



# LOOKING INWARD

## Issues of Educational Equity in the US

- **Where We Live**
- **What We Have**
- **Who We Are**

**We've seen what educational inequity can look like globally.**

***What does educational inequity look like in the United States?***

Girl Rising asks students to explore the profound barriers faced by girls around the world to their education and their independence. Girl Rising also encourages students to look within themselves, at their own communities, and at the challenges that exist closer to home. This resource is designed to help educators and students – primarily those living in the United States – do just that.

The obstacles to educational equity in the US look different in many ways to those highlighted in the Girl Rising stories. For example, the issues around gender and schooling – which are central to Girl Rising's mission – are perhaps more subtle in the US, where high school completion, college enrollment and college graduation rates are higher for girls than boys. But the issues of educational inequity are very real and reflect other inequities that exist in the US, including those around gender, race and economic class.

This resource is not meant to be a comprehensive review. The goal is to provide a scaffold to extend the Girl Rising conversation, to inspire meaningful discussions, to guide students in making connections to their own experiences and – as always – to encourage young people to use their voices and agency for change.

The lessons in this resource can be presented through open-ended discussion, student-led research, and real-world application.

## **Facilitator Notes:**

Looking Inward: Issues of Educational Equity in the US is designed to be flexible and can be integrated into Girl Rising lessons or taught as a follow-up lesson(s) at the end of a Girl Rising unit.

- The resource is divided into three sections: Where We Live, What We Have, and Who We Are.
- Each section contains sub-topics with context, relevant statistics, supplementary resources for teachers and students (a resource may appear in multiple topics), and discussion questions.
- An **Activity Addendum** provides suggestions for general activities that can be used for any topic, as well as specific activities connected to each topic.
- A link to Girl Rising's [Trauma Informed Support](#) document is included, which offers strategies for holding difficult conversations with young people.



# SECTION 1: WHERE WE LIVE

- **Zoning:** The Connection Between Zip Code and Quality Education
- **Environmental Pollution:** How Exposure to Pollution Disrupts Learning

# Zoning:

## The Connection Between Zip Code and Quality Education

In the US, approximately 90% of children attend public schools. They are usually assigned to a local school by zip code, a process called school zoning. While about half of the funding for public schools comes from the federal and state governments, the other half is raised locally, and predominantly based on property taxes. This means that people who live in wealthier neighborhoods – and pay higher property taxes – have access to better resourced neighborhood schools. And students who live in poorer communities often attend schools with less funding for teachers, support services, books, technology and enrichment activities.

### Background Statistics and Facts:

- 71% of students attend their assigned public school, despite alternatives that include charter schools, magnet schools, and school districts with open enrollment policies.
- The highest quality public elementary schools are in districts that average a median home price that is four times higher than in districts with the lowest quality public elementary schools.
- Across the US in the school year 2017–2018, approximately \$279 billion, or 81%, of local revenues for public school districts were derived from local property taxes.

### Teacher Resources:

- [School Monday: The Cost of Opportunity podcast series](#)  
(video: 6.5 mins)
- [Zoned Out: How School and Residential Zoning Limit Education Opportunity](#)
- [Good School, Rich School; Bad School, Poor School: The Inequality at the Heart of America's Education System](#)
- [TED Talk | How America's Public Schools Keep Kids in Poverty | Kandice Sumner](#)  
(video: 13.5 mins)

### Student-facing Resources:

- [Disparity in Property Tax Causes Inequity in School Funding](#)
- [NOW THIS: School Inequality - Part 1](#)  
(video: 7.5 mins)
- [NOW THIS: School Inequality - Part 2](#)  
(video: 4.5 mins)

### Discussion Questions:

- What does a good education look like?
- How does where you live affect the quality of the school you attend?
- How might family income affect the education you receive?
- How does your school compare to the top-performing public school in your school district?

# Environmental Pollution:

## How Exposure to Pollution Disrupts Learning

Environmental pollution can have a devastating impact on children’s physical health, developmental growth and educational achievement. Black, Latino and low-income children are more likely to live near highly polluted areas, where they are exposed to unsafe water, poor air quality and toxic waste sites. Students in these communities are also more likely to attend schools where they face risks from damaging auto emissions, lead-based paint and lead-laced drinking water. The effect is seen in higher rates of learning disabilities, academic challenges, behavioral problems, suspensions and absenteeism.

