

# School Enrollment in the United States: 2018

## Population Characteristics

### Current Population Reports

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According to the American Community Survey (ACS), about a quarter (26 percent) of the U.S. population over the age of 3 were enrolled in school in 2018.<sup>1</sup> This report brings together the latest data from both the ACS and the Current Population Survey (CPS); two complementary U.S. Census Bureau surveys that provide data on school enrollment in the United States, in order to provide a comprehensive, holistic picture of the state of school enrollment. Specifically, this report outlines the current picture of education in America and discusses how the latest numbers compare with historical levels.<sup>2</sup>

The data in this report are the most recent available from the surveys reported here. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruptions in activities in the United States and around the world. Preliminary indications from other sources show that school enrollment was changed in form more than in numbers. According to data from the Census Bureau's Household Pulse survey, nearly 93 percent of people in households with school-aged children reported their children engaged in some form of "distance learning" from home.<sup>3</sup> Data collected by the National Student Clearinghouse show that changes in college enrollment (including shifts in the number of courses

taken) in spring 2020 were no different from the average rate and pattern of the prior two years.<sup>4</sup> The picture of school enrollment in this report can serve as a baseline for understanding these changes and those that emerge in coming months and years.

Highlights from the sections of the report using ACS data are:

- In 2018, school enrollment included 5.0 million nursery school students, 4.0 million kindergarteners, 32.8 million students in first through eighth grades, 17.1 million high schoolers, 17.8 million undergraduate students, and 4.3 million graduate students.<sup>5</sup>
- High school dropout rates—defined as the percentage of people who are not enrolled in school and do not have a high school degree—declined (13 percent of all 18- to 24-year-olds in 2005 to 6 percent in 2018), and the racial and ethnic differences in high school dropout rates have narrowed.
- In 2018, approximately 21 percent of graduate students and 12 percent of undergraduate students were foreign-born.
- Just over half (54 percent) of all undergraduate students were non-Hispanic White, 15 percent

<sup>1</sup> Percent enrolled is calculated from ACS Detailed Table B14001. See: <<https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=school%20enrollment&tid=ACSDT1Y2018.B14001&t=School%20Enrollment&vintage=2018&hidePreview=true>>.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau's Disclosure Review Board (DRB) and Disclosure Avoidance Officers have reviewed this data product for unauthorized disclosure of confidential information and have approved the disclosure avoidance practices applied to this release. DRB number: CBDRB-FY20-POP001-0173.

<sup>3</sup> See Kevin McElrath, "Schooling During the Pandemic," from the series, America Counts: Stories Behind the Numbers, August, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> J. Causey, Q. Liu, M. Ryu, D. Shapiro, and Y. Zheng, A COVID-19 Supplement to Spring 2020 Current Term Enrollment Estimates, Herndon, VA, National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, June 2020. <<https://nscresearchcenter.org/current-term-enrollment-estimates/>>.

<sup>5</sup> Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling error. All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing, and unless otherwise noted, all comparisons are statistically significant at the 10 percent significance level.

were Black, 20 percent were Hispanic, and 8 percent were Asian.<sup>6</sup>

- Similarly, approximately 50 percent of all K-12 students were non-Hispanic White, 14 percent were Black, 25 percent were Hispanic, and 5 percent were Asian.

Highlights from the sections of the report using CPS data are:

- In the 16-year period from 2003 to 2018, the number of students enrolled in nursery school, kindergarten, elementary school, and high school differed from the 2018 level only in a few instances.<sup>7</sup>
- College enrollment levels rose by 3.8 million from 2003 to 2011, only to fall by 1.5 million from 2011 to 2018.
- The percentage of kindergarteners who attend full-day increased from 10 percent in 1967 to 81 percent in 2018.
- According to the CPS, the share of undergraduate

<sup>6</sup> Federal surveys give respondents the option of reporting 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). This report shows data using the race-alone approach. Use of the single-race population does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. The Census Bureau uses a variety of approaches. This report will refer to the White-alone population as White, the Black-alone population as Black, and the Asian-alone population as Asian. In this report, the terms “White, not Hispanic” and “non-Hispanic White” are used interchangeably and refer to people who are not Hispanic and who reported White and no other race. Since Hispanics may be any race, data in this report for Hispanics overlap with data for race groups. For more information, see [www.census.gov/mso/www/training/pdf/race-ethnicity-onepager.pdf](http://www.census.gov/mso/www/training/pdf/race-ethnicity-onepager.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> In 2005, high school enrollment was above the 2018 level, and the same was true for kindergarten enrollment from 2010 to 2013.

## THE ACS AND THE CPS: TWO SOURCES OF SCHOOL ENROLLMENT DATA

The ACS is the largest annual survey administered by the Census Bureau, sampling about 3.5 million housing unit addresses per year. It looks at a wide range of social, economic, and housing characteristics for the population using a multitude of demographic variables. Each year, the Census Bureau publishes the ACS’s 1-year estimates for geographic areas with populations of 65,000 or more. For geographic areas with smaller populations, several years of data are pooled together to create more precise multiyear estimates. Since 2010, the ACS has published 5-year data for all geographic areas down to the census tract and block group levels.

The ACS samples the entire resident population, including those living in institutions and other group quarters such as prisons and hospitals. In this respect, data from the ACS are highly comparable with data collected in Census 2000 and earlier decennial censuses. The ACS asks respondents throughout the entire calendar year whether they were enrolled in school at any time in the previous three months. The survey also asks whether each enrolled person attended public school or private school, and in what grade or level the person was enrolled.<sup>1</sup>

While the ACS is the largest annual survey currently conducted by the Census Bureau, the CPS is the oldest. The CPS samples approximately 72,000 eligible housing units each month. The CPS is designed to meet reliability requirements for states and the 12 largest metropolitan areas, however, the sample size is sometimes not sufficient to describe small geographic areas. Estimates of school enrollment from the CPS are based on a special supplement administered every October since 1956, allowing the construction of a time series for school enrollment. The supplement on school enrollment asks detailed questions of people aged 3 and older. Twenty questions gather information on a single year of enrollment, enrollment status, and level for the previous year: whether the respondent goes to school full-time or part-time; whether they attend a two-year or four-year institution; whether they are obtaining any vocational training; and whether they received a degree in the previous year.<sup>2</sup> In general, the ACS is relied on for more recent estimates and for estimates at lower levels of geography due to its larger size, and the CPS is relied on for historical comparison. In addition, some of the additional questions in the CPS provide information not available in the ACS.

<sup>1</sup> Tables from the ACS about school enrollment can be accessed on the Census Bureau’s data website at [data.census.gov/cedsci/](http://data.census.gov/cedsci/).

<sup>2</sup> Tables about students and school enrollment from the CPS can be found 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).

Table 1.

