

Test History of Test-Day Absentees Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver

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This is the third brief in a research series on the ACT® fee waiver program. In the first brief, *Use of Fee Waivers to Register for the ACT*,¹ we found that, between the 2014–15 and 2018–19 school years, about one out of five registrations for the ACT was completed with a fee waiver and that ACT’s fee waiver program appears to have reached its intended recipients—i.e., students from lower-income families. In the second brief, *Test-Day Absenteeism Among Students Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver*,² we found that, over the same five-year period, roughly one out of four fee-waived ACT registrations resulted in a test day absence, with higher absentee rates among students who reported lower family income levels.

This high rate of test-day absenteeism is concerning. The ACT test is an important step in the college-going process, with over 1,500 colleges across the US either requiring, recommending, or considering test scores as a criterion for admission decisions.³ Fee waivers are intended to remove the financial burden of taking the test, thus potentially expanding eligible students’ access to a greater number of colleges across the US. If these students fail to sit for a test date, it is important to examine whether they still had access to one or more ACT testing opportunities.

Accordingly, for this third brief, we examined the prior and subsequent testing behavior of students who did not test on their originally scheduled test date. The established time frame for observing this other testing behavior comprises a three-year period that includes the test year in which the students were absent on their originally scheduled test date, the test year before that event, and the test year after that event. We found that:

- Only one-third of test-day absentees who had registered with a fee waiver had taken the ACT on a prior test date (including State and District testing), compared to one-half of the absentees who had paid the registration fee.⁴
- Only one out of four test-day absentees who had registered with a fee waiver took the ACT on a subsequent test date (including State and District testing), compared to one out of every two absentees who had paid the registration fee.
- A little over one-half of all test-day absentees who had registered with a fee waiver never tested during the three-year time frame surrounding their test day absence. Only one-quarter of absentees who paid the registration fee did not test within the three-year period.



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- Among test-day absentees who had registered with a fee waiver, students with a lower family income or whose parents had lower education levels were more likely to never test over the three-year period compared to their peers with higher family income and parent education levels.
- Of those test-day absentees who had registered with a fee waiver, states varied widely in the percentage who never took the ACT within the three-year period. States that offer State and District testing had the lowest rates of these students never testing, whereas states from the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic (historically, SAT states) had the highest rates of these students never taking the ACT.

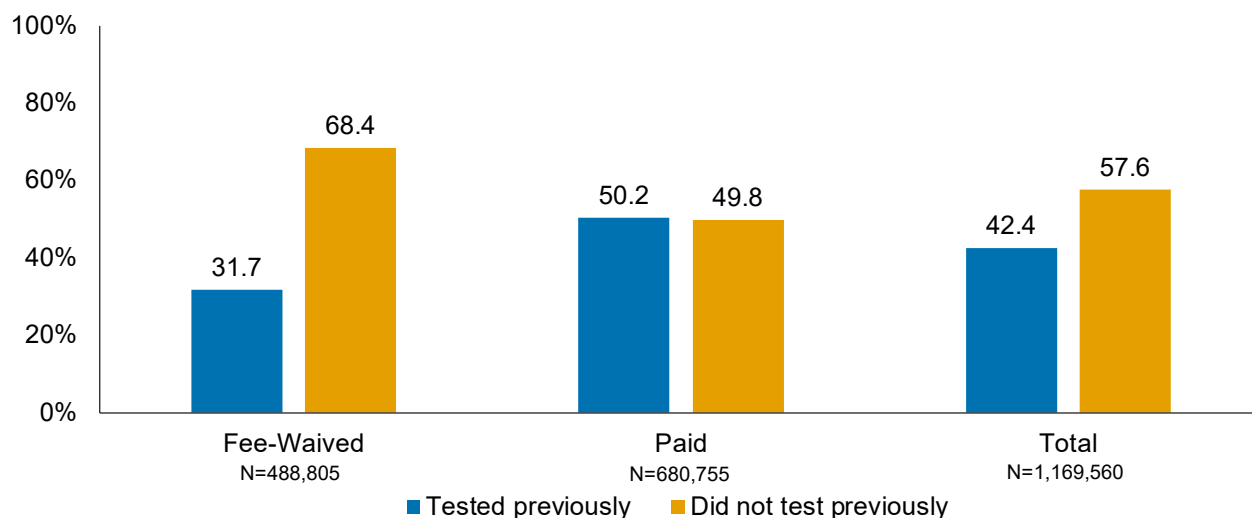
Unlike prior briefs in our series, we focus our analysis for this third brief on students as opposed to test registrations. Specifically, in this brief, we focus on students who did not test on at least one scheduled National test date during the 2015–16, 2016–17, or 2017–18 school years.⁵ For these students, we examined whether they had:

