

# Postsecondary Enrollment Before, During, and Since the Great Recession

## Population Characteristics

### Current Population Reports

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Education is highly valued in the United States as a means to acquire skills and experience that allow individuals to realize greater earnings over the course of their working lives. The value placed on education is evidenced by the fact that 89 percent of people 25 years and older have completed high school, and 60 percent have studied beyond the high school level.<sup>1</sup> The value placed on education is also seen in the increase in college enrollment over time, from 2.4 million students in 1955 to 19.1 million students in 2015.<sup>2</sup> While enrollment has increased over the long run, enrollment has increased and decreased within this long-term increase. This report provides an overview of postsecondary enrollment during one of these periods, covering the years preceding and since the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009, using data collected in the Current Population Survey (CPS). It examines the postsecondary enrollment of the adult population by demographic and social characteristics, such as age, sex, and race and Hispanic origin.

<sup>1</sup> "Table 1. Educational Attainment of the Population 18 Years and Over, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2016," March 2017, <[www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/education-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/education-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html)>, accessed on January 24, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "CPS Historical Time Series Tables on School Enrollment, Table A-1. School Enrollment of the Population 3 Years Old and Over, by Level and Control of School, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1955 to 2015," August 23, 2017, <[www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/school-enrollment/cps-historical-time-series.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/school-enrollment/cps-historical-time-series.html)>, accessed on January 24, 2018.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Total postsecondary enrollment increased from 17.2 million students in 2006 to 20.4 million students in 2011, and subsequently decreased to 19.1 million students in 2015.
- Change in enrollment occurred overwhelmingly at the undergraduate level, and the 2011 to 2015 decrease in enrollment was concentrated in 2-year colleges.
- Students not enrolled in any school in the prior year were a major contributor to the increase in college enrollment during the recession.
- The proportions of non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics 15 to 34 years old who were enrolled in college increased from the prerecession to the recession period.
- In 2015, greater percentages of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians were enrolled in college than prerecession.
- Hispanic undergraduate enrollment increased greatly, as the percentage of 15- to 34-year-olds enrolled in undergraduate college increased from 11.5 percent in 2000 to 18.4 percent in 2015.

## INTRODUCTION

At least since the mid-twentieth century, postsecondary enrollment has increased during recessionary periods as labor market conditions degrade.<sup>3</sup> Recent research indicates that postsecondary enrollment was similarly counter-cyclical during the Great Recession.<sup>4</sup> One focus of this report is to document the change in postsecondary enrollment across this period in more detail, examining the components of change in postsecondary enrollment before, during, and since the Great Recession to determine how the enrollment of different population subgroups contributed to the broader changes in postsecondary enrollment. A second focus of this report is to consider change in the types of students who entered college in terms of their precollege roles, examining change in the number of college students who were previously enrolled in high school or college, or who were not enrolled in school in the prior year. In this report, the “prerecession,” “recession,” and “postrecession” periods refer to the 2000 to 2007, 2008 to 2011, and 2012 to 2015 periods, respectively. These labels do not neatly correspond to the Great Recession, but do cover periods of relatively lower unemployment before the beginning of the recession, higher unemployment during and shortly after the recession, and moderate and declining unemployment in more recent years.

<sup>3</sup> For example, see Harris Dellas and Plutarchos Sakellaris, “On the Cyclicity of Schooling: Theory and Evidence,” *Oxford Economic Papers*, 55, 2003, pp. 148–72. J. Peter Mattila, “Determinants of Male School Enrollments: A Time-Series Analysis,” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 64, 1982, pp. 242–51.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Lisa Barrow and Jonathan Davis, “The Upside of Down: Postsecondary Enrollment in the Great Recession,” *Economic Perspectives*, 36(4), 2012, pp. 117–29.

## Data

School enrollment estimates come from the School Enrollment Supplement to the Current Population Survey (CPS), which is administered in October and includes 20 questions on school enrollment and recent degree completion. The CPS samples approximately 57,000 households in October and has collected data on school enrollment since 1945.

## POSTSECONDARY ENROLLMENT

The Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.<sup>5</sup> Recessions are periods lasting a few months or longer during which activity across the national economy declines.<sup>6</sup> The determination of recessions relies on many measures of broad economic activity; because of this, some noticeable impacts of recessions may not perfectly correspond to the recognized beginning or end of a recession. For example, the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 5.0 percent at the beginning of the Great Recession (December 2007), and was 9.5 percent at the end of the recession (June 2009), but continued to increase to reach 10.0 percent a few months later (October 2009) before starting to decline.<sup>7</sup>

Enrollment in college increased from 17.2 million students in 2006 through the Great Recession and the years after the end of the recession, to reach 20.4 million postsecondary students enrolled

<sup>5</sup> Recessions are determined by the National Bureau of Economic Research’s Business Cycle Dating Committee, see <<http://nber.org/cycles/>>.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the National Bureau of Economic Research’s Business Cycle Dating Committee’s determination of recessionary periods, see <[www.nber.org/cycles/recessions.html](http://www.nber.org/cycles/recessions.html)>.

<sup>7</sup> “Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate,” <<http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000000>>, accessed on January 24, 2018.

in 2011 (Figure 1). College enrollment decreased after 2011 and numbered 19.1 million students in 2015. Enrollment in college includes enrollment at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The former includes enrollment at 2-year or 4-year schools below and leading up to an associate’s degree or bachelor’s degree. Graduate enrollment is enrollment leading to advanced degrees, such as master’s degrees, professional degrees, and doctoral degrees.<sup>8</sup> Table 1 shows estimated total college enrollment, enrollment in 2-year and 4-year undergraduate college, total undergraduate enrollment, and college enrollment at the graduate level for the years 2000 through 2015.

