



SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN RURAL AND URBAN COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the socioeconomic factors that influence access to higher education in rural and urban communities, with a particular focus on how disparities in income, parental education, access to resources, and geographic location impact students' ability to enroll in and complete tertiary education. Through a quantitative analysis, the study compares rural and urban students across several indicators, revealing significant barriers to college enrollment for rural students. The findings highlight that despite similar socioeconomic statuses, rural students consistently face lower college enrollment rates due to limited access to educational infrastructure, financial constraints, and geographic challenges. The paper calls for targeted policy interventions to improve access to higher education for rural students, including enhanced financial support, better access to technology, and efforts to address the geographical distribution of educational institutions. By examining these disparities, this study provides valuable insights into the persistent challenges faced by rural students and offers recommendations for fostering equitable access to postsecondary education.

KEYWORDS: *Socioeconomic Factors, Rural Education, Urban Education, College Enrollment, Educational Disparities, Technology Access, Higher Education Barriers.*

INTRODUCTION

The paper pays close attention to the socioeconomic determinants affecting the availability of an individual to the higher education and, specifically, to the problems encountered by the students in the rural versus the challenges encountered by the students in the metropolitan environment (Lopez and Perez, 2024). Specifically, it examines how the differences in educational systems, the distribution of resources, and socioeconomic status of households all play a role in a created significant rural-urban educational gap, which has the consequence of affecting the accessibility to tertiary education (Vu et al., 2025). The study also investigates the specific social, economic, cultural and geographic barriers that the rural students face whenever they wish to have a higher education. Such challenges may be very taxing in terms of resilience to withstand (Chidakwa, 2025). In addition to that, this approach examines the role of these regional inequalities in perpetuating inequality cycles that ultimately influence the growth of human capital in the nation and its economy (Wells et al., 2023). These challenges are also exacerbated by the fact that students in the rural environment have an added disadvantage in the form of the inability to access high-quality education and financial limitations, contributing to the lower percentage of college enrollment than urban students (Baloyi, 2020; Wells et al., 2023). However, being close to schools is not a sufficient condition to be able to receive them fairly, and socioeconomic status of a particular person is an important factor in the likelihood of taking advantage of the provided possibilities, which is usually realized in the form of the accumulation of economic and cultural capital (Wells et al., 2023). The fact that higher mean socioeconomic statuses between the rural and non-rural students are further supported by the fact that even in those cases when both the rural and non-rural students have the same mean socioeconomic status, the status of the former is already a predictor of lower college enrollment rates, particularly the four-year schools (Wells et al., 2023). Also, despite the fact that the enrollment disparity has narrowed over the past few decades, the college enrollment rate and the degree attainment rate in the rural students are still lower, which proves that the systemic barriers are still present (Cain and Class, 2023; Wells et al., 2019). Such problems are especially detrimental to students residing in rural areas, deprived people, or workers since they often have to address further problems, like the inability to use high speeds and technologies, which only increases the existing disparities in education (McNamee et al., 2024). This incessant gap determines the critical need of the hard work and legislative adjustments towards providing every student with equal access to higher education, irrespective of geographical or socioeconomic factors (Wells et al., 2019, 2023). This research examines such differences where access to and achievement in education depends on socioeconomic status and geographical location especially in postsecondary education (Byun et al., 2011; Wells et al., 2023). The goal of educational achievement and postsecondary enrollment has always been lower among rural students compared to non-rural students, and this has continued despite the recent policy changes to enhance the college admission system and the advent of online education (Molefe et al., 2017).