**School Enrollment by Level of Enrollment and Selected Characteristics: 2018**

(Population aged 3 and older enrolled in school. Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Total enrolled in school	Nursery school	Kindergarten through 12th grade					College		
			Total	Kindergarten	Elementary grades 1 to 4	Elementary grades 5 to 8	High school	Total	Undergraduate	Graduate school
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>80,917</b>	<b>4,966</b>	<b>53,882</b>	<b>3,978</b>	<b>15,914</b>	<b>16,889</b>	<b>17,101</b>	<b>22,068</b>	<b>17,793</b>	<b>4,275</b>
<b>Sex</b>										
Male .....	40,134	2,572	27,657	2,029	8,155	8,672	8,801	9,905	8,137	1,768
Female .....	40,783	2,394	26,225	1,949	7,759	8,217	8,300	12,164	9,656	2,508
<b>Race and Hispanic origin</b>										
White alone .....	53,827	3,340	35,838	2,601	10,523	11,282	11,432	14,649	11,854	2,795
White alone, non-Hispanic .....	41,608	2,639	26,987	1,939	7,879	8,447	8,721	11,982	9,525	2,457
Black alone .....	11,632	682	7,730	566	2,274	2,362	2,528	3,221	2,637	583
Asian alone .....	4,886	260	2,634	208	763	814	849	1,992	1,400	592
Hispanic (any race) .....	18,800	1,081	13,648	1,017	4,079	4,359	4,191	4,072	3,570	502
<b>Nativity</b>										
Native-born .....	75,301	4,863	51,479	3,861	15,395	16,208	16,016	18,959	15,585	3,374
Foreign-born .....	5,616	103	2,403	117	519	682	1,085	3,110	2,208	901
<b>Control of School</b>										
Public .....	67,749	2,968	48,183	3,494	14,234	15,082	15,374	16,598	14,041	2,557
Private .....	13,168	1,998	5,699	484	1,680	1,808	1,727	5,470	3,752	1,718
<b>Region</b>										
Northeast .....	13,374	869	8,550	617	2,492	2,666	2,776	3,955	3,094	861
Midwest .....	16,747	1,075	11,270	830	3,321	3,534	3,585	4,402	3,534	868
South .....	30,927	1,861	21,014	1,564	6,259	6,594	6,597	8,051	6,499	1,553
West .....	19,869	1,160	13,048	968	3,842	4,096	4,143	5,661	4,666	994
<b>Language Spoken at Home</b>										
Total population aged 5 and over .....	76,989	1,256	53,665	3,761	15,914	16,889	17,101	22,068	17,793	4,275
Speaks English .....	58,871	1,018	41,445	2,959	12,343	13,057	13,086	16,409	13,303	3,106
Speaks a non-English language .....	18,118	238	12,220	802	3,570	3,833	4,015	5,660	4,490	1,170

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates. For more information, see &lt;www.census.gov/acs&gt;.

students who were over 30 years of age or were in adult roles such as marriage and parenthood declined between 2000 and 2018.

### CURRENT ENROLLMENT STATISTICS FROM THE AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

This section describes the state of school enrollment drawing on data from the ACS. In 2018, 80.9 million people in the U.S. were enrolled in school (Table 1). This included 5.0 million nursery school students, 4.0 million kindergarteners, 32.8

million students in first through eighth grades, 17.1 million high schoolers, 17.8 million undergraduate students, and 4.3 million graduate students.<sup>8</sup>

#### Nursery School

The ACS collects data year-round, thus it provides a picture of students across the entire year. At the nursery school level, private school attendance accounted for 40 percent of the total (2.0 of 5.0 million), more than at later grades, with the exception of graduate

<sup>8</sup> Here and throughout the report numbers may add up to more or less than the total due to rounding.

school. Graduate school had a lower number but a similar percentage in private school enrollment. Only 10 percent of high school students and 21 percent of undergraduate students attended private schools. Although private school enrollment was prevalent among nursery school students, a majority (60 percent) attended public nursery schools. Racially and ethnically, about half (2.6 million) of nursery school students were non-Hispanic White alone, with 682,000 Black (14 percent), 260,000 Asian (5 percent), and 1.1 million Hispanic (22 percent)

Table 2.

**Median Household Income of Students Enrolled in Nursery School through High School by Level of Enrollment and Control of School: 2018**

(Population aged 3 and older living in households. Income in inflation-adjusted 2018 dollars)

Control of school	Nursery school	Kindergarten	Elementary grades 1 to 4	Elementary grades 5 to 8	High school
Total.....	83,600	71,600	72,900	76,600	81,000
Public.....	63,300	68,400	70,500	73,800	78,600
Private.....	118,800	99,200	100,100	105,100	109,000

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs)>.

(Table 1). The vast majority (98 percent) of nursery school students were native-born (Table 1).

Household income for children enrolled in school varied by level of enrollment (Table 2). Median annual income for households of nursery school students was \$84,000—higher than that for students in kindergarten through high school, which ranged from \$72,000 to \$81,000. Private nursery school students were in higher income homes than public nursery school students, with median household incomes in 2018 at \$119,000 versus \$63,000.<sup>9</sup>

**Kindergarten through 12th Grade**

In 2018, 53.9 million students were enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade. Of these, 27.0 million, or 50 percent of the total, were non-Hispanic White (Table 1). This percentage ranged from 49 percent in kindergarten to 51 percent in high school. In 2018, there were 7.7 million Black kindergarten through 12th grade students (14 percent of the total), 2.6 million Asian students in these grades (5 percent of the total), and 13.6 million Hispanic students (25 percent of the total). Most kindergarten

<sup>9</sup> The American Community Survey asks respondents to report the income received in the past 12 months from the time of interview. Interviewing takes place year-round, meaning part of the income reported in 2018 was received in 2017.

through 12th grade students were native-born. In 2018, 2.4 million students in kindergarten through 12th grade—four percent of the total—were foreign-born (Table 1). The majority of U.S. kindergarten through 12th grade students attended public schools, while 5.7 million (11 percent) attended private schools (Table 1). Students in private schools came from homes with higher incomes than those students who attended public schools (Table 2). Specifically, those who attended private kindergarten, elementary school, or high school came from households with median incomes of \$99,000 to \$109,000, whereas students who attended public schools in kindergarten through 12th grade came from households with median incomes of \$68,000 to \$79,000.

**High School Dropout**

In 2018, 6 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were high school dropouts—that is, they were not currently enrolled in high school and had not completed high school (Figure 1). To provide a clearer sense of overall patterns over time, the ACS is used to investigate group-specific high school dropout rates over recent years. It is worth noting that some of these 18- to 24-year-olds may

later return to school, but as of the time of the survey and for the purposes of this report, they are considered dropouts.<sup>10</sup> High school dropout rates in the United States have declined about 6 percentage-points since 2005. This decline has been particularly noteworthy among Black and Hispanic youth (Figure 1). The Black dropout rate declined from 14 percent in 2005 to 7 percent in 2018, while the Hispanic rate dramatically declined from 27 percent to 10 percent during the same period. During this time, the non-Hispanic White rate declined from 8 percent to 5 percent, and the Asian dropout rate declined from 4 percent to 2 percent.

