

Educational attainment is one of the most important influences on economic well-being. More education tends to be reflected in greater socio-economic success for individuals and the country. Although the United States' overall trend reflects a more educated population, significant differences in educational attainment remain with regard to age, gender, race, and origin. Nevertheless, the educational attainment of the young adults (ages 25 to 29), who provide a glimpse of our Nation's future, indicates a dramatic improvement in educational attainment by those groups who have historically been less educated.

This report provides information on basic educational trends and attainment levels across many segments of the U.S. population. The findings are based on data collected in the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the Bureau of the Census in March 1997 and refer to the population 25 years and over unless otherwise specified.

Americans are more educated than ever.

The high school educational attainment level of the adult population continued to rise in 1997, following a general trend that has been noted in the Current Population Survey since educational attainment was first measured in 1947 (Figure 1).

Defining Educational Attainment

A single question on the Current Population Survey which asks for the highest grade or degree completed is used to determine educational attainment. Prior to 1992, educational attainment was measured only as years of completed schooling.

In March 1997, over four-fifths (82.1 percent) of all adults age 25 or older reported completing at least high school, a record high, and over 1-in-5 adults (23.9 percent) had attained at least a Bachelor's degree.

The increase in young adults' educational attainment may be leveling off.

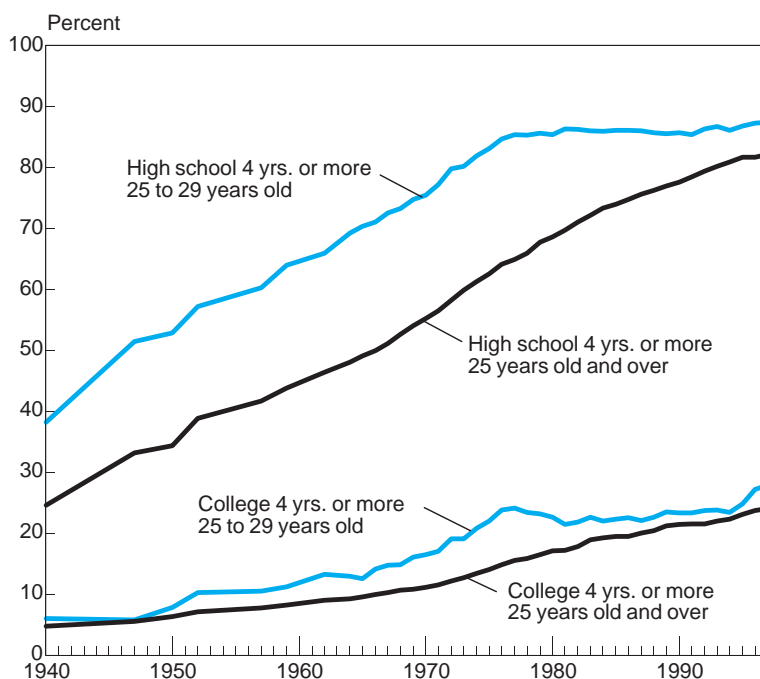
Almost 9 in 10 young adults ages 25 to 29 (87.4 percent) had completed high school by 1997; this percentage was not different from that recorded in 1996 and 1995. Over the last 20 years, annual point estimates of high school completion among young adults have been in the range of 85-87 percent.

The percentage of young adults who had completed a Bachelor's degree in 1997 (27.8 percent) was statistically equivalent to the record high level recorded in 1996. During the past two decades, the proportion of the young adult population with a Bachelor's degree has changed only modestly, with the proportion remaining above 20 percent.

The younger population is more educated than the older population.

For each educational measure shown in Table A, the high school educational attainment levels were substantially higher for younger age groups and decreased successively

Figure 1. Percent of the Population Who Have Completed High School or College: Selected Years 1940 to 1997



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey.

for each older age group—just over half (60.4 percent) of those age 75 and older had completed high school compared with 87.4 percent for ages 25 to 29. Only the 40 to 44 age group deviates from this pattern. Similarly, for postsecondary schooling, one-eighth (12.7 percent) of the population age 75 and older had a Bachelor's degree compared with 27.8 percent of the 25 to 29 population. Given the very large differences in education between younger and older age groups, the attainment level of the total adult population will continue to rise for some time, as younger,

more educated, age groups replace older, less educated, ones, even if attainment levels for young adults remain constant.

