Test-Day Absenteeism Among Students Who Registered for the ACT with a Fee Waiver

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This is the second brief in a series of studies we are conducting to investigate ACT's fee waiver program. The first brief, *Use of Fee Waivers to Register for the ACT*, summarizes the number and percentage of ACT national test date registrations that were completed with a fee waiver between the 2014-2015 and 2018-19 school years.[1] This brief provides an overview of *test-day absenteeism* during the same five school years among students who registered for ACT national test dates with fee waivers. Our findings include:

- Over the five-year period studied, the test-day absentee rate among registrations completed with a fee waiver (27.4%) was over twice as high as the absentee rate for registrations where the fee was paid (11.2%).
- The test-day absentee rates among fee-waived registrations increased slightly over the five-year period studied, from 25.6% to 28.9%. The test-day absentee rate for paid registrations remained more stable, increasing by only .5 percentage points over this time period.
- Within each of the five school years studied, the test-day absentee rate for fee-waived registrations increased from September to December and then leveled off for the remainder of the school year and summer.
- Test-day absentee rates among registrations completed with a fee waiver varied by states, ranging from a high of 40.0% of fee-waived registrations in the District of Columbia to a low of 21.0% in Iowa.
- Given their large ACT-taking populations, Florida, Texas, and California alone accounted for 40% of all test-day absences nationally among registrations completed with a fee waiver.
- Students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education had some of the highest test-day absentee rates among students who registered for the ACT. This pattern was evident regardless of whether their registration fee was waived or paid, but the absentee rates among students from underserved backgrounds whose registration fee was waived were about two times higher than the absentee rates of students from underserved backgrounds who paid the registration fee.

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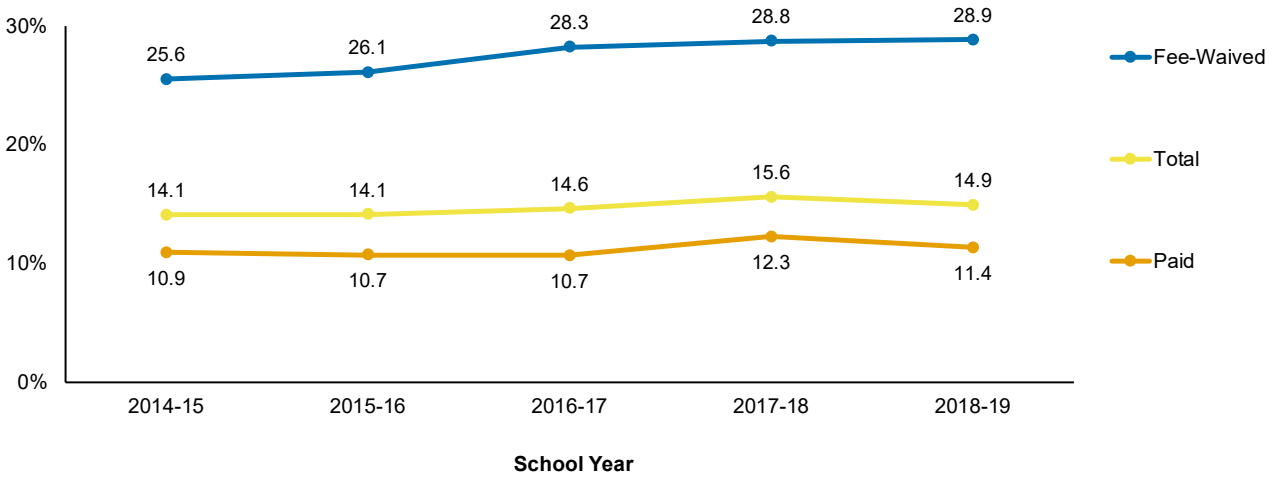
Historically, a large and disproportionate share of students who register for an ACT national test date with a fee waiver have not subsequently taken the test on their registered test date. In this issue brief, we will refer to this phenomenon as "test-day absenteeism." By this definition, a test-day absence could result from any number of student actions on or before the scheduled test date, such as failing to upload proper photo identification by the requested date, arriving late or not at all to the test center, forgetting materials needed for admission to the test center (i.e., admission ticket and photo identification), or submitting a test date change request (before or after the test date).[2] Between 2014-15 and 2018-19, 27.4% of fee-waived registrations resulted in a test day absence, compared to an absentee rate of only 11.2% among paid registrations. This extent of absenteeism among students who registered with a fee waiver resulted in over 865,000 empty test seats and $44 million in forfeited fee waivers during this five-year period.[3]