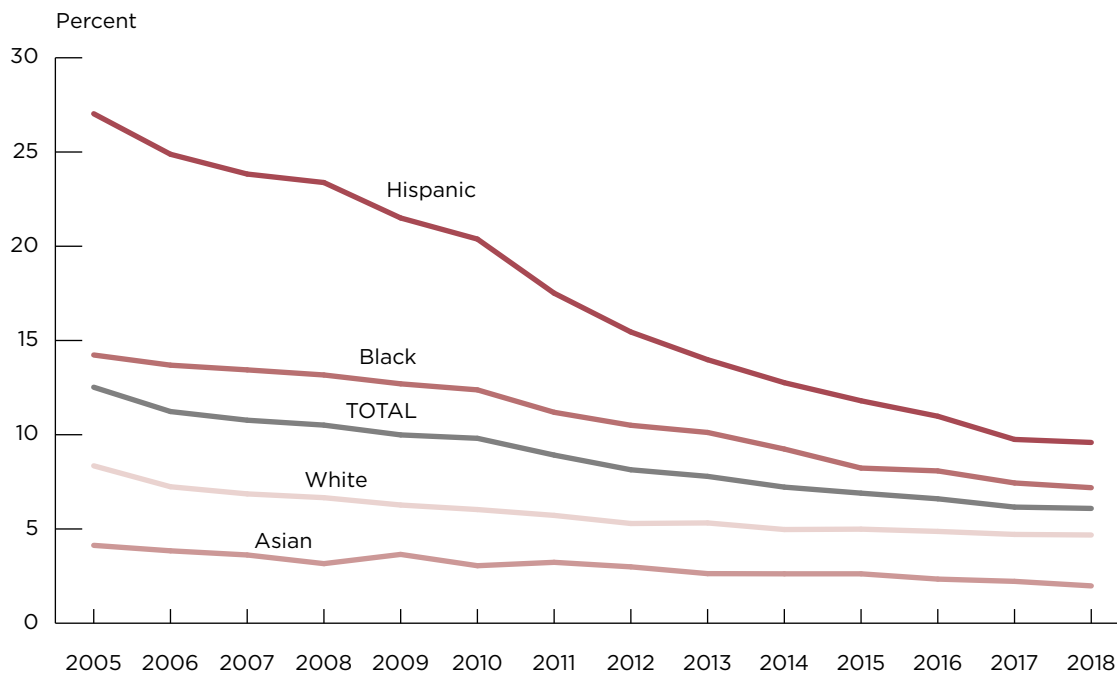
**College**

Throughout this report, the term “college” is used to refer to enrollment in both undergraduate and graduate schools. Undergraduate schools are generally two- and four-year programs that lead to associate’s and bachelor’s degrees. Graduate schools enroll students pursuing advanced degrees such as master’s degrees, PhD’s, law degrees, and medical degrees.

<sup>10</sup> There are alternative methods of measuring drop-out statuses. For example, see the Department of Education report at <<https://nces.ed.gov/programs/dropout/technotes.asp>>.

Figure 1.

**Percentage of People Aged 18–24 Who Have Not Completed High School and Are Not Attending School by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2005 to 2018**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates, 2005-2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs)>.

In 2018, a little over half (54 percent) of the 17.8 million undergraduate college students and 57 percent of the 4.3 million graduate students were non-Hispanic White (Table 1). Black students made up 2.6 million, or 15 percent of all undergraduates, and 583,000 (14 percent) of graduate students. In 2018, 1.4 million Asians were enrolled as undergraduates (eight percent of the undergraduate population), and 592,000 were enrolled as graduate students (14 percent of the graduate population). The same year, 3.6 million Hispanics were enrolled as undergraduates (20 percent of the undergraduate population), and 502,000 were enrolled as graduate students (12 percent). Students who spoke a language other

than English at home made up 25 percent (4.5 million) of undergraduates and 27 percent (1.2 million) of graduate students. By comparison, the proportion speaking a language other than English among students at all levels was 24 percent.

Foreign-born students were 12 percent of undergraduates (2.2 million). However, the school level with the highest proportion of foreign-born students was graduate school, which in 2018 had 901,000 foreign-born students, 21 percent of the total number of graduate students (Table 1).

According to the ACS, in 2018 there were 9.7 million female undergraduate and 2.5 million female graduate students

(Table 1), who constituted 54 and 59 percent of the undergraduate and graduate student body, respectively.

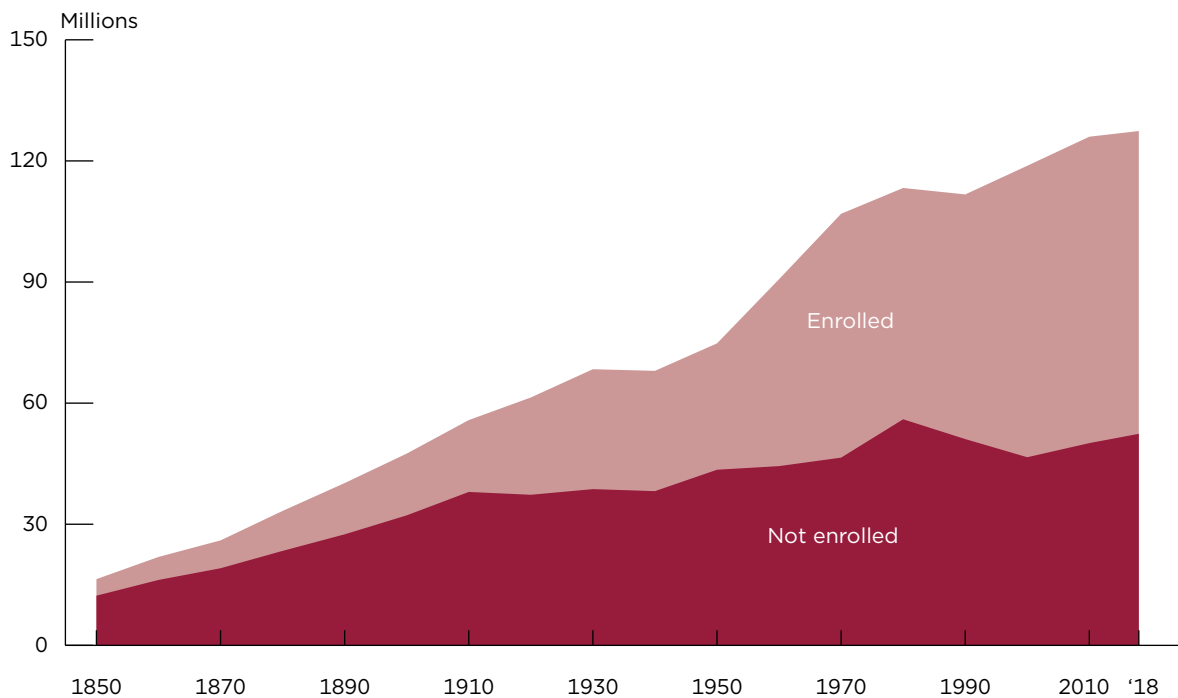
**HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF ENROLLMENT, USING CENSUS AND ACS DATA**

Data on school enrollment have been collected in the decennial census since 1850. Before turning to examine the history available from CPS, these long-term data can help provide context (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> In 1850, 4.1 million of the 16.4 million people under the age of 30 (25 percent) were enrolled in

<sup>11</sup> The American Community Survey serves as the continuation of the decennial census program for the purpose of measuring population characteristics. As such, data from the ACS are included along with census data in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

### U.S. Population Under Age 30 by Enrollment Status: 1850 to 2018



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Censuses, 1850–2000 (for more information, see <[www.census.gov/decennial-census](http://www.census.gov/decennial-census)>); American Community Survey, 1-Year Estimates, 2010 and 2018 (for more information, see <[www.census.gov/acs](http://www.census.gov/acs)>).

school. By 2010, 75.9 million of the 126.0 million people under 30 (60 percent) were students. Since 2010, the number of students under the age of 30 decreased to 75.0 million in 2018. The percentage of the under-30 population enrolled in school changed only slightly since 2010 (going from 60 percent to 59 percent).

#### HISTORICAL PATTERNS OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT, AND ENROLLMENT BY LEVEL USING CPS DATA

Although it is convenient to use decennial census data to the distant past, the CPS provides a consistent and detailed record of enrollment from the middle of the twentieth century. The CPS will be the basis for the examination of

enrollment in the balance of this report. Levels of school enrollment generally follow levels in the population, with more people college age or elementary school age leading to more college or elementary students, respectively. For example, the post-World War II baby boom led directly to an increase in elementary school enrollment during the 1960s, followed by an increase in high school enrollment in the early 1970s (Figure 3).<sup>12</sup> Generally, when enrollment does move