Educational attainment differs by socio-economic factors.

Gender: Overall, educational attainment levels were higher for men than women for two of the three measures shown in Table A. Statistically, men and women had the same rate of high school completion (82.0 vs. 82.2 percent, which were not statistically different). In fact, the last time a statistical difference existed was in 1989.

However, for post-secondary schooling, men had higher college attainment levels than women, with 26.2 percent of men but only 21.7 percent of women with a Bachelor's degree or more, and 49.9 percent of men and 46.9 percent of women having completed some college or more.

However, for the population ages 25 to 29, educational attainment levels for women exceeded those of men (Figure 2). At the high school level, 88.9 percent of these young women had completed high school, compared with 85.8 percent of young men. At the college level, 29.3 percent of women and 26.3 percent of men had earned a Bachelor's degree or more. The last time young women and men had equal rates of high school and college attainment was in 1995.

Race: The percentages of Whites and Blacks with a high school education both maintained a record level in 1997. Among Whites, 83.0 percent were high school graduates or more, statistically different from the 74.9 percent recorded for Blacks and the 84.9 percent for Asians¹. The high school graduation rates of Blacks and Asians were also statistically different.

The Black/White high school attainment gap has narrowed for all adults, as the proportion of Black students obtaining a high school degree has increased considerably during the past decade. For the population 25 and over, the Black/White differential in the proportion of high school graduates decreased from 13.6 percentage points in 1987 (63.4 percent of Blacks and 77.0 percent of Whites) to about 8 percentage points in 1997.

For young adults (ages 25 to 29), the Black/White high school attainment gap has disappeared. In 1987, the young White high school educational attainment level exceeded that of the young Blacks (83.3 percent for Black to 86.3 percent for White). Even though the educational attainment levels of both the young Blacks and young Whites has increased over

Table A.
Summary Measures of the Educational Attainment of the Population, Ages 25 and Over: March 1997

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristics	Number of people	Percentage with		
		High school graduate or more	Some college or more	Bachelor's degree or more
Population ages 25 and over	170,581	82.1	48.3	23.9
Age group:				
25 to 29 years old	19,260	87.4	57.1	27.8
30 to 34 years old	20,996	87.2	54.3	26.4
35 to 39 years old	22,755	87.5	52.3	24.9
40 to 44 years old	21,205	88.7	54.6	26.4
45 to 49 years old	18,354	87.8	56.0	29.3
50 to 54 years old	14,659	85.6	51.5	27.2
55 to 59 years old	11,579	79.9	43.3	22.1
60 to 64 years old	9,896	75.0	38.0	19.2
65 to 69 years old	9,501	70.9	34.9	17.3
70 to 74 years old	8,514	67.9	32.7	15.3
75 years or older	13,862	60.4	27.9	12.7
Gender:				
Men	81,620	82.0	49.9	26.2
Women	88,961	82.2	46.9	21.7
Race:				
White	144,058	83.0	49.1	24.6
Black	19,072	74.9	39.0	13.3
Asian and Pacific Islander	6,107	84.9	61.7	42.2
Hispanic origin:				
Hispanic	15,476	54.7	28.8	10.3
Non-Hispanic	155,105	84.7	50.3	25.2
White Non-Hispanic	129,299	86.3	51.5	26.2
Nativity:				
Native born	150,361	84.4	49.2	23.8
Foreign born	20,221	65.3	41.7	24.5
Marital status:				
Never married	25,354	83.6	53.7	27.9
Married spouse present	105,710	85.0	50.9	26.3
Married spouse absent	6,833	70.3	37.4	13.8
Separated	4,642	72.0	36.4	11.7
Widowed	13,720	60.3	26.0	10.0
Divorced	18,965	83.8	47.4	18.6
Region:				
Northeast	34,031	82.5	46.7	26.6
Midwest	39,505	85.2	46.9	22.5
South	59,924	79.3	45.7	21.9
West	37,121	83.1	55.6	25.9
Metropolitan residence:				
Metropolitan area	137,382	83.4	58.0	26.0
Nonmetropolitan area	33,199	76.8	35.3	14.8

