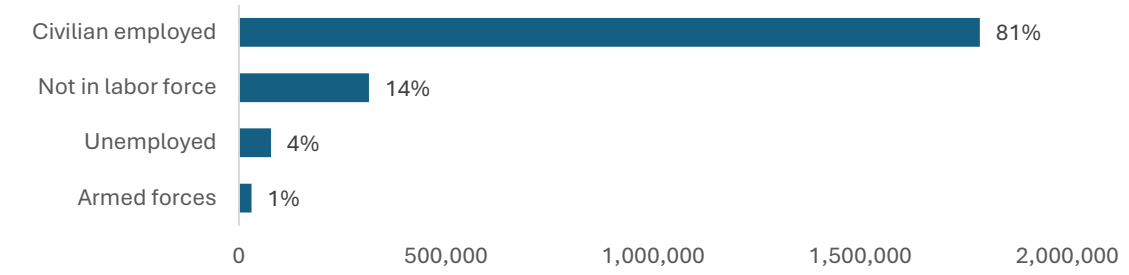
Data Snapshot

Civilian employed adults are more likely than adults who are unemployed or not in the labor force to have an associate degree or higher.

Adults with postsecondary credentials are more likely to be employed and less likely to experience unemployment or to exit the labor force. Understanding these patterns helps policymakers and workforce leaders design targeted strategies to increase postsecondary attainment, reduce unemployment, and strengthen the state economy.

The American Community Survey (ACS) provides four main employment status categories: civilian employed, unemployed, not in the labor force, and armed forces. Most adults (81%) are employed, while smaller shares are unemployed, out of the labor force, or in the armed forces (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Population Distribution by Employment Status (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)
Key takeaway: Most adults in Washington are civilian employed.

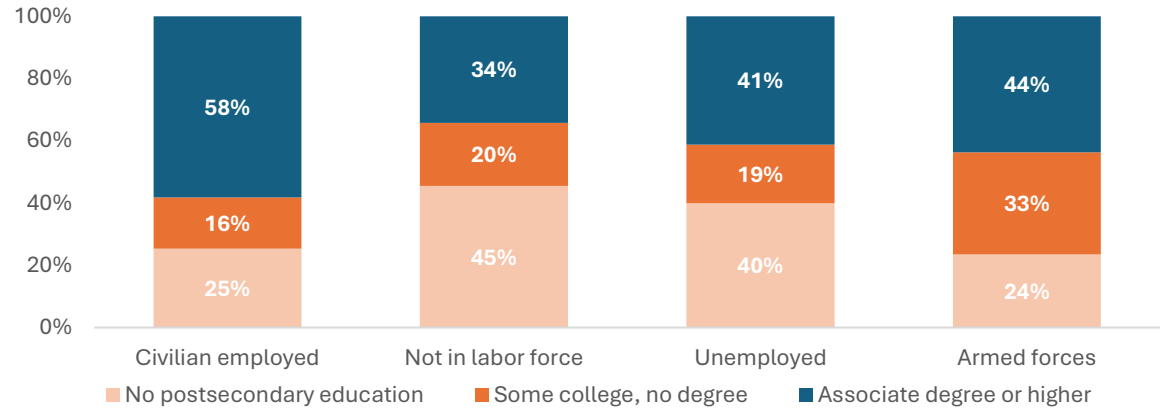


Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Civilian employed adults are more likely to have an associate degree or higher compared to adults who are unemployed or not in the labor force (Figure 20). Adults without credentials are overrepresented among those not working, indicating barriers to labor market entry and stability.

Figure 20: Postsecondary Attainment by Employment Status (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: Adults who are not in the labor force or who are unemployed are more likely to have no postsecondary education.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Employment status is a key indicator of economic wellbeing and workforce participation. Expanding postsecondary attainment helps more adults enter and remain in the workforce, reducing unemployment and increasing labor force participation while strengthening tax revenue, productivity, and overall economic resilience.

How does postsecondary attainment vary regionally?