- Taken the ACT on a previous test date during the same test year or the prior test year
- Taken the ACT on a subsequent test date during the same year or the following test year
- Taken the ACT at any time over the three-year period including the prior test year, same test year, or following test year

Previous Test-Taking Behavior of Test-Day Absentees

Overall, 42.4% of the test-day absentees in our study had taken the ACT on a previous test date in the same year or the prior year (see Figure 1). This test event included any National test date as well as in-school testing through ACT's State and District testing options. The percentage of absentees that had tested previously differed substantially by the registration type for the test date in which the student was absent. Among the test-day absentees who had registered for that test date with a fee waiver, only 31.7% had taken the ACT previously, whereas 50.2% of students who had paid the registration fee for the test date in which they were absent had tested previously.

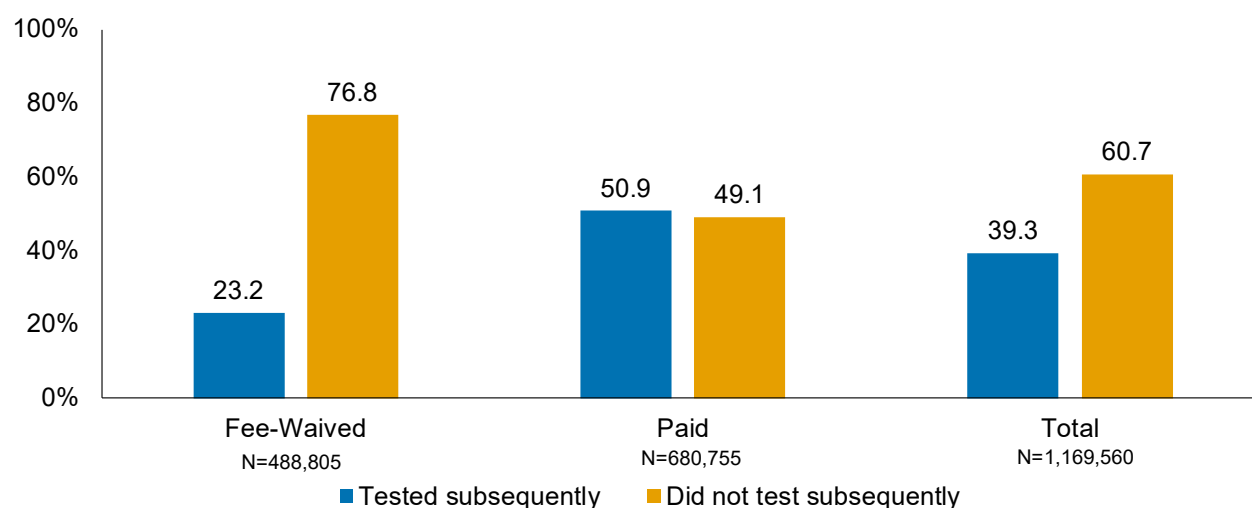
Figure 1. Previous ACT Test-Taking among Test-Day Absentees



Subsequent Test-Taking Behavior of Test-Day Absentees

Among all test-day absentees covered in this study, 39.3% went on to take the ACT on a subsequent National test date or State and District test date either in the same or following test year (see Figure 2).⁶ As with prior test behavior, subsequent test behavior differed by the registration type of the test-day absentees. Just over half (50.9%) of test-day absentees who paid the registration fee for the test date in which they were absent took the ACT on a subsequent test date compared to only 23.2% of test-day absentees who had used a fee waiver to register for the test date in which they were absent.