### Background Statistics and Facts:

- Children living within two miles of a government designated Superfund site – abandoned areas containing hazardous toxins and contaminated materials – have a 23% increase in cognitive disabilities such as learning and intellectual disabilities, autism, and speech and language impairment. They are 42% more likely to be suspended from school compared to the average public school student, and 45% more likely to repeat a grade.
- Black children make up only 16% of the US public school population, but they make up 25% of all students who attend schools worst affected by air pollution. In contrast, White children make up 52% of the public school population, but they make up only 28% of students who attend schools worst affected by air pollution. This disparity remains even when accounting for the urban-rural divide.
- Childhood asthma is the number one disease-related reason children ages 5-17 are absent from school, leading to over 10.5 million missed school days annually; multiple studies show a link between lower socioeconomic status and harm from pollution, including asthma.

### Teacher Resources:

- [How Exposure to Pollution Affects Educational Outcomes and Inequality](#)
- [Studies Find School Air Pollution Affects Student Performance and Behavior](#)
- [How Does Pollution Affect a Child’s Test Scores?](#)  
(video: 1.5 mins)
- [Flint’s Children Suffer in Class After Years of Drinking the Lead-Poisoned Water](#)
- [In San Francisco’s Bayview-Hunters Point Neighborhood, Advocates Have Taken Air Monitoring Into Their Own Hands](#)

### Student-facing Resources:

- [What Causes Air Pollution?](#)  
[The Dr. Binocs Show](#)  
(video: 6 mins)
- [Flint’s Children Suffer in Class After Years of Drinking the Lead-Poisoned Water](#)
- [Flint’s Water Crisis Explained](#)  
(video: 3.5 mins)
- [Flint Youth Activist](#)  
(video: 1 mins)
- [Memphis May Have the Sweetest Water in the World, but Toxic Waste Could Ruin It All](#)
- [This High School is Contaminated with Lead. It Blames the Recycling Plant Next Door.](#)

## *Environmental Pollution continued...*

### **Discussion Questions:**

- Why are some areas/neighborhoods subject to higher levels of environmental pollution more than others?
- How can pollution affect a child's brain development or ability to learn?
- Who is responsible for cleaning up environmental pollution? What can and should be done to prevent and/or stop it?
- How is your community affected by environmental pollution? What are some ways we can reduce pollution in our communities?



## SECTION 2: WHAT WE HAVE

- **Income Status:** How Poverty Limits Educational Opportunity
- **Food Insecurity:** How It Damages Student Outcomes
- **Access to Technology:** Challenges for Students in the Digital Age

# Income Status:

## How Poverty Limits Educational Opportunity

The US is among the world's wealthiest countries, but in 2020, 37 million people – or 11.4% of the population – lived in poverty. And that includes 12 million children. In addition to facing extreme challenges like unstable housing, hunger and significant stress, students living in poverty also lack resources at home that other students might take for granted, like extra support with homework, access to the internet, and use of a computer or books. The impact of poverty can put children at greater risk of behavioral and social-emotional challenges, make it harder for them to learn, increase their absences, and limit their educational attainment.

### Background Statistics and Facts:

- In 2020, the rates of young people under 18 living below the poverty line were: 27.7% Black, 23.1% Latino, 14% White and 8.4% Asian.
- As of 2019, 53% of four-year-old children living in poverty were enrolled in preschool compared with 76% of four-year-olds with a family income at five times the poverty level. A similar income gap in preschool participation is seen for three-year-olds.
- Children who experience poverty in the first years of life are approximately 30% less likely to complete high school than children who don't experience poverty.
- Children living in poverty are more likely to be absent from school more often. For example, in Michigan, economically disadvantaged students were chronically absent at three times the rate of their higher income peers.

### Teacher Resources:

- [TEDx Talk | The Brain on Poverty](#)  
[Jessica Sharpe](#)  
(video: 10 mins)
- [The State of America's Children 2021](#)
- [How Does Poverty Affect Learning?](#)  
(video: 2.5 mins)

### Student-facing Resources:

- [Opportunity Gap](#)  
(video: 3 mins)
- [TED Talk | How America's Public Schools Keep Kids In Poverty](#)  
[Kandice Sumner](#)  
(video: 13.5 mins)
- [Child Poverty: In Their Own Words](#)  
(video: 3 mins)
- [NOW THIS: School Inequality - Part 1](#)  
(video: 7.5 mins)
- [NOW THIS: School Inequality - Part 2](#)  
(video: 4.5 mins)



## *Income Status continued...*

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What is poverty?
- How does poverty impact a child's education?
- What is the relationship between family income and high school graduation rates? How might this affect a student's future opportunities?
- What resources do students need to be successful in school?