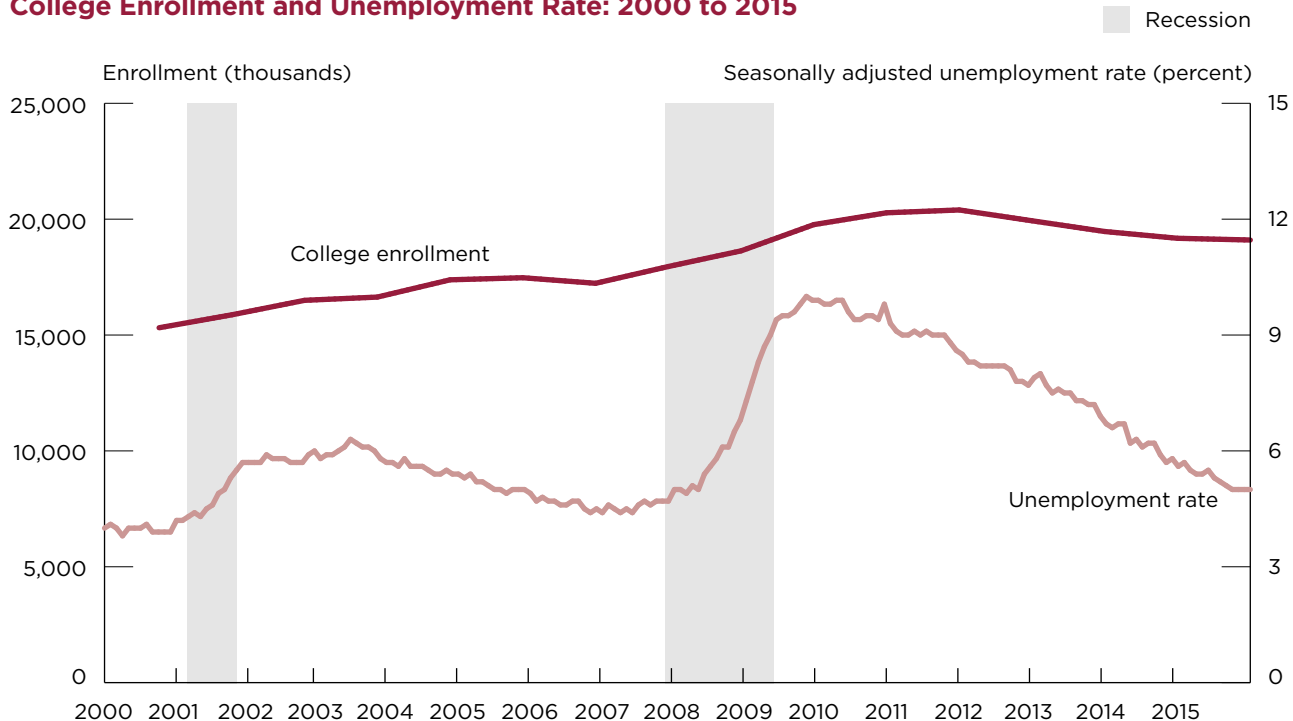
Change in undergraduate enrollment accounted for most of the change in postsecondary enrollment between 2006 and 2015. It accounted for 2.8 million students of the 3.2-million student increase in total postsecondary enrollment between 2006 and 2011. From 2011 to 2015, undergraduate enrollment accounted for 1.2 million students of the 1.3 million-student decrease in total college enrollment.

While enrollment in 2-year institutions accounted for less than one-third of undergraduate enrollment in 2006, increase in enrollment

<sup>8</sup> Students may be enrolled at a level without pursuing a particular degree.

Figure 1.

**College Enrollment and Unemployment Rate: 2000 to 2015**



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, January 2000–December 2015; and National Bureau of Economic Research, U.S. Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions.

Table 1.

**College Enrollment by Level of Enrollment: 2000 to 2015**

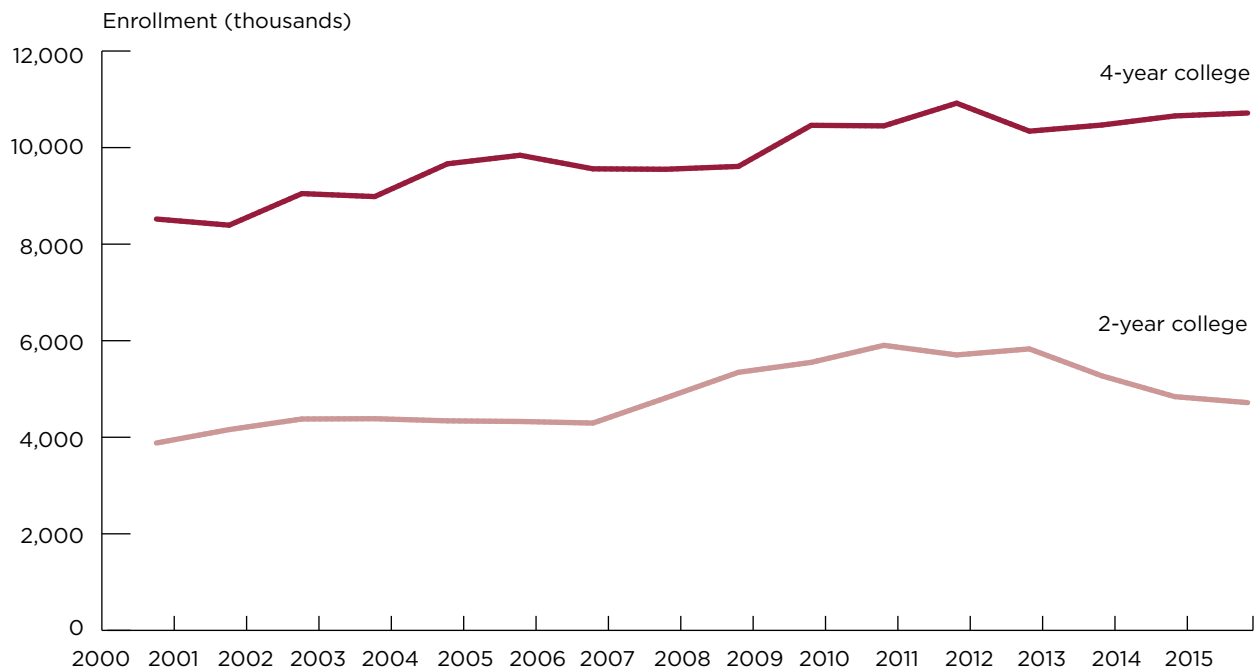
(Numbers in thousands)

Year	Total college enrollment	Undergraduate college enrollment			Graduate and professional school enrollment
		Total undergraduate	2-year college	4-year college	
2000	15,314	12,401	3,881	8,520	2,913
2001	15,873	12,552	4,159	8,393	3,321
2002	16,498	13,426	4,378	9,047	3,072
2003	16,638	13,370	4,384	8,985	3,268
2004	17,383	14,004	4,340	9,664	3,378
2005	17,473	14,169	4,327	9,841	3,304
2006	17,232	13,854	4,294	9,560	3,378
2007	17,956	14,365	4,814	9,551	3,591
2008	18,632	14,955	5,345	9,610	3,676
2009	19,764	16,012	5,551	10,461	3,752
2010	20,275	16,354	5,904	10,450	3,921
2011	20,397	16,625	5,705	10,920	3,773
2012	19,930	16,170	5,830	10,340	3,760
2013	19,467	15,738	5,270	10,468	3,729
2014	19,175	15,498	4,841	10,656	3,677
2015	19,101	15,433	4,717	10,716	3,668

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015.

Figure 2.

### Undergraduate Enrollment in 2-Year and 4-Year Colleges: 2000 to 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015.

at 2-year institutions accounted for approximately one-half of the 2.8 million-student increase in undergraduate enrollment between 2006 and 2011 (Figure 2). From 2011 to 2015, enrollment in 2-year institutions accounted for 1.0 million students of the 1.2 million-student decrease in undergraduate enrollment. Enrollment in 4-year institutions decreased from 10.9 million students in 2011 to 10.3 million students in 2012, and increased to 10.7 million students in 2015. In contrast, 2-year enrollment decreased after 2012, declining from 5.8 million students in 2012 to 4.7 million students in 2015.