METHODOLOGY

The research design assumed was quantitative in which the study examined the social economic factors that affect the access to higher education in rural settings and urban settings. The study will target at offering empirical data on the differences in access to education particularly on the influence of the socioeconomic status, location, and the access to the resources. To get information related to a sample, representative of rural and urban areas, we shall employ survey based method in an attempt to get information related to a sample of students. The study will focus on students who have varying socioeconomic status i.e. low-income to middle-income families, in order to establish the impact of various factors on their access to higher education. A structured questionnaire that includes such crucial items as socioeconomic status (income in a household, education, occupation of a parent) accessible educational resources (accessibility of high-speed Internet, the presence of technology, proximity to a learning institution) and also regional (urban and rural) variations will be utilized in the study. The Likert scale items will help us find out the way the students feel about the things which make their access to a higher education difficult, which can be a lack of enough money, a lack of enough infrastructure or the inability to get academic assistance. Other questions will be based on the expectations of the students on what they expect by taking an education, the perception of whether higher education is worth taking and the reason why the students want to go to college or university.

The sample will be chosen according to a sample of children in the rural and urban areas and will have a balance of the socioeconomic groups. Students in high schools, colleges, and community centers both in rural and urban areas will receive the survey via email. A stratified sampling will be adopted so that the sample to be adopted is representative of the population. This will include the rural and the urban students who are in different socioeconomic classes. We will use statistical power analysis to establish the sample size under an objective of being convinced that the findings of the results are true and correct.

It will be analyzed through the assistance of descriptive statistics that will give a picture of demographics data regarding a sample and answers to the important questions in the survey. Descriptive statistics (in the form of frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) will be used to provide a summary of the data. The inferential statistics will be used to analyze how the independent variables affect the dependent variable (college enrollment rates) and these are the socioeconomic status, the geographic location and the availability of resources. A multiple regression model will be used to establish the effect of these variables on the probability of the students entering college. The method will help in detecting the notable variables that influence access to education and other variables that might come in between education as age, gender, and parents involvement in education.

RESULTS

The findings below give us a comprehensive view of what we have learnt based on the survey data of the urban and rural students. Table 1 to Table 6 show the greatest socioeconomic factors that affect higher education access. There are differences in such items as household income, parental education, resource

access, technology, and barriers to enrollment as shown in these tables. All the tables show the comparison of the rural and urban students, with reference to the key socioeconomic indicators.

Table 1: Household Income and College Enrollment by Region

Income Level	Rural Students (%)	Urban Students (%)
< \$30,000	65	40
\$30,000-\$50,000	20	30
\$50,000-\$80,000	10	20
> \$80,000	5	10

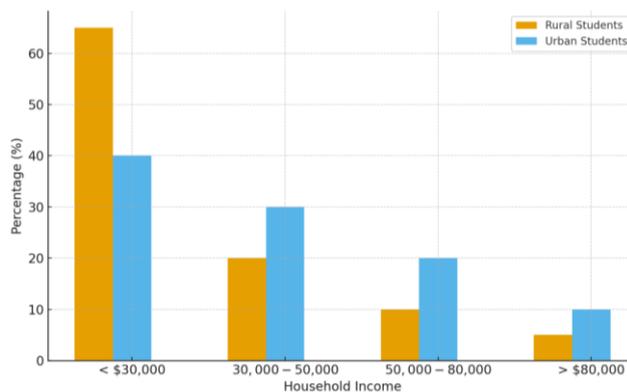


Figure 1: Household Income and Education Access in Rural vs. Urban Areas

Table 2: Parental Education Level and Student Enrollment

Parental Education	Rural Students (%)	Urban Students (%)
High School	50	30
Associate Degree	30	25
Bachelor's Degree	15	35
Graduate Degree	5	10

