

Educational Attainment in the United States: 2003

Issued June 2004

Population Characteristics

P20-550

The population in the United States is becoming more educated, but significant differences in educational attainment remain with regard to age, sex, race, and origin. Nevertheless, the educational attainment of young adults (25 to 29 years), which provides a glimpse of our country's future, indicates dramatic improvement by groups who have historically been less educated.

This report provides information on basic educational trends and attainment levels across many segments of the population. The findings are based on data collected in the 2003 Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) to the Current Population Survey (CPS) and refer to the population 25 years and over unless otherwise specified.¹

Americans are more educated than ever.

In 2003, over four-fifths (85 percent) of all adults 25 years or older reported they

Defining Educational Attainment

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

had completed at least high school; over one in four adults (27 percent) had attained at least a bachelor's degree; both measures are all time highs.² In 2003, the percentage of the adult population who had completed high school increased for the first time since 2000, when it was 84 percent. This increase follows a general trend that the Current Population Survey has shown since educational attainment was first measured in 1947 (Figure 1).

Young adults' high school attainment has leveled off.

The proportion of young adults aged 25 to 29 who had completed high school by 2003 (87 percent) was not different from

¹ This supplement is now called the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC). It was formerly called the Annual Demographic Survey or simply the "March Supplement." The population represented (the population universe) is the civilian noninstitutionalized population of the United States. Members of the Armed Forces living off post or with their families on post are included if there is at least one civilian adult living in the household. Most of the data from the ASEC were collected in March (with some data collected in February and April), and the data were controlled to the independent population estimates for March 2003. The estimates in this report are based on responses from a sample of the population. As with all surveys, estimates may vary from the actual values because of sampling variation or other factors. All comparisons made in this report have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted.

² From this point forward, regardless of the level of attainment being discussed, this report refers to respondents who have a particular level of attainment or higher. For example, when discussing those who have completed high school, this report is referring to those who have completed high school or more education. The same holds true when the attainment categories "some college" and "bachelor's degree" are discussed.

Current Population Reports

By
Nicole Stoops

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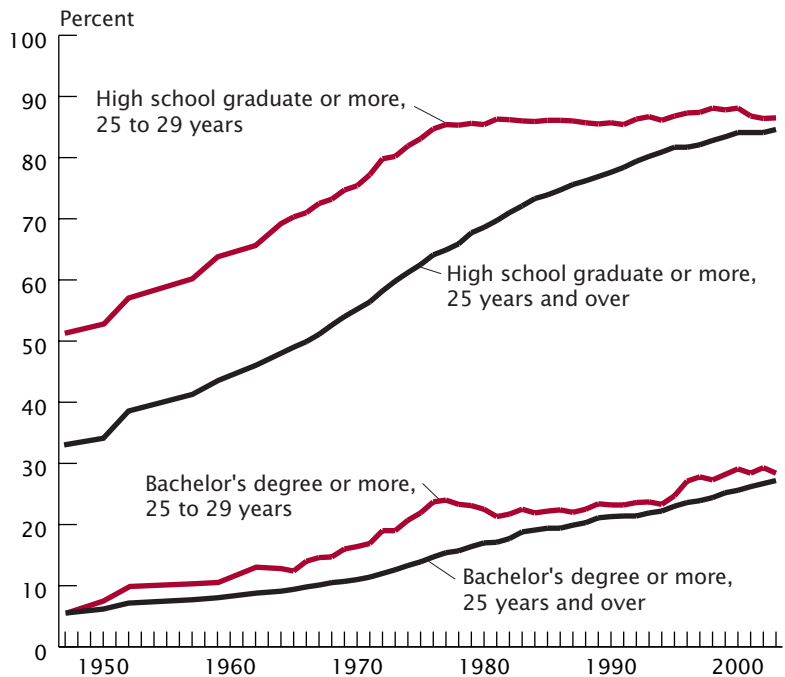
that recorded in 2002 and 2001. Over the last 20 years, annual estimates of high school completion among young adults changed modestly, remaining in the range of 85 percent to 88 percent.

The percentage of young adults who had completed a bachelor's degree in 2003 remains high (28 percent), but was slightly less than the record high level last reached in 2002 (29 percent). While the proportion of the young adult population with a bachelor's degree changed only modestly (1 percentage point) from 1983 to 1993, it increased by 5 percentage points during the past decade.

The younger population is more educated than the older population.

