

20.32: Educational Attainment and Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Disparity

Learning Objectives

- To study large disparities in educational attainment among various racial and ethnic groups

Research conducted by

United States Census Bureau

Case study prepared by

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Overview

The U.S. Census Bureau defines educational attainment as the highest level of education that a person has completed. Large disparities in educational attainment continue to exist among racial and ethnic groups. The gender gap in educational attainment, however, has been undergoing a dramatic social shift in recent decades. In Table 20.32.1 below, the U.S. Census Bureau tabulated these trends among Whites, Blacks, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics between 1970 and 2010. This case study focuses only on college graduates. The data for "College graduate or more" represent the percentage of adults aged 25 years and older that obtained a degree from regular four-year colleges and universities and graduate or professional schools in each racial and ethnic group.

The U.S. Census Bureau defines the racial and ethnic categories in the following manner:

- "White" refers to persons having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.
- "Black" refers to persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa.
- "Asian" refers to persons having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.
- "Pacific Islander" refers to persons having origins in any of the original peoples of the Pacific Islands, such as Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, and Tonga.
- "Hispanic" refers to an ethnic group comprised of persons of any race who are of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin.

**Table 230. Educational Attainment by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex:
1970 to 2010**

[in percent. See Table 229 for headline and totals for both sexes]

Year	All races ¹		White ²		Black ³		Asian and Pacific Islander ⁴		Hispanic ⁵	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE OR MORE ⁶										
1970.....	51.9	52.8	54.0	55.0	30.1	32.5	61.3	63.1	37.9	34.2
1980.....	67.3	65.8	69.6	68.1	50.8	51.5	78.8	71.4	45.4	42.7
1990.....	77.7	77.5	79.1	79.0	65.8	66.5	84.0	77.2	59.3	51.3
1995.....	81.7	81.6	83.0	83.0	73.4	74.1	(NA)	(NA)	52.9	53.8
2000.....	84.2	84.0	84.8	85.0	78.7	78.3	88.2	83.4	56.6	57.5
2005.....	84.9	85.5	85.2	86.2	81.0	81.2	90.4	85.2	57.9	59.1
2007.....	85.0	86.4	85.3	87.1	81.9	82.5	89.8	85.9	58.2	62.5
2008.....	85.9	87.2	86.3	87.8	81.8	84.0	90.8	86.9	60.9	63.7
2009.....	86.2	87.1	86.5	87.7	84.0	84.1	90.4	86.2	60.6	63.3
2010.....	86.6	87.6	86.9	88.2	83.6	84.6	91.2	87.0	61.4	64.4
COLLEGE GRADUATE OR MORE ⁷										
1970.....	13.5	8.1	14.4	8.4	4.2	4.6	23.5	17.3	7.8	4.3
1980.....	20.1	12.8	21.3	13.3	8.4	8.3	39.8	27.0	9.4	6.0
1990.....	24.4	18.4	25.3	19.0	11.9	10.8	44.9	35.4	9.8	8.7
1995.....	26.0	20.2	27.2	21.0	13.6	12.9	(NA)	(NA)	10.1	8.4
2000.....	27.8	23.6	28.5	23.9	16.3	16.7	47.6	40.7	10.7	10.6
2005.....	28.9	26.5	29.4	26.8	16.0	16.8	54.0	46.8	11.8	12.1
2007.....	29.5	28.0	29.9	28.3	18.0	19.0	55.2	49.3	11.8	13.7
2008.....	30.1	28.8	30.5	29.1	18.7	20.4	55.8	49.8	12.6	14.1
2009.....	30.1	29.1	30.6	29.3	17.8	20.6	55.7	49.3	12.5	14.0
2010.....	30.3	29.6	30.8	29.9	17.7	21.4	55.6	49.5	12.9	14.9

NA Not available. ¹ Includes other races not shown separately. ² Beginning 2005, for persons who selected this race group only. See footnote 2, Table 229. ³ Persons of Hispanic origin may be any race. ⁴ Through 1990, completed 4 years of high school or more and 4 years of college or more. ⁵ Starting in 2005, data are for Asians only, excludes Pacific Islanders. ⁶ Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Census of Population, 1970 and 1980, Vol. 1; Current Population Reports P20-550, and earlier reports; and "Educational Attainment," <<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>>.

Figure 20.32.1: Educational Attainment by Race, Hispanic Origin and Sex

Educational attainment is strongly associated with future employment, income, and health status.

Questions to Answer

How has the percentage of college graduates changed over time between 1970 and 2010 among the racial and ethnic groups and between the genders within each group? How might we illustrate these changes graphically?

Design Issues

Beginning with the 2000 U.S. Census, respondents were given the option of selecting more than one race category to indicate their racial identities. Therefore, data on race from 2000 and beyond are not directly comparable with earlier censuses. The data in Table 20.32.1 represent persons who selected only one race category and exclude persons who selected more than one race.

In the 2005 U.S. Census and beyond, the “Asian and Pacific Islander” category was split into two separate categories, “Asian” and “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.” There were several reasons for the split. The combined category was not a homogeneous group because it put together peoples with few social or cultural similarities and who are dissimilar on important demographic characteristics. For example, in 1990, about 11 percent of Pacific Islanders aged 25 years and older obtained a bachelor’s degree compared with about 40 percent of Asians. Since Pacific Islanders are numerically a smaller group than Asians (in 2010, there were about a half million Pacific Islanders versus about 14.6 million Asians), not including them in the data of Table 20.32.1 starting in 2005 biases the percentage of college graduates upwards somewhat, but not strongly.

Descriptions of Variables

Table 20.32.1 : Description of Variables

Variable	Description
College graduate or more	Obtained a degree from regular four-year colleges and universities and graduate or professional schools
Year	Decade years from 1970 to 2010
White_M White_F	Percentage of college graduates in U.S. subpopulation of White males aged 25 years and over; likewise for White females
Black_M Black_F	Percentage of college graduates in U.S. subpopulation of Black males aged 25 years and over; likewise for Black females
AsnPac_M AsnPac_F	Percentage of college graduates in U.S. subpopulation of Asian and Pacific Islander males aged 25 years and over; likewise for Asian and Pacific Islander females
Hispan_M Hispan_F	Percentage of college graduates in U.S. subpopulation of Hispanic males aged 25 years and over; likewise for Hispanic females

Data Files

Educational_attainment.xls

Links

Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010

Latinos and Education: Explaining the Attainment Gap

Why Do Women Outnumber Men in College?

References

- U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2012. Section 4. Education, 143-151

- Telfair, J., Shelton, T. L. (2012). Educational attainment as a social determinant of health. North Carolina Medical Journal, 73(5), 358-365

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