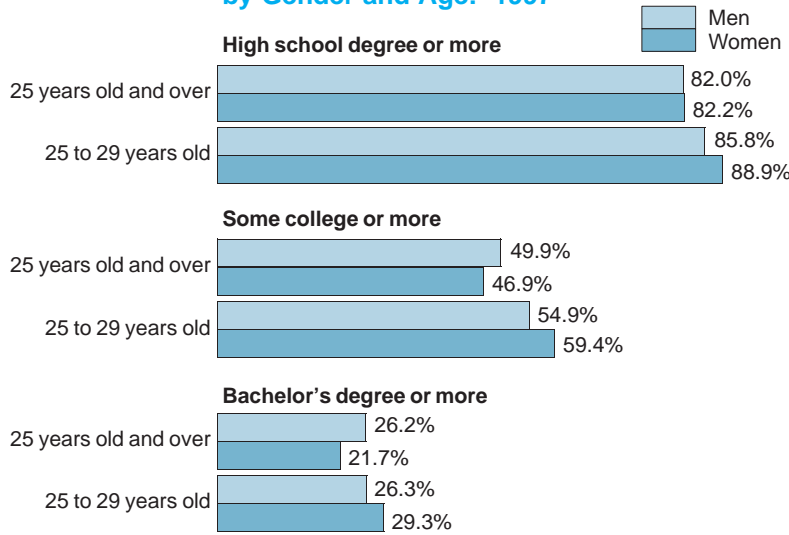
Note: Hispanics may be of any race. Races do not add to total population; data for American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut not shown.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 1997.

Contact: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Education and Social Stratification Branch, 301-457-2464.

¹ Includes Pacific Islanders.

Figure 2.
Differences in Educational Attainment by Gender and Age: 1997



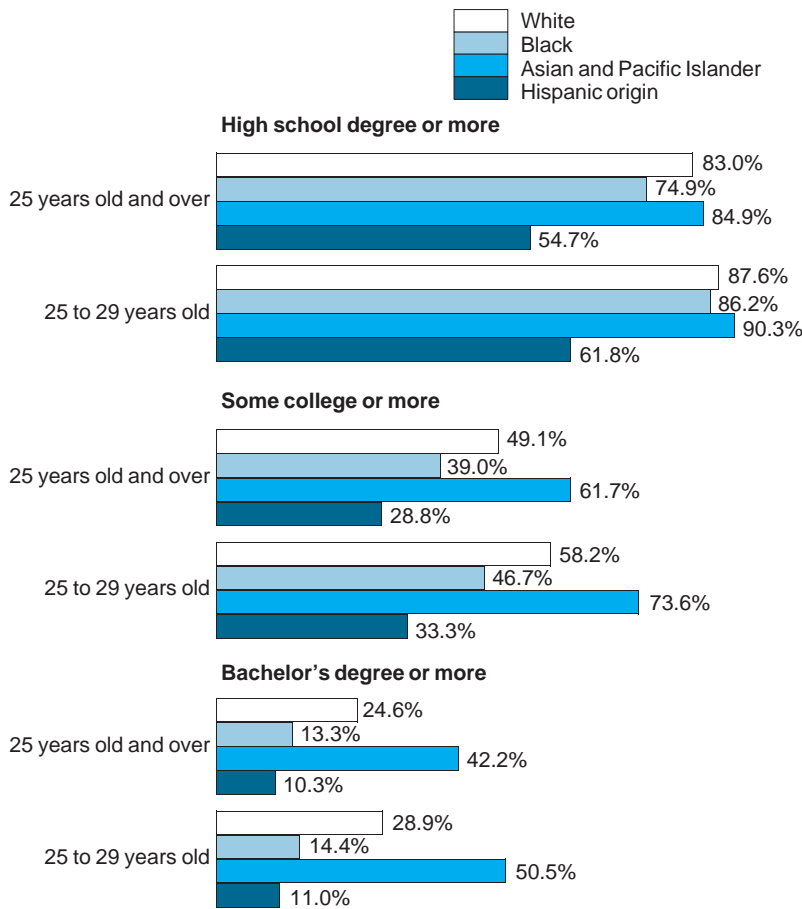
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 1997.

the past decade, there is no statistical difference between their 1997 values (Figure 3).

Asians have the greatest proportion of college graduates. At the college completion level, differences by race for ages 25 and over were evident—with the highest levels reported by Asians: 42.2 percent have a Bachelor's degree or more, compared with 24.6 percent of Whites, and 13.3 percent of Blacks.