As shown in Table A, high school attainment levels by age generally increased up to 45 to 49 years (89 percent) and then decreased successively for each older age group. The oldest age group, those 75 and over, had the lowest high school attainment at 68 percent. Similarly, for postsecondary schooling, the percentage who had obtained a bachelor's degree was substantially higher for younger than for older age groups—15 percent of people 75 and over had a bachelor's degree, compared with 28 percent of people 25 to 29. Given the very large differences in education between younger and older age groups, the attainment level of the total adult population will continue to rise for some time, as younger, more educated age groups replace older, less educated ones, even if attainment levels for young adults remain constant.

Figure 1.
Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Age: 1947 to 2003



Note: Prior to 1964, data are shown for 1947, 1950, 1952, 1957, 1959, and 1962. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey and the 1950 Census of Population.

Educational attainment differs by demographic characteristics and geographic location.

Sex. Women have made gains in both high school and postsecondary educational attainment. In 2003, for the second year in a row, women had a higher rate of high school completion (85 percent) than men (84 percent), as shown in Table A. The 2002 difference was the first statistically significant one between the sexes since 1989.

Over the last decade, college attainment has increased for both men and women, but women

appear to be making greater strides. Women experienced an increase of nearly 7 percentage points in the proportion with a bachelor's degree in the past decade, reaching 26 percent, while men experienced an increase of about 4 percentage points, reaching 29 percent. The proportions having completed some college (or more education) were more similar—52 percent of women and 53 percent of men.³

³ Some college includes respondents who have completed some college but have no degree and those who have completed an associate's degree.

Table A.

Summary Measures of the Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over: 2003

Characteristic	Number of people (in thousands)	High school graduate or more		Some college or more		Bachelor's degree or more	
		Percent	90-percent confidence interval	Percent	90-percent confidence interval	Percent	90-percent confidence interval
Population 25 years and over.....	185,183	84.6	84.4 - 84.8	52.5	52.3 - 52.7	27.2	27.0 - 27.4
Age group:							
25 to 29 years	18,721	86.5	86.0 - 87.0	57.4	56.7 - 58.1	28.4	27.8 - 29.0
30 to 34 years.....	20,521	87.6	87.2 - 88.0	58.6	58.0 - 59.2	31.5	30.9 - 32.1
35 to 39 years.....	21,284	87.6	87.2 - 88.0	56.5	55.9 - 57.1	29.8	29.2 - 30.4
40 to 44 years.....	22,790	88.4	88.0 - 88.8	56.5	55.9 - 57.1	29.1	28.6 - 29.6
45 to 49 years.....	21,420	89.3	88.9 - 89.7	57.4	56.8 - 58.0	29.9	29.3 - 30.5
50 to 54 years.....	18,814	88.7	88.3 - 89.1	58.9	58.3 - 59.5	31.1	30.5 - 31.7
55 to 59 years.....	15,470	86.9	86.4 - 87.4	55.1	54.4 - 55.8	29.0	28.3 - 29.7
60 to 64 years.....	11,930	83.0	82.4 - 83.6	47.3	46.5 - 48.1	24.5	23.8 - 25.2
65 to 69 years.....	9,438	76.9	76.1 - 77.7	39.1	38.2 - 40.0	19.6	18.9 - 20.3
70 to 74 years.....	8,673	72.8	71.9 - 73.7	36.4	35.5 - 37.3	18.5	17.7 - 19.3
75 years and over.....	16,123	67.5	66.8 - 68.2	32.4	31.7 - 33.1	15.4	14.9 - 15.9
Sex:							
Men	88,597	84.1	83.9 - 84.3	53.2	52.9 - 53.5	28.9	28.6 - 29.2
Women	96,586	85.0	84.8 - 85.2	51.9	51.6 - 52.2	25.7	25.4 - 26.0
Race and origin:							
White alone.....	153,188	85.1	84.9 - 85.3	52.9	52.7 - 53.1	27.6	27.4 - 27.8
Non-Hispanic White alone.....	133,488	89.4	89.2 - 89.6	56.4	56.2 - 56.6	30.0	29.8 - 30.2
Black alone.....	20,527	80.0	79.5 - 80.5	44.7	44.0 - 45.4	17.3	16.8 - 17.8
Asian alone.....	7,691	87.6	87.0 - 88.2	67.4	66.5 - 68.3	49.8	48.8 - 50.8
Hispanic (of any race).....	21,189	57.0	56.5 - 57.5	29.6	29.1 - 30.1	11.4	11.1 - 11.7
Nativity:							
Native.....	158,128	87.5	87.3 - 87.7	54.2	54.0 - 54.4	27.2	27.0 - 27.4
Foreign born.....	27,055	67.2	66.6 - 67.8	42.7	42.1 - 43.3	27.2	26.6 - 27.8
Marital status:							
Never married	28,694	84.9	84.5 - 85.3	54.8	54.3 - 55.3	29.0	28.5 - 29.5
Married spouse present	113,748	87.0	86.8 - 87.2	55.9	55.6 - 56.2	30.5	30.3 - 30.7
Married spouse absent.....	7,389	72.5	71.6 - 73.4	38.2	37.2 - 39.2	16.1	15.3 - 16.9
Separated.....	4,447	74.5	73.3 - 75.7	38.6	37.3 - 39.9	13.8	12.9 - 14.7
Widowed.....	13,970	67.2	66.5 - 67.9	30.3	29.6 - 31.0	12.5	12.0 - 13.0
Divorced.....	21,382	86.5	86.1 - 86.9	50.9	50.3 - 51.5	21.0	20.5 - 21.5
Region:							
Northeast.....	36,182	85.7	85.4 - 86.0	50.7	50.3 - 51.1	30.3	29.9 - 30.7
Midwest.....	41,728	87.8	87.5 - 88.1	52.5	52.1 - 52.9	26.0	25.6 - 26.4
South.....	66,071	82.2	81.9 - 82.5	50.1	49.7 - 50.5	25.3	25.0 - 25.6
West.....	41,202	84.0	83.6 - 84.4	58.1	57.6 - 58.6	28.7	28.3 - 29.1

