



## 2021 Census Data on Tennesseans' Education Levels

December 19, 2022

---

### Key Takeaways

- An estimated 38% of Tennesseans age 25+ had at least an associate's degree last year, and 31% had a bachelor's or more – both higher than past years but lower than the national rate.
  - Some differences in post-secondary education rates among white, black, and Hispanic Tennesseans are shrinking, but significant gaps remain.
  - Over the last decade, median earnings have grown for Tennesseans at every level of education after adjusting for inflation.
- 

The U.S. Census Bureau released new data in September on income, poverty, education, and health insurance coverage in 2021. These metrics paint a picture of the social and economic circumstances across America.

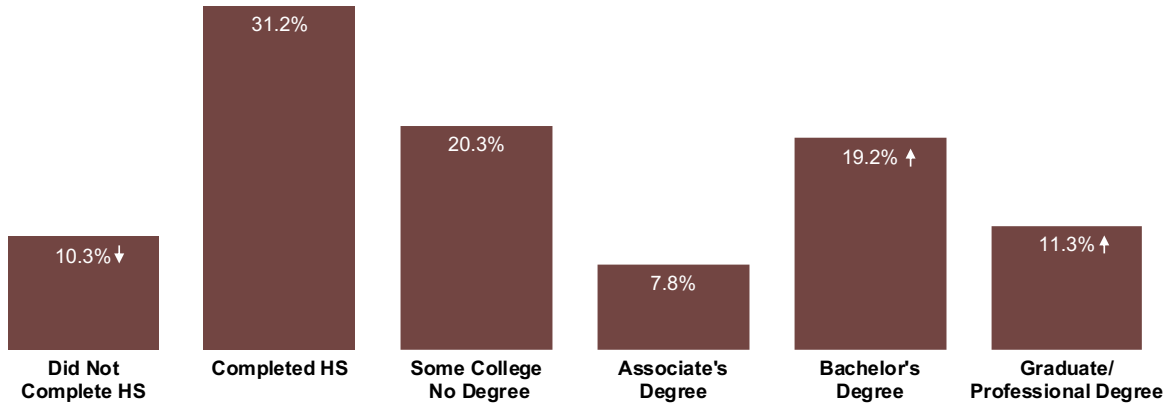
Here's what stands out from the estimates of Tennesseans' education levels in 2021.

### Education Levels in Tennessee

**Tennessee's recent upward trend in the share of residents with post-secondary degrees continued into 2021, though it remains lower than the national rate.** The majority of Tennesseans have at least some college (**Figure 1**) but most do not have a post-secondary degree (**Figure 2**). An estimated 38.2% of Tennesseans 25 and older had at least an associate's degree last year, and 30.5% had a bachelor's degree or higher. Both metrics have risen in recent years (**Figure 3**). (1) Meanwhile, state policymakers have also sought to increase the number of Tennesseans with technical degrees and certifications. However, the American Community Survey does not collect information on those credentials.

## Figure 1. The Majority of Tennesseans Have Completed At Least Some College

Highest Level of Education Attained by Tennesseans Ages 25+ (2021)