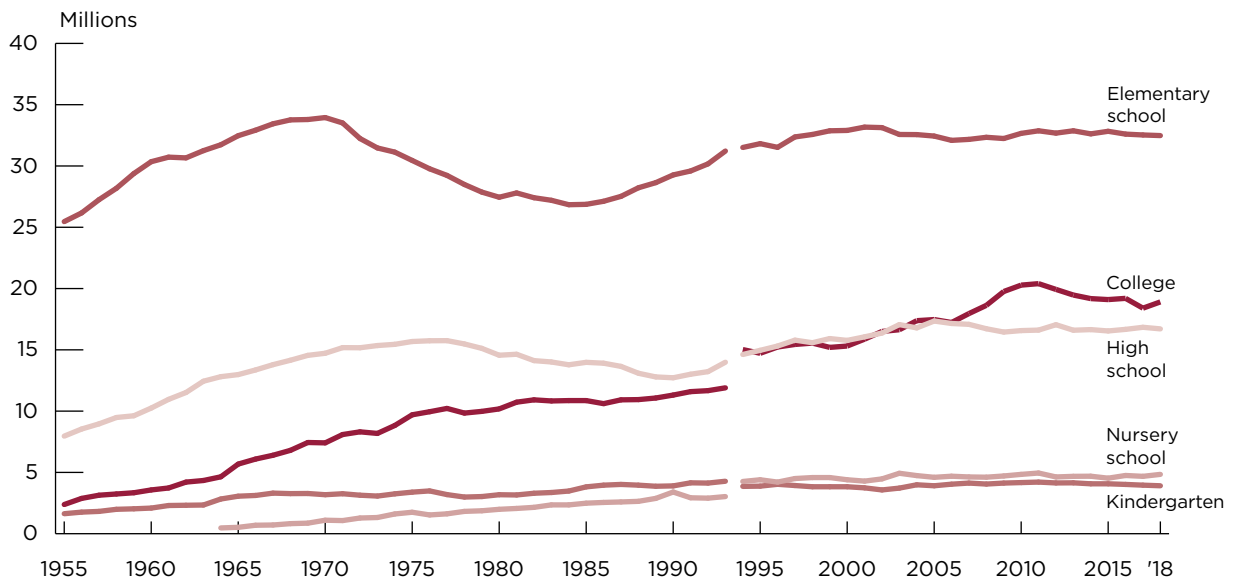
<sup>12</sup> From 1960 to 1966, elementary school enrollment increased by 2.6 million from 1970 to 1976, and high school enrollment increased by 1.0 million. See: Jessica W. Davis and Kurt Bauman, "School Enrollment in the United States: 2011." *Current Population Reports*, P20-564, U.S. Census Bureau, September, 2013, <[www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2013/demo/p20-571.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2013/demo/p20-571.pdf)>.

independent of population, it is at older and younger ages, specifically nursery school and college, as discussed below.

#### Historical Patterns in Nursery School Enrollment

In 1964, there were 471,000 nursery school students (Figures 3 and 4). By 2018, this number climbed to 4.8 million. In the period from 1964 to 1978, the number of children in nursery school increased despite a decrease in the overall population of 3- and 4-year-olds. The population of nursery school students went from 6 percent of the size of the population of 3- and 4-year-olds in 1964 to 29 percent in 1978. From 1979 to 1993, there was an increase in the 3- to 4-year-old population, and the number of

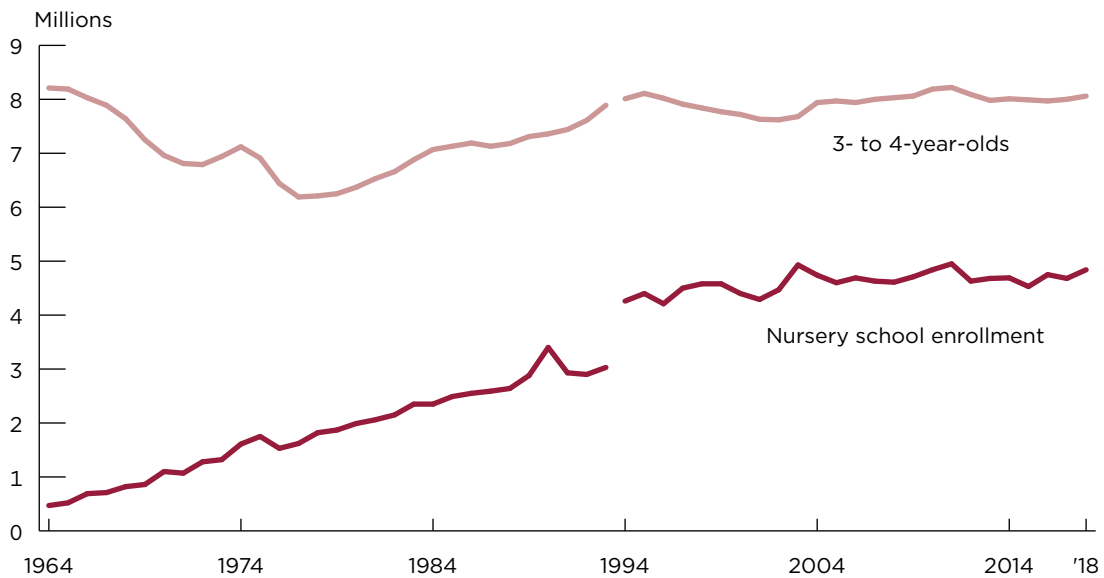
Figure 3.  
**Enrollment by Level of School: 1955 to 2018**



Note: Enrollment estimates were affected by 1994 changes in CPS data collection methods. For general discussion of these changes, see: Sharon R. Cohany, Anne E. Polivka and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, "Revisions in the Current Population Survey Effective January 1994," *Employment and Earnings*, 41(35) 1994.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1955-2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

Figure 4.  
**Nursery School Enrollment and the Number of 3- and 4-Year-Olds: 1964 to 2018**



Note: Enrollment estimates were affected by 1994 changes in CPS data collection methods. For general discussion of these changes, see: Sharon R. Cohany, Anne E. Polivka and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, "Revisions in the Current Population Survey Effective January 1994," *Employment and Earnings*, 41(35) 1994.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1964-2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

nursery school students continued to increase both absolutely, and relative to the number of 3- to 4-year-olds, reaching 38 percent in 1993. The apparent jump in nursery school enrollment between 1993 and 1994 may have resulted from changes in data collection procedures, as noted in Figure 4. However, from 1994 to 2000, the ratio of nursery school students to children aged 3 to 4 continued to grow. Since 2000, the population aged 3 and 4 ranged between 7.6 and 8.2 million, and there has been a slight increase in the number of nursery school students, from 4.3 to 4.8 million.

### Historical Patterns Through 12th Grade Enrollment

About 96 percent of elementary and secondary school children aged 5 to 17 were enrolled in school in 2018.<sup>13</sup> The enrollment rate for this group remained at 90 percent or higher, even for 16- to 17-year-olds, from 1981 to 2018.<sup>14</sup> This stability means that the number of kindergarten through 12th grade students largely reflected the number of children of school age. The entry of the baby boomers, and the children of baby boomers “echo boomers,” led to higher numbers of elementary school students (Figure 3). As baby boomers entered school

<sup>13</sup> See Table 1. Enrollment Status of the Population 3-Years-Old and Over, by Sex, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, Foreign-Born, and Foreign-Born Parentage: October 2018. <[www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/school-enrollment/2018-cps.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/school-enrollment/2018-cps.html)>.