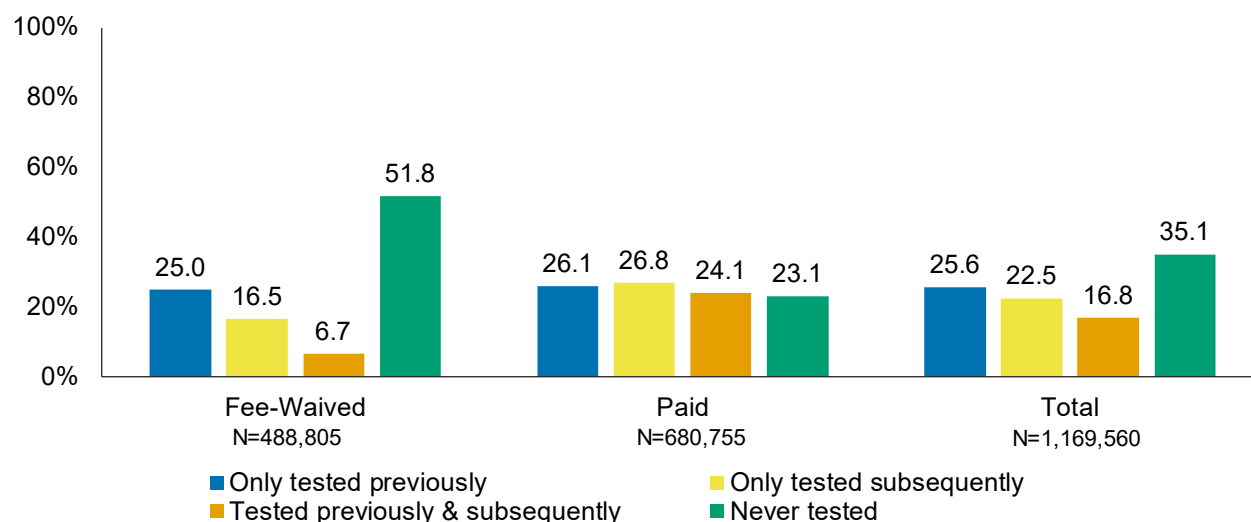
Figure 2. Subsequent ACT Test-Taking among Test-Day Absentees



