



What happened to adult education in the United States?

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In 2000, federally funded public adult education programs provided basic skills training and English language instruction to over 2.6 million students, or about 1.5% of the U.S. adult population. By 2021, enrollment had plummeted to under 900,000, or less than 0.4% of adults. What explains these declines? This policy brief describes the evolution of federally supported U.S. adult education over the past 25 years as it relates to demographic shifts and trends in costs, providers, and federal accountability policies. We organize our brief around five findings drawn from our analysis of federal reporting data and conclude with recommendations for policy and research. Our brief highlights the increasing importance of immigrants to this sector, rising costs, and missed opportunities for research due to inadequate data systems.

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Abstract:

In 2000, federally funded public adult education programs provided basic skills training and English language instruction to over 2.6 million students, or about 1.5% of the U.S. adult population. By 2021, enrollment had plummeted to under 900,000, or less than 0.4% of adults. What explains these declines? This policy brief describes the evolution of federally supported U.S. adult education over the past 25 years as it relates to demographic shifts and trends in costs, providers, and federal accountability policies. We organize our brief around five findings drawn from our analysis of federal reporting data and conclude with recommendations for policy and research. Our brief highlights the increasing importance of immigrants to this sector, rising costs, and missed opportunities for research due to inadequate data systems.

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Introduction

Public adult education programs serve some of the most marginalized populations in the United States. Targeting learners outside the K-12 and postsecondary education systems, adult basic and secondary education classes allow high school dropouts and adults with low literacy to re-engage in formal schooling at any phase of life. For immigrants seeking to improve their English language skills, English as a Second Language (ESL) courses offered by adult education programs are one of the few public services available to help them build the skills they need to integrate into U.S. society.

National statistics show dramatic declines in federally funded adult education programs over the past 25 years, as shown in Figure 1. In 2000 (i.e., the 2000-01 academic year), over 2.6 million students were enrolled in adult education classes in the United States. By 2021, enrollment had fallen to under 900,000 students, a decline of over 65%.¹ Over this time, adult education shrank from a system whose enrollment represented about 1.5% of the total adult population to one that reaches less than 0.4% of adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b; 2021a). Moreover, enrollment declined across all levels and types of adult education programs: adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and adult ESL.² Between 2000 and 2021, enrollment in adult ESL fell by 60% and enrollment in ABE/ASE fell by 71%, extending downward trends described by Pickard (2022). Although the COVID-19 pandemic did accelerate losses in adult education enrollment, pandemic-era enrollment declines explain only a modest

¹ Adult education statistics are constructed from authors' calculations using data from the U.S. Department of Education National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), unless otherwise noted. See nrs.ed.gov.

² Beginning in 2016, enrollment was reported separately for Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) courses in NRS. To facilitate apples-to-apples comparisons over time, we combine adult ESL and IELCE enrollments into a single adult ESL category.

share of the overall change in enrollment during this period, as total adult education enrollments had already fallen by over 58% from 2000 to 2019.

While enrollment in adult education has declined, economic and demographic changes have exacerbated the needs of the primary populations these programs seek to serve: adults without high school diplomas and immigrants. On the one hand, rising income inequality has left less-educated workers farther and farther behind while college-educated workers have seen substantial economic gains (Autor, 2014; Piketty & Saez, 2014; Hoffman, Lee & Lemieux, 2020; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d). On the other hand, the limited English proficient (LEP) adult population in the United States has grown tremendously, more than doubling between 1990 and 2021 (Manson et al., 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021b). The needs of recent arrivals have been brought into stark relief by the recent “migrant crisis” in cities such as New York and Chicago (e.g., Alvarez, DeChalus & Main, 2024; Cadava, 2024; Colvin, Groves & Gomez Licon, 2024; Ferré-Sadurni, 2024; Narea, 2024). Immigrants also make up a growing share of adults without high school diplomas: among the 24 million U.S. adults without a high school diploma or equivalent credential, nearly half (48%) speak a language other than English at home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021c).

What happened to public adult education in the United States? Why has enrollment declined so precipitously despite continued need for these services? What can we learn – and what questions cannot be answered – using the best-available data sources about access to, demand for, and utilization of federally funded adult education?