Even among young adults, Asians had significantly higher college completion levels. One-half of the young Asian population (50.5 percent) had attained a Bachelor's degree. In comparison, almost 1 in 3 Whites (28.9 percent) and 1 in 7 Blacks (14.4 percent) in the 25 to 29 age group had a Bachelor's degree.

Figure 3.
Differences in Educational Attainment by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: 1997



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 1997.

Hispanic origin: At all three levels of attainment (high school, some college, and college graduates), the Hispanic origin population (who may be of any race) has the lowest proportion of completed education, in comparison with Whites, Blacks, and Asians. Just over one-half (54.7 percent) of Hispanic adults were high school graduates or more, over one-fourth (28.8 percent) have completed some college, and about 1 in 10 (10.3 percent) have completed a Bachelor's degree or more.

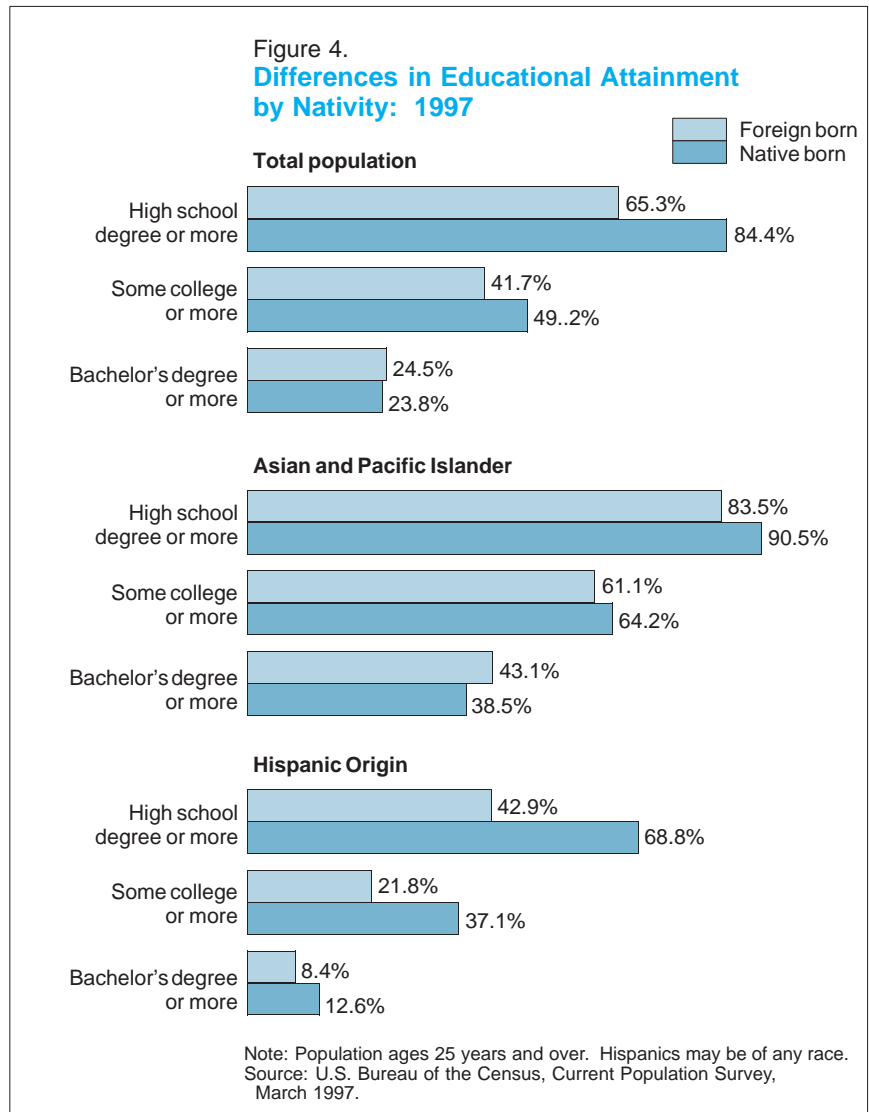
Compared with a decade ago, the Hispanic origin population has experienced some gains in educational attainment. The proportion of the population ages 25 and over with a high school degree or more increased about 4 percentage points from the 1987 level, which was 50.9 percent; the proportion who had some college increased about 7 percentage points; and the proportion with a Bachelor's degree or more increased about 2 percentage points. Similar to the trend shown for the total population, the educational attainment was substantially higher for the young adult Hispanic population (ages 25 to 29) and decreased successively for each older age group.