Data Snapshot

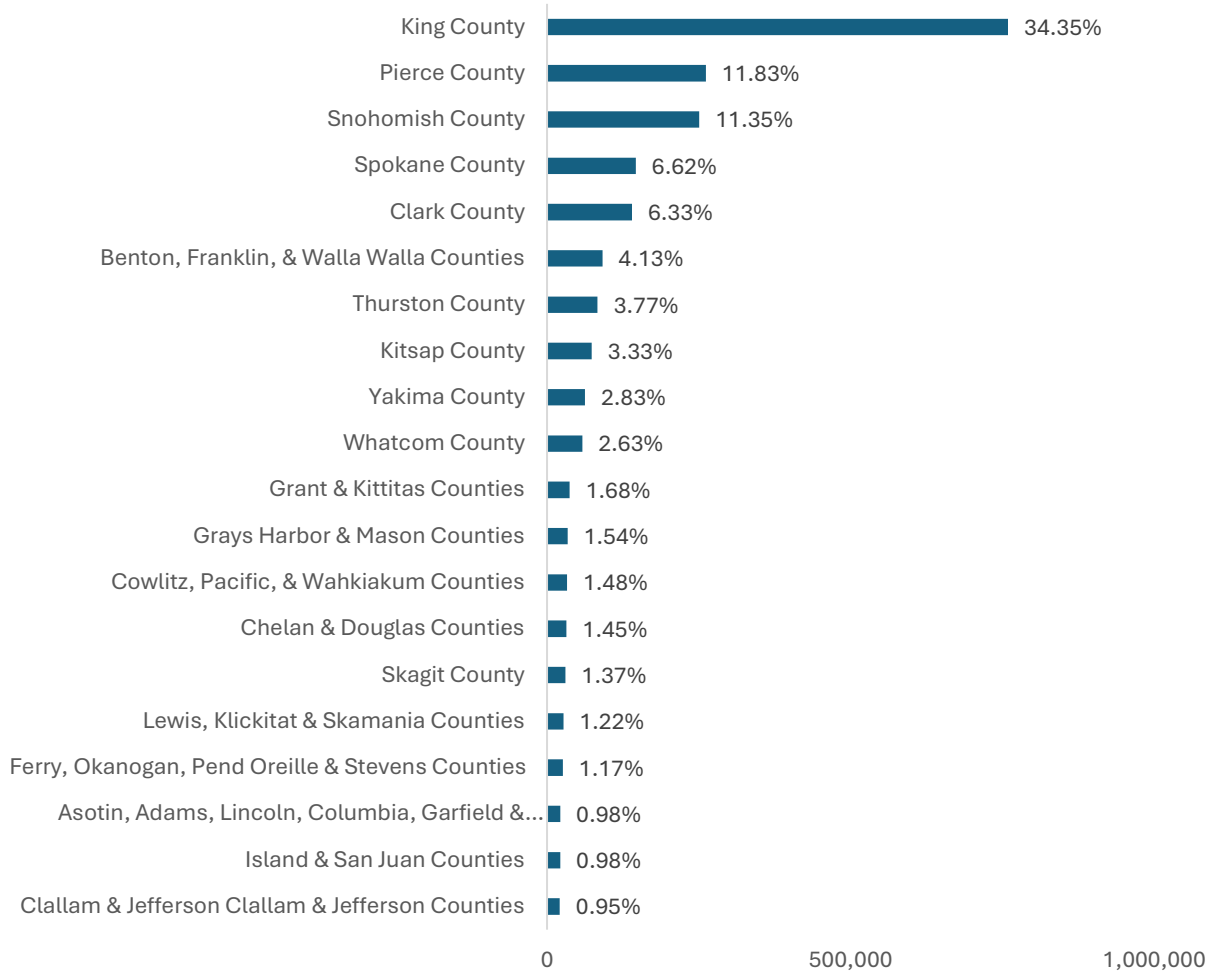
Rural regions show lower attainment levels than urban areas.

Urban regions have higher percentages of adults with postsecondary attainment. Examining postsecondary attainment by region highlights geographic disparities in education and workforce readiness. Urban counties along the Puget Sound, such as King, Snohomish, and Pierce, tend to have higher attainment and more postsecondary resources, while rural and lower-population regions face barriers related to access, affordability, and availability of programs.

Adults living in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties collectively make up 57% of adults in Washington (Figure 21). With greater resources than adults in more rural areas of the state, adults living in these counties have more access to postsecondary education.

Figure 21: Population Distribution by Region (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties have the largest populations of adults.