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

For the population 25 to 29 years in 2003, educational attainment levels of women exceeded those of men (Figure 2)—88 percent of young women and 85 percent of young men had completed high school, while at the college level, the proportions were 31 percent and 26 percent, respectively. The

last year young women and men had equal rates of high school and college attainment was 1995.

Race. The percentage of high school graduates varied by race (Figure 3). The proportion of both Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites who had a high school diploma reached record highs, at 80 percent and

89 percent, respectively, in 2003.⁴ The percentage of high school

⁴ Hereafter, this report uses the term Black to refer to people who reported a single race of Black or African American and the term Hispanic to refer to people who are Hispanic or Latino. The term non-Hispanic White is used to refer to people who reported a single race of White and are not Hispanic or Latino. The term Asian is used to refer to people who reported a single race of Asian.

graduates among Asians was 88 percent.⁵

The difference in the percentages of Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites who had completed high school was smaller in 2003 than ten years earlier. While the proportion with a high school diploma increased for both Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites, the Black population experienced a greater percentage point increase. For the population 25 and over, the difference decreased from 14 percentage points in 1993 (70 percent of Blacks and 84 percent of non-Hispanic Whites) to about 9 percentage points in 2003.

The difference in high school attainment between non-Hispanic White and Black young adults (25 to 29 years) has remained relatively unchanged over the past decade, reaching 6 percentage points (88 percent for Blacks and 94 percent for non-Hispanic Whites) in 2003.

Asians had the highest proportion of college graduates.⁶ For people 25 and over, 50 percent of Asians had a bachelor's degree, compared with 30 percent of non-Hispanic Whites and 17 percent of Blacks. Even among young adults (25 to 29 years old), Asians had significantly higher college completion levels—62 percent compared with 34 percent of non-Hispanic Whites and 17 percent of Blacks.

Hispanic origin. Compared with a decade ago, the educational attainment levels of the Hispanic

⁵ Due to the changes in the race categories in the Current Population Survey in 2003 (see the text box on New Racial Classifications), no comparable historical data are available for the Asian population (excluding Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders).

⁶ The proportion of the Asian population with a bachelor's degree or more education was statistically higher than that of the Asian and Pacific Islander population (the racial classification shown in previous CPS reports).