<sup>14</sup> See Table A-2. Percentage of the Population 3-Years-Old and Over Enrolled in School, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1947 to 2018. <[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)>.

from 1955 to 1970, the number of elementary school students went from 25.5 million to 34.0 million (Figure 3). In 1985, that number had dropped to 26.9 million, with a subsequent increase up to 33.2 million in 2001. Similar patterns were found in high school enrollments. High school enrollment increased from 10.3 million in 1960 to 15.7 million in 1976, decreased to 12.7 million in 1990, and increased again to 17.4 million in 2005. While the size of the school-age population is largely responsible for K-12 enrollment overall, it is true that kindergarten and high school enrollment rates have increased over time. In 1955, 78 percent of 5- and 6-year-olds attended school. In 2018, it was 94 percent.<sup>15</sup> Kindergarten enrollment moved upwards from 1.6 million in 1955 to 4.1 million in 2007. However, the number of kindergarteners has not significantly changed in the past 10 years, from 4.0 million in 2008 to 3.9 million in 2018 (Figure 5). The percentage of kindergarteners attending full-day has seen an increase over the past 50 years. In 1967, 10 percent of kindergarteners attended school full-day, while in 2018 it was 81 percent (Figure 5). While not all states today require their school districts to offer kindergarten (and of those that do, not all require full-day kindergarten specifically),<sup>16</sup> it is clear from historical patterns that full-day kindergarten has become predominant.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Table 5.3. Types of state and district requirements for kindergarten entrance and attendance, waivers and exemptions for kindergarten entrance, by state: 2018. National Center for Education Statistics. State Educational Reforms. <[nces.ed.gov/programs/state\\_reform/tab5\\_3.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/state_reform/tab5_3.asp)>.

At high school ages 16 to 17, the percentage attending school has also increased. In 1955, 77 percent of 16- to 17-year-olds attended school, while in 2018, 92 percent attended.<sup>17</sup> These changes are seen in high school dropout rates. In 1967, 20 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds had dropped out (not enrolled and not completed high school); in 2018, it was 6 percent.<sup>18</sup>

### Historical Patterns in College Enrollment

In 1955, there were 2.4 million students enrolled in college (Figure 3). By 2018, 18.9 million were enrolled. In 1967, 26 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds were attending college, whereas in 2018, 41 percent of the same group were enrolled.<sup>19</sup> The increase in college enrollment over this span was not always steady. Enrollment reached 20.4 million in 2011, and declined by 2.0 million from 2011 to 2017, followed by an increase in 2018 (Figure 3). While women were about equally likely to attend undergraduate college in the 1900s to 1930s, during the period from 1930 to 1950, men

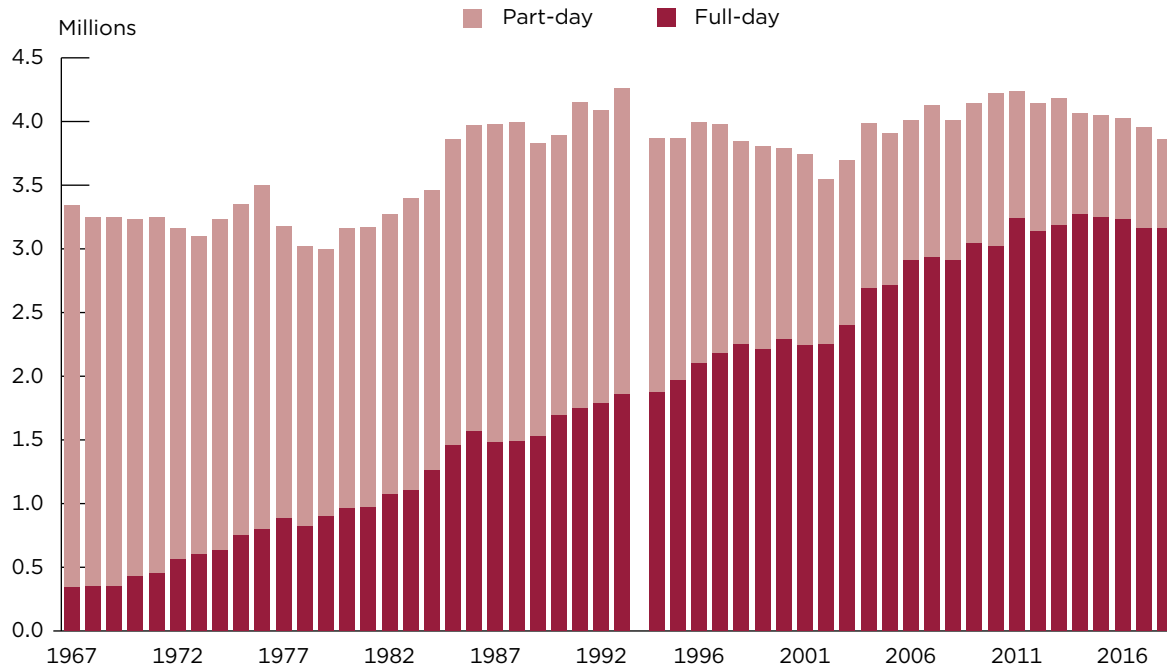
<sup>17</sup> Table A-2. Percentage of the Population 3 Years Old and Over Enrolled in School, by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1947 to 2018. <[www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/school-enrollment/cps-historical-time-series.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/school-enrollment/cps-historical-time-series.html)>.

<sup>18</sup> Table A-5A: Population 14 to 24 Years Old by High School Graduate Status, College Enrollment, Attainment, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: October 1967 to 2018 CPS Historical Time Series Tables on School Enrollment. U.S. Census Bureau. <[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)>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.



Figure 5.  
**Full- and Part-Day Kindergarten Enrollment: 1967 to 2018**



Note: Enrollment estimates were affected by 1994 changes in CPS data collection methods. For general discussion of these changes, see: Sharon R. Cohany, Anne E. Polivka and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, "Revisions in the Current Population Survey Effective January 1994," *Employment and Earnings*, 41(35) 1994.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1964-2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

became more likely to attend.<sup>20</sup> In 1947, according to CPS data, 27 percent of college students were women (Figure 6). Around this time, women began to make up an increasing share of the college population, with a female-majority crossover taking place in the late 1970s.<sup>21</sup> By 2001, there

<sup>20</sup> Claudia Goldin, Lawrence F. Katz, and Ilyana Kuziemko. 2006. "The Homecoming of American College Women: The Reversal of the College Gender Gap." National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 12139 <[www.nber.org/papers/w12139](http://www.nber.org/papers/w12139)>.

<sup>21</sup> In 1976, 48 percent of college students were female, statistically less than one-half. In 1977 and 1978, the percent who were female were not statistically different from half. In 1979 and 1980, women were 52 percent of the student body each year, slightly above the 50 percent level.

were 2.1 million more female college students than male college students; by 2012, there were 2.7 million more, and in the past four years there has remained close to 2.0 million more female than male students.<sup>22</sup> In 2018, women made up 56 percent of the college population.

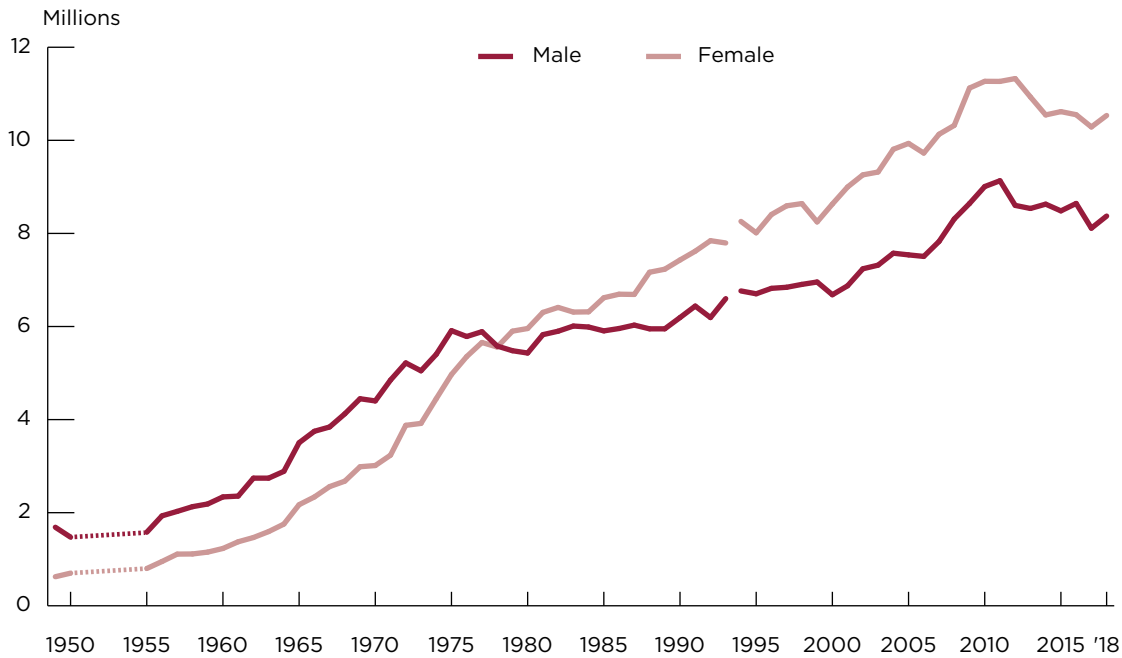
While the common image of college students as 20-somethings away from home and spending