Test-Taking Behavior of Test-Day Absentees over a Three-Year Period

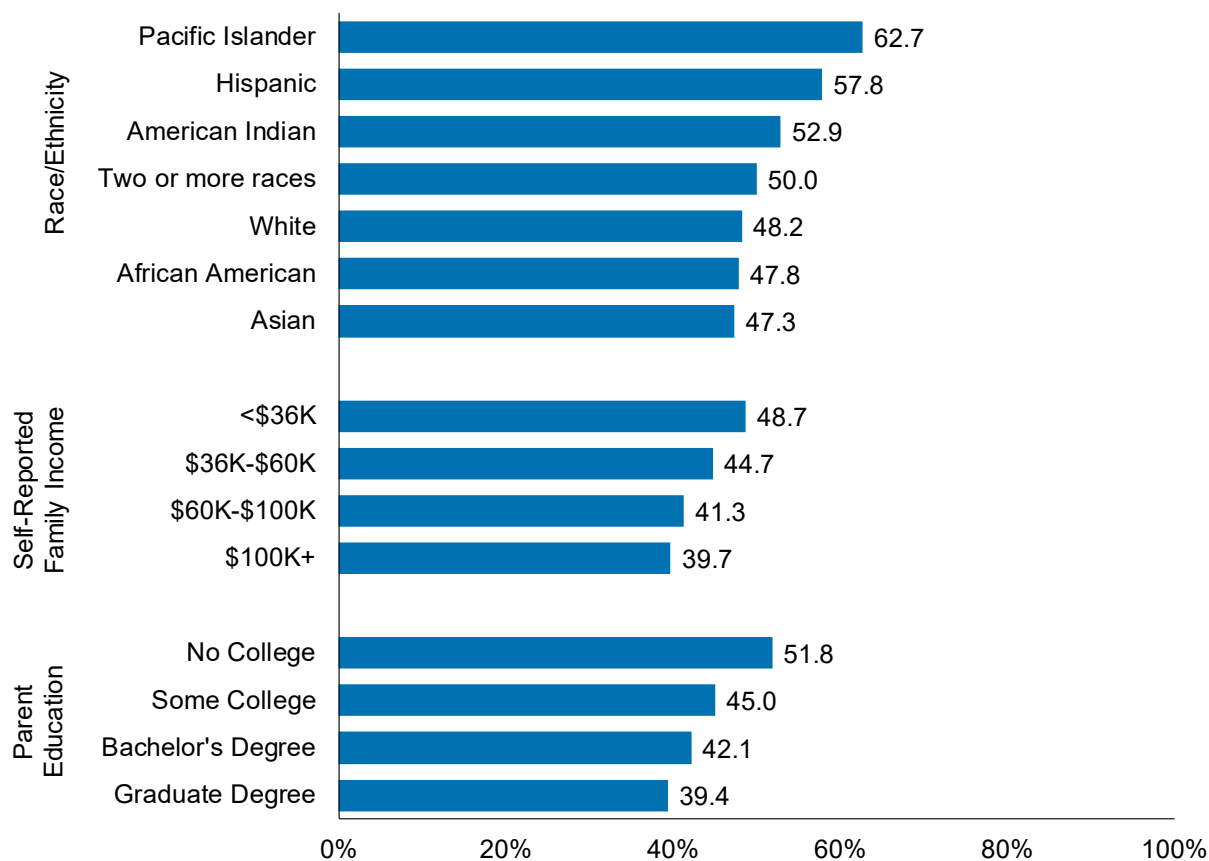
Taking both prior and subsequent test-taking into account provides a stark contrast between those test-day absentees who registered with a fee waiver versus those who paid the registration fee. Over half (51.8%) of all test-day absentees who had registered with a fee waiver never took the ACT during the three test years under consideration in this study, compared to roughly one-fourth (23.1%) of all absentees who had paid the registration fee (see Figure 3). Additionally, only 6.7% of absentees who had registered with a fee waiver tested both previously and subsequently, compared to 24.1% of absentees who had paid for their registration.

Figure 3. Any ACT Test-Taking among Test-Day Absentees



Given these large discrepancies, a closer examination of the test-taking behavior of absentees who had registered for the ACT with a fee waiver is warranted. Figure 4 shows the percentage of this group (N=488,805) who never tested within the three-year window by race/ethnicity, self-reported family income, and parent education level.⁷ Compared to Asian (47.3%), African American (47.8%), and White (48.2%) test-day absentees, substantially higher shares of Pacific Islander (62.7%) and Hispanic (57.8%) test-day absentees never took the ACT within the three-year period of our study. Figure 4 also shows that there is a relationship between the extent to which test-day absentees never take the ACT and the students' self-reported family income and parent education level. Specifically, students with a lower family income or whose parents had lower education levels were more likely to never test over the three-year period compared to their peers with higher family income and parent education levels.⁸