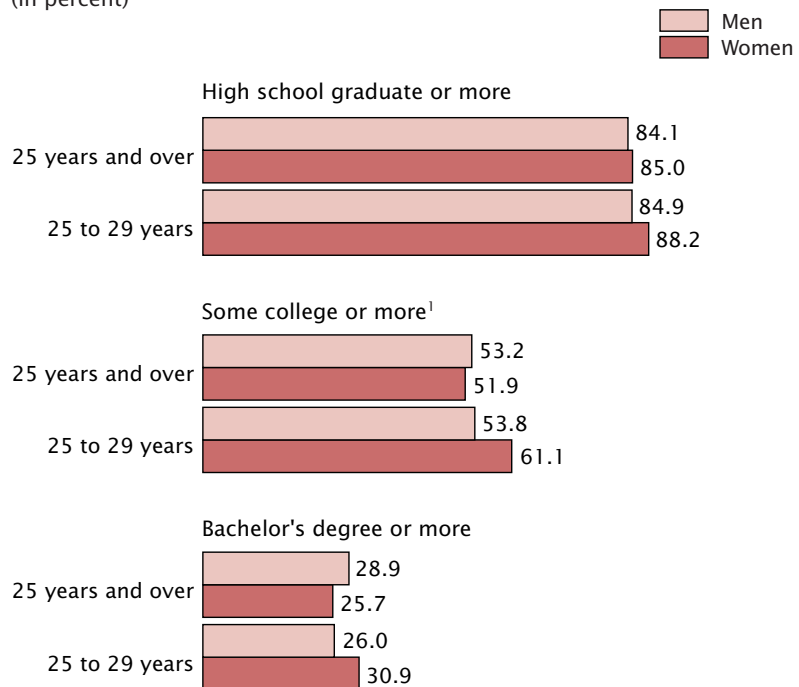
New Racial Classifications

In 2003, CPS respondents were able to identify themselves in one or more racial groups for the first time; previously they had to choose only one.* The use of the single-race population in this report does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. The Census Bureau uses a variety of approaches. Data for people who reported a particular race, regardless of whether they also reported others, are available in the detailed table package which can be found at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>.

Also in 2003, data on the Asian population was collected separately from that on the Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander population. Data on American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders, are not included in this report because the sample was not sufficiently large.

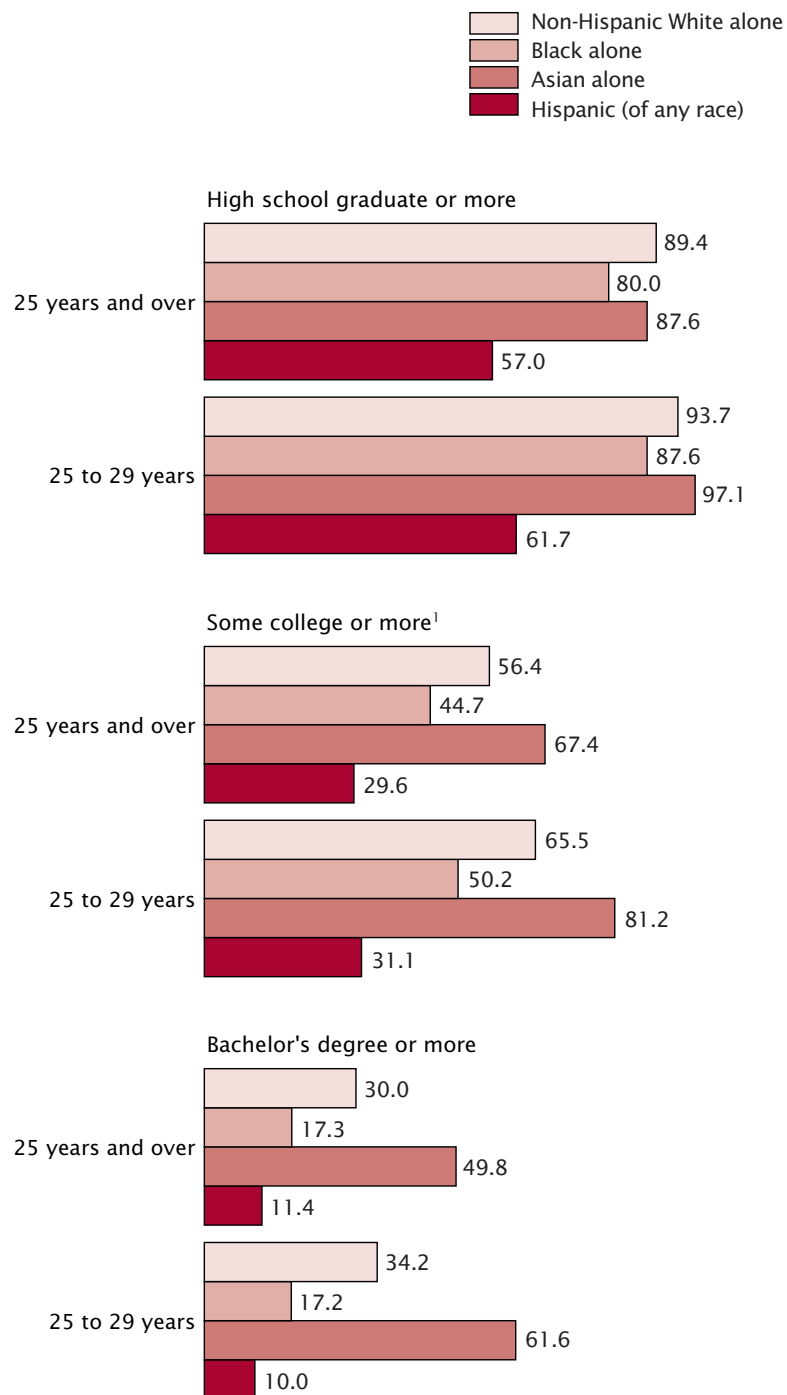
* The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) establishes the official guidelines for the collection and classification of data for race (including the option for respondents to mark more than one race) and Hispanic origin. Race and Hispanic origin are treated as separate and distinct concepts in accordance with OMB's guidelines. For further information, see <www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg/ombdir15.html>.