From the outset, we see that the change in college enrollment during the Great Recession had two important aspects: first, a large increase in enrollment during

the time when the impact of the recession was felt and, second, a concentration of the impact in 2-year undergraduate college enrollment.

### ENROLLMENT BY SEX, RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN, AND AGE

**Enrollment by sex.** Male unemployment increased more than female unemployment during the Great Recession and remained higher in the months and years after the recession.<sup>9</sup> During the recession, males increased their

<sup>9</sup> "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, Men 20 Years and Over," <<http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000025>>, accessed on January 24, 2018; "Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, Women 20 Years and Over," <<http://data.bls.gov/timeseries/LNS14000026>>.

enrollment in college at all levels relative to earlier years (Table 2). The percentage of students enrolled in all levels of college who were female, while higher than the percentage male, was lower during the recession than it was prior to the recession.

**Enrollment by age.** The number of students enrolled in college increased across all age groups from the prerecession period to the recession period, but change from the recession to the post-recession period differed by age. After the recession, the number of students enrolled in college increased only for those 20 to 24 years old. Enrollment was greater in the postrecession period for those under the age of 30 than it was in the prerecession period. For the population aged 20 to 24,

Table 2. **Average Annual College Enrollment by Level of Enrollment, Race and Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age: 2000 to 2015**  
(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Total college enrollment						Undergraduate college enrollment												Graduate and professional school enrollment								
	2000-2007			2008-2011			2012-2015			Total undergraduate			2-year college			4-year college			2000-2007			2008-2011			2012-2015		
	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015						
<b>TOTAL</b> .....	<b>16,803</b>	<b>19,767</b>	<b>19,418</b>	<b>15,987</b>	<b>15,710</b>	<b>4,323</b>	<b>5,626</b>	<b>5,165</b>	<b>9,206</b>	<b>10,360</b>	<b>10,545</b>	<b>3,273</b>	<b>3,781</b>	<b>3,708</b>	<b>13,529</b>	<b>15,987</b>	<b>15,710</b>	<b>4,323</b>	<b>9,206</b>	<b>10,360</b>	<b>10,545</b>	<b>3,273</b>	<b>3,781</b>	<b>3,708</b>			
Male .....	7,324	8,773	8,563	7,168	7,069	1,824	2,460	2,270	4,151	4,708	4,800	1,348	1,605	1,493	5,976	7,168	7,069	1,824	4,151	4,708	4,800	1,348	1,605	1,493			
Female .....	9,479	10,994	10,855	8,818	8,640	2,499	3,166	2,895	5,055	5,652	5,745	1,925	2,176	2,215	7,554	8,818	8,640	2,499	5,055	5,652	5,745	1,925	2,176	2,215			
<b>White alone, not Hispanic</b> .....	<b>11,340</b>	<b>12,617</b>	<b>11,242</b>	<b>10,042</b>	<b>8,981</b>	<b>2,692</b>	<b>3,207</b>	<b>2,628</b>	<b>6,355</b>	<b>6,835</b>	<b>6,353</b>	<b>2,293</b>	<b>2,575</b>	<b>2,261</b>	5,041	4,582	4,115	1,164	2,923	3,166	2,958	954	1,097	911			
Male .....	6,299	6,938	6,217	5,460	4,866	1,527	1,523	1,791	3,432	3,669	3,395	1,340	1,478	1,350	6,299	6,938	6,217	1,527	3,432	3,669	3,395	1,340	1,478	1,350			
Female .....	2,223	2,811	2,752	2,354	2,253	651	923	830	1,215	1,431	1,423	357	457	499	824	1,061	1,082	238	478	576	584	108	150	168			
<b>Black alone, not Hispanic</b> .....	<b>1,148</b>	<b>1,244</b>	<b>1,545</b>	<b>862</b>	<b>1,059</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>271</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>606</b>	<b>787</b>	<b>362</b>	<b>383</b>	<b>486</b>	1,399	1,750	1,670	413	737	855	839	249	307	331			
Male .....	585	598	759	418	528	113	121	127	288	298	400	184	180	232	563	646	786	115	269	308	387	178	202	255			
Female .....	1,148	1,244	1,545	862	1,059	228	256	271	557	606	787	362	383	486	<b>Asian alone, not Hispanic</b> .....	401	418	528	113	288	298	400	184	180	232		
Male .....	585	598	759	418	528	113	121	127	288	298	400	184	180	232	563	646	786	115	269	308	387	178	202	255			
Female .....	1,148	1,244	1,545	862	1,059	228	256	271	557	606	787	362	383	486	<b>Hispanic, of any race</b> .....	385	443	531	115	269	308	387	178	202	255		
Male .....	744	1,204	1,447	1,063	1,297	267	517	579	391	546	718	86	141	149	1,785	1,204	1,447	267	391	546	718	86	141	149			
Female .....	1,041	1,394	1,840	1,245	1,618	379	576	692	527	308	387	135	149	222	1,041	1,394	1,840	379	527	308	387	135	149	222			
15 to 19 years old. ....	3,863	4,475	4,253	4,448	4,213	515	1,679	1,498	2,556	2,768	2,715	27	27	40	3,863	4,475	4,253	515	2,556	2,768	2,715	27	27	40			
20 to 21 years old. ....	3,610	4,190	4,403	4,105	4,256	332	1,095	1,113	2,744	3,010	3,143	80	85	147	3,610	4,190	4,403	332	2,744	3,010	3,143	80	85	147			
22 to 24 years old. ....	3,057	3,635	3,838	2,780	2,957	768	805	799	1,767	1,975	2,158	647	855	880	3,057	3,635	3,838	768	1,767	1,975	2,158	647	855	880			
25 to 29 years old. ....	2,219	2,871	2,765	1,791	1,733	725	764	683	838	1,027	1,050	866	1,080	1,032	2,219	2,871	2,765	725	838	1,027	1,050	866	1,080	1,032			
30 to 34 years old. ....	1,308	1,516	1,376	983	864	7,755	417	341	436	566	523	539	533	512	1,308	1,516	1,376	983	436	566	523	539	533	512			
35 years and over. ....	2,747	3,080	2,783	1,879	1,686	11,782	867	731	865	1,013	956	1,114	1,201	1,097	2,747	3,080	2,783	11,782	865	1,013	956	1,114	1,201	1,097			

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000-2015.

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total enrollment increased from before the recession to the recession, and again from the recession to the postrecession period. For those 30 years and older, the number enrolled in the postrecession period was not statistically different from the prerecession period.

Change in the percentage of age groups' members enrolled in college was similar to the change in the number of enrollees (Table 3), as the percentage of all age groups' members enrolled in college increased from the prerecession period to the recession period. Moving from the prerecession period into the recession period, all groups had an increase in the portion enrolled, followed by a decrease for all but those between 20 and 24 years old—for whom the percentage enrolled was not statistically different in the recession and postrecession periods. In the end, a larger proportion of each age category below the age of 30 enrolled after the recession than in the prerecession period, and the increase was 3 percentage points or higher for those under 25 years.