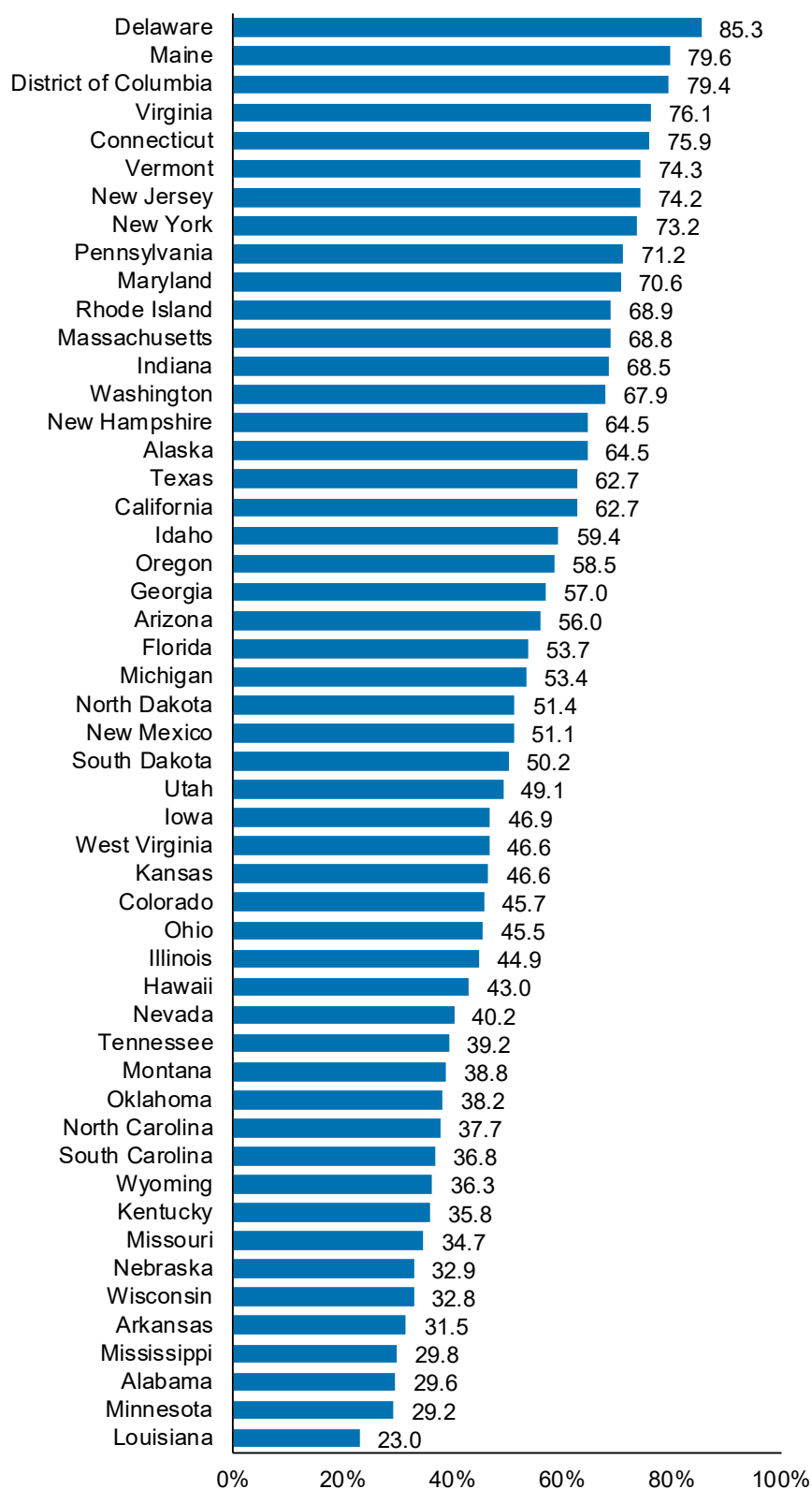
Figure 4. Percentage of Fee-Waived Test-Day Absentees Who Never Tested by Student Characteristics



Note: We excluded any data that were missing for race/ethnicity, family income, and parent education.