Figure 2.
Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex and Age: 2003
(In percent)



¹ Some college includes respondents who have completed some college, but have no degree and those who have completed an associate's degree.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

Figure 3.
Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: 2003
(In percent)



¹ Some college includes respondents who have completed some college, but have no degree and those who have completed an associate's degree.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

population increased. The proportion of the population 25 years and over with a high school diploma increased from 53 percent in 1993 to 57 percent in 2003; the proportion who had some college increased from 26 percent to 30 percent; and the proportion with a bachelor's degree increased from 9 percent to 11 percent. Nonetheless, they remain lower than the levels for non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, and Asians.⁷

The educational attainment of the young Hispanic population (ages 25 to 29) was also substantially lower than for other groups. During the past decade, this population showed no significant change in the proportion completing high school (62 percent in 2003) or attaining a bachelor's degree (10 percent in 2003).

Foreign born. Among the population 25 years and over, the percentage of the foreign born with a high school diploma (67 percent) was dramatically lower than that of the native population (88 percent), but paradoxically, the percentage with a bachelor's degree was the same (27 percent).⁸

All the foreign-born groups shown in Figure 4 had a lower proportion of high school graduates than the native population. The largest

⁷ Because Hispanics may be of any race, data in this report for Hispanics overlap slightly with data for the Black population and for the Asian population. Based on the 2003 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey, 3.1 percent of the Black population 25 years and over and 1.4 percent of the Asian population 25 years and over were of Hispanic origin.

⁸ The U.S. Census Bureau uses the term foreign born to refer to anyone who is not a U.S. citizen at birth. This includes naturalized U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as students), humanitarian migrants (such as refugees), and people illegally present in the United States. The term native is used to refer to anyone born in the United States or a U.S. Island Area such as Puerto Rico, or born abroad of a U.S. citizen parent.

difference was between native and foreign-born Hispanics (74 percent and 45 percent, respectively).

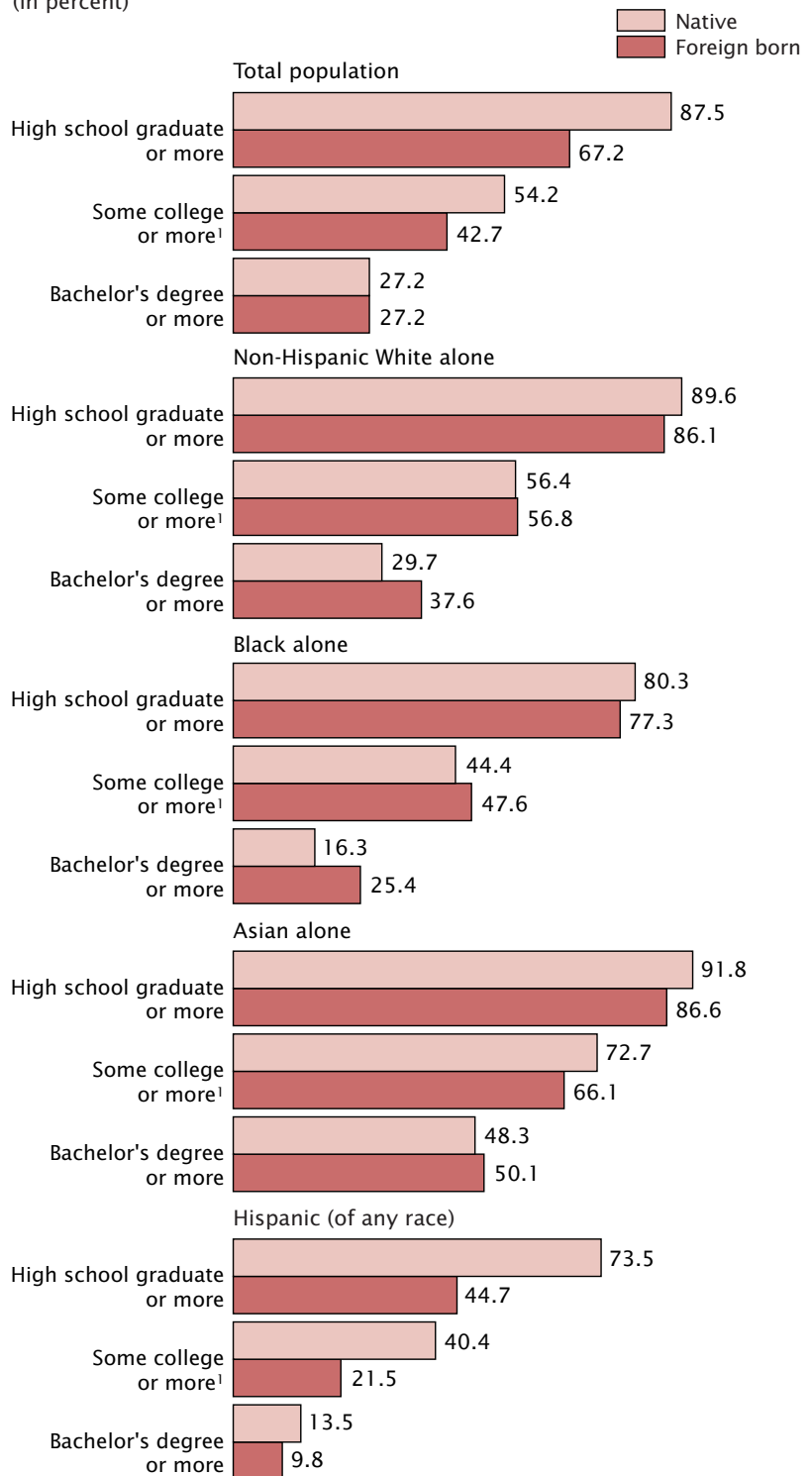
At the bachelor's level, foreign-born Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites fared better than their native counterparts. Foreign-born Hispanics, in contrast, had a smaller proportion with a bachelor's degree than the native population (10 percent and 14 percent, respectively). The low educational attainment of foreign-born Hispanics, who compose more than 50 percent of the Hispanic population, contributes to the low attainment levels of the entire Hispanic population.