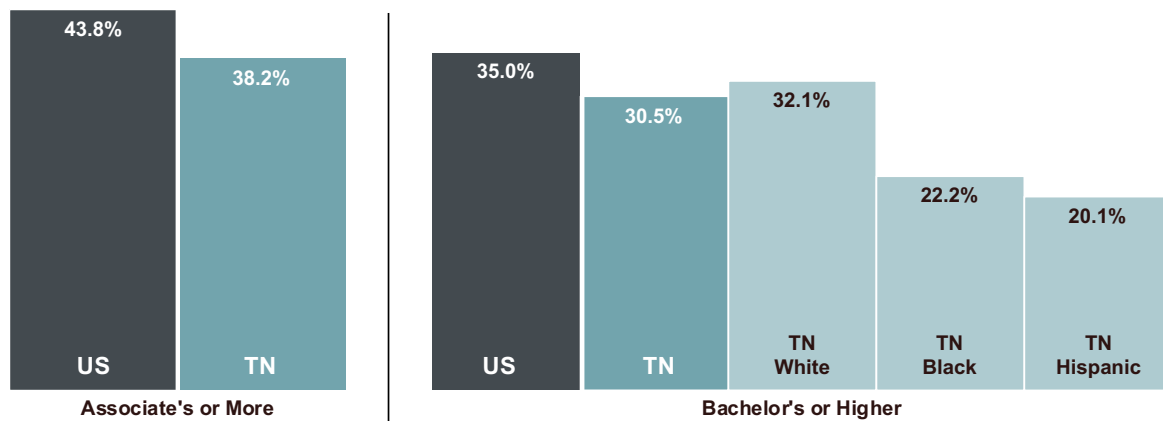


↓↑ Shows a statistically significant change from 2019. Due to the margins of error, the difference in all other 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant. Due to pandemic-related disruptions, detailed ACS –year estimates are not available for 2020.

Source: 2019-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (1)

## Figure 2. Most Tennesseans Did Not Have a Post-Secondary Degree in 2021

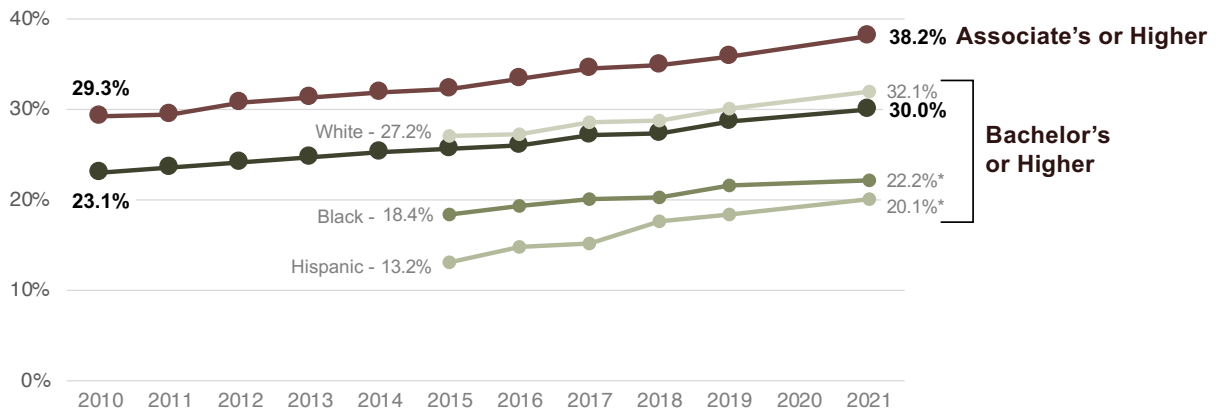
Highest Level of Education Attained by Tennesseans Ages 25+ (2021)



Source: 2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (1)

### Figure 3. Educational Attainment is Trending Up for Black, Hispanic, and White Tennesseans, But at Different Rates

Highest Level of Education Attained by Tennesseans Ages 25+ (2021)



Note: Due to pandemic-related disruptions, detailed ACS 1-year estimates are not available for 2020. \* Due to the margins of error, the difference in 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant.

Sources: 2010-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (1)

### Demographic and Geographic Variation

**Some differences in post-secondary education rates by race and ethnicity are shrinking, but significant gaps remain (Figure 3).<sup>i</sup>** (1) From 2015 to 2021, the share of Tennesseans with at least a bachelor's increased the most among Hispanics (up 6.9 percentage points), followed by white residents (up 5.3 points), and then black residents (up 3.8 points). Despite this progress, 20% of Hispanics and 22% of black Tennesseans had a bachelor's or higher, compared to 32% of white residents.