The purpose of this brief is to analyze and contextualize changes in adult education in the United States over the past 25 years, highlighting changes in the size, composition, costs, and organizational structure of the sector and relating these to demographic shifts. We conduct our

analysis using public data from the National Reporting System (NRS), the federal reporting and accountability system for adult education programs, which we supplement with population estimates from other sources such as the American Community Survey and U.S. Census. NRS data include national and state-level aggregate data on adult education enrollments, providers, and state and federal funding. NRS data do not include program-level information on enrollment, funding, or student characteristics, a limitation we discuss in finding 5.

The remainder is organized as follows: We begin by presenting a brief background on adult education in the United States. We then present the five primary findings from our analysis. We conclude by discussing lessons for policy and research.

Adult Education in the United States

Distinct from and complementary to postsecondary education, public adult education has a long history in the United States. Records of organized adult education in individual states and cities date back to the 18th century. By the 1920s, public citizenship and “Americanization” classes for recent immigrants complemented a patchwork of evening and part-time programs to develop skills of adults with limited formal education (Knowles, 1994; Stubblefield & Keane, 1994). In 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act significantly expanded the role of the federal government in adult education, laying the foundation of our modern adult public education system. Federally funded adult education programs provide two general categories of services, each serving about half the adult education population:

1. Adult Basic Education or Adult Secondary Education (ABE or ASE) courses, where adults who lack foundational skills or did not earn a high school diploma develop academic proficiencies (e.g., basic literacy or numeracy), learn practical skills (e.g., computer skills or financial literacy), or prepare to take a high school

equivalency exam. ABE programs serve learners with skills below the 9th grade level while ASE programs serve learners with skills at the 9th to 12th grade level.

2. English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, where adults who lack English language proficiency develop their skills reading, writing, speaking, and understanding the English language (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This includes IELCE programs, which integrate civics instruction and the Integrated Education and Training model.

Today, local school districts, community-based organizations, community colleges, and other organizations operate federally funded adult education programs in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and six U.S. territories at an annual cost of over \$2 billion in state and federal funds (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a). By statute, the vast majority of federal funding for adult education (88%) is allocated by formula grants to states based on Census counts of the number of adults without a high school diploma (Capps et al., 2009; Judd, 2017). The remaining 12% of federal funding for adult education, which is allocated to IELCE programs, is based on the number of immigrants who were approved for permanent legal residence in that state (Collins, 2014). States are required to contribute matching funds of about 25% of total adult education spending (CLASP, 2016).

Causal research on adult education in the United States is limited, but several recent studies find promising evidence on the effects of adult ESL. Heller and Slungaard Mumma (2023) use a randomized enrollment lottery for a large adult ESL program in Massachusetts to identify its effect on economic and civic outcomes. We find that individuals who participated in the program earned about \$2,400 more per year and were over twice as likely to vote. Also in Massachusetts, Roder and Elliot (2020) show that participants who were randomly assigned to

receive adult ESL paired with career coaching and job placement assistance increased their earnings by over \$2,600 two years later.

Research on the potential returns to ABE and ASE is more mixed. The most recent randomized evaluations of ABE/ASE programs looked at the effects of these services as part of a larger evaluation of a job training program operated by the U.S. Department of Labor in the 1980s and 1990s. Two such older studies found that random assignment to job training and adult education classes – including ABE, ASE, and ESL – had positive effects on earnings and employment but did not disaggregate results by the type of adult education service received (Zambrowski & Gordon, 1993; Hamilton et al., 2001). In addition, many ABE and ASE programs are organized around preparing students to develop the requisite skills to pass a high school equivalency exam (e.g., the GED[®] or HiSET[®]). While adults with high-school equivalency credentials generally outperform their uncredentialed peers in the labor market, a substantial literature has called into question whether there is a causal relationship between high school equivalency credential attainment and labor market outcomes (e.g., Heckman, Humphries, & Kautz, 2014; Jepsen, Mueser & Troske, 2016). However, other interventions that help adults build foundational academic skills do pay off. Recent work by Brough, Phillips, and Turner (forthcoming) demonstrates that dedicated high schools for adults in Indiana increased graduates' earnings by nearly 40%.