Marital status. Differences in educational attainment by marital status reflect, to a large extent, differences in age composition. For example, the high level of high school completion among the never-married population (85 percent) reflects this group's relatively young age distribution. Conversely, the low level among widowed people (67 percent) is in part attributable to this group's older age. A similar pattern is seen in college completion levels.

Labor force. Among the civilian population 25 years and over, educational attainment is higher for the employed than for the unemployed, who in turn generally have higher attainment than those who are not in the labor force.⁹ Among employed civilians in 2003, educational attainment was quite high, with 90 percent having completed high school and 33 percent having completed a bachelor's degree (Table B).

⁹ The unemployed and those not in the labor force did not differ significantly in their attainment of bachelor's degrees.

Figure 4.
Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Nativity, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 2003
(In percent)



¹ Some college includes respondents who have completed some college, but have no degree and those who have completed an associate's degree.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

Table B.
Educational Attainment by Labor Force Status and Occupation: 2003

Labor force status and occupation	Number of people (in thousands)	Percent		
		High school graduate or more	Some college or more	Bachelor's degree or more
Civilian population 25 years and over	184,505	84.5	52.4	27.2
In labor force	124,115	89.7	59.4	31.8
Employed	117,539	90.1	60.1	32.5
Not employed	6,576	81.2	45.3	18.2
Not in the labor force	60,390	73.9	38.2	17.8
Employed civilians, 25 to 64 years	112,898	90.4	60.6	32.7
Management, business, and financial occupations	18,374	97.8	79.5	53.4
Professional and related occupations	24,591	99.1	90.2	68.1
Service occupations	15,595	80.3	40.2	11.6
Sales and related occupations	11,924	93.9	62.6	31.6
Office and administrative support occupations	16,019	95.9	58.1	17.7
Farming, fishing, and forestry occupations	639	55.4	20.8	6.8
Construction and extraction occupations	6,670	74.8	31.3	8.2
Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations	4,268	86.7	42.5	6.9
Production occupations	8,224	77.5	31.1	7.3
Transportation and material moving occupations	6,593	78.7	29.8	7.0

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

Table C.
Average Earnings in 2002 by Educational Attainment, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin for all Workers, 18 Years and Over

Characteristic	Total	Not a high school graduate	High school graduate	Some college or associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Advanced degree
Total	\$36,308	\$18,826	\$27,280	\$31,046	\$51,194	\$72,824
Men	\$44,310	\$22,091	\$32,673	\$38,377	\$63,503	\$90,761
Women	\$27,271	\$13,459	\$21,141	\$23,905	\$37,909	\$50,756
White alone	\$37,376	\$19,264	\$28,145	\$31,878	\$52,479	\$73,870
Non-Hispanic White alone	\$39,220	\$19,423	\$28,756	\$32,318	\$53,185	\$74,122
Black alone	\$28,179	\$16,516	\$22,823	\$27,626	\$42,285	\$59,944
Asian alone	\$40,793	\$16,746	\$24,900	\$27,340	\$46,628	\$72,852
Hispanic (of any race)	\$25,824	\$18,981	\$24,163	\$27,757	\$40,949	\$67,679