The educational attainment of the young Hispanic population (ages 25 to 29) was substantially less than that of the young White, Black, and Asian populations. Moreover, during the past decade, the young adult Hispanic population showed little gain in educational attainment, with no significant change at the high school level (59.8 percent in 1987 and 61.8 percent in 1997), and a slight increase at the Bachelor's or more level (8.7 percent in 1987 and 11.0 percent in 1997).

Foreign-born: The percentage of the foreign-born population with a high school diploma was dramatically lower than the native-born population, but paradoxically, the percentage of those with a Bachelor's degree or more was about the same (Figure 4). For both the Hispanic and Asian populations, the proportions with a high school diploma were significantly greater for the native-born than their foreign-born counterparts. Indeed, the proportion of foreign-born Hispanics with less than a high school education was almost twice as high as that for native-born Hispanics (57.2 percent compared with 31.2 percent). This factor contributes to the low attainment levels of the entire Hispanic population.

In contrast, at the college attainment level, the proportion of Asians with a Bachelor's degree or more was significantly higher for the foreign-born population than the native-born (43.1 percent and 38.5 percent, respectively). However, the proportion of foreign-born Hispanics with a Bachelor's degree or more was significantly lower than that for native-born Hispanics (8.4 percent and 12.6 percent).

Marital Status: Differences in educational attainment across marital statuses reflect, to a large extent, differences in the age composition of marital status groups. For example, the high level of high school completion among the never married population (83.6 percent) reflects the fact that this group is relatively young. Conversely, the low level among the widowed population (60.3 percent) is in part



because this group consists primarily of an older population. A similar pattern is seen in college completion levels.

Labor force: Educational attainment is higher for the employed than for the unemployed population, who in turn generally have higher attainment than those who are not in the labor force. Among employed people, educational attainment is quite high, with 89.3 percent of them reporting completing high school, and 29.2 percent completing a Bachelor's degree (Table B).

Occupation: Educational attainment also varied across occupational categories. While 99.3 percent of the workers in professional specialty occupations have completed high school, only 63.4 percent of private household work-

ers have achieved this level of education. With respect to higher education, 75.5 percent of people in professional specialty occupations have completed a Bachelor's degree or more, the highest level across the major occupational groups. For many occupations, however, fewer than ten percent of the workers had completed college, including categories such as precision production workers and machine operators.

Earnings: Earnings for the population 18 years and over were higher at each progressively higher level of education (Table C). This relationship holds true not only for the entire population, but across each subgroup defined by gender, race, and Hispanic origin. Within each specific educational level, earnings

Table B.
Educational Attainment by Labor Force Status and Occupation:
March 1997

(Numbers in thousands)

Labor force status and occupation	Number of people	Percentage with		
		High school graduate or more	Some college or more	Bachelor's degree or more
Civilian labor force, 25 years and over				
Employed	109,399	89.3	56.5	29.2
Not employed	5,035	74.4	36.9	13.3
Not in the labor force	55,437	68.3	32.9	14.1
Occupation of employed people,				
25 to 64 years old	105,611	89.8	57.0	29.4
Executive, admin., and managerial	16,688	97.3	76.3	47.8
Professional specialty occupations	17,514	99.3	93.3	75.5
Technicians and related support occ.	3,576	97.9	78.2	29.8
Sales occupations	11,670	93.7	61.0	29.6
Administrative support occupations including clerical	14,961	96.1	53.8	15.7
Private household occupations	516	63.4	24.6	5.6
Other service occupations	11,783	80.9	36.9	9.4
Farming, forestry, and fishing	2,370	66.9	30.8	11.0
Precision prod., craft, and repair	12,204	82.8	35.5	6.8
Machine operators, assemblers, and inspectors	6,703	74.5	22.8	4.1
Transportation and material moving	4,519	78.6	27.5	4.7
Handlers, equip. cleaners, helpers, and laborers	3,107	73.6	25.9	6.9

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 1997.
Contact: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Education and Social Stratification Branch, 301-457-2464.