**Enrollment by race and Hispanic origin.** As college enrollment increased from 2000 to 2011 and declined in the postrecession period, changes in enrollment were not uniform across race

and Hispanic origin groups.<sup>10</sup> The number of non-Hispanic Whites enrolled in college increased from the prerecession to the recession period and decreased from the recession to the postrecession period, such that the number of non-Hispanic Whites enrolled in the postrecession period was not statistically different from the number enrolled in the prerecession period (Table 2). Similar changes held in terms of percentages at the undergraduate level (Table 3). These changes occurred for non-Hispanic White enrollment in 2-year colleges and 4-year colleges.

The number of Blacks enrolled in college increased from the prerecession period to the recession period, but did not change significantly from the recession to the postrecession period. As a result, about 0.5 million more Blacks were enrolled in college after the recession than before the recession. The proportion of Blacks enrolled in college similarly increased from the prerecession to the recession period and, despite a reduction from the recession period to the postrecession period, remained higher

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<sup>10</sup> Federal surveys now give respondents the option to report more than one race. Therefore, two basic ways of defining a race group are possible. A group such as Asian may be defined as those who reported Asian and no other race (the race alone or single race concept), or as those who reported Asian, regardless of whether they also reported another race (the race-alone-or-in-combination concept). The body of this report (text, figures, and tables) shows data for people who reported they were the single race White and non-Hispanic, people who reported the single race Black and non-Hispanic, and people who reported the single race Asian and non-Hispanic. Use of the single-race populations does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. Data for those who report two or more races, the American Indian and Alaska Native, and the Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander populations are not shown in this report because of their small sample size in the CPS.

after the recession than before the recession.

The number of Hispanics enrolled in college increased by 0.8 million from the prerecession to the recession period and increased again by 0.7 million in the postrecession period, resulting in an overall gain of 1.5 million—an approximate doubling (184.0 percent of the prerecession level). The percentage of Hispanics enrolled at all levels was greater after the recession than it was before. Before the recession, 13.2 percent of Hispanics 15 to 34 years old enrolled in college, compared to 23.2 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, while after the recession 20.2 percent of Hispanics enrolled in college and 23.7 percent of non-Hispanic Whites enrolled in college.

As with Hispanics, the total number of Asians enrolled in college increased across all three periods and was higher in the postrecession period than before the recession. Similarly, a greater percentage of Asians enrolled in 4-year college after the recession than before. Before, during, and after the recession, Asians enrolled in college at higher percentages than any other group.

The results show that the number of students enrolled in college increased for all groups during the Great Recession and the period of high unemployment that immediately followed. The number and percentage of non-Hispanic Whites enrolled in college increased during the recession, as did the number and percentage of Blacks and Hispanics enrolled in college, before decreasing to approximate prerecession levels. The numbers of Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics enrolled in college remained higher

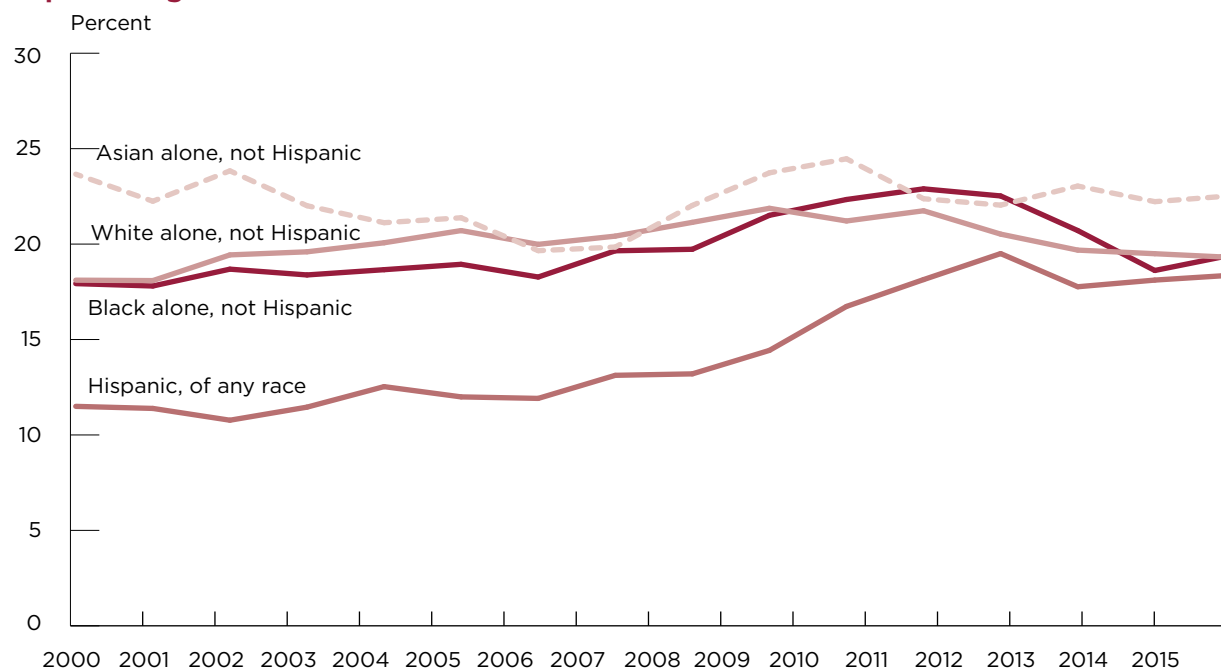
Table 3.

**Average Annual Percentage of People 15 to 34 Years Old Enrolled in College by Level of Enrollment, Race and Hispanic Origin, Sex, and Age: 2000 to 2015**