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

Occupation. Educational attainment also varied across occupational categories for the civilian population 25 to 64 years old. While 99 percent of the workers in professional and related occupations had completed high school, only 55 percent of farming, fishing, and forestry workers had done so. In 2003, 68 percent of people in professional and related occupations had completed a bachelor's

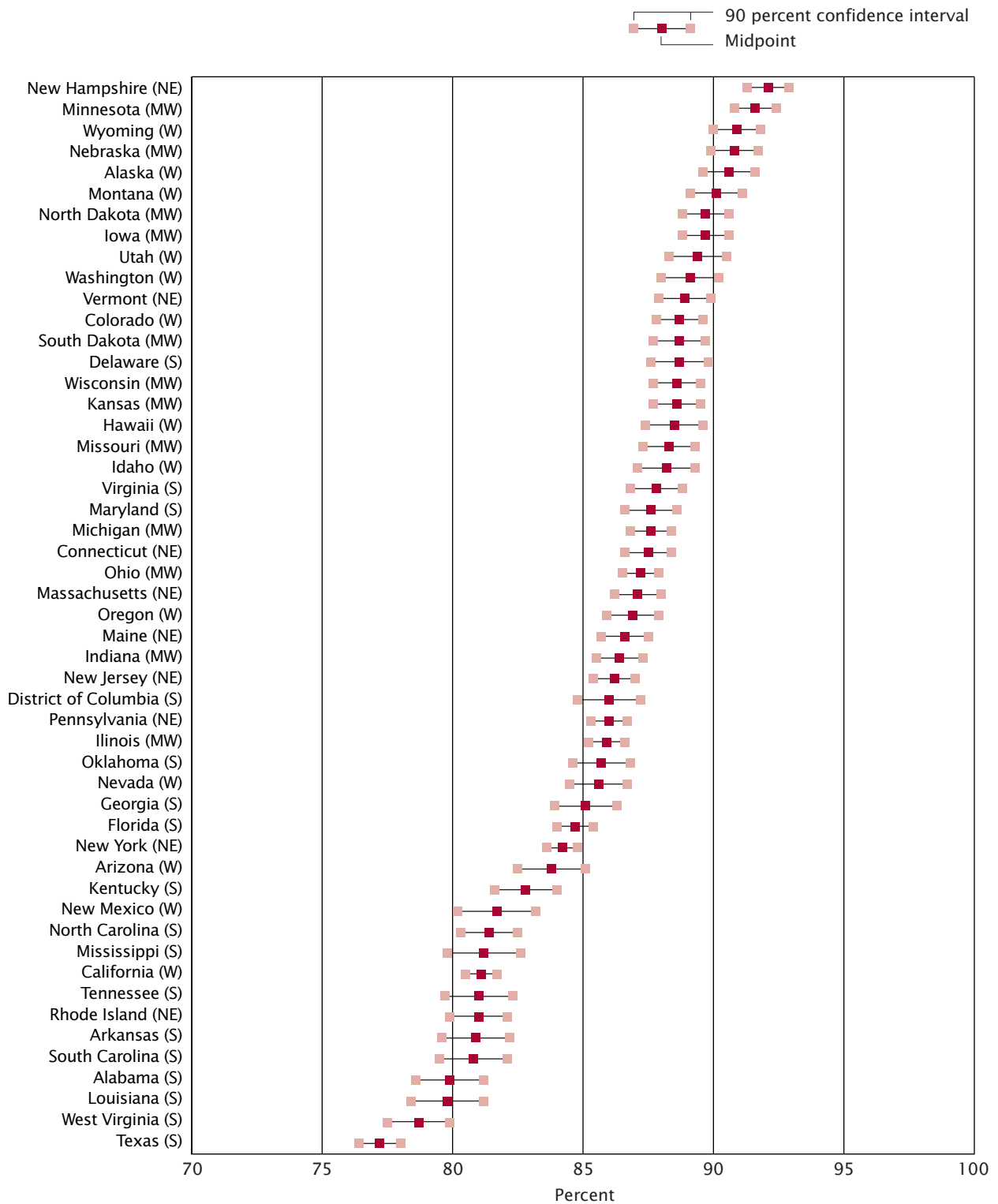
degree, the highest level across the major occupational groups. For many occupations, however, less than 10 percent of the workers had completed college, including categories such as production workers; construction and extraction workers; and installation, maintenance, and repair workers.