<sup>22</sup> The gap between female and male college students in 2001 was statistically different from the gap in 2012, but not from the gap in any year from 2013 to 2018. The 2012 gap was different from the gaps from 2014 to 2018. The 2013 gap differed from 2014 and 2016. All other comparisons of male-female gaps between years 2001 and 2012-2018 were not statistically significant.

their time in classes and dorms at four-year universities reflects reality for some, the fact is that the American college experience is diverse. According to the 2018 CPS, a little over half (56 percent) of college students were undergraduates at four-year universities, while 23 percent were undergraduates at two-year colleges, and 22 percent were graduate students (Table 3).<sup>23</sup> The percentage of undergraduates who were attending two-year institutions declined from 2012 (36 percent) to 2018 (29 percent). This change

<sup>23</sup> The percent of college students who were at two-year colleges and the percent who were graduate students were not statistically different.

Figure 6.  
**College Enrollment by Sex: 1947 to 2018**



Note: Enrollment estimates were affected by 1994 changes in CPS data collection methods. For general discussion of these changes, see: Sharon R. Cohany, Anne E. Polivka and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, "Revisions in the Current Population Survey Effective January 1994," Employment and Earnings, 41(35) 1994.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1947-2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

was described in a recent Census Bureau report showing how post-recession four-year college enrollment rebounded to above where it was before the recession, whereas two-year college enrollment did not.<sup>24</sup> From 1980 to 2015, the proportion of undergraduates attending a two-year college had averaged one-third (34 percent).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Erik P. Schmidt, "Postsecondary Enrollment Before, During, and Since the Great Recession." Current Population Reports, P20-580, U.S. Census Bureau, April 2018. <[www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/P20-580.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/P20-580.pdf)>.

<sup>25</sup> Table A-7: College Enrollment of Students 14 Years Old and Over, by Type of College, Attendance Status, Age, and Sex: October 1970 to 2018. CPS Historical Time Series Tables on School Enrollment. U.S. Census Bureau. <[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)>.

In 2018, 56 percent of college students were enrolled in four-year undergraduate schools. Nearly half (47 percent) of all students fit into the conventional image of full-time, four-year undergraduates, while 8 percent were part-time, four-year undergraduates (Table 3). Graduate students were more likely than undergraduate students to be part-time. Overall, 22 percent of all college students were graduate students while 8 percent were part-time graduate students, which means that 39 percent of graduate students were part-time. Among students in two-year schools, 35 percent were part-time (8 percent out of 23 percent). Among students in four-year schools, 15 percent

were part-time (8 percent of 56 percent). Older people were more likely to be enrolled in graduate programs: 45 percent of students 25 to 34 and 47 percent of students 35 and over, compared with under 13 percent of students aged 20 to 24 and 1 percent of students under 20.<sup>26</sup> Enrollment in two-year colleges were common among 15- to 19-year-olds (34 percent), while the proportion in two-year schools didn't vary much among students aged 20 and over (18 to 22

<sup>26</sup> The percentage in graduate programs was not statistically different between those aged 25 to 34 and those 35 and over.

Table 3.

### Distribution of College Enrollment by Type of School, Level, and Full-Time/Part-Time Status by Selected Characteristics: 2018

(In percent)

Selected characteristics	Two-year undergraduate			Four-year undergraduate			Graduate school		
	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>22.6</b>	<b>14.6</b>	<b>8.0</b>	<b>55.8</b>	<b>47.4</b>	<b>8.4</b>	<b>21.6</b>	<b>13.1</b>	<b>8.5</b>
<b>Sex</b>									
Male .....	21.8	14.9	7.0	58.5	50.7	7.8	19.7	12.5	7.1
Female .....	23.2	14.4	8.8	53.7	44.8	8.9	23.1	13.6	9.5
<b>Age</b>									
15-19 .....	33.6	28.9	4.7	65.6	62.8	2.8	0.9	0.9	0.0
20-24 .....	18.2	11.8	6.4	68.7	61.5	7.2	13.1	10.4	2.7
25-34 .....	19.5	8.4	11.1	35.8	22.2	13.6	44.7	28.2	16.5
35 and over .....	22.1	8.3	13.8	30.8	17.2	13.6	47.1	18.3	28.8
<b>Race and Hispanic origin</b>									
White alone .....	22.7	14.7	8.0	57.0	48.7	8.4	20.3	11.6	8.7
White alone, non-Hispanic ..	18.9	12.5	6.4	58.0	50.0	8.1	23.1	13.1	9.9
Black alone .....	24.4	14.9	9.4	51.8	42.1	9.8	23.8	14.2	9.6
Asian alone .....	15.4	11.4	4.0	52.2	47.2	5.0	32.4	26.6	5.9
Hispanic (any race) .....	34.6	20.6	13.9	53.5	44.4	9.1	11.9	7.1	4.8
<b>Employment<sup>1</sup></b>									
Full-time .....	20.9	6.8	14.1	38.6	20.8	17.8	40.5	15.7	24.8
Part-time .....	27.0	17.8	9.2	58.6	50.4	8.2	14.4	10.8	3.6
Not employed .....	20.8	17.1	3.7	64.0	60.9	3.1	15.1	13.0	2.1

<sup>1</sup> "Not employed" category includes the unemployed (looking for work) and those not looking for work.

Note: Details may not sum to totals due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, School Enrollment Supplement, October 2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

percent).<sup>27</sup> One-third (34 percent) of students aged 25 and over were attending four-year undergraduate colleges.

Differences across race and Hispanic origins were notable at the two-year and graduate school levels. Non-Hispanic Whites and Asians were less likely to be attending a two-year school (19 percent and 15 percent, respectively) than Blacks (24 percent) and Hispanics (35 percent). At the graduate school level, Asian college students were more likely than other groups to be enrolled (32 percent),

<sup>27</sup> The proportion of college students in two-year schools among 20- to 24-year-olds were not significantly different from the proportion in two-year schools among people 25 to 34. The proportion in two-year schools among 25- to 34-year-olds were not significantly different from the proportion in two-year schools among people 35 and over.

followed by Blacks (24 percent), non-Hispanic Whites (23 percent), and Hispanics (12 percent).<sup>28</sup>

Two-year colleges and graduate school were both popular among people who combined enrollment and employment. More than one-third (41 percent) of full-time employed students were in graduate school. Employed students were also more likely than non-working students to attend college part-time.

<sup>28</sup> The percent of Black college students attending graduate school was not statistically different from the percent of non-Hispanic White students doing so. Neither of these were statistically different from the percentage of Blacks attending two-year colleges. In addition, the percentage of Asian students attending graduate school were not statistically different from the percent of Hispanics attending two-year colleges.