# Food Insecurity:

## How It Damages Student Outcomes

In 2021, nearly one in ten people in the US faced food insecurity, which means they did not have reliable, affordable, or convenient access to enough food or healthy food options. Many of them live in poorer communities, some of which are considered “food deserts” because they lack grocery stores that sell affordable healthy food. Children who experience hunger are more likely to receive special education services or mental health counseling. They are also more likely to get poorer grades, repeat a grade, have difficulty getting along with their peers, and be late, suspended or absent from school. For some of these students, the only meals they receive each day are provided by schools through government funded breakfast and lunch programs.

### Background Statistics and Facts:

- In 2020, 7.6 % of households with children (2.9 million) were food insecure.
- Before the COVID pandemic, nearly 100,000 schools/institutions served free or reduced-price school lunches to almost 22 million students each day. In the 2020-21 school year, approximately 19.6 million students received a free or reduced-priced lunch.
- Government programs like SNAP (formerly food stamps) and school meals lifted 3.2 million people out of poverty in 2019.

### Teacher Resources:

- [TEDx Talk | The Impact of School Meals](#)  
[Abby Miller](#)  
(video: 11 mins)
- [Benefits of School Lunch](#)
- [Too Hungry to Learn: Food Insecurity and School Readiness](#)
- [Hunger and Poverty in America](#)

### Student-facing Resources:

- [11 Facts About Hunger in the US](#)
- [11 Facts About Food Deserts](#)
- [The Food Deserts of Memphis: Inside America’s Hunger Capital | Divided Cities](#)  
(video: 13 mins)
- [Building an Oasis in a Philadelphia Food Desert](#)  
(video: 8 mins)

### Discussion Questions:

- How does access to enough food – and healthy food – affect academic performance in school?
- Why might a neighborhood be a food desert? Why don’t large chain grocery stores build in certain neighborhoods?
- What is the role of government food programs in mitigating the impact of food insecurity on young people? How do they support students?

## Access to Technology: Challenges for Students in the Digital Age

The digital divide – the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not – most acutely affects students from rural and Southern communities, and disproportionately impacts Black, Latino, and Native American students and those from lower-income households. In some areas there is no broadband access, but the primary obstacle for most families without access is cost. The impact is seen in school achievement: students who lack access to devices and broadband services tend to have lower grade point averages than their peers. The COVID pandemic exacerbated the existing divide.

### Background Statistics and Facts:

- As of 2020, 4.4 million households with students still lack consistent access to a computer and 3.7 million lack internet access.
- 25% of teens in households with an annual income under \$30,000 lack access to a computer at home, compared with just 4% of those in households earning over \$75,000.
- Students of color are disproportionately disconnected; while they make up 40% of the student population, they account for 54% of all disconnected students.
- 53% of students who live in small towns or rural areas have high-speed internet access compared to 77% of those who live in suburbs, and 70% of those in cities. 9% of students in rural areas, 6% in small towns, 5% in cities, and 4% in suburbs have no internet access at all.

### Teacher Resources:

- [Closing the Digital Divide in US Education – For Good](#)
- [Digital Divide Compounds US Education Equity Problem](#)
- [How City Leaders Can Bridge the Digital Divide](#)

### Student-facing Resources:

- [Are Rural Students Getting Shortchanged in the Digital Age?](#)  
(video: 7 mins)
- [The Digital Divide Has Narrowed, but 12 Million Students are Still Disconnected](#)
- [Digital Divide and Education Inequality](#)  
(video: 6 mins)
- [Remote Learning is Intensifying America's 'Homework Gap'](#)  
(video: 6 mins)

## *Access to Technology continued...*

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What factors impact a student's access to technology?
- What kind of technology do you have at your school? At home?
- How does access to technology help students learn? What might the impact be if students don't have access to these things?
- What would digital equity look like in your school? In your community? Whose responsibility is it to make sure all students have access to computers and high-speed internet? Why?



## SECTION 3: WHO WE ARE

- **Students of Color:** School Experiences and Outcomes
- **Undocumented Immigrants:** Obstacles to Educational Opportunity
- **Gender Expectations:** How Students are Treated Differently in School Based on Gender Identity

## **Students of Color: School Experiences and Outcomes**

Legal segregation in the US ended more than 75 years ago, but today many children of color still attend schools that are racially separate and unequal. In almost every US city, students of color are more likely than White students to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and attend public schools with more limited resources. That means that these schools may have less experienced teachers, fewer advanced classes and less funding for enrichment programs – resulting in different learning experiences and fewer opportunities for many students of color.