Finding 1: Federally funded adult education programs serve fewer eligible adults than in the past

Since 2000, adult education enrollment in federally funded programs has fallen both in absolute terms and as a share of the U.S. adult population, as discussed. Enrollment has also fallen as a share of its target populations. In 2000, participation in adult ABE or ASE programs

was equivalent to 4.7% of U.S. adults without a high school diploma, as shown in Figure 2. Likewise, 2000 enrollment in ESL classes was equivalent to 6.8% of the adult LEP population in the United States. By 2021, enrollment in each adult education sector was equivalent to under 2% of its relevant target population. While the COVID-19 pandemic induced enrollment declines across all sectors of education between 2020 and 2022 (e.g., Grawe, 2021; Malkus, 2022), adult education enrollment shares in each sector had already fallen below 2.5% by 2019.

[FIGURE 2 HERE]

Finding 2: Demand for adult education services from immigrants is growing

While adult education enrollment has declined as a share of adults without high school diplomas and also as a share of adult English learners, as shown in Figure 2, this fact obscures the dramatically different demographic trends within these two populations over the past 25 years. Figure 3 plots the number of adults without a high school diploma in the United States against the sum of ABE and ASE enrollment each year (Figure 3A) and the number of LEP adults against adult ESL enrollment (Figure 3B). As shown in Figure 3A, declines in the number of participants in ABE/ASE programs coincide with declines in the number of adults without a high school diploma. Between 2000 and 2021, the adult population without a high school diploma fell from 18.4% to 10.6% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b; 2021a). Participation in the GED[®] and other high school equivalency exams also fell significantly over this period (Barshay, 2018; Heller, 2024). In contrast, the number of participants in ESL programs has declined despite dramatic *increases* in the adult U.S. LEP population, as shown in Figure 3B. Between 2000 and 2021, the adult LEP population grew from 16.4 million to 23.4 million, an increase of 43% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a; 2021b). Immigrants also make up a growing share of the adult population without a high school diploma in the United States. In 2021, 42% of the 24.2 million

adults (10.3 million adults) without a high school diploma were foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021a).

[FIGURE 3 HERE]

Given that ESL enrollment has fallen despite the growth of the LEP population, it is relevant to consider whether enrollment has fallen because there is less demand for in-person English classes than in the past, perhaps because of the increasing availability of app-based language learning tools (Loewen, Isbell & Sporn, 2020). Anecdotal data suggest that this is not the case. Although data on demand for adult education services is not centrally collected, research and news reports indicate that ESL programs are failing to meet demand in many places, with some programs waitlisting hundreds of students for months or years (e.g., Tucker, 2007; Burge, 2012; Hu, 2014; Heller & Slungaard Mumma, 2023).

Finding 3: Costs have risen substantially, but per-pupil spending remains low relative to other education sectors

Although federal and state funding for adult education has fallen by 15-20% in real terms since 2000, the per-pupil costs have increased substantially, reducing the impact of these dollars (U.S. Department of Education, 2023a). In 2000, federal and state governments spent approximately \$1,196 per adult education participant in constant 2022-23 dollars. By 2018-19, that figure grew to \$2,220, an increase of roughly 85% in per-participant costs (NRS, n.d.; U.S. Department of Education, 2023a).

Rising costs are not unique to adult education. Per-pupil expenditure in K-12 education rose by nearly 30% in real terms between 2000-01 and 2020-21 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b). In higher education, average student costs of attendance for four-year undergraduate institutions increased by almost 50% in real dollars between 2000-01 and 2020-21 (U.S.

Department of Education, 2023c). Many of the explanations that have been proposed for increased costs in these sectors are also relevant to adult education, including the “cost disease” theory, which proposes that technological changes that increase labor productivity in some sectors increase costs in personal service industries such as education (Baumol & Blackman, 1995; Archibald & Feldman, 2011). Notably, even after experiencing proportionally larger increases in per-pupil expenditure, adult education program costs are dwarfed by K-12 and higher education spending. In 2018-19, total per-pupil expenditure in K-12 schools (\$17,791) was roughly eight times higher than in adult education programs, and the average cost of tuition and fees at a four-year college (\$19,306) was nearly nine times higher (U.S. Department of Education, 2023b, 2023c).

Another factor that may have contributed to rising costs is the implementation of new accountability and reporting requirements (Condelli, 2013). Following trends toward increased accountability in education, the most recent reauthorization of the primary federal law on adult education – Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 – implemented new performance accountability measures primarily focused on employment and postsecondary success. These requirements have greatly increased the data collection and reporting duties of adult education providers (NRS, 2024).