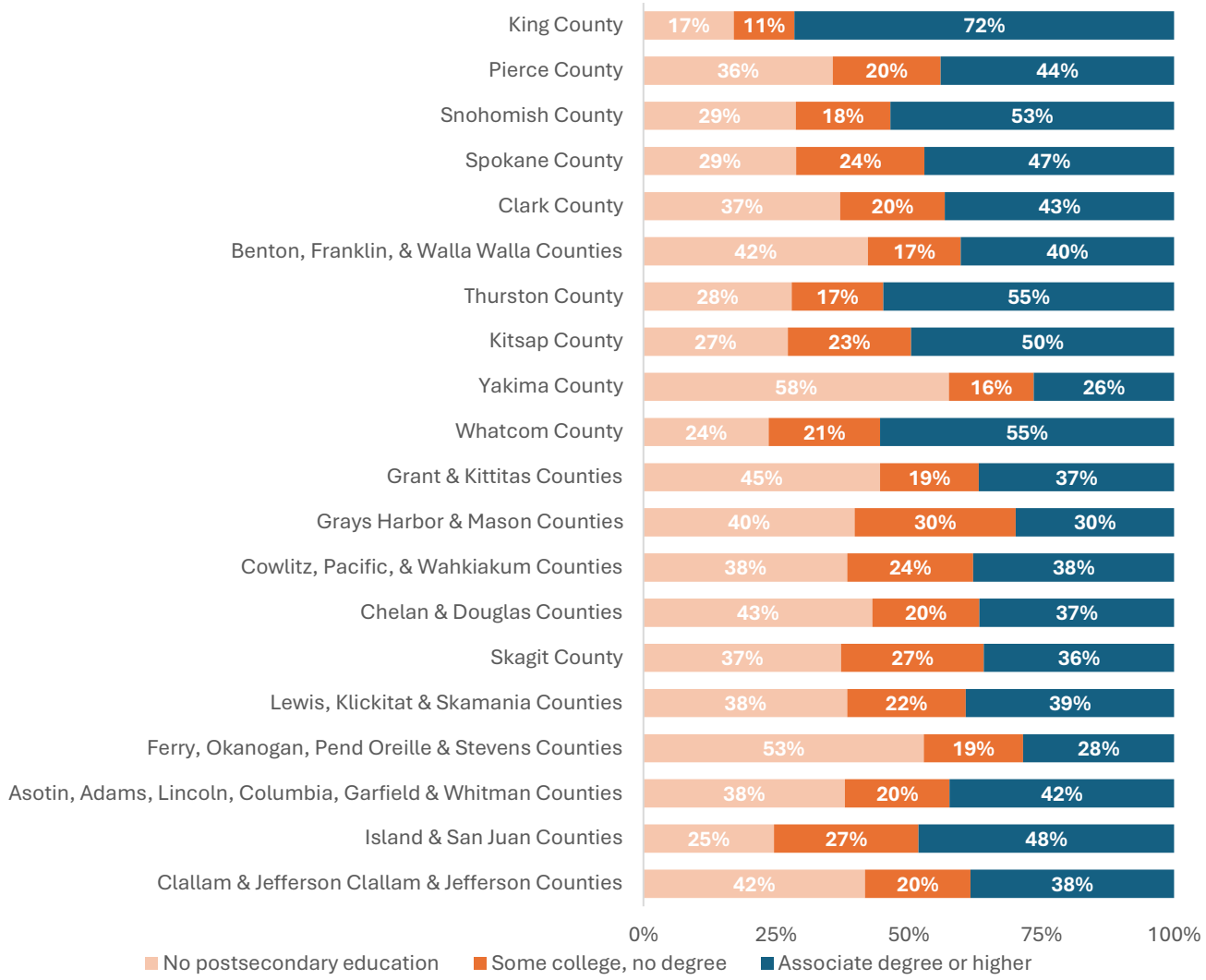


Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Regional disparities in attainment are substantial. King County has a much higher share of adults with a postsecondary degree (72%) than Pierce County (44%) and Snohomish County (53%) (Figure 22). But this discrepancy presents a unique opportunity to engage adults in postsecondary education, as Snohomish is largely rural and highly populated.