Putting economics aside, students of color face challenges that White students don't, in many cases the consequence of implicit bias. Middle-class, White, and Asian students are more likely than low-income, Black, and Latino students to be identified as gifted and participate in gifted education programs. Students of color – and particularly Black girls – are often more harshly disciplined, resulting in higher rates of suspension, expulsion, use of restraints, and referral to law enforcement. As a result, studies show that students of color are more likely to have negative attitudes about school, lower academic motivation and performance, and be at increased risk of dropping out. These experiences can shape a child's sense of self and belief in their abilities to succeed.

### **Background Statistics and Facts:**

- In the 2018-19 school year, Asian/Pacific Islander students had the highest national high school graduation rate (93%), followed by White (89%), Latino (82%), Black (80%), and Native American/Alaska Native (74%) students.
- A disproportionate number of Black children receive more than one out-of-school suspension in preschool. Overall, Black students in kindergarten through 12th grade are suspended three times more often and expelled 1.9 times more than White students.
- Schools serving predominantly Black students have 5% more novice teachers than schools with fewer Black students. In 32 states, there are more first-year teachers in schools serving the most Latino students; in Massachusetts, 29% of Latino students attend schools with high percentages of uncertified teachers, compared to 12% of their peers.
- School districts in the US serving the largest populations of Black, Latino, or Native American students receive roughly \$1,800, or 13%, less per student in state and local funding than those serving the fewest students of color.
- The majority of Asian (80%) and White (59%) students who took the SATs in 2020 met the college readiness math benchmark, compared to less than a quarter of Black students and under a third of Latino students. This difference exists, but is less stark, in English scores.

## *Students of Color continued...*

### **Teacher Resources:**

- [How US Schools Punish Black Kids](#)
- [Getting Black Students More Access to Non-Novice Teachers](#)
- [How Minnesota’s Lack of Teachers of Color Hurts Students and What Reform Could Look Like](#)  
(video: 8 mins)
- [The Condition of Native American Students](#)
- [TED Talk | How America’s Public Schools Keep Kids in Poverty | Kandice Sumner](#)  
(video: 13.5 mins)
- [Fast Facts: Latino Students and English Language Learners](#)
- [Four Ways Teachers Can Reduce Implicit Bias](#)

### **Student-facing Resources:**

- [Black Student Voices: What We Need From Our Schools](#)  
(video: 5.5 mins)
- [TEDxYouth Talk | Battling Cultural Stereotypes | Sadie Ortiz](#)  
(video: 5 mins)
- [NOW THIS: School Inequality - Part 1](#)  
(video: 7.5 mins)
- [NOW THIS: School Inequality - Part 2](#)  
(video: 4.5 mins)
- [Native American Students Respond to American Education](#)  
(video: 2.5 mins)
- [TedxYouth Talk | Native Youth are More Than Statistics | Elyssa \(Sierra\) Concha](#)  
(video: 13 mins)
- [“I Feel Invisible”: Native Students Languish in Public Schools](#)
- [The Discipline Divide](#)  
(video: 2 mins)

### **Discussion Questions:**

- What challenges to education do students of color face that their White peers may not?
- How do biases – explicit or implicit – impact a student’s educational experiences?
- Black adolescent girls are disciplined more than their White peers. Why do you think that is? And what is the impact?
- The Latino population is the fastest growing in the United States. What are some of the educational barriers Latino students face?
- What can schools do to provide equitable learning experiences for all students?

# Undocumented Immigrants: Obstacles to Educational Opportunity

Approximately one million undocumented immigrant children live and attend school in the US. These students, like refugees and documented immigrants, confront a number of particular challenges in school, including limited English-proficiency, xenophobia, and anti-immigrant bullying, but they also endure the added stress of knowing that they or their families could be deported. And, while these children are legally entitled to the same K-12 education as US citizens and legal residents, some school districts create obstacles to discourage them from enrolling. By almost every level of academic achievement — including graduation, dropout rates, college preparation, and state standardized tests — they are behind their classmates.