Table C.
Average 1996 Earnings by Educational Attainment, and Gender, Race, and Hispanic Origin, for the Population Ages 18 and Over

Characteristic	Total	Not a	Some		Bachelor's degree	Advanced degree
		high school graduate	High school graduate	Associate degree		
Total	\$28,106	\$15,011	\$22,154	\$25,181	\$38,112	\$61,317
Male	\$34,705	\$17,826	\$27,642	\$31,426	\$46,702	\$74,406
Female	\$20,570	\$10,421	\$16,161	\$18,933	\$28,701	\$42,625
White	\$28,844	\$15,358	\$22,782	\$25,511	\$38,936	\$61,779
Black	\$21,978	\$13,110	\$18,722	\$23,628	\$31,955	\$48,731
Hispanic Origin	\$19,439	\$13,287	\$18,528	\$22,209	\$32,955	\$49,873

Note: Hispanics may be of any race.
Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 1997.
Contact: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Education and Social Stratification Branch, 301-457-2464.

differ by gender and race. This variation may result from a variety of factors, such as occupation, age, or labor force experience.

Regions and States

Educational attainment levels were lowest in the South. Among the four Census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South and West) the pro-

portion of people who completed high school ranged from 79.3 in the South to 85.2 in the Midwest. In terms of college attainment, the West was highest in the completion of some college or more (55.6 percent), and the Northeast and West were highest in the completion of a Bachelor's degree or more (26.6 percent and 25.9 percent,

which were not statistically different). The data also show that attainment levels were higher in metropolitan areas than in non-metropolitan areas.

Alaska and Wyoming were the only states with high school graduation rates that exceeded 90 percent (Figure 5). Although Alaska had the highest point estimate at 92.1 percent, its value was not statistically different from that of Wyoming.² Many of the states with lower rates of high school completion were in the South. Kentucky, with the lowest point estimate at 75.4 percent, was not statistically different from the 9 states ranked immediately above it (Louisiana through New Mexico).

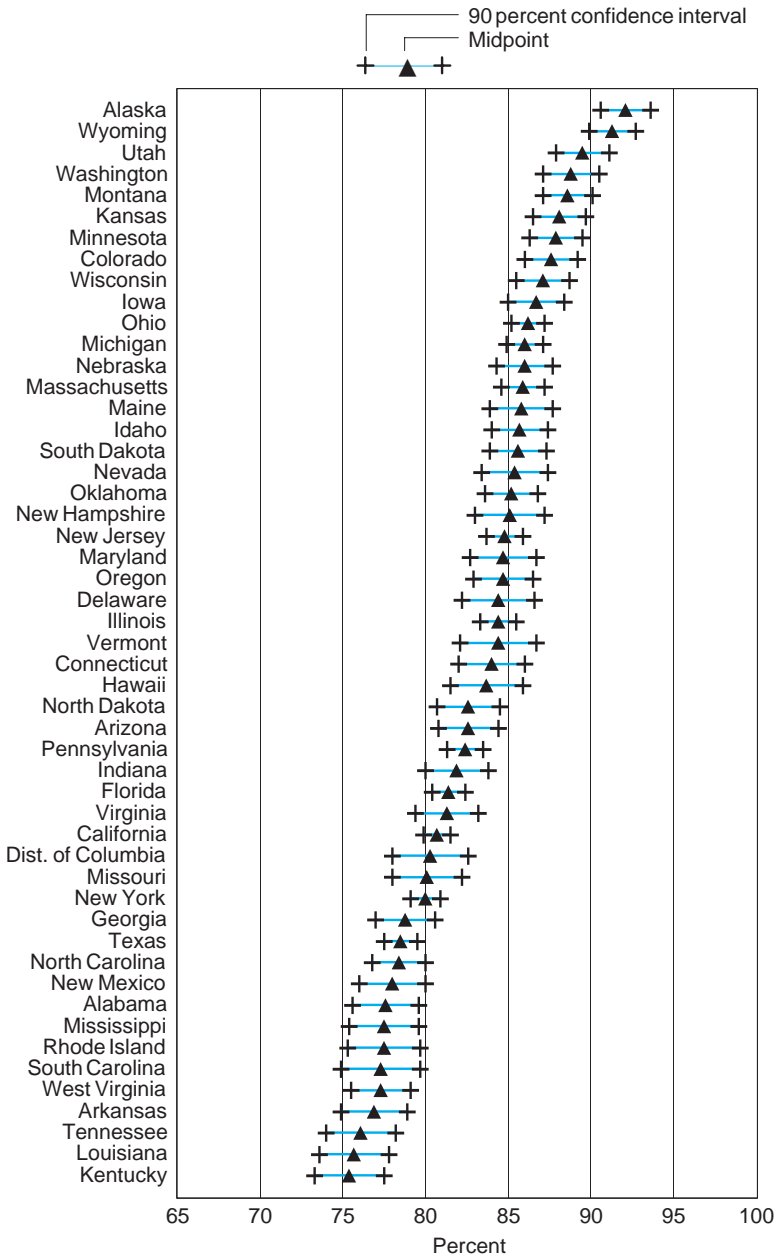
The pattern was somewhat different with regard to levels of Bachelor's degree completion. Washington D.C., with the largest point estimate of 33.7 percent, was not statistically different from Massachusetts or Maryland. At the bottom of the list, Arkansas, with the smallest point estimate of 14.6 percent, was not statistically different from West Virginia, Indiana, and Tennessee.