Characteristic	Total college enrollment			Undergraduate college enrollment								Graduate and professional school enrollment			
	Total undergraduate			2-year college		4-year college		Graduate and professional school enrollment							
	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015	2000-2007	2008-2011	2012-2015			
<b>TOTAL</b> .....	<b>21.5</b>	<b>24.2</b>	<b>23.4</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>19.7</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>6.9</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>12.8</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>3.7</b>
Male .....	19.6	22.3	21.5	16.7	19.0	18.4	4.8	6.4	5.7	11.9	12.6	12.7	2.9	3.3	3.1
Female .....	23.4	26.1	25.3	19.7	21.9	21.1	6.0	7.4	6.8	13.7	14.5	14.3	3.7	4.2	4.2
<b>White alone, not Hispanic</b> .....	<b>23.2</b>	<b>25.7</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>19.6</b>	<b>21.5</b>	<b>19.8</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>14.2</b>	<b>15.0</b>	<b>14.3</b>	<b>3.6</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>3.9</b>
Male .....	21.6	24.1	22.0	18.4	20.3	18.7	4.9	6.1	5.0	13.5	14.3	13.7	3.2	3.8	3.3
Female .....	24.8	27.3	25.3	20.8	22.6	20.8	5.9	6.9	6.0	15.0	15.8	14.8	4.0	4.7	4.5
<b>Black alone, not Hispanic</b> .....	<b>21.1</b>	<b>24.6</b>	<b>23.5</b>	<b>18.5</b>	<b>21.6</b>	<b>20.3</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>12.5</b>	<b>13.3</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>3.2</b>
Male .....	17.9	21.4	20.9	16.2	19.2	18.3	5.1	7.0	6.5	11.1	12.2	11.9	1.7	2.3	2.5
Female .....	23.8	27.4	25.8	20.5	23.8	22.1	6.9	9.5	7.9	13.6	14.3	14.2	3.4	3.7	3.7
<b>Asian alone, not Hispanic</b> .....	<b>30.4</b>	<b>31.8</b>	<b>31.5</b>	<b>21.8</b>	<b>23.2</b>	<b>22.5</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>5.4</b>	<b>15.8</b>	<b>16.6</b>	<b>17.1</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>8.7</b>	<b>9.1</b>
Male .....	32.1	31.9	32.8	23.0	23.0	23.4	6.0	6.5	5.3	16.9	16.5	18.2	9.1	8.9	9.4
Female .....	28.8	31.8	30.3	20.6	23.3	21.5	5.9	6.7	5.5	14.7	16.6	16.0	8.2	8.5	8.8
<b>Hispanic, of any race</b> .....	<b>13.2</b>	<b>17.1</b>	<b>20.2</b>	<b>11.9</b>	<b>15.6</b>	<b>18.4</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>7.3</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>7.1</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>1.8</b>
Male .....	10.7	15.1	17.3	9.7	13.7	16.1	3.9	6.8	7.2	5.8	7.0	8.9	1.0	1.3	1.2
Female .....	16.1	19.5	23.3	14.4	17.8	20.9	5.7	8.0	8.7	8.6	9.9	12.2	1.7	1.7	2.4
15 to 19 years old .....	53.3	59.1	57.0	52.9	58.7	56.5	17.6	22.2	20.1	35.3	36.6	36.4	0.4	0.4	0.5
20 to 21 years old .....	46.5	50.8	51.9	45.5	49.8	50.1	10.1	13.3	13.1	35.4	36.6	37.0	1.0	1.0	1.7
22 to 24 years old .....	25.9	29.2	29.1	20.4	22.3	22.4	5.4	6.5	6.1	15.0	15.9	16.4	5.5	6.9	6.7
25 to 29 years old .....	11.7	13.7	13.1	7.1	8.6	8.2	2.7	3.6	3.2	4.4	4.9	5.0	4.6	5.2	4.9
30 to 34 years old .....	6.7	7.7	6.6	3.9	5.0	4.2	1.7	2.1	1.6	2.2	2.9	2.5	2.8	2.7	2.5

Note: Populations for which percentages are determined do not include people enrolled in school at levels below college (e.g., high school).  
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000-2015.

Figure 3.  
**Percentage of People 15 to 34 Years Old Enrolled in Undergraduate College by Race and Hispanic Origin**



Note: Denominators for percentage enrolled in undergraduate college do not include age group members enrolled below the college level.  
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015.

after the recession than they were before, and the percentages of Black and Hispanics enrolled were higher after the recession than before.

**Undergraduate enrollment by race among the college-aged.**

Considering undergraduate enrollment in particular, Figure 3 depicts the percentage of the population 15 to 34 years old enrolled at the undergraduate level by race and Hispanic origin from 2000 to 2015.<sup>11</sup> For non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, the percentage of the population enrolled at the undergraduate level reached new highs between 2009 and

2012.<sup>12</sup> Between 2011 and 2015, the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks enrolled in undergraduate college decreased to approximate 2007 levels for Blacks and to levels lower than 2007 for Whites in 2015. In 2015, the percentage of Hispanics enrolled in college was not statistically different from the apparent high point reached in 2012, and the percentage of Asians enrolled was not statistically different from the apparent high point of 2010.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Non-Hispanic White enrollment reached 21.9 percent in 2009 and was not statistically different in 2010 or 2011, when enrollment was 21.2 and 21.8 percent, respectively. Black enrollment reached 21.5 percent in 2009 and was not statistically different in 2010, 2011, or 2012, when enrollment was 22.3, 22.9, and 22.5 percent, respectively. Hispanic enrollment reached 19.5 percent in 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Asian enrollment in 2010 was not statistically different from other years between 2008 and 2015.

Change in enrollment among the Hispanic population was most marked, rising from 11.9 percent in 2006 to 18.4 percent in 2015 and reducing the difference between the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites and Hispanics enrolled in college from 8.1 percentage points to the point that, in 2015, the percentage of Hispanics enrolled was not statistically different from non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks.

In summary, the proportion of non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics enrolled in college increased to reach new highs during the high-unemployment years of 2008 to 2011, but groups differed in how much of those

<sup>11</sup> The 15- to 34-year-old age group accounted for 89.9 percent of undergraduate enrollees in 2015.



Table 4.

**College Enrollment by Level of Enrollment and Prior Year Enrollment Status: 2000 to 2015**

(Numbers in thousands)

Year	2-year college enrollment			4-year college enrollment			Graduate and professional school enrollment		
	High school	Not enrolled	Continuing	High school	Not enrolled	Continuing	Undergraduate	Not enrolled	Continuing
2000	696	1,173	2,012	1,246	1,311	5,962	383	869	1,647
2001	574	1,434	2,152	1,210	1,309	5,874	540	1,098	1,675
2002	647	1,548	2,189	1,266	1,440	6,431	358	1,074	1,595
2003	634	1,352	2,398	1,233	1,362	6,390	491	1,058	1,714
2004	682	1,400	2,258	1,369	1,329	6,965	510	994	1,859
2005	763	1,281	2,283	1,401	1,390	7,051	433	908	1,963
2006	799	1,205	2,290	1,308	1,298	6,953	466	1,078	1,834
2007	863	1,445	2,505	1,532	1,380	6,638	551	1,033	2,001
2008	955	1,480	2,910	1,407	1,497	6,706	503	1,184	1,983
2009	960	1,741	2,850	1,480	1,629	7,353	620	1,093	2,033
2010	1,042	1,801	3,061	1,487	1,723	7,241	663	1,142	2,115
2011	911	1,526	3,268	1,501	1,428	7,990	715	1,022	2,025
2012	1,003	1,674	3,153	1,357	1,507	7,476	704	937	2,111
2013	873	1,400	2,997	1,415	1,355	7,698	715	936	2,063
2014	831	1,392	2,619	1,441	1,455	7,760	754	996	1,919
2015	915	1,156	2,646	1,389	1,483	7,843	653	913	2,085

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015.

gains remained through 2015.<sup>14</sup> Blacks maintained some gains, reaching parity with non-Hispanic Whites in the percentage of the 15- to 34-year-old group enrolled in college in 2015. Hispanics made large gains across the period, closing much of the enrollment gap between themselves and other groups, such that the percentage of non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics 15 to 34 years old enrolled in college was not statistically different in 2015.

