



# The Complexity of Education Debt among Older Americans

## Methodology

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To conduct this analysis, we use data from the 2013–16 administrations of the Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking (SHED).<sup>1</sup> The SHED surveys 4,000 to 6,000 randomly selected households annually. We pool the data and use sample weights from each year of the survey, weights that are generated using demographic and geographic distributions from the most recent Current Population Survey.

In each year after 2013, a selection of randomly sampled households from the previous year were surveyed again and included in the new year's data. Because each year is weighted to produce a cross-sectional estimate, we include these resurveyed households in all years they were surveyed. In the 2014, 2015, and 2016 surveys, the sample included an oversample of respondents with a household income of less than \$40,000.

All dollar amounts reported have been inflation-adjusted to 2016 dollars (except for the household income categories that are dollars of the day). In our analysis, we look at Americans holding any type of education debt. When we restrict the sample to those holding student loans, our results are quantitatively similar.

Estimates using results from the SHED are comparable with estimates generated from the Current Population Survey, the Survey of Income and Program Participation, and the American Community Survey.<sup>2</sup>

TABLE 1

## Demographics of Adults Ages 50 and Older Who Hold Education Debt

	All Respondents			Excluding N/A	
	Sample size	Share among adults with education debt for self	Share among adults with education debt for child or grandchild	Sample size	Share among adults with education debt for child or grandchild
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,868</b>	<b>3.5%</b>	<b>7.8%</b>	<b>10,479</b>	<b>9.5%</b>
<b>Race</b>					
White	10,208	2.2%	8.2%	8,325	10.1%
Black	1,122	9.4%	5.3%	903	16.6%
Hispanic	897	5.1%	7.0%	743	8.5%
Other	309	4.2%	8.3%	239	10.8%
Multiple	332	6.3%	8.8%	269	10.8%
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	6,446	3.5%	7.5%	5,197	9.3%
Female	6,422	3.5%	8.0%	5,282	9.7%
<b>Household income</b>					
\$0-19,999	2,215	6.4%	2.0%	1,585	2.7%
\$20,000-39,999	3,565	3.3%	3.7%	2,859	4.8%
\$40,000-59,999	1,700	2.6%	6.0%	1,397	7.3%
\$60,000-99,999	2,596	3.5%	10.5%	2,232	12.2%
\$100,000+	2,792	2.4%	13.0%	2,406	15.2%
<b>Educational attainment</b>					
High school or less	7,963	2.5%	6.4%	6,606	7.7%
Associate's degree	1,081	6.9%	10.5%	883	13.0%
Bachelor's degree	2,146	3.5%	10.7%	1,669	14.0%
Advanced degree	1,678	6.4%	9.9%	1,321	12.8%

Source: 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking.

Note: N/A indicates that the respondent was not asked the question, which typically indicates that they did not report having children or grandchildren.

TABLE 2

**Debt and Financial Security among Adults Ages 50 and Older Who Hold Education Debt**

	Adults with Education Debt for Self		Adults with Education Debt for Child or Grandchild	
	Sample size	Share	Sample size	Share
<b>Debt type</b>				
Student loan	387	85.1%	505	84.2%
HELOC	387	7.6%	505	9.9%
Credit card	387	20.2%	505	13.8%
Other	387	10.4%	505	6.0%
<b>Current debt amount</b>				
25th percentile	401	\$4,080	197	\$4,794
50th percentile	401	\$11,440	197	\$13,260
75th percentile	401	\$30,000	197	\$33,660
<b>Monthly payment</b>				
25th percentile	421	\$0	351	\$0
50th percentile	421	\$54	351	\$121
75th percentile	421	\$182	351	\$306
<b>Debt status</b>				
Behind on payments or in collections	402	31.1%	183	9.0%
<b>Financial security</b>				
Very difficult to get by	455	20.9%	932	7.8%
Just getting by	455	34.0%	932	25.5%
Doing okay	455	36.0%	932	44.8%
Living comfortably	455	8.9%	932	21.8%

Source: 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking.

Notes: HELOC = home equity line of credit. Student loan includes private or federal loans.

## Notes

1. See "Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking," Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, last updated August 7, 2017, [https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/shed\\_data.htm](https://www.federalreserve.gov/consumerscommunities/shed_data.htm).
2. See Jeff Larrimore, Maximilian Schmeiser, and Sebastian Devlin-Foltz, "Should You Trust Things You Hear Online? Comparing SHED and Census Bureau Survey Results," Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, October 15, 2015, <https://www.federalreserve.gov/econresdata/notes/feds-notes/2015/comparing-shed-and-census-bureau-survey-results-20151015.html>.

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