One puzzling finding that emerges from the NRS data is that the per-participant costs of adult education services appear to vary substantially across states. In 2018 (pre-pandemic), for example, Vermont and D.C. reported spending over \$2,800 per adult education participant from state and federal funds (calculations based on NRS Tables 3 and 14). In that same year, Maryland, Nebraska, and Delaware reported spending under \$650 per participant. Some of this variation reflects real differences in how adult education services are being implemented, but it

seems likely that the observed heterogeneity also reflects differences in how data on enrollment or spending are reported in the NRS, as well as the role of local and private funding for adult education services.

Finding 4: Fewer K-12 school districts provide adult education services than in the past

The number of adult education providers has also decreased over time, driven by a steady decline in the number of local education agencies (LEAs) providing adult education services, as shown in Figure 4. While LEAs remain the most common type of adult education provider – representing roughly 45% of providers and sub-providers (“providers”) reported in the NRS -- the number of school districts providing federally funded adult education decreased by 57% (from 2,463 to 1,071) between 2005 and 2021. The number of community-based organizations, which represent a smaller share of adult education providers, has also declined over this time, while the number of community college providers has grown. In 2005, the state of California reported 286 adult education providers, including 205 LEAs. After emergency legislation gave California school districts permission to redirect adult education funds to fill budget gaps following the 2008 financial crisis, the number of LEA providers fell to 183 LEAs in 2011 (Nichols, 2011). As of 2022, California had only 168 LEA providers.

Finding 5: Existing data on adult education severely limits meaningful research

One reason for the limited attention adult education has received from education researchers is data limitations. While the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) provides comprehensive data on postsecondary institutions in the U.S. and the Common Core of Data (CCD) and Private School Universe Survey (PSS) provide comparable data on K-12 institutions, there is no comparable centralized directory of adult education programs in the U.S. This means it is not possible for researchers to answer basic questions such as how the

availability of these programs aligns with local needs, let alone assemble longitudinal data to analyze trends in access across geographies over time.

Moreover, ambiguities around what is or is not included in NRS data make it difficult to interpret. States are required to provide matching funds for adult education equivalent to 25% of total adult education spending, but some spend much more. It is unclear, however, whether states consistently report all state-level spending in NRS data. Federal “maintenance of effort” requirements create potential disincentives for reporting state spending above what is required, particularly if those investments come from non-renewable or politically dependent sources. In informal conversations, adult education leaders have expressed concerns about the extent to which the enrollment counts that are reported in NRS reflect the full scope of state and local investment in adult education as well as the consistency of variable definitions over time. With only aggregate data available and minimal oversight of the reporting process, we are unable to address these concerns.

Policy Implications

Adult education enrollment has fallen dramatically over the past twenty five years. These declines are not explained by decreased need for these services, as measured by the skills or credentials of the U.S. population; by these measures, need for adult education services has *grown*. It has also evolved. As compulsory schooling age requirements trend upward and graduation rates rise, a larger share of Americans earn conventional high school diplomas and demand for programs that help individuals pursue alternative credentials has declined (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). At the same time, dramatic increases in the adult LEP population has increased pressure on adult ESL programs, leading to long waitlists in some places. In 2000, just 42% of adult education students enrolled in adult ESL classes, while in

2019, adult ESL programs served more students than ABE and ASE combined.

This motivates our first recommendation: that increased attention—and funding—be directed to adult education based on its role in promoting immigrant integration. One concrete step would be to revise the existing primary federal funding formula for adult education allocations to take into consideration the number of LEP adults in a state. Doing so would provide explicit recognition that LEP adults – including immigrants with higher levels of education who lack English language skills – are a relevant population for these services (Capps et al., 2009). More generally, adult education programs should figure prominently in discussions about how communities can take steps to support the success of new waves of immigrants. This is overdue given the changing demographics of adult education students, and argues for the continued relevance of this sector despite falling demand for other services. It also provides a way to capitalize on recent research finding positive impacts of these programs on participants and economic returns for taxpayers (e.g., Modestino, Dopkins & Santelices, 2019; Roder & Elliott, 2020; Heller & Slungaard Mumma, 2023).