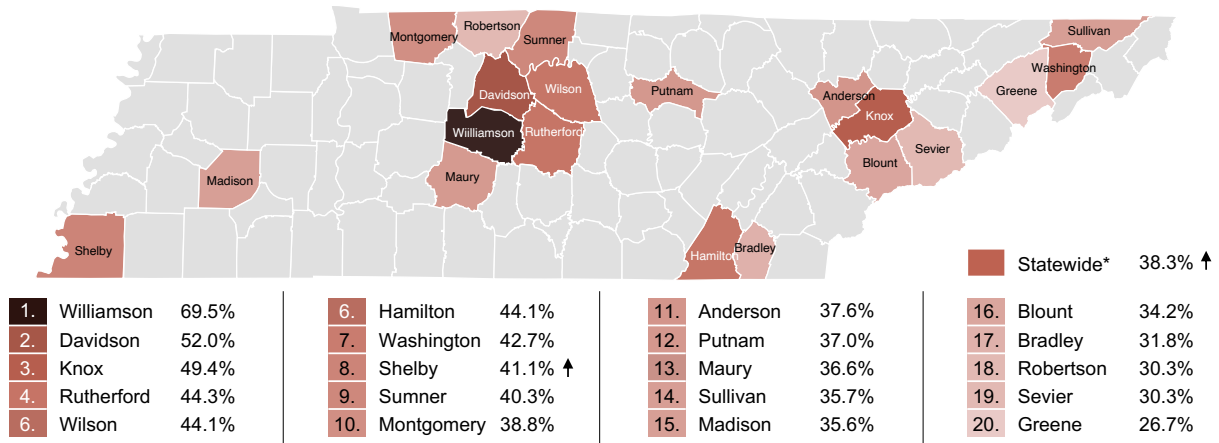
**Rates of post-secondary education in Tennessee also vary by geography.** The Census Bureau's September data release also includes 2021 estimates for counties with populations above 65,000. Among the 20 Tennessee counties with available data:

- Associate's Degree or More** — The share of adults 25 and older with at least an associate's degree ranged from 69.5% in Williamson County to 26.7% in Greene County (Figure 4). The share increased in Shelby County. Due to the margins of error, the difference in all other 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant. (1)
- Bachelor's Degree or More** — Residents with bachelor's degrees or more varied from 62.0% in Williamson County to 19.2% in Sevier County (Figure 5). Four counties saw a statistically significant increase from 2019: Anderson, Knox, Rutherford, and Shelby. (1)

See Table A1 in the Appendix for complete 2019-2021 county data.

## Figure 4. In Tennessee's Most Populated Counties, 27–70% of Adults Age 25+ Have at Least an Associate's Degree

% of Tennesseans Ages 25+ with an Associate's Degree or Higher (2021)