As in the first brief, we focus our analysis here on ACT registrations and not individuals. Although we sometimes refer to *students*, ACT *registrations* and not individual students are the unit of analysis in this brief. We focus on registrations because students could register to take the ACT on more than one test date and because students who were eligible for fee waivers could use up to two fee waivers to register for the ACT. Given this focus on registrations, our results include students who may have registered and tested multiple times in this five-year window.

Trends in Test-Day Absenteeism

Between the 2014-15 and 2018-19 school years, the test-day absentee rate for test registrations where the fee was waived increased slightly (by 3.1 percentage points), while the test-day absentee rate for test registrations where the fee was paid remained more stable, increasing by only .5 percentage points (Figure 1). In any given school year, the test-day absentee rate among fee-waived registrations was over twice as high as the absentee rate for paid registrations. Indeed, over the five-year period, registrations completed with a fee waiver represented only 21.5% of all national test date registrations, but they represented 40.1% of all test-day absences.

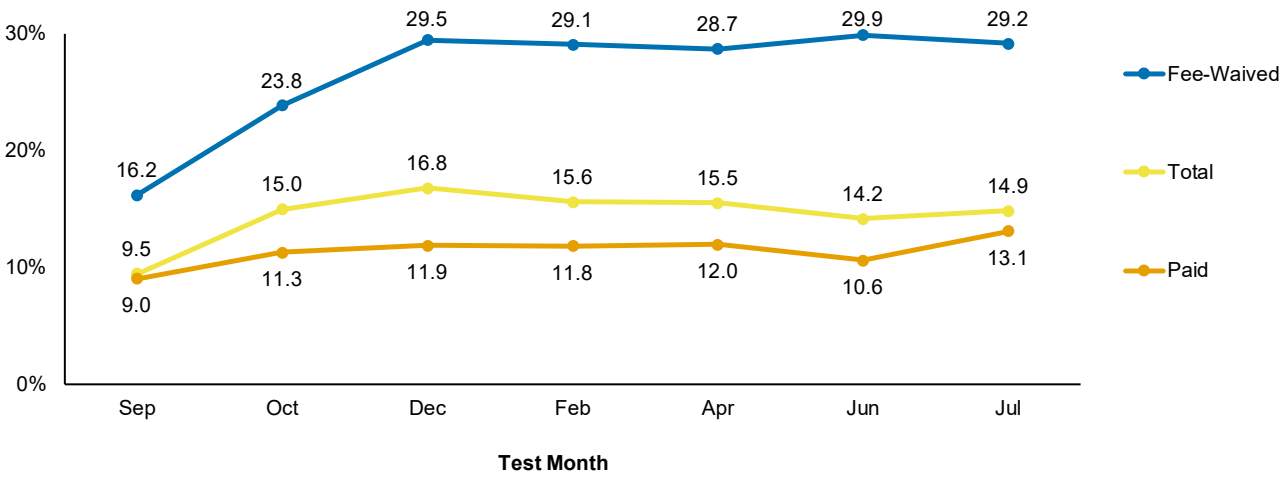
Figure 1. Test-day Absentee Rate by Registration Type and School Year



Test-Day Absenteeism across Test Dates

The percentage of registrations that resulted in a test-day absence was not consistent across the national test dates in a given school year (see Figure 2). Test-day absentee rates, which were at their lowest for the September test date, steadily increased during the first half of the school year and flattened out over the second half of the school year and summer. This pattern holds true for both fee-waived registrations and paid registrations. Although the test-day absentee rate is consistently higher for fee-waived registrations than for paid registrations, the gap is at its smallest for the September test date. This pattern that we see by national test date was similar within each of the five years studied, even after the introduction of the July ACT test date during the 2017-18 school year.