We recognize that highlighting the immigrant-serving role of the adult education sector carries political risks. Immigration is a volatile and increasingly polarized topic (Baker & Edmonds, 2021). The public may be less willing to invest in adult education if these investments are seen as primarily supporting immigrants instead of native-born Americans (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004; Dahlberg, Edmark & Lundqvist, 2012). Adult education stakeholders may also be concerned that emphasizing ESL will distract from the other populations these programs service, including adults with low literacy. Nonetheless, we argue that improving the English skills of immigrants has the qualities of a consensus-building agenda, representing a way to align adult literacy with immigrant social justice movements while simultaneously helping immigrants

develop the skills needed for self-sufficiency (Yankwitt, 2020).

Our second recommendation is that the federal government invest in improving public data on adult education programs. The implementation of new accountability requirements for adult education providers has greatly increased the amount of data reported by federally funded adult education programs but it has done little to make these data more useful to researchers attempting to understand the scale, scope, or impacts of this often overlooked sector. In K-12 and higher education, the availability of high quality data on enrollment, demographics, and spending has made possible paradigm-shifting research on the causes and consequences of resource disparities. The same will be needed for researchers to consider these issues in the context of adult education.

As a first step, Congress should direct funding to the U.S. Department of Education (U.S. DOE) to collect and publish basic information on adult education providers including, at a minimum, location, provider type, enrollment by service type, and funding received. Producing this data should be easy for states, given that the data reported to NRS comes from statewide participant-level data systems. Relatedly, U.S. DOE's Digest of Education Statistics – a widely used and authoritative source documenting the state of U.S. public education – should include IELCE enrollments in their annual adult education counts, and revise post-2016 tables to facilitate apples-to-apples historical comparisons. Additionally, U.S. DOE should regularly conduct a survey of state adult education directors to compile comprehensive data on spending from state sources on adult education services.

Finally, we encourage the development of research partnerships between scholars of education and adult education programs. More and better research is needed to understand how program costs and components relate to effects, explore tradeoffs (and potential

complementarities) between investments in basic skills and work-specific skills, and to identify and scale the most effective practices to help adult education students develop the skills they need to build meaningful and productive lives.