Source of the Data

Most estimates in this report come from data obtained in March 1997 from the Current Population Survey (CPS). Some estimates are based on data obtained from the CPS in earlier years and from decennial censuses. The Bureau of the Census conducts the survey every month, although this report uses only March data for its estimates.

² Each state estimate should be evaluated using the 90 percent confidence interval around each midpoint. Thus, the estimate for Alaska (92.1 percent +/- 1.5) was not statistically different from ordered point estimates down through Wyoming, at 91.3 percent (+/- 1.4). When using the state estimates provided from the CPS, users must keep in mind the sampling variability associated with these estimates, which is considerably higher than for estimates based on the nation as a whole. Because of this, year-to-year estimates may fluctuate simply due to the changes in sample in that area over time. While one cannot make precise statements about exact rank or changes in rank over time, the data do provide a general indication of the relative level (that is, high, no difference, or low) of educational attainment across states.

Figure 5.
**Percent of High School Graduates for the
 Population Age 25 and Over, by State:
 March 1997**



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey, March 1997.

Accuracy of the Estimates

All statistics are subject to sampling error, as well as nonsampling error such as survey design flaws, respondent classification and reporting errors, data processing mistakes, and undercoverage.

The Census Bureau has taken steps to minimize errors in the

form of quality control and editing procedures to reduce errors made by respondents, coders, and interviewers.

Ratio estimation to independent age-race-sex-Hispanic population controls partially corrects for bias attributable to survey undercoverage. However, biases exist in the

estimates when missed people have characteristics different from those of interviewed people in the same age-race-sex-Hispanic group.

Analytical statements in this report have been tested and meet statistical standards. However, because of methodological differences, use caution when comparing these data with data from other sources. Contact John Finamore, Demographic Statistical Methods Division, at 301-457-4183 or via Internet E-mail at john.finamore@ccmail.census.gov for information on the source of the data, the accuracy of the estimates, the use of standard errors, and the computation of standard errors.

More Information

Detailed tabulations are available (16 detailed tables totaling 86 pages and 3 historical tables) that provide demographic characteristics of educational attainment by race and Hispanic origin. The electronic version of these tables is available on the Internet, at the Census Bureau's World-Wide Web site (<http://www.census.gov>). Once on the site, click on "Subjects A-Z", then "Educational Attainment".

A paper version of these tables, along with related historical tables, is available as PPL-87 for \$30.00. To receive a paper copy, send your request for "PPL-87, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1997," along with a check or money order in the amount of \$30.00 payable to Commerce-Census-88-00-9010, to U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, P.O. Box 277943, Atlanta, GA 30384-7943, or call our Statistical Information Office on 301-457-2422. A copy of these tabulations will be made available to any existing CPR P20 subscriber without charge, provided that the request is made within 3 months of the issue date of this report. Contact our Statistical Information Office on 301-457-2422.

Contacts

For additional information on these topics, contact Jennifer C. Day or Andrea E. Curry, Education and Social Stratification Branch, on 301-457-2464 or via Internet E-mail

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User Comments

The Census Bureau welcomes the comments and advice of data and report users. If you have any

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