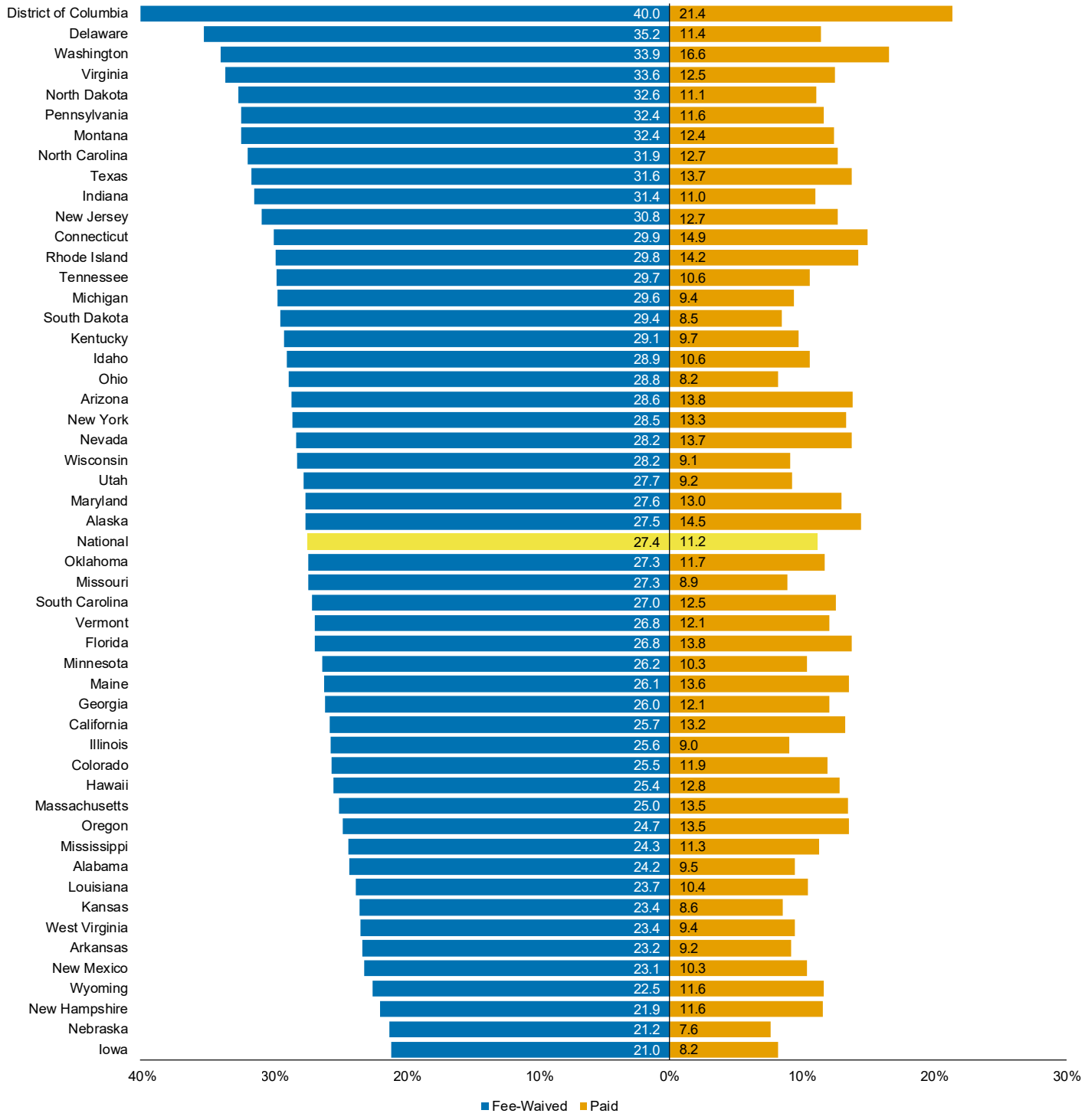
Figure 2. Test-day Absentee Rate by Registration Type and Test Month (5-year Aggregate)



