

Girls Left Behind: U.S. Rural-Urban Inequality in Educational Attainment  
among a Millennial Cohort

The past few years have seen reinvigorated interest in the economic, health, and political behavioral outcomes of people living in “rural America.” Curiously, we know little about the educational attainment of youth growing up across more rural and urban areas of the country—a primary driver of social and economic disparities across geographic space. We use the Education Longitudinal Study (ELS:2002) to examine inequalities in educational attainment across the rural and urban continuum. Results reveal a striking rural disadvantage in bachelor’s degree attainment among women, but not men. These gender-divergent patterns result in an absence of the “female advantage” in degree attainment among rural men and women, and a startling “female advantage” among urban young men and women. This research adds a geographic dimension to well-established literatures on the female “advantage” in education and illuminates rural-urban inequalities in educational attainment that were previously rendered empirically invisible.

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