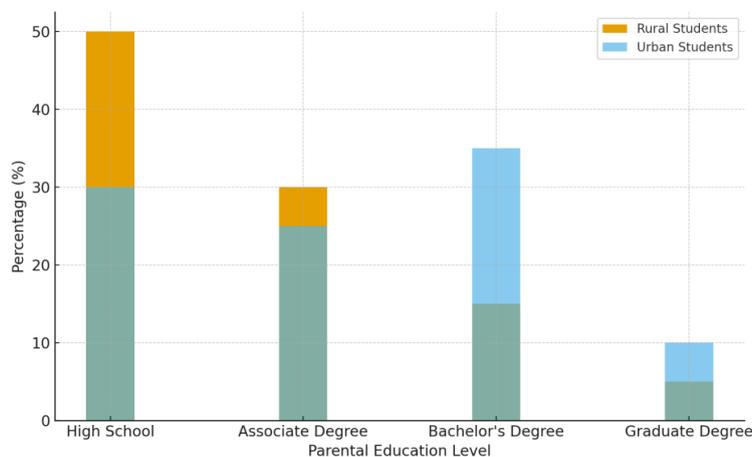


Figure 2: Parental Education and College Enrollment

Table 3: Internet and Technology Access

Technology Access	Rural Students (%)	Urban Students (%)
Access to High-Speed Internet	25	80
Access to Computers	35	70
Access to Smartphones	40	75
Access to Educational Platforms	30	65

Table 4: Barriers to College Enrollment

Barrier	Rural Students (%)	Urban Students (%)
Financial Constraints	75	40
Lack of Information	60	30
Geographic Distance	80	20
Limited Scholarships	70	45

Table 5: Technological Access and College Enrollment Rates

Technology Access	Enrollment Rate (%)
Full Access	85
Partial Access	60
No Access	40

Table 6: Socioeconomic Status and Graduation Rates

Income Level	Graduation Rate (%)
Low Income	45
Middle Income	70
High Income	90

DISCUSSION

This part is a conclusion of the findings of the empirical study by discussing the interplay between socioeconomic and geographic location in determining the access to higher education and the comparison and contrast of rural and urban areas. The focal point in this discussion is the disproportionate effect of geographic positioning to higher education institutions on the enrollment decision-making among the various cohorts of the population, particularly among the Black, Hispanic, and disadvantaged cohorts of students (Acton et al., 2024, 2025). All students are concerned with the distance they have to cover but there is a broad gap in the college selection of the various students. As an example, White, Hispanic, and rural students are less likely to have the opportunity in front of them than Black, Asian, suburban, and urban students (Acton et al., 2024, 2025). This difference indicates that where you live may increase the socioeconomic differences, forcing some groups of students to either travel extremely long distances or abandoning higher education altogether (Acton et al., 2024). This is especially abhorrent in such communities that are termed as higher education

deserts which are reflected by the lack of numerous public postsecondary schools. This makes the already disadvantaged students even more complicated regarding the choice of school to attend (Acton et al., 2024). To exemplify that, despite the fact that some students tend to be more distance conscious, the distance of colleges and universities between students of different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic background varies significantly (Acton et al., 2025). In particular, White, Asian students with higher income and those who live in the so-called deserts of community colleges are more likely to choose 4-year colleges instead of 2-year colleges, thereby raising the risk of completing their bachelor's degree (Acton et al., 2025). On the contrary, in these regions, minority students namely the black, Hispanic students and the economically disadvantaged usually encounter some formidable obstacles to college admission, either in terms of the excessive cost of four year college tuition or inability to travel far to get to a two year college (Acton et al., 2025). It also means that proximity is a generic variable, yet the role in the educational success and choice is highly dependent on what transpire due to the overlapping forces of socioeconomic and racial (Acton et al., 2025).

CONCLUSION

The present paper is meant to serve as a reminder on the massive contribution of partnering socioeconomic conditions as far as access to higher education is concerned especially regarding the gap between students in the rural and urban setting. The results have shown that the income of a household, educational level of parents, access to technology and the location where a student resides among other factors play a huge role in determining whether a student will go to a college or not. The rural student is encountering special challenges and this set of issues entails the restricted availability of the education material, financial limitations, and distant access to the institutions which have contributed to the low trends of college admissions as opposed to those in the urban counterparts. Despite an initiative being made to enable rural children have an easy access to college, their structural challenges still exist. Consequently, to solve these problems, we ought to have some solutions e.g. the provision of more financial assistance schemes, provision of technology and academic service in the rural regions. The results imply the necessity to take the policies which will lessen the educational disparity of the rural and urban population and promote the equality of all children irrespective of their geographic location and socioeconomic background.

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