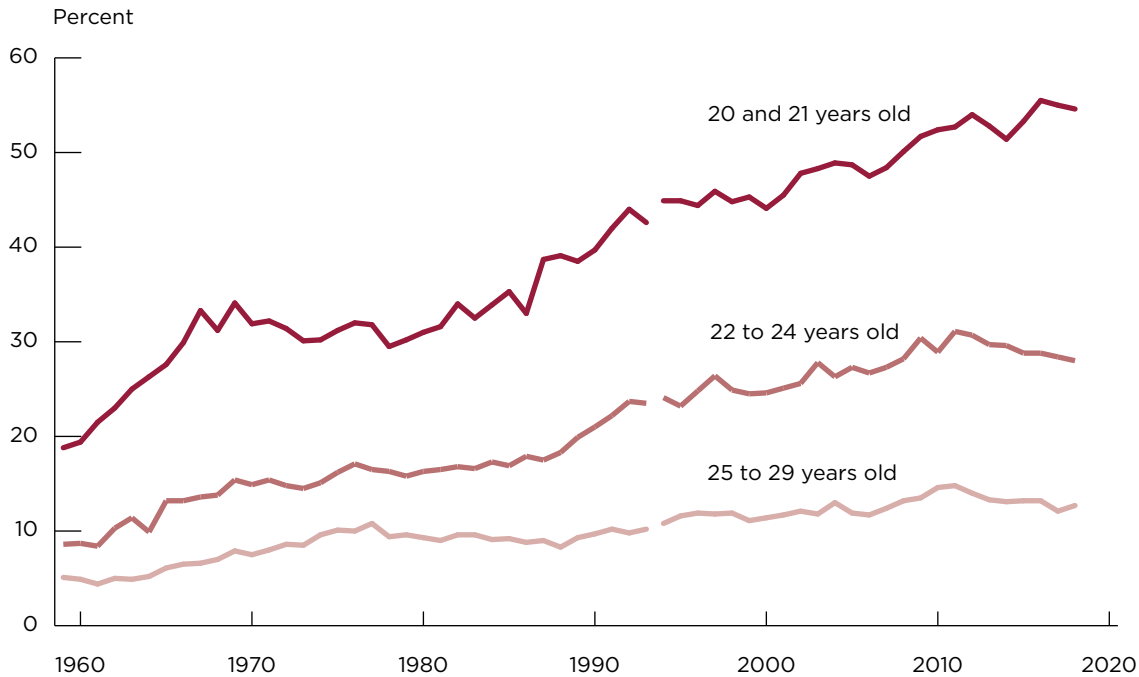
### College Students and Adult Roles

In 2018, college students under the age of 30 in the United States constituted 80 percent of all college students (both undergraduate and graduate).<sup>29</sup> Figure 7 indicates that a greater proportion of young people in their 20s were enrolled than in the past, with increases across the board for this age group. In 1960, 19 percent, 9 percent, and 5 percent of the 20 to 21 age group, 22 to 24 age group, and 25 to 29 age group, respectively, were in school. By 2018, these numbers all significantly increased to 55 percent, 28 percent, and 13

<sup>29</sup> See, "School Enrollment in the United States: October 2018 - Detailed Tables," Table 1. Enrollment Status of the Population 3 Years Old and Over, by Sex, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, Foreign-Born, and Foreign-Born Parentage: October 2018. <[www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/school-enrollment/2018-cps.html](http://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/school-enrollment/2018-cps.html)>.

Figure 7.

**Proportion of People Aged 20 to 29 Enrolled in School by Age Group: 1960 to 2018**



Note: Enrollment estimates were affected by 1994 changes in CPS data collection methods. For general discussion of these changes, see: Sharon R. Cohany, Anne E. Polivka and Jennifer M. Rothgeb, "Revisions in the Current Population Survey Effective January 1994," *Employment and Earnings*, 41(35) 1994.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960–2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

percent, respectively. From 2011 to 2018, the 20- to 21-year age group has not changed statistically, while older groups had a decrease in their rates of enrollment.

In recent years, students aged 30 and over have formed a decreasing portion of the undergraduate college population: in 2000, 18 percent of undergraduate college students were aged 30 or older, whereas in 2018 only 14 percent were aged 30 or older (Figure 8). As the undergraduate student body became increasingly younger, the number who combined college attendance and certain adult roles also declined. A smaller proportion of undergraduate college students were married or had children. In 2000, 18 percent of students were married

compared with 12 percent in 2018; 16 percent of students had at least one resident child compared with 11 percent in 2018; full-time employment was combined with enrollment for 28 percent of students in 2000, and 20 percent of students in 2018. In addition to the overall downward shift, the prevalence of these roles may have been shaped by the enrollment and employment opportunities during a time when the economy was recovering from the Great Recession.<sup>30</sup>

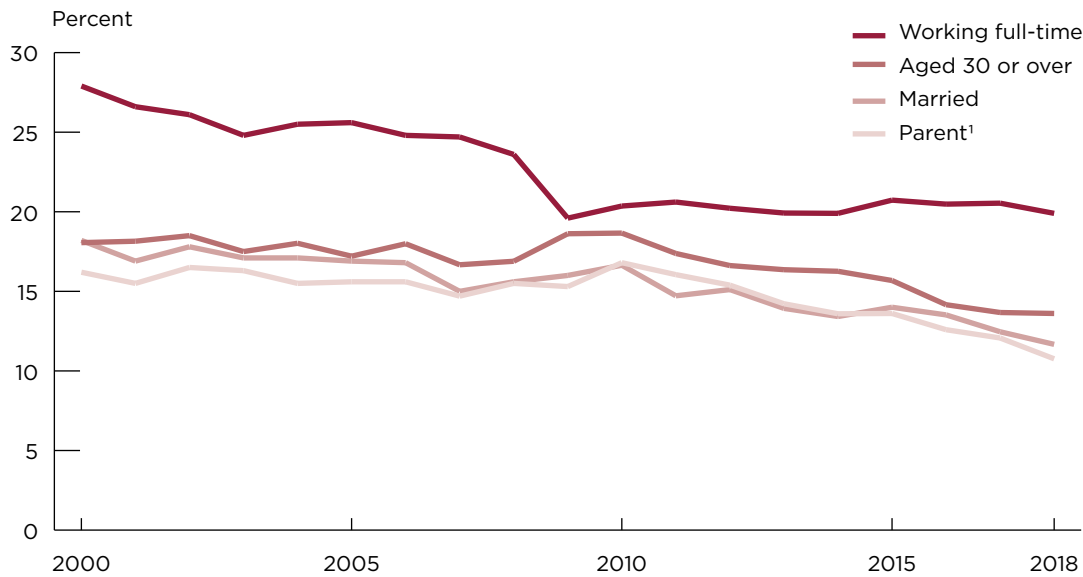
In 2018, the majority of college students had not yet entered the

<sup>30</sup> Erik P. Schmidt, "Postsecondary Enrollment Before, During, and Since the Great Recession." *Current Population Reports*, P20-580, U.S. Census Bureau, April 2018. <[www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/P20-580.pdf](http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2018/demo/P20-580.pdf)>.

"adult roles" of marriage, parenthood, or full-time employment. However, a significant minority (36 percent) of college students (undergraduate and graduate students together) were married, parents, or working full-time. To obtain accurate estimates for small subsets of the college population, we use a larger sample than what is available from a single year of CPS data. Adult characteristics are examined in Table 4 using averages from CPS data pooled over three years (2016–2018). Students in adult roles generally require more flexible school schedules in order to accommodate their schooling and their other work and family responsibilities. Parent-students in particular tended to be disproportionately represented

Figure 8.