Test-Day Absenteeism across States

Over the five school years studied, test-day absentee rates varied across the United States (see Figure 3). The District of Columbia had the highest absentee rates regardless of registration type, with two out of five fee-waived test registrations and one out of five paid test registrations resulting in a test-day absence. At the other end of the continuum, states such as Iowa and Nebraska had some of the lowest absentee rates among both fee-waived and paid test registrations. As seen in Figure 3, several states had large discrepancies in test-day absentee rates between fee-waived and paid registrations. For example, in states such as Ohio, South Dakota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Delaware, Missouri, and Utah, the test-day absentee rate for fee-waived registrations was over three times higher than the absentee rate for paid registrations. Even in the states with the smallest discrepancies, the test-day absentee rate for fee-waived registrations was still almost double the rate for paid registrations.

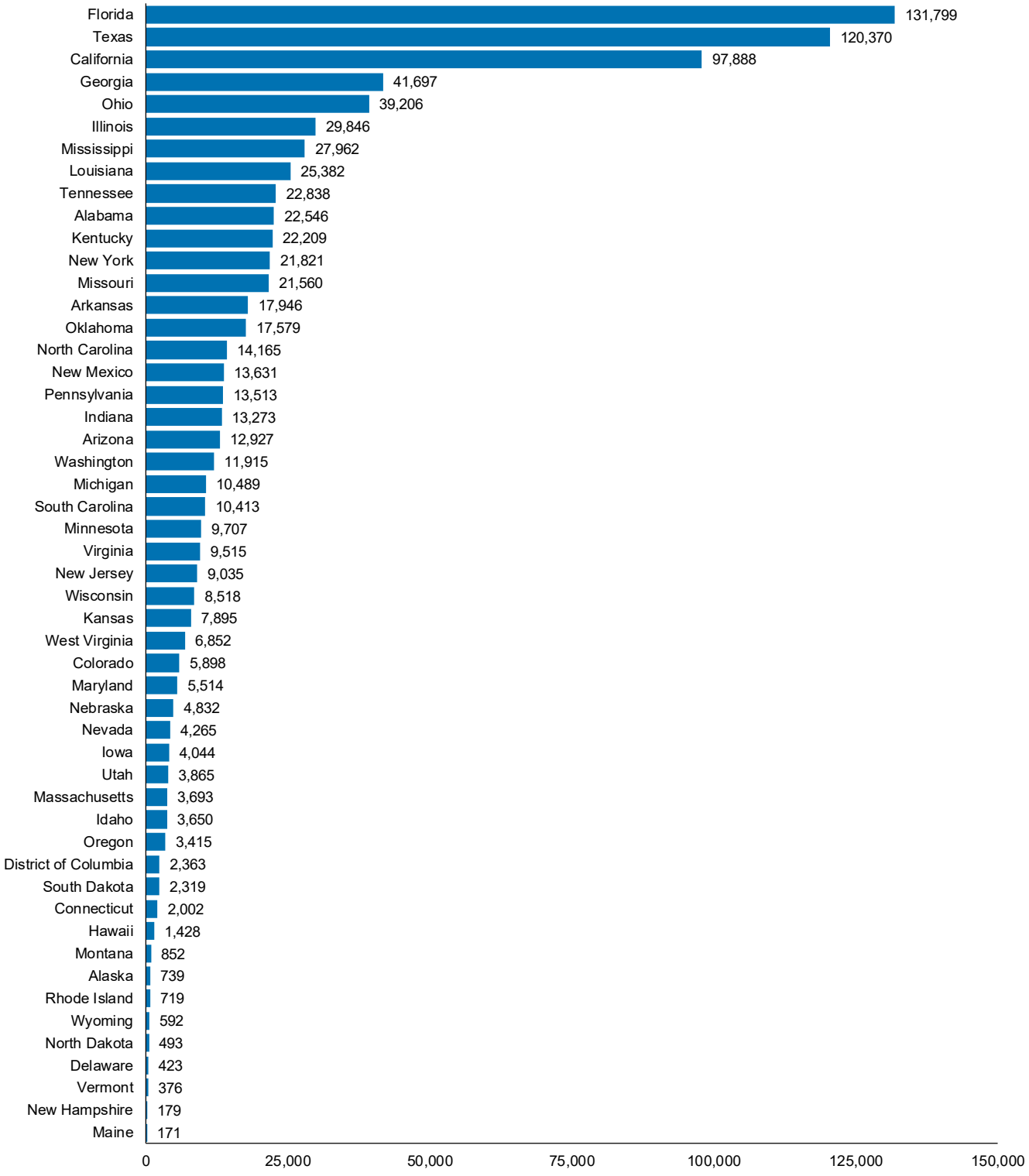
Figure 3. Test-day Absentee Rate by Registration Type within US States (5-year Aggregate)