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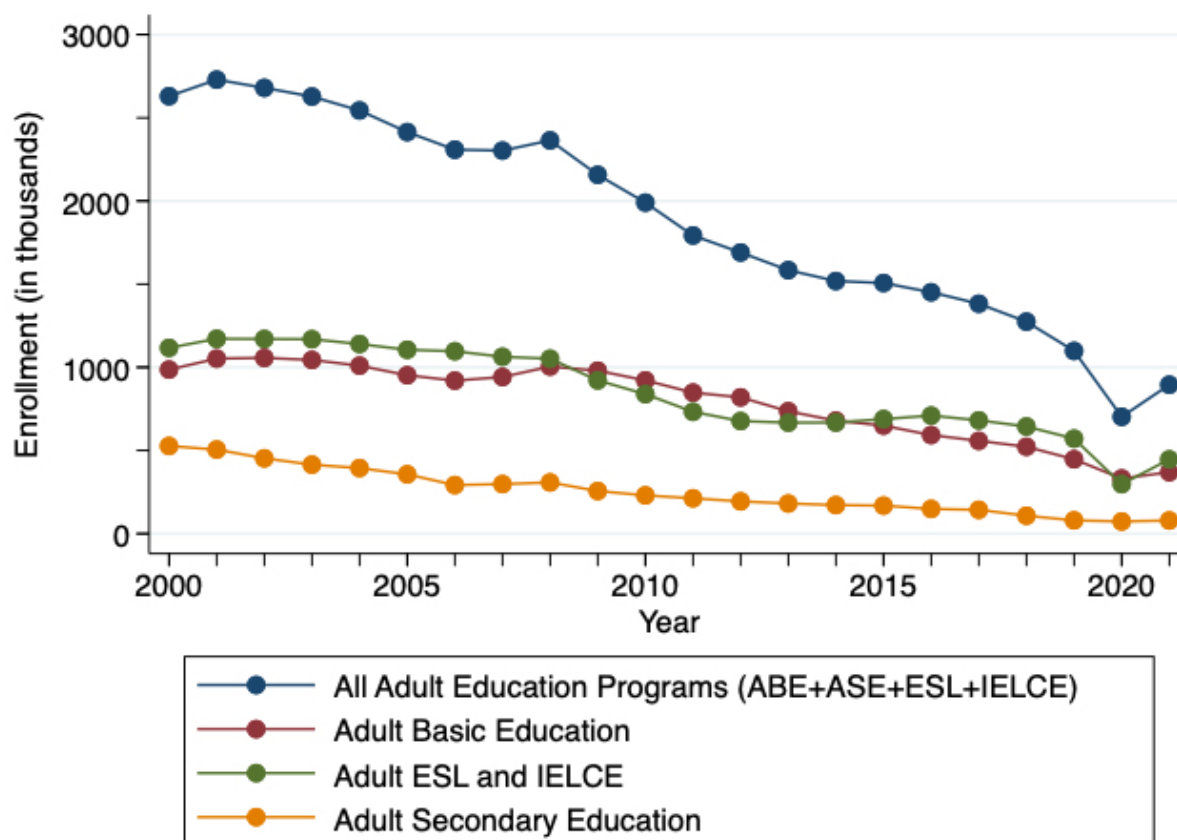
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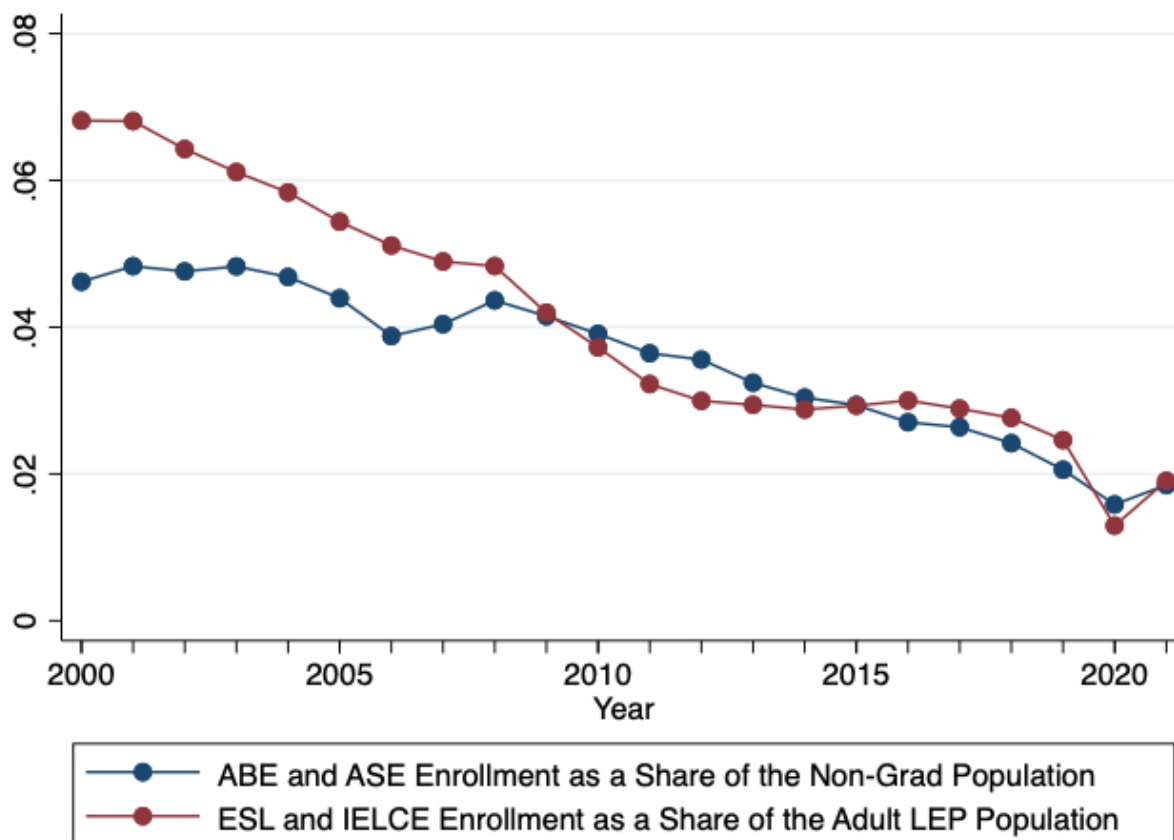
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Figure 1. Adult Education Enrollment in the United States, 2000-2021, by Program Type