**ENROLLMENT BY PRIOR YEAR STATUS**

Enrollment in college is often thought of as a transition that occurs immediately after high school, after which enrollment is maintained from one year to the next until a student completes the

<sup>14</sup> Non-Hispanic White enrollment reached 21.9 percent in 2009 and was not statistically different in 2010 or 2011, when enrollment was 21.2 and 21.8 percent, respectively. Black enrollment reached 21.5 percent in 2009 and was not statistically different in 2010, 2011, or 2012, when enrollment was 22.3, 22.9, and 22.5 percent, respectively. Hispanic enrollment reached 19.5 percent in 2012.

education that he or she desires. Many students do enroll in college directly from high school; however, every year a large number of students who were not enrolled in school at any level during the prior year enroll in college. In all years across the 2000 to 2015 period, more students who were not enrolled in school in the prior year enrolled in undergraduate college (2- and 4-year students combined) than students who were enrolled in high school in the prior year (Table 4). Some students not enrolled in the prior year had previously taken college coursework and returned to get more education, and others enrolled without prior college experience.

The combined number of people who enrolled in college from high school and from being not enrolled in school during the previous year increased to reach new highs in 2009 and 2010 before decreasing through 2015

(Table 4).<sup>15</sup> The number of people enrolled in college from high school was greater in 2015 than in 2000, while the number of people enrolled in college from being not enrolled was not statistically different in 2000 and 2015. In 2015, of students who had not been enrolled in college the year before, 39.5 percent were enrolled in high school in the prior year, 12.8 percent were between high school and college in other pursuits, and 47.6 percent had attended college at some point in the past but were not enrolled in the previous year.<sup>16</sup>

Table 5 shows enrollment by prior year status in percentage terms. In 2000, 56.9 percent of people who were enrolled in high school in the previous year enrolled in

<sup>15</sup> The number of students enrolling in undergraduate college from high school or not enrolled in school in the previous year was not statistically different in 2009 at 5.8 million and in 2010 at 6.1 million.

<sup>16</sup> The focus of this discussion is the students who enrolled in college from high school compared to students who were not enrolled in the previous year, regardless of whether they entered college for the first time or returned to college after time in other pursuits.

Table 5.  
**Percentage of People 15 to 34 Years Old in Prior Year Enrollment Status Groups Who Enrolled in College: 2000 to 2015**

Year	Prior year enrollment status		
	High school	Not enrolled	College
2000	56.9	4.8	71.1
2001	55.7	5.5	74.3
2002	58.8	5.9	74.3
2003	58.4	5.4	73.9
2004	58.4	5.3	72.2
2005	62.8	5.1	74.1
2006	59.9	5.0	72.3
2007	64.5	5.5	75.6
2008	62.8	5.9	74.8
2009	65.3	6.5	76.6
2010	65.2	6.8	74.0
2011	63.5	5.7	75.8
2012	63.4	6.0	75.5
2013	60.3	5.3	75.5
2014	58.3	5.5	73.5
2015	61.3	5.0	74.9

Note: The denominator for the high school group is people who were enrolled in high school the previous year and not enrolled in high school in the current year.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015.

college. The proportion of this group that enrolled in college increased to reach 65.3 percent in 2009 before decreasing to 61.3 percent in 2015, which was higher than the percentage that enrolled in 2000.<sup>17</sup> Although college students who were not enrolled in the previous year outnumber those enrolled in high school in the previous year, their rate of college enrollment is smaller given that there are many more people who were not in school than who recently completed high school.<sup>18</sup> The rate of college enrollment for people not enrolled in the

previous year was 4.8 percent in 2000 and increased to 5.9 percent in 2002. This was a period when the unemployment rate was increasing, corresponding to the 2001 recession (Figure 4). From 2002 to 2006, the proportion of the nonenrolled who enrolled in college decreased to 5.0 percent, approximating 2000 levels, and then increased to reach 6.8 percent in 2010. Also during this period, the unemployment rate increased during the Great Recession. From 2010 to 2015, the percentage of the nonenrolled entering college declined to levels comparable with years (2004, 2005, and 2006) prior to the recession.

The total number of students that entered undergraduate college (from high school and from nonenrollment) increased from 4.4 million in 2000 to 6.1 million in 2010, before falling to 4.9 million in 2015. This increase in enrollment resulted in more students

who were in a position to continue their studies. In contrast to those previously enrolled in high school and those previously not enrolled in school, the percentage of people enrolled in college who remained enrolled from one year to the next fluctuated within the range of 71.1 percent to 76.6 percent across the period.

Here the data show that students previously enrolled in high school and those who were not enrolled in school entered college in greater numbers during the recession and were a major contributor to the increase in total college enrollment. After the recession, students continued to enroll in college immediately after high school in great numbers. By contrast, fewer of those who were not enrolled in school entered college in the years after the effects of the recession were felt, contributing to the decrease in total college enrollment.