While the prior comparison is based on the *percentage* of registrations that resulted in a test-day absence within a given state, we also looked at which states had the largest *number* of test-day absences among registrations completed with a fee waiver. Here, the states ranked differently (see Figure 4). Over the five years studied, three states—Florida, Texas, and California—when combined (n = 350,057), accounted for about 40% of all test-day absences nationally among fee-waived registrations (n = 865,543). Every other state accounted for less than 5% of the national number of fee-waived registrations

that resulted in a test-day absence. This finding is not altogether surprising given that these three states also accounted for about 40% of all fee-waived registrations over the same five-year period.

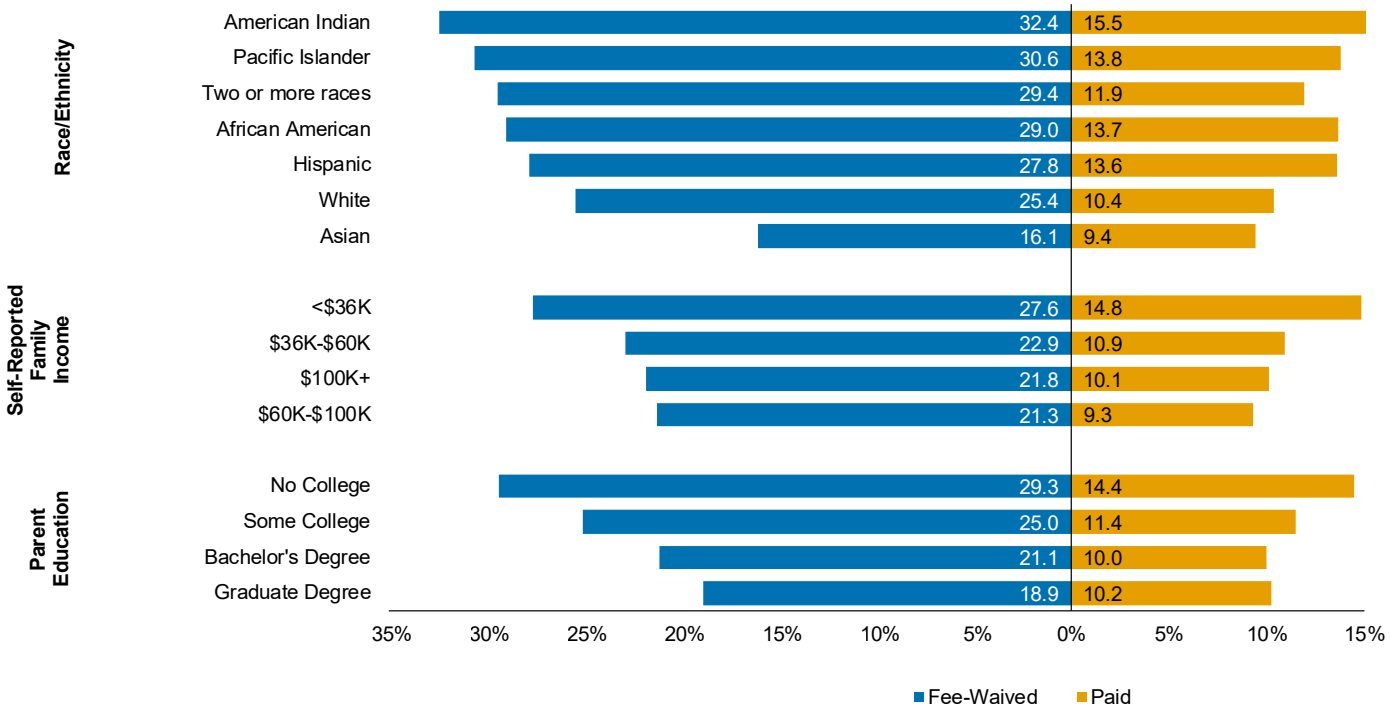
Figure 4. Number of Fee-Waived Registrations that Resulted in a Test-Day Absence by US State (5-Year Aggregate)