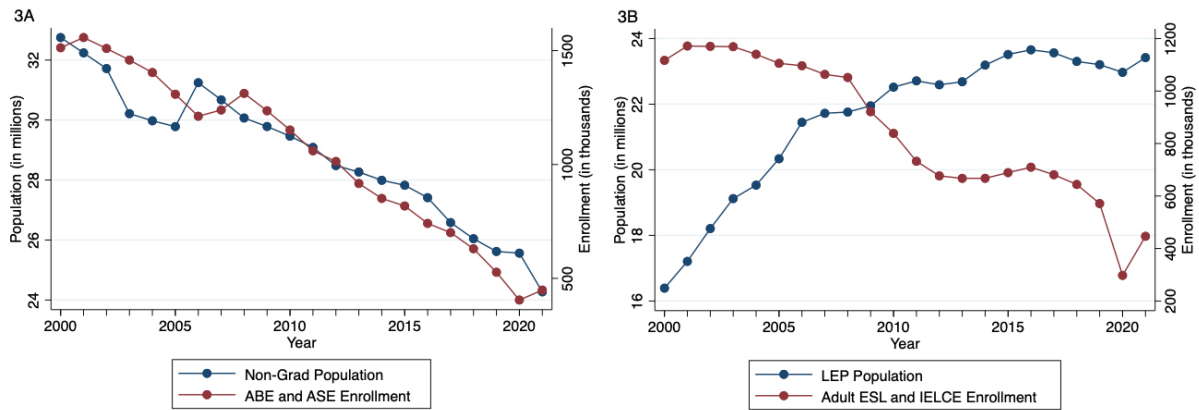
Notes: Each line plots total annual enrollment in the indicated adult education programs, summing over public programs in all 50 U.S. States and Washington D.C. (NRS, n.d.). Adult education enrollments in U.S. territories are omitted. Federally funded programs are required to report enrollment by program under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA) and its 2014 replacement, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA).

Figure 2. Share of Target Population Enrolled in Public Adult Education, by Program Type



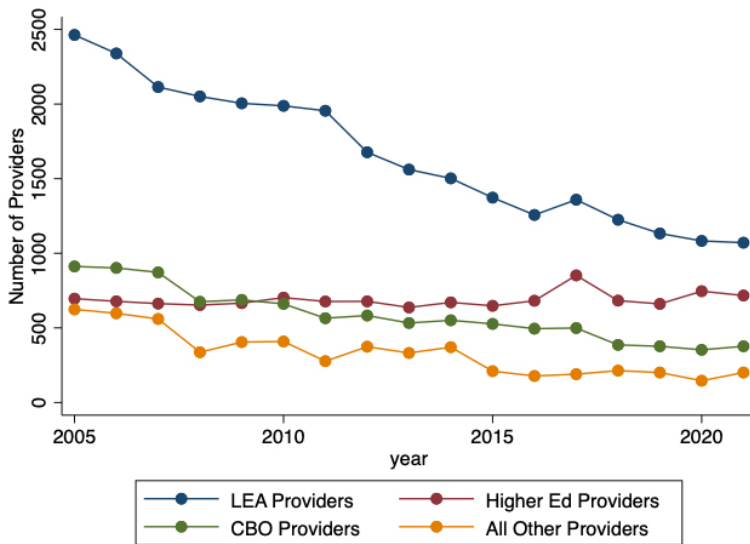
Notes: Each line plots the ratio of total annual enrollment in the indicated adult education programs (i.e., the enrollment totals from Figure 1) divided by the total number of adults without a high school diploma (blue line) or the total number of limited English proficient adults (red line). All totals sum over the relevant population in all 50 U.S. States and Washington D.C., omitting U.S. territories. (NRS, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000-2021).

Figure 3: Public Adult Education Enrollment vs. Target Population Size, by Program Type



Notes: Each line plots total annual enrollment in the indicated adult education programs (i.e., the enrollment totals from Figure 1) alongside the total number of adults without a high school diploma (Figure 3A) or the total number of limited English proficient adults in the United States (Figure 3B). All totals sum over the relevant population in all 50 U.S. States and Washington D.C., omitting U.S. territories. (NRS, n.d.; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000-2021).

Figure 4: Number of Adult Education Providers, by Organization Type



Notes: Authors calculations from NRS data, Table 14 (NRS, n.d.). Counts by year sum the total number of federally funded adult education providers and sub-recipients in all 50 U.S. States, Washington D.C., and six U.S. territories.