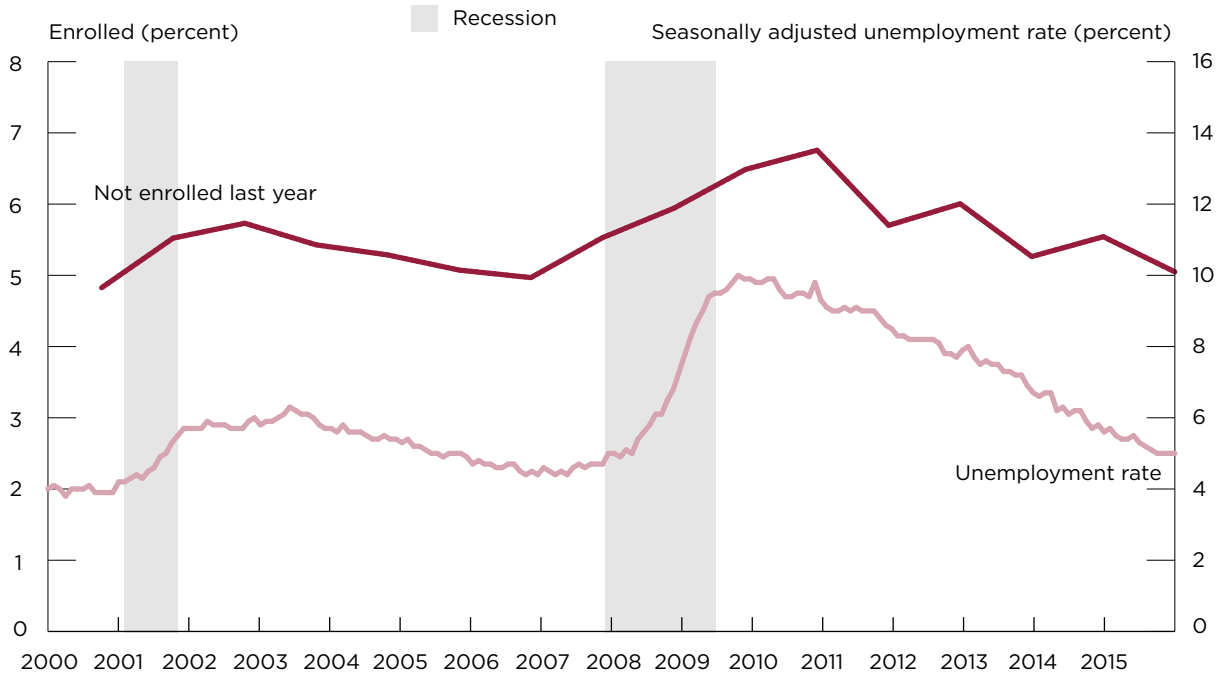
### COLLEGE-LEAVING

Thus far, this report has examined college enrollment during a period of high unemployment. In theory, when labor market conditions are poor, a lack of opportunity may motivate some people to enroll in college, affecting total college enrollment. This portion of the report focuses on the other factor that affects the number of people enrolled in college—whether people remain enrolled from one year to the next. If more or fewer people leave college in a given year, total college enrollment can decrease or increase from one year to the next. In addition to college-leaving, this section examines the conditions under which individuals leave college—particularly whether they hold

<sup>17</sup> Not statistically different from the 65.3 percent who enrolled in 2009, 65.2 percent of people who were enrolled in high school in the previous year enrolled in college in 2010.

<sup>18</sup> For example, in 2015, 52.6 million people were not enrolled in college in the previous year and 2.7 million of those people had enrolled in college, while 3.8 million people were enrolled in high school in the previous year and 2.3 million of those people had enrolled in college. The much larger percentage of high school students who enroll in college, relative to those who were not enrolled in school, largely follows from the relative population size of the two groups.

Figure 4.  
**Percentage of People 15 to 34 Years Old Not Enrolled in College in the Prior Year Enrolled in College**



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, January 2000–December 2015; and National Bureau of Economic Research, U.S. Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions.

degrees—and the labor market outcomes experienced by those who leave college.

Following from the previous discussion of enrollment by prior year status, as the percentage of students who remained enrolled in college from one year to the next fluctuated across 2000 to 2015, so too did the percentage of students who left college across the period. The percentage of students who left college was statistically different from the 25.7 percent who left college in 2001 in only 5 of the 16 years in the 2000 through 2015 period.<sup>19</sup> Even if the proportion of students who left college fluctuated across the 2000 to 2015 period, the

<sup>19</sup> In 2000, 2004, 2006, 2009, and 2011, the percentage of students who left college was statistically different from 2001.

characteristics of students who left college may have changed systematically across the period.

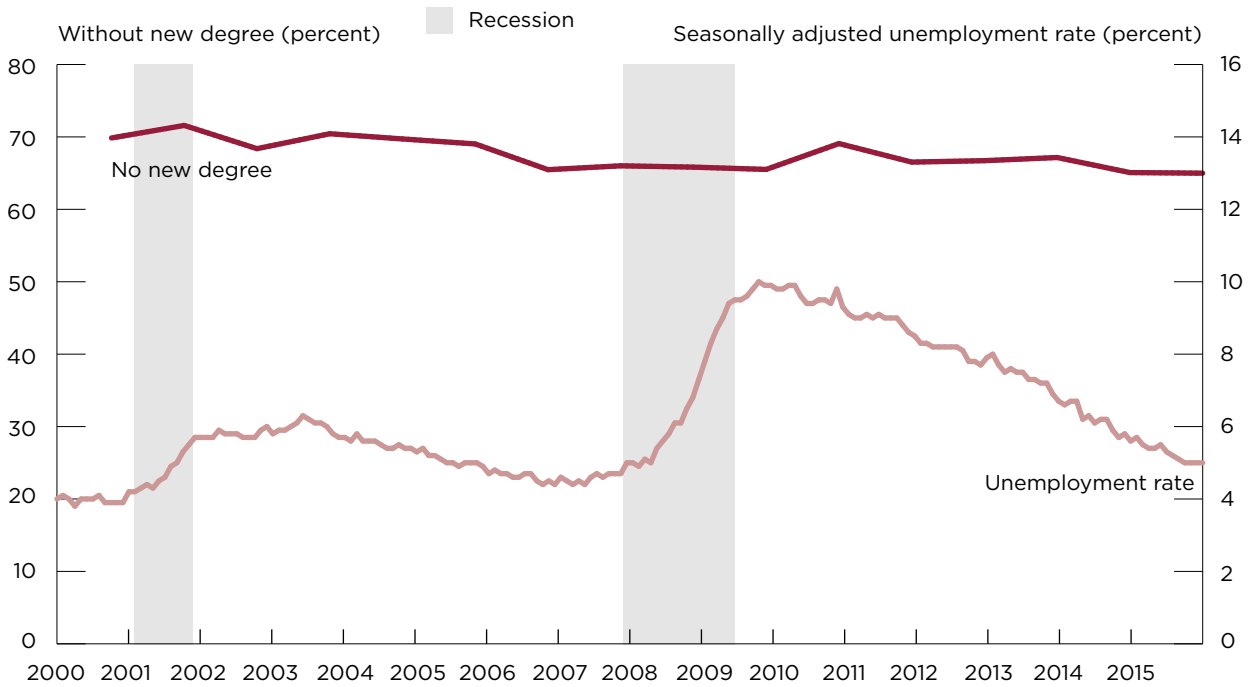
**Degree completion.** The School Enrollment Supplement to the CPS asks people less than 30 years old who have an associate’s degree or higher to identify the year in which they completed their most recent degree. This makes it possible to identify which individuals completed a degree among those enrolled in college in the previous year and no longer enrolled. From 2000 to 2005, about 70 percent of students who left college had not completed a degree in the previous year (Figure 5). From 2005 to 2006, the proportion of students who left college and had not completed a degree in the previous year declined to 65.5 percent. In all but one year since 2006, the

percentage of students who left college and had not completed a degree in the previous year was not statistically different from 2006.

**Unemployment of college-leavers.** The percentage of all students who left college that were unemployed increased between the prerecession period and the recession period (Figure 6). This was true for those with a bachelor’s degree, those with an advanced degree, and those who had not completed a college degree. Comparing prerecession and postrecession periods, college-leavers with degrees (associate’s, bachelor’s, or advanced) were unemployed at higher rates in 2012 to 2015 than in 2000 to 2007. A similar percentage of those who left college

Figure 5.

