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Population Characteristics

School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1978 (Advance Report)

HIGHLIGHTS

- College enrollment declined from 11.5 million to 11.1 million between 1977 and 1978. The decline occurred mainly among men, while the apparent decline in the number of women attending college was not statistically significant.
- High school enrollment, as well as kindergarten and elementary school enrollment, declined. This was the first year that high school enrollment was significantly affected by the decline in births during the 1960's.¹
- Nursery school enrollment increased between 1977 and 1978. Over the past 10 years, the number enrolled in nursery schools has more than doubled despite declines in the population of nursery school age.
- Important changes in the distribution of college students 14 to 34 years of age occurred during the past decade. In 1978, a greater proportion of all college students were women and more Blacks attended college than in the past. In addition, a larger proportion of college students was attending part time in 1978 than in 1970, and the proportion of all college students who were 35 years old or over was significantly greater in 1978 than in 1972, the first year for which data were available.

The total number of persons 3 to 34 years old enrolled in school was 58.6 million in October of 1978, about 1.4 million lower than the number enrolled in October 1977 (table 1). The decline in total enrollment reflected the declines at all levels from kindergarten through college.

Nursery school enrollment in October 1978 was significantly greater than in 1977. Enrollment has more than

¹ Between 1977 and 1978, the population of high school age (i.e. those 14 to 17 years old) declined by 200,000 while school enrollment rates for this age group remained constant. This resulted in a significant decline in the number of high school students 14 to 17 years old.

doubled in the last 10 years despite a decline of 22 percent in the population 3 and 4 years of age, the main nursery school ages. In 1978, 34 percent of all 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in school, whereas a decade earlier only 16 percent had been enrolled (table 2). This increase coincides with the increase in labor force participation of mothers, upgrading of the educational attainment of parents, and greater availability of nursery school facilities.² It may also reflect a growing recognition by the American population of the advantages of beginning the formal education process at an early age.³

In 1978, kindergarten and elementary school enrollment was 5.7 million lower than in 1970 (the peak year of elementary school enrollment) even though the enrollment rates of 5- to 6-year-olds increased from 90 to 95 percent and the enrollment rate for those 7 to 13 years old remained at close to 99 percent. While enrollment in both private and public schools has declined substantially since 1970, virtually all of the 1977-78 decline of 740,000 in the number in elementary school was confined to public schools.

As the smaller birth cohorts of the mid-1960's reached high school age (14 to 17 years of age), high school enrollment began to decline significantly. The number of persons in this age group was estimated to be 16.4 million in 1978 as compared with 16.6 million in 1977. The school enrollment rate for 14- to 17-year-olds was high in 1978 (94 percent) and there is no indication from trends of the past few years that enrollment rates at the high school level will increase further. Thus, high schools will increasingly experience the decreases in enrollment that have been occurring in elementary schools for several years.

² Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 318, "Nursery School and Kindergarten Enrollment of Children and Labor Force Status of Their Mothers: October 1967 to October 1976."

³ D.P. Weikert, et. al., The Ypsilanti Perry Preschool Project: Preschool Years and Longitudinal Results Through Fourth Grade. Monograph No. 3. Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope Foundation, 1975; D. Irvin, et. al., Evaluation of the New York State Experimental Prekindergarten Program: Preliminary Report of Findings. Albany: Division of Research, New York State Education Department, 1977.

Perhaps the most noteworthy change between 1977 and 1978 was the decline in the number of college students. Total college enrollment decreased from 11.5 million in 1977 to 11.1 million in 1978 (table 4); this decline is of interest because it occurred at a time when the number of persons of traditional college age (18 to 21 years old) did not decrease. There was a decline in the college attendance of men but no evidence of a similar change for women. A more in-depth study is necessary to explain the reasons for this observed decline in college enrollment.⁴

Notable changes have also occurred in the age, race, and sex distribution of college students over the past 10 years. In 1968, 6 percent of all college students under 35 years of age were Black; by 1978, 10 percent were Black with the number of Blacks enrolled in college more than doubling (an increase of 135 percent) during the intervening years. The number of Blacks in college has been around 1 million since 1975 (table 3).

Between 1968 and 1978, the number of women under 35 years of age enrolled in college increased by 76 percent, while the corresponding number of men increased by only 24 percent. Women made up 39 percent of all college students under 35 in 1968 but comprised 48 percent by 1978 (table 3). Although the proportion of 18- and 19-year-olds enrolled in college was as large for women as for men in 1978, the proportion of women 20 and 21 years old in college

⁴ Advance enrollment statistics provided by colleges and compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics show that a large amount of the college enrollment decline occurred in the State of California. No similar geographic information is available from the Current Population Survey. See National Center for Education Statistics, *Fall Enrollment in Colleges and Universities, 1978, Preliminary Estimates*.

remained significantly lower than that for men of the same ages (26 percent for women compared to 31 percent for men). This suggests that in 1978, women were as likely as men to enter college but were not as likely to continue on to graduation (table 6).

In 1978, about 380,000 persons of Spanish origin under 35 years of age were enrolled in college. This represents a 56 percent increase from 1972 (the earliest year for which data for persons of Spanish origin are available).

Between 1972 and 1978, the number of persons 35 years old and over enrolled in college increased by two-thirds or 66 percent. (1972 is the earliest year for which data for persons 35 and over are available.) The number of women over 35 enrolled in college doubled while the number of enrolled males increased by about a quarter (table 4). In 1978, 850,000 women and 460,000 men 35 years old and over were enrolled in college.

The demographic character of undergraduate enrollment shifted between 1970 and 1978 (table 5). By 1978, a higher proportion of undergraduates under 35 were older than the traditional undergraduate age (over 21 years old); 34 percent were 22 years old and over in 1978 as compared to 26 percent in 1970. A greater proportion of undergraduates were attending college part time in 1978 than in 1970 (24 percent as opposed to 17 percent). In 1970, for every 100 undergraduates enrolled in 4-year colleges, there were 37 enrolled in 2-year colleges. In 1978, however, there were 43 2-year college students for every 100 4-year college undergraduates.

Symbols. In the tables, a dash "--" represents zero or rounds to zero and "NA" means not available.