## Background Statistics and Facts:

- Most states have at least 1,000 undocumented students in their K-12 schools. This number is significantly higher in several states, including Texas (111,000), Florida (74,000), and California (72,000).
- 30% of all undocumented immigrants live below the poverty line.
- Nearly 100,000 undocumented students graduate from high school in the US every year. As of 2018, 37% of undocumented immigrants 25 or older have a high school diploma or some college; 44% of undocumented immigrants 25 or older have completed less than high school.
- In 2017, among the undocumented immigrants in the US, 47% were from Mexico, 18% from Central America, and 14% from Asia.

## Teacher Resources:

- [For DACA Students, It's Hard to Focus on a Bright Future When Faced with Deportation Fears - PBS NewsHour](#) (video: 8 mins)
- [The US Public Education System and Undocumented Students](#)
- [Barriers in the United States Education System for Immigrant Children](#)

## Student-facing Resources:

- [What It's Like Growing Up Undocumented in America](#)
- [Undocumented Students in US Face Unique Challenges](#)

## Discussion Questions:

- What is the difference between refugees, documented and undocumented immigrants?
- Federal law requires that states provide public school education for all children regardless of their immigration status. Why does this matter?
- What challenges do undocumented students face that other students do not?
- Do you think the US has a responsibility to provide a free public education for undocumented immigrant students? Why? Or why not?



## Gender Expectations:

### How Students Are Treated Differently in School Based on Gender Identity

From an early age at school, children are introduced to and internalize gender norms and stereotypes. Although high school graduation rates in the US are higher for girls than boys, girls face significant biases. Studies show that teachers have different expectations for girls (or those who identify as girls) and boys with regard to behavior, classroom participation, and academic performance, especially in STEM subjects. For example – and whether intentional or not – teachers sometimes convey to girls that they need to work harder in order to be as successful as their male peers, call on boys more frequently, and ask fewer questions of girls. These behaviors can harm a girl's confidence, sense of self, and interest in particular subjects – all of which may result in lower academic achievement. For LGBTQ students, these challenges are often compounded.

#### Background Statistics and Facts:

- In a 2017 study, 30% of the girls with the highest reported grade point averages (4.0 or above) did not think they were smart enough for their dream careers; 8% of girls believed that men are better leaders than women; and 46% of girls thought that certain jobs are better for men than women.
- In a 2018 study, when faced with a boy and a girl of the same race and socio-economic status who performed equally well on math tests and whom the teacher rated equally well in behavior and engaging with school, the teacher rated the boy as more mathematically able.
- A study of students between fourth and eighth grade shows that boys' confidence drops at less than one-sixth the rate of girls. And, through 11th grade, girls' confidence continues to fall at a faster rate than that of boys.
- A recent study shows that middle school girls pass algebra at higher rates than do boys and that girls perform on par with boys in advanced science and math courses as they move into high school. However, as students get closer to college, girls take fewer advanced STEM courses. This gap is often compounded by issues of race and class.
- According to GLSEN's 2017 National School Climate Survey almost 90% of LGBTQ students experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, actual or perceived race and ethnicity, and actual or perceived disability. Nearly two-thirds reported experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school.

## Teacher Resources:

- [TEDx Talk | Equity and Gender-Based Education | Elizabeth Wolfson](#)  
(video: 9 mins)
- [How Our Education System Undermines Gender Equity](#)
- [Gender Equity in the Classroom: Ideas on How to Minimize Gender Bias in Teaching Practices](#)
- [Unlocking Opportunities for African American Girls](#)
- [The Girls' Index: New Insights Into the Complex World of Today's Girls](#)
- [5 Must Know Educational Stats About the LGBTQ Community](#)

## Student-facing Resources:

- [Teenage Girls are Facing Impossible Expectations](#)
- [Generation Impact: the Coder](#)  
(video: 7 mins)
- [When School Dress Codes Distract From Education](#)
- [TEDxYouth | Supporting LGBTQ+ students | Noah Bennett](#)  
(video: 7 mins)
- [Student Reporting Labs on the Experiences of LGBTQ Youth](#)  
(video: 2 mins)

## Discussion Questions:

- What is gender equity, and why does it matter?
- What differences do you see in the way students are treated based on their gender in your classroom or school? Do any of your teachers treat you differently because of your gender identity?
- How does discrimination affect the educational experiences of LGBTQ students? What can schools do about it?
- What are some of the academic stereotypes about boys, girls or LGBTQ students? How do different expectations affect a girl's/ boy's/their experience and success at school?
- What would a classroom or a school free from gender bias look like?