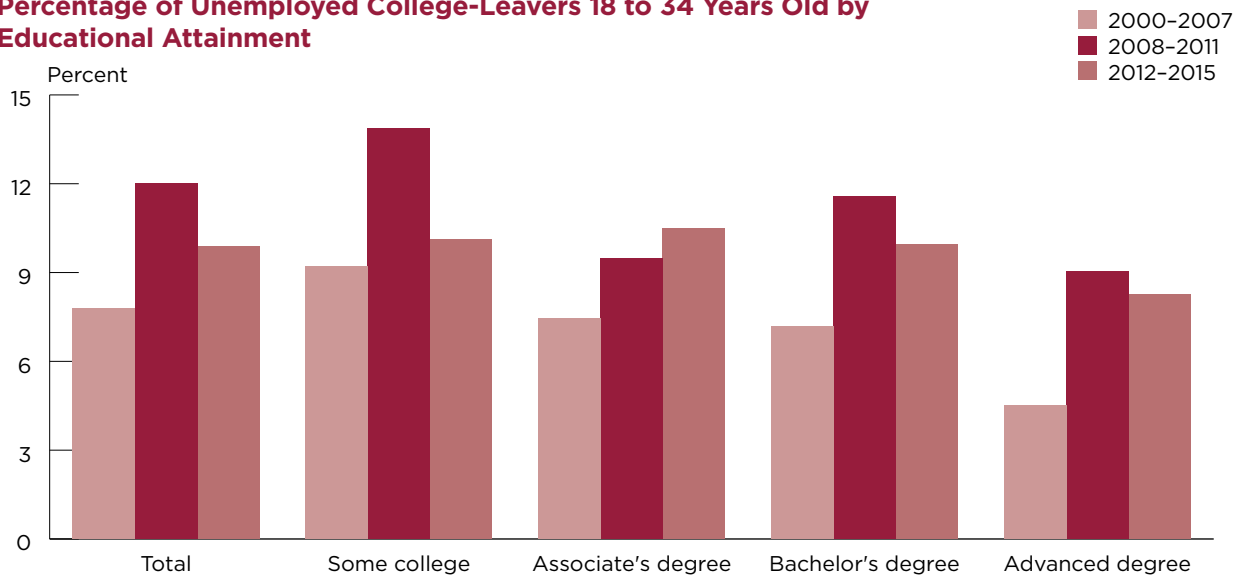
**Percentage of College-Leavers 15 to 29 Years Old Without a New Degree**



Note: The Current Population Survey collects recent degree completion information for only those under 30 years of age. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Seasonally Adjusted Unemployment Rate, January 2000–December 2015; and National Bureau of Economic Research, U.S. Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions.

Figure 6.

**Percentage of Unemployed College-Leavers 18 to 34 Years Old by Educational Attainment**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October 2000–2015.

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without completing a degree were unemployed in the prerecession and postrecession periods. Regardless of whether they had completed a degree or which degree they completed, similar proportions of people who left college were unemployed in the postrecession period.

This examination of college-leaving from 2000 to 2015 shows five things. First, the proportion of students who left college fluctuated across the period. Second, the percentage of students leaving college without a newly completed degree declined and largely remained at a lower level from 2006 to the present. Third, a larger percentage of people who left college during the recession period were unemployed than were before the recession. Fourth, after the recession, only students who left college without completing a degree were unemployed at prerecession levels, while other groups were unemployed at levels higher than they were before the recession. Finally, after the recession, those who left college were unemployed at similar rates, regardless of whether or which degree they had completed. That all college-leavers were unemployed at similar rates, suggests that the labor market was slower to absorb the larger number of people who left college with degrees. The increase in the number of people who left college with degrees followed from the increase in college enrollment, and the decrease in the proportion of people who left college without having completed a degree.

## CONCLUSION

This report examines change in college enrollment for various subgroups in the population and highlights the components of the change in enrollment observed before, during, and since the Great Recession. Enrollment in postsecondary education increased from 2006 through the recession and after to peak in 2011, and decreased in recent years but maintained gains relative to 2006 enrollment. There are three major themes in the data reported here to highlight.

The first major theme observed is that changes in college enrollment during the Great Recession were consistent with research showing that economic contractions lead individuals to enroll in school to obtain additional training. During economic contractions, attending college becomes a more attractive option for some people as the worsening labor market reduces the amount of potential earnings foregone in order to obtain additional education. Among those not enrolled in school in the prior year, and therefore likely engaged in the labor market, there was an increase in enrollment during the recession and a return to prerecession levels of enrollment by 2015. High school students were similarly more likely to enroll in college during the recession than before, but after the recession they enrolled at rates that exceeded prerecession levels. Additionally, while enrollment increased and subsequently decreased in both 2-year and 4-year colleges, the change was

concentrated in 2-year colleges. After the recession, 2-year college enrollment returned to prerecession levels, while 4-year college enrollment was higher than it was before the recession. Two-year colleges generally have lower tuition and fees than 4-year institutions, and they may be more appropriate for those who seek to gain new skills quickly.

Secondly, Hispanic college enrollment increased markedly across the 2000 to 2015 period. Prior to the recession, the percentage of Hispanics 18 to 34 years old enrolled in college was lower than the percentages of other groups enrolled in college. By 2015, the percentage of Hispanics enrolled in college was comparable to the percentages of non-Hispanic White and Black peers enrolled in college. Additionally, the percentage of Blacks 18 to 34 years old enrolled in college increased to reach parity with non-Hispanic Whites by 2015.

Third, a greater percentage of students who left college during the recession were unemployed than were before the recession. Those who left college having completed degrees were unemployed at higher rates after the recession than they were before, as the labor market may have been slow to absorb the increased supply of degree-holders that resulted from the increase in college enrollment and the increase in the proportion of students leaving college who had completed degrees.

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## SOURCES OF THE DATA

Estimates in this report are from the 2000 to 2015 October supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The population represented (the population universe) in the School Enrollment Supplement to the October 2000 to 2015 CPS is the civilian non-institutionalized population living in the United States. The institutionalized population, which is excluded from the population universe, is composed primarily of the population in correctional institutions and nursing homes (91 percent of the 4.1 million institutionalized people in Census 2000).

## ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

Statistics from sample surveys are subject to sampling error and nonsampling error. All comparisons presented in this report take sampling error into account and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level. This means the 90 percent confidence interval for the difference between estimates being compared does not include zero. Nonsampling error in surveys may be attributed to a variety of sources, such as how the survey was designed, how respondents interpret questions, how able and willing respondents are to provide correct answers,

and how accurate answers are coded and classified. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures in sample selection, the wording of questions, interviewing, coding, data processing, and data analysis.

The final CPS population estimates are adjusted in the weighting procedure using ratio estimation, whereby sample estimates are adjusted to independent estimates of the national population by age, sex, and race and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for bias due to undercoverage, but biases may still be present when people who are missed by the survey differ from those interviewed in ways other than age, sex, and race and Hispanic origin. How this weighting procedure affects other variables in the survey is not precisely known. All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources. Further information on the source of the data and accuracy of the estimates, including standard errors and confidence intervals, can be found at <[www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsoct15.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsoct15.pdf)> or by contacting the Demographic Statistical Methods Division via e-mail at <[dsmd.source.and.accuracy@census.gov](mailto:dsmd.source.and.accuracy@census.gov)>.

## MORE INFORMATION

Detailed tabulations, related information, and historic data are available on the Internet at the School Enrollment page on the Census Bureau's Web site at <[www.census.gov/topics/education/school-enrollment.html](http://www.census.gov/topics/education/school-enrollment.html)>.

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