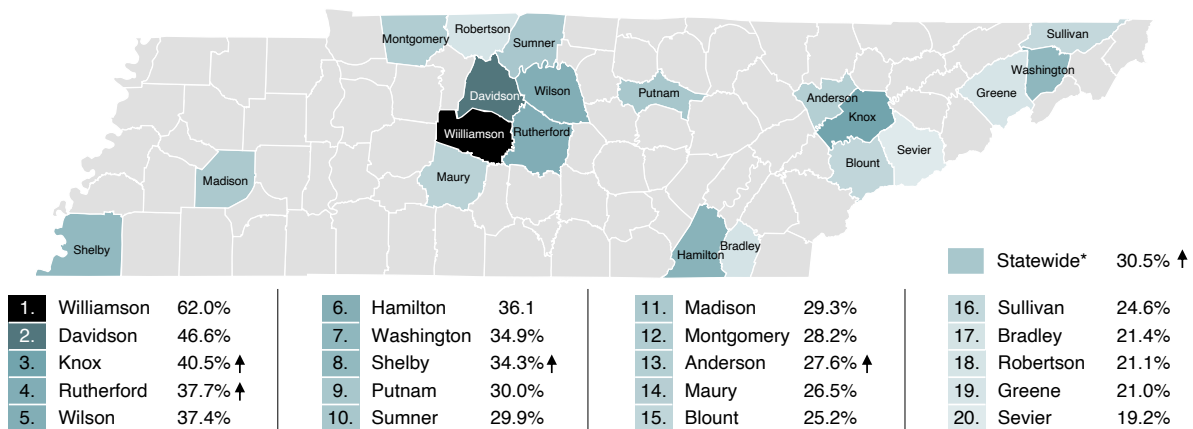


↓↑ Shows a statistically significant change from 2019. Due to the margins of error, the difference in all other 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant. Due to pandemic-related disruptions, detailed ACS –year estimates are not available for 2020.

Source: 2019-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (1)

## Figure 5. In Tennessee's Most Populated Counties, 19–62% of Adults Age 25+ Have at Least a Bachelor's Degree

% of Tennesseans Ages 25+ with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher (2021)



↓↑ Shows a statistically significant change from 2019. Due to the margins of error, the difference in all other 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant. Due to pandemic-related disruptions, detailed ACS –year estimates are not available for 2020.

Source: 2019-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (1)

## Education and Earnings in Tennessee

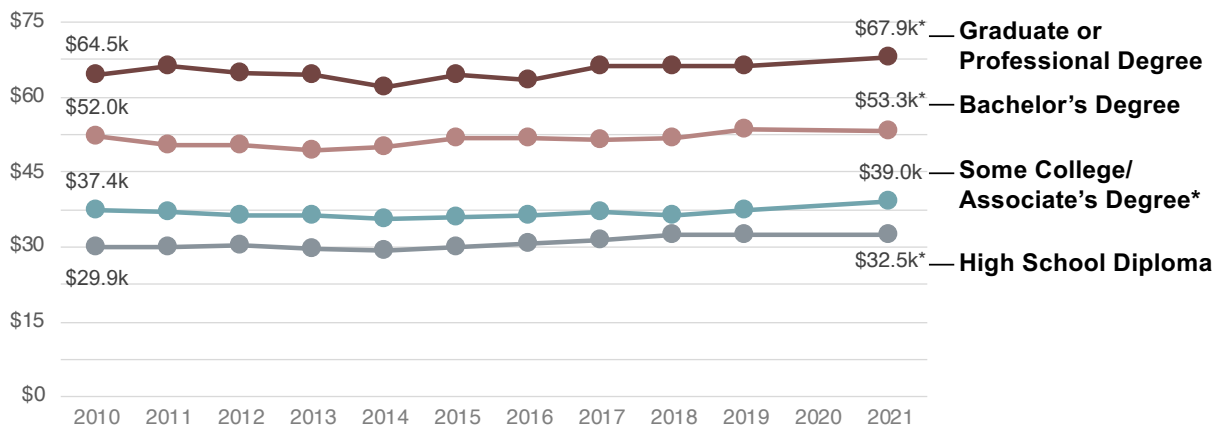
**Higher levels of education continue to be associated with higher earnings in Tennessee (Figure 6).**

In 2021, for example, Tennesseans with just a bachelor’s degree had median earnings of about \$53,000. In other words, half of the people in that group made more and half earned less. For comparison, median earnings were 37% lower for Tennesseans with only some college or an associate’s degree — about \$39,000.

**Over the last decade, median earnings have grown for Tennesseans at every level of education (Figure 6).** (1) (3) After adjusting for inflation, the greatest increase occurred for earnings of those with a high school diploma, which were 9% higher in 2021 than in 2010. Earnings grew more slowly for those with some college or an associate’s degree – up 4% – and those with a bachelor’s degree or with a graduate or professional degree – up 3% and 5% respectively.

### Figure 6. In Tennessee’s Most Populated Counties, 19–62% of Adults Age 25+ Have at Least a Bachelor’s Degree

Median Earnings for Tennesseans by Highest Level of Education (in 2021 dollars) (2010-2019)



Inflation-adjusted median earnings are shown in 2021 dollars using the CPI-U. (3) Note: Due to pandemic-related disruptions, detailed ACS 1-year estimates are not available for 2020. \* Due to the margins of error, the difference in 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant.