Earnings. Average earnings in 2002 for the population 18 years and over were higher at each

progressively higher level of education (Table C).¹⁰ This relationship holds true not only for the entire population but also across most subgroups defined by sex, race,

¹⁰ For more information on the relationship between earnings and educational attainment, see the Current Population special report (P23-210) *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings*, available on the Census website at <www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>.

Figure 5.
High School Graduates in the Population 25 Years and Over for States: 2003



Note: Region Codes: NE - Northeast, MW - Midwest, S - South, W - West.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement, 2003.

and Hispanic origin.¹¹ Within each specific educational level, earnings differed by sex and race.¹² This variation may result from a variety of factors, such as occupation, working full- or part-time, age, or labor force experience.

Regions and states. Among the four census regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) in 2003, the proportion of people who had completed high school ranged from 88 percent in the Midwest to 82 percent in the South.¹³ The percentage with some college was highest in the West (58 percent), while the populations in the Northeast and the West had the highest proportions with a bachelor's degree (30 percent and 29 percent, respectively).

The states with the highest high school graduation rates were New Hampshire, Minnesota, and Wyoming (Figure 5). Although New Hampshire had the highest point estimate, 92 percent, its value was not statistically different from those of Minnesota and Wyoming.¹⁴ Many

¹¹ Average earnings did not differ between Asians who had a high school diploma and Asians who had attended some college or had received an associate's degree.

¹² Average earnings for Blacks and Asians did not differ for those who had less than a high school diploma. Average earnings for those who had attended some college or had received an associate's degree also did not differ between Blacks and Asians. Similarly, average earnings did not differ for Asians and non-Hispanic Whites who held advanced degrees.

¹³ The corresponding Census-designated region is noted in parentheses next to each state in Figure 5 of this report.

¹⁴ Each state estimate should be evaluated using the 90-percent confidence interval around each midpoint. Thus, the estimate for New Hampshire (92.1 ± 0.8) was not statistically different from other point estimates down through Wyoming at $90.9 (\pm 0.9)$. When using the state estimates provided from the CPS, users must keep in mind the sampling variability associated with these estimates, which is considerably higher than for estimates based on the nation as a whole. Because of this, year-to-year estimates may fluctuate simply due to changes in the sample in that area over time. While one cannot make precise statements about exact rank or changes in rank over time, the data do provide a general indication of the relative level (that is, high, no difference, or low) of educational attainment across states.

of the states with lower rates of high school completion are in the South--Texas, at 77 percent, was the lowest.

The pattern was somewhat different for levels of bachelor's degree completion.¹⁵ Massachusetts had the highest point estimate, 38 percent; however, this was not statistically different from those of Maryland and Colorado. West Virginia had the lowest point estimate: 15 percent. Washington D.C.'s point estimate of 46 percent was higher than in any state.

Source of the Data

Most estimates in this report come from the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) to the 2003 Current Population Survey (CPS). Some estimates are based on data obtained from the CPS in earlier years. The population represented (the population universe) in the 2003 ASEC is the civilian noninstitutionalized population of the United States. Members of the Armed Forces living off post or with their families on post are included if at least one civilian adult lives in the household. The institutionalized population, which is excluded from the population universe, is composed primarily of people in correctional institutions and nursing homes (91 percent of the 4.1 million institutionalized people in Census 2000). Most of the data from the ASEC were collected in March (with some data collected in February and April), and the data were controlled to independent population estimates for March 2003. For annual time series from the CPS,

¹⁵ Data on bachelor's degree attainment for states are available in Table 13 in the detailed table package. Instructions for locating the detailed tables on the Internet are available at the end of this report.

data collected in the 2003 ASEC may be compared with data collected in the March Supplement to the CPS in prior years.

Accuracy and Reliability of the Data

Statistics from surveys are subject to sampling and nonsampling 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 the estimates being compared does not include zero. Nonsampling errors 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 the 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 Current Population Survey 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 known precisely. All of these considerations affect comparisons across different surveys or data sources.

For further information on the source of the data and accuracy of the estimates including standard errors and confidence intervals, go to Appendix G of <www.census.gov/apsd/techdoc/cps/cpsmar03.pdf> or contact John Finamore of the Census Bureau Demographic Statistical Methods Division by e-mail at <dsmd.source.and.accuracy@census.gov>.

More Information

Detailed tabulations are available (14 detailed tables and 3 historical

tables) that provide demographic characteristics of the population by educational attainment. These tables are available on the Census Bureau's Web site <www.census.gov>. Once on the site, click on "Subjects A-Z," then "E," and then "Educational Attainment."

Contacts

For additional information on these topics, contact Nicole Stoops, Education and Social Stratification Branch, on 301-763-2464 or by

e-mail
<nicole.s.stoops@census.gov>.

User Comments

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