Figure 22: Postsecondary Attainment by Region (Ages 25 to 44, Not Enrolled)

Key takeaway: Rural regions show lower shares of adults with postsecondary credentials than urban areas.



Source: WSAC calculation of 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS)

Rural and low-population counties often have lower attainment levels, a reflection of the fact that such areas have fewer institutions accessible locally and limited program availability, and they require longer travel distances. Areas with lower attainment are more likely to face skill gaps in the local labor market, limiting economic growth and business expansion. Regional disparities in credentials also influence income, unemployment rates, and reliance on public benefits across the state. Targeted regional strategies—such as local training programs, online or hybrid courses, and partnerships with employers—can help close these gaps.

Conclusion

Postsecondary attainment can improve individual wellbeing as well as broader social and economic outcomes. Expanding equitable access for adults can also strengthen communities across Washington. As this report shows, however, attainment varies significantly across adult populations and profile measures. Adults with higher levels of educational attainment tend to have higher incomes and are more likely to be employed, yet some groups continue to face greater barriers to earning a credential. Racial and ethnic minority groups, adults with children, and adults living in rural counties are less likely to have postsecondary attainment. Washington may still have a long way to go before reaching its attainment goal, but understanding where gaps persist is an important first step toward closing them.

In Washington, most working-age adults who are not currently enrolled are employed in management, computer operations, office administration, sales, and transportation. These occupations vary in skill and credential requirements: some require postsecondary education, while others are accessible with only a high school diploma. However, many offer limited opportunities for advancement without additional training. As employment in office administration and sales declines and transportation remains relatively stagnant, adults in these fields may find that upskilling and completing a credential can open the door to stronger opportunities, benefiting workers, families, employers, and the broader economy.

Together, the profiles in this report provide a glimpse of the characteristics, barriers, and opportunities among Washington adults without postsecondary credentials. National and state research on adult reengagement suggests that targeted outreach to adults with some college but no degree—especially recent stop-outs—paired with flexible, affordable programs and proactive advising can substantially increase reenrollment and completion. Initiatives like REACT in Florida, California Reconnect, New Jersey's Some College, No Degree (SCND) initiative, and the National Student Clearinghouse's *Some College, No Credential* series, offer evidence that reducing administrative and financial barriers, providing targeted outreach, and offering dedicated coaching can further boost reenrollment and completion rates. Across gender, race and ethnicity, family structure, household language, wages, occupation, employment status, and region, the profiles highlighted here show patterns that can inform more targeted support for adult learners. Addressing these patterns can help create equitable access to opportunity across households, communities, and regions.

Postsecondary attainment can improve people's lives and support stronger social and economic outcomes. Expanding fair access for adults can also strengthen communities across Washington. As this report shows, attainment differs across adult groups and profile measures. Adults with more education are more likely to have jobs and earn higher incomes. However, some groups still face greater barriers to earning a credential. These groups include racial and ethnic minority groups, adults with children, and adults living in rural counties. Washington still has a long way to go before reaching its attainment goal. Understanding where these gaps remain is an important first step toward closing them.

Limitations

The findings presented in this report should be interpreted in light of the underlying data and analytical approach.

This analysis is based on the 2024 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS). As a sample survey rather than a complete count of Washington's population, ACS estimates are subject to sampling error and other survey-related limitations. While the ACS is one of the most current and comprehensive sources of demographic, educational, and economic information available, estimates may differ from those produced by other data sources.

The report is descriptive and is intended to provide a demographic and economic profile of Washington adults ages 25 to 44 who are not currently enrolled in postsecondary education. The analyses identify patterns and differences across educational attainment groups but do not establish causal relationships between educational attainment and outcomes such as income, employment, or household characteristics.

Educational attainment estimates presented in this report are also conservative relative to Washington's statewide attainment goal. The ACS educational attainment measure does not capture many short-term postsecondary credentials, including college-level certificates, industry-recognized certifications, or apprenticeships. While these credentials and programs can lead to employment, career advancement, and continued education, they are not currently captured in the ACS education level. As a result, some adults with valuable postsecondary credentials are classified as not having attained a credential recognized within the ACS educational attainment categories.

Finally, this report focuses primarily on demographic and economic characteristics. Future analyses may expand on these findings by examining additional dimensions, including the social and civic outcomes associated with postsecondary education, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of its benefits for individuals and communities.

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