Test-Day Absenteeism among Students Who Are Traditionally Underrepresented in Higher Education

By design, ACT fee waivers have been used at higher rates by students who have been historically underrepresented in US higher education.[4] That said, over the five school years studied, these same students had some of the highest test-day absentee rates among all students using fee waivers (see Figure 5).[5] Between 2014-15 and 2018-19, roughly one-third of all fee-waived registrations completed by American Indian students resulted in a test-day absence. The test-day absentee rates of Pacific Islander, African American, and Hispanic students who registered with a fee waiver were also higher than those of White and Asian students who completed their registrations with a fee waiver. In addition, test-day absentee rates were inversely related to self-reported family income and highest parental/guardian education level.[6] Although many of these same patterns in test-day absentee rates by race/ethnicity, family income, and parent education were evident among students who paid the registration fee, the absentee rates of these students were substantially lower than their peers who registered with a fee waiver.

Figure 5. Test-Day Absentee Rate by Registration Type and Student Characteristics (5-year Aggregate)



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

Conclusion

Expanding access to the ACT can increase students' access to and opportunities within higher education, and this is especially important for those students who are traditionally underrepresented at degree-granting institutions. Unfortunately, 27.4% of ACT registrations completed with a fee waiver resulted in test-day absences, with higher absentee rates among students of color, students who reported the lowest family income category, and students whose parents have no college education. The absentee rates for students in these particular groups were higher than those of other students who received fee waivers as well as their peers who paid the registration fee.

Given the importance of a college readiness assessment in students' postsecondary planning, we need to learn whether test-day absentees who registered with a fee waiver still had access to one or more ACT testing opportunities. In the next brief in this series, we will examine the prior and subsequent testing behavior of these students.

Notes

1. Ty Cruce, 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. We will address the reasons for test-day absences among students who registered for the ACT with a fee waiver in a future brief.

3. This dollar amount was calculated by multiplying the number of absent students whose registration fees were waived by the registration fee for their selected test option and test year. Registration fees differed by test option (i.e., the ACT or the ACT with writing) and test year.

4. Cruce, Moore, and Hayes, *Use of Fee Waivers to Register for the ACT.*

5. 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).

6. 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 reigstration fees are waived.

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