**Percentage of Undergraduate College Students in Selected Adult Roles: 2000 to 2018**



<sup>1</sup> The role of "parent" refers to having own children living in household of respondent.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October School Enrollment Supplement, 2000-2018. For more information, see <www.census.gov/cps>.

in the less traditional for-profit colleges.<sup>31</sup> Attendance at two-year colleges and part-time attendance accompanied adult roles for both men and women (Table 4). For example, while 76 percent of female undergraduate students with none of these adult roles attended a four-year institution, only 59 percent of female undergraduate parents did. Similarly, a large majority (89 percent) of female undergraduates with no adult roles were enrolled full-time, but just over half (53 percent) of female undergraduate parents were. For people who are juggling adult roles, the picture of the

full-time student at a traditional four-year university or college does not fit as well as it does for their often younger counterparts who have more flexibility to devote themselves full-time to their studies.

Women were more likely than men to be in some adult roles (especially raising at least one child) while also attending school. Of female college students, 40 percent had at least one "adult role" of marriage, parenthood, or full-time work, compared with 31 percent of men. The percent of female and male students who were employed full-time was 27 percent and 25 percent respectively.

Women were more likely than men to go to school as a parent: 18 percent compared with 9 percent for men, and were significantly more

likely to be married as students (18 percent versus 16 percent). The contrast between men and women college students in adult roles are shown graphically in Figure 9. Age also had a strong relationship with adult roles, with 24 percent of students under 30 having at least one of these roles, and 86 percent of students 30 and over having such a role. Despite the potential difficulty of attending school while simultaneously fulfilling other adult roles such as full-time employment, parenthood, or marriage, a number of students did so.

**SOURCES OF THE DATA**

Most estimates in this report are from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS) and the October 2018 supplement to

<sup>31</sup> Julie Anderson, Lindsey Reichlin Cruse, Barbara Gault, "Single Mothers Overrepresented at For-Profit Colleges," IWPR #Q063, Institute for Women's Policy Research, September 2017. <iwpr.org/publications/single-mothers-overrepresented-profit-colleges/>.

Table 4.

**Type of Enrollment by Adult Roles of College Students: 2016–2018 Averaged Data**

(Numbers in thousands)

Adult roles	Average annual number of students	Undergraduate		Graduate
		Percent four-year	Percent full-time	Percent full-time
<b>Male</b>				
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>8,376</b>	<b>71.3</b>	<b>80.1</b>	<b>65.6</b>
No adult roles .....	5,764	73.5	89.7	88.0
Parent <sup>1</sup> .....	759	63.7	52.0	47.4
Unmarried parent .....	103	59.3	50.7	48.2
Married .....	1,312	63.6	54.9	50.6
Full-time work .....	2,091	64.5	45.4	40.7
<b>Female</b>				
<b>Total</b> .....	<b>10,457</b>	<b>71.3</b>	<b>76.8</b>	<b>57.6</b>
No adult roles .....	6,272	76.2	89.4	85.9
Parent .....	1,861	58.6	52.5	43.5
Unmarried parent .....	841	55.1	56.3	54.6
Married .....	1,908	63.8	49.5	41.7
Full-time work .....	2,785	64.8	44.3	35.0

<sup>1</sup>The role of “parent” refers to having own children living in household of respondent.

Note: Data in this table represent an equally-weighted average of the numbers in each category from each of the three years. Categories of parenthood, marriage and full-time work overlap.

Source: US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October School Enrollment Supplement: 2016, 2017, and 2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

the Current Population Survey (CPS). Some estimates are based on data obtained by the ACS and CPS in earlier years. The population represented (the population universe) in the 2018 ACS includes both the household and the group quarters populations (the resident population). The group quarters population consists of the institutionalized population (such as people in correctional institutions or nursing homes) and the noninstitutionalized population (most of whom reside in college dormitories). The population represented (the population universe) in the School Enrollment Supplement to the October 2018 CPS is the civilian noninstitutionalized population living in the U.S. The institutionalized population, which is excluded from the population universe, is composed primarily of the population in correctional institutions and

nursing homes (98 percent of the 4.0 million institutionalized people in Census 2010).<sup>32</sup>

### ACCURACY OF THE ESTIMATES

Statistics from sample surveys are subject to sampling error and non-sampling error. All comparisons presented in this report have taken 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

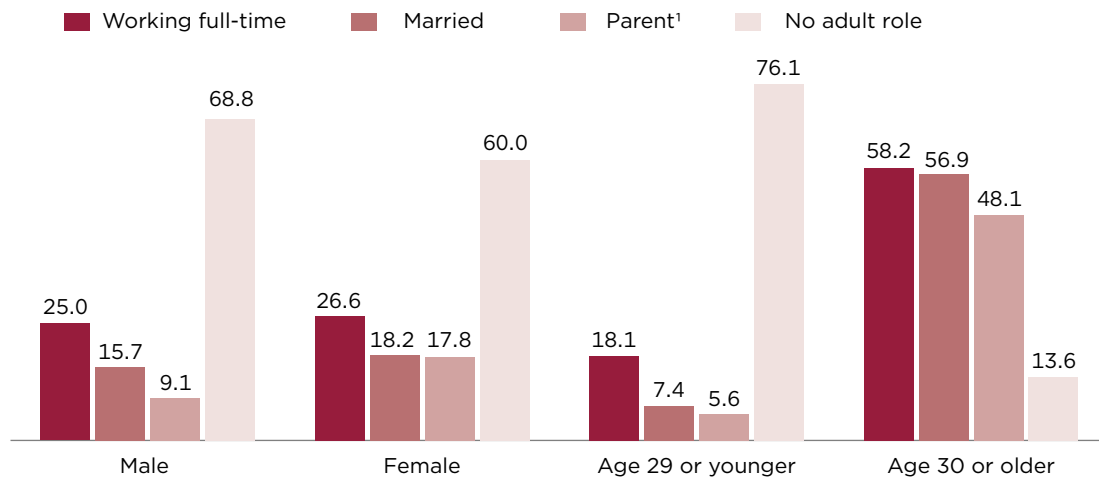
correct answers, and how accurately answers are coded and classified. To minimize these errors, the Census Bureau employs quality control procedures in sample selection, the wording of questions, interviewing, coding, data processing, and data analysis. The final ACS population estimates are adjusted in the weighting procedure for coverage error by controlling specific survey estimates to independent population controls by sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin. This weighting partially corrects for bias due to over- or under-coverage, but biases may still be present, for example, when people who were missed differ from those interviewed in ways other than sex, age, race, and Hispanic origin. How this weighting procedure affects other variables in the survey is not precisely known. All of these considerations

<sup>32</sup> See, U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census Summary File 2, Table PCT38, “Group Quarters Population by Group Quarters Type.”

Figure 9.

### Adult Roles for U.S. College Students by Sex and Age: 2016-2018 Averaged Data

Percent



<sup>1</sup> The role of "parent" refers to having own children living in household of respondent.

Note: Data in this figure represent an equally-weighted average of the numbers in each category from each of the three years. Categories of parenthood, marriage and full-time work overlap.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey October School Enrollment Supplement: 2016, 2017, and 2018. For more information, see <[www.census.gov/cps](http://www.census.gov/cps)>.

affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources. For information on sampling and estimation methods, confidentiality protection, and sampling and nonsampling errors, please see the "2018 ACS 1-year Accuracy of the Data" document located at <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/code-lists.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/technical-documentation/code-lists.html)>.

The CPS weighting procedure uses ratio estimation whereby sample estimates are adjusted to independent estimates of the national population by age, race, sex, 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, race, sex, 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 <[www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/complete.2018.html](http://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/technical-documentation/complete.2018.html)> or by contacting David Hall of 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)>.

For additional information, questions or comments, contact Kurt Bauman at 301-763-2464 or via e-mail at <[Kurt.J.Bauman@census.gov](mailto:Kurt.J.Bauman@census.gov)>.