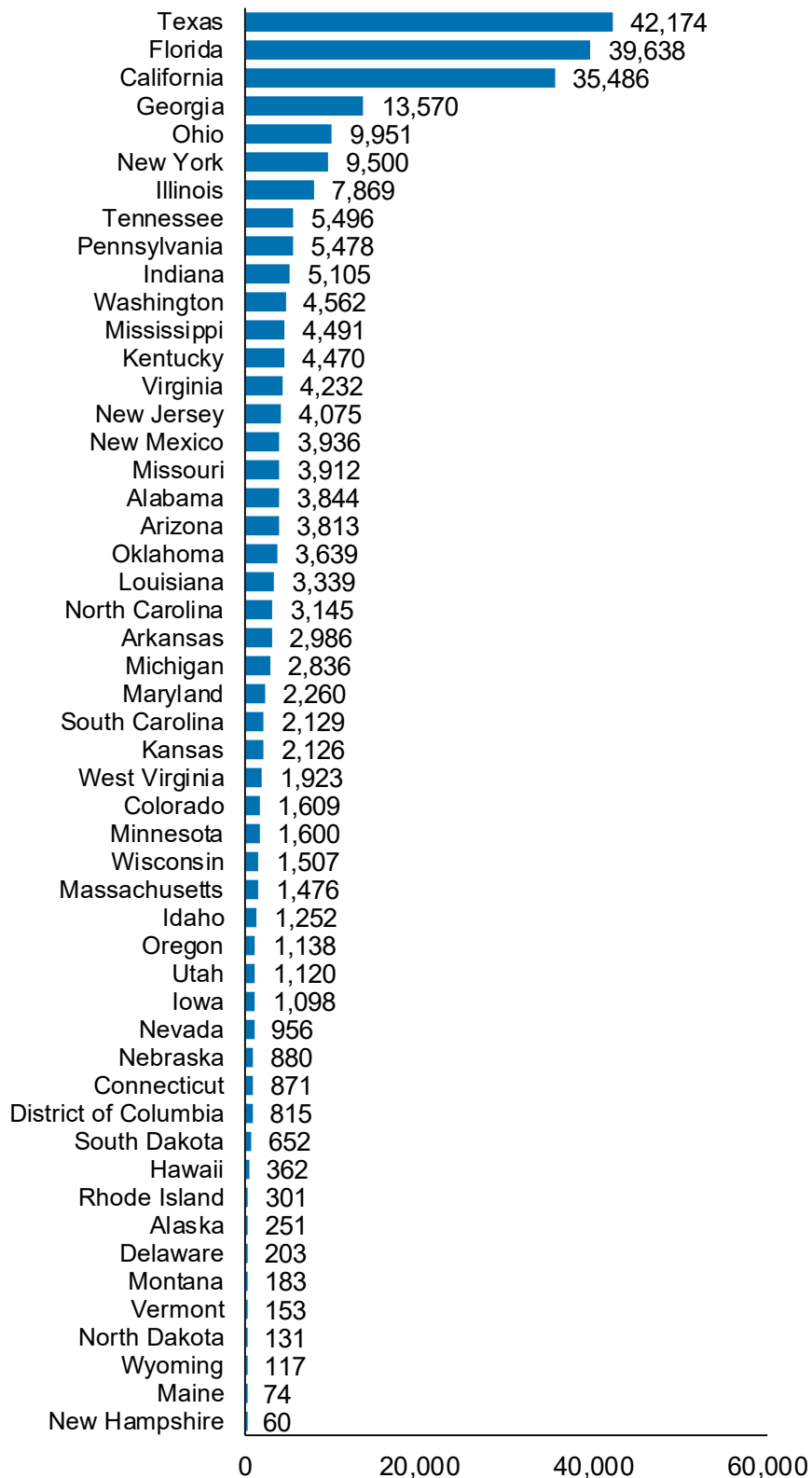
In addition to varying by student characteristics, the share of fee-waived test-day absentees who never took the ACT also varied by state—from as low as 23.0% in Louisiana to as high as 85.3% in Delaware (see Figure 5). Those states in which ACT had a state contract to test all public high school juniors (e.g., Louisiana, Minnesota, Alabama, Mississippi) had the lowest shares of fee-waived test-day absentees who never took the ACT. At the other end of the continuum, states located in the Northeast and in the Mid-Atlantic (e.g., Delaware, Maine, Connecticut, Vermont; those that have traditionally had a larger share of students taking the SAT) had the highest rates of fee-waived test day absentees who never took the ACT.