Sources: 2010-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (1)

## References

1. **U.S. Census Bureau.** 2010-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. [Online] September 2022. Available via <http://data.census.gov>.
2. **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.** Consumer Price Index: CPI-U. [Online] Accessed from <https://www.bls.gov/>.

## THE SYCAMORE INSTITUTE

The Sycamore Institute is an independent, nonpartisan public policy research center for Tennessee. Sign up for email alerts at [SycamoreTN.org](http://SycamoreTN.org).

*Written By:* Mandy Pellegrin, Deputy Director | *Other Contributing Staff:* Brian Straessle, Executive Director

For further information, contact Brian Straessle at [Brian@SycamoreTN.org](mailto:Brian@SycamoreTN.org).

**Table A1. 2019-2021 Census Data on Tennesseans' Education Levels**

American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (2019-2021)

	Total Population		% of Adults 25+ with an Associate's Degree or Higher		% of Adults 25+ with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher	
	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
<b>Tennessee</b>	6,829,174	6,975,218	36.1%	38.3%*	28.7%	30.5%*
<b>Anderson</b>	76,978	77,576	31.4%	37.6%	21.3%	27.6%*
<b>Blount</b>	133,088	137,605	29.3%	34.2%	23.3%	25.2%
<b>Bradley</b>	108,110	110,162	29.6%	31.8%	22.5%	21.4%
<b>Davidson</b>	694,144	703,953	51.9%	52.0%	45.7%	46.6%
<b>Greene</b>	69,069	70,621	25.3%	26.7%	19.0%	21.0%
<b>Hamilton</b>	367,804	369,135	44.1%	44.1%	35.1%	36.1%
<b>Knox</b>	470,313	486,677	46.5%	49.4%	37.7%	40.5%*
<b>Madison</b>	97,984	98,775	34.2%	35.6%	27.1%	29.3%
<b>Maury</b>	96,387	104,760	35.5%	36.6%	25.1%	26.5%
<b>Montgomery</b>	208,993	227,900	43.9%	38.8%	30.9%	28.2%
<b>Putnam</b>	80,245	81,188	34.2%	37.0%	28.4%	30.0%
<b>Robertson</b>	71,813	74,098	26.8%	30.3%	21.2%	21.1%
<b>Rutherford</b>	332,285	352,182	39.6%	44.3%	30.8%	37.7%*
<b>Sevier</b>	98,250	99,517	25.9%	30.3%	19.0%	19.2%
<b>Shelby</b>	937,166	924,454	37.7%	41.1%*	31.7%	34.3%*
<b>Sullivan</b>	158,348	159,265	34.2%	35.7%	26.3%	24.6%
<b>Sumner</b>	191,283	200,557	38.8%	40.3%	30.6%	29.9%
<b>Washington</b>	129,375	134,236	40.4%	42.7%	31.7%	34.9%
<b>Williamson</b>	238,412	255,735	67.5%	69.5%	61.8%	62.0%
<b>Wilson</b>	144,657	151,917	43.0%	44.1%	35.1%	37.4%

\* Indicates a statistically significant change from 2019. Due to the margins of error, the difference in all other 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant. Due to pandemic-related disruptions, detailed ACS 1-year estimates are not available for 2020.

Notes: Because of small sample size, one-year estimates are not available for the 75 TN counties with populations below 65,000. However, statewide estimates include residents of every county.

Source: 2019-2021 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates

---

<sup>i</sup> Due to the margins of error, the difference in some 2019 and 2021 estimates is not statistically significant. The Census Bureau's American Community Survey generates estimates based on a sample of the total population. The margin of error measures the likely range of the true value if every person were surveyed. When the error margins for two values overlap, the difference may simply be due to sampling or estimation issues. To learn more about the importance of samples, [read our tips for interpreting statistics](#).