Figure 5. Percentage of Fee-Waived Test-Day Absentees Who Never Tested by US State



The prior comparison is based on the percentage of fee-waived test-day absentees in a given state who never took the ACT within a three-year period; we also looked at which states had the largest number of fee-waived test-day absentees who never tested. Here, the states ranked differently (see Figure 6). Three states—Texas, Florida, and California—when combined (N=117,298), accounted for about 46% of all fee-waived test-day absentees who never took the ACT (N=252,794) over the three-year period. This finding is not surprising given that these three states also accounted for about 40% of all registrations that were completed with a fee waiver and about 40% of all test-day absenteeism among students who registered with a fee waiver.

Figure 6. Number of Fee-Waived Test-Day Absentees Who Never Tested by US State



Conclusion

A substantial number of students who are eligible for fee waivers are using them to register for the ACT. Unfortunately, too many of these students are not following through and testing on their registered test date. Of these test-day absentees, a little over half never take the ACT. Given the importance of ACT scores for admission to many four-year colleges in the US, it is imperative to learn more about why these students are not testing. The next brief in this series will highlight the reasons why students who registered for the ACT with a fee waiver were unable to sit for the test as scheduled and address ways that stakeholders can join ACT in working to improve attendance rates in their communities, districts, states, and across the country.

Notes

1. Cruce, Ty, Raeal Moore, and Shannon Hayes, *Use of Fee Waivers to Register for the ACT* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020). <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1826-fee-waiver-usage.pdf>.
2. Cruce, Ty, Shannon Hayes, and Raeal Moore, *Test-Day Absenteeism Among Students Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020). <https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1829-fw-test-day-absenteeism.pdf>.
3. NCES, "Use the Data," Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/use-the-data>.
4. National test dates are testing opportunities on the weekend (typically Saturday) where students choose to take the ACT and are generally responsible for registering themselves and paying any non-waived fees. State and District test dates represent tests administered during the school day at no cost to the student; all students are offered the opportunity (or required) to test on a specific date at their school.
5. If students were absent on more than one test date during this three-year period, we randomly selected one of those test dates to use in our analysis. Over the three-year period examined in this brief, 1,169,560 students in the United States were absent on at least one test date for which they had originally registered. Of these students, 58.2% paid the registration fee for their test date and 41.8% had the registration fee waived for their test date. This percentage is comparable to our finding in the second brief that registrations completed with a fee waiver represented 40.1% of all test-day absences. That brief used registrations as opposed to students as the unit of analysis, and fee waiver representation was based on five years of data (2014–15 through 2018–19) as opposed to three years of data.

6. Taking the test on a subsequent National test date required either requesting a test date change for the current registration or registering anew for a different National test date with or without a fee waiver.
7. Data on student and family characteristics are self-reported. When students register to take the ACT test, they are asked a number of questions about themselves and their families, including their race and ethnicity, their family's income, and the education level of their parent(s)/guardian(s). We excluded any data that were missing for race/ethnicity, family income, and parent education.
8. Although most students from households earning over \$60,000 would not qualify for an ACT fee waiver, students do not always accurately self-report their family income. As a result, we find small percentages of students in higher self-reported income categories whose ACT registration fees are waived.

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