

Educational Attainment in the United States: 2015

Population Characteristics

Current Population Reports

By Camille L. Ryan and Kurt Bauman

March 2016

P20-578

This report provides a portrait of educational attainment in the United States based on data collected from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The report examines educational attainment of the adult population by demographic and social characteristics such as age, sex, race and Hispanic origin, and disability status, as well as differences in educational attainment between the native and the foreign born.¹ Historical data are also included to present some general trends over time.

HIGHLIGHTS

- In 2015, almost 9 out of 10 adults (88 percent) had at least a high school diploma or GED, while nearly 1 in 3 adults (33 percent) held a bachelor's or higher degree.²
- The percentage of women who had a bachelor's degree or higher (33 percent) was not statistically different than the percentage of men (32 percent) with this level of education.
- Educational attainment varied by race and Hispanic origin. More than half of Asians aged 25 and older

had a bachelor's degree or higher in 2015.³ Asians were more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to have at least a bachelor's degree.

- Asians and non-Hispanic Whites were more likely to hold a bachelor's degree or higher compared with Blacks and Hispanics.
- Native adults were more likely to have a high school education or higher but were no more likely than foreign-born adults to hold an advanced degree.
- Adults without a disability were more likely to hold a bachelor's degree or more than adults with a disability.

DEMOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

In 2015, the majority (88 percent) of adults were at least high school graduates and more than half (59 percent) had completed some college or more (Table 1). One out of three adults (33 percent) reported they had a bachelor's degree or more education, and 12 percent reported an advanced degree, such as a master's, professional, or doctorate degree. Educational attainment varied by age, sex, race and Hispanic origin, nativity, and disability status.

¹ The adult population is defined as the population 25 and older for the purposes of this analysis.

² The percentage before rounding can be found in Table 1 of this report. Although the estimate found in the table (32.5 percent) can be rounded to 33 percent, this estimate is statistically different than 33 percent. All comparisons in this report are statistically significant at the 90 percent level unless stated otherwise. The estimates are based on responses from a sample of the population and may differ from actual values because of sampling variability or other factors. As a result, apparent differences between the estimates for two or more groups may not be statistically significant.

³ Federal surveys now 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 first approach (race alone). Use of the single-race population does not imply that it is the preferred method of presenting or analyzing data. For further information, see the 2010 Census Brief, *Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010* (C2010BR-02) at <<http://census.gov/library/publications/2011/dec/c2010br-02.html>>.

Table 1.

Educational Attainment of the Population Aged 25 and Older by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, and Other Selected Characteristics

(Numbers in thousands)

Characteristic	Total	High school graduate or more		Some college or more		Associate's degree or more		Bachelor's degree or more		Advanced degree	
		Percent	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent	Margin of error ¹ (±)	Percent	Margin of error ¹ (±)
Population 25 and older	212,132	88.4	0.3	58.9	0.5	42.3	0.5	32.5	0.5	12.0	0.3
Age											
25 to 34	43,006	90.5	0.6	65.0	0.9	46.5	0.9	36.1	1.0	10.9	0.6
35 to 44	39,919	88.7	0.5	62.8	0.9	46.7	1.0	36.3	1.0	13.8	0.7
45 to 64	83,213	89.4	0.4	59.0	0.7	42.6	0.7	32.0	0.7	12.1	0.5
65 and older.	45,994	84.3	0.7	49.7	0.9	34.1	0.9	26.7	0.8	11.3	0.7
Sex											
Male.	101,888	88.0	0.4	57.6	0.7	41.2	0.7	32.3	0.6	12.0	0.4
Female.	110,245	88.8	0.3	60.1	0.6	43.4	0.6	32.7	0.6	12.0	0.4
Race and Hispanic origin											
White alone	168,420	88.8	0.3	59.2	0.6	42.8	0.6	32.8	0.6	12.1	0.3
Non-Hispanic White alone	140,638	93.3	0.3	63.8	0.6	46.9	0.7	36.2	0.7	13.5	0.4
Black alone	25,420	87.0	0.9	52.9	1.4	32.4	1.4	22.5	1.2	8.2	0.7
Asian alone	12,331	89.1	1.2	70.0	1.9	60.4	2.0	53.9	2.0	21.4	1.5
Hispanic (of any race)	31,020	66.7	1.1	36.8	1.0	22.7	0.9	15.5	0.7	4.7	0.4
Nativity Status											
Native born	175,519	91.8	0.3	61.3	0.5	43.3	0.6	32.7	0.6	11.9	0.3
Foreign born	36,613	72.0	1.0	47.6	1.1	37.6	1.1	31.4	1.1	12.5	0.7
Disability Status											
With a disability	28,052	78.6	0.9	41.6	1.2	24.9	1.0	16.7	0.9	5.7	0.5
Without a disability	183,351	89.9	0.3	61.5	0.5	45.0	0.6	34.9	0.5	12.9	0.3

¹ A margin of error is a measure of an estimate's variability. The larger the margin of error in relation to the size of the estimate, the less reliable the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error forms the 90 percent confidence interval.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 Current Population Survey.

Age. The overall increase in educational attainment documented over the past 6 decades occurred as younger (and more educated) cohorts replaced older, less educated cohorts in the adult population. In 2015, the 65 and older age group reported lower levels of high school and college attainment than all younger age groups. Among adults aged 65 and older, 84 percent had completed high school or more education compared to 91 percent of adults aged 25 to 34 and 89 percent of adults aged 35 to 44 years or 45 to 64 years (Table 1). In addition, 27 percent of the population aged 65 and older reported a bachelor's degree or

more education compared to 36 percent of adults 25 to 34 years old and 32 percent of adults aged 45 to 64 years (Table 1).

Sex. Educational attainment differed between men and women. In 2015, about 90 percent of both men and women had completed high school or more. However, a higher percentage of women had completed at least some college. Sixty percent of women had some college or more education compared to 58 percent of men. Thirty-two percent of men and 33 percent of women had completed at least a bachelor's

degree and 12 percent of each sex held an advanced degree.⁴

Race and Hispanic Origin. Educational attainment also varied by race and Hispanic origin. Non-Hispanic Whites reported the highest percentage of adults with at least a high school education

⁴ The percentage of men who held a bachelor's degree or higher was not statistically different from the percentage of women. Data from the American Community Survey (ACS), released by the Census Bureau in September 2015, show that women 25 years and older have a higher rate of college completion than men. The ACS is able to measure smaller differences in the population due to its larger sample size. See the blog entitled *Women Now at the Head of the Class, Lead Men in College Attainment* at <<http://blogs.census.gov/2015/10/07/women-now-at-the-head-of-the-class-lead-men-in-college-attainment/>>.

(93 percent). Asians reported the highest percentage of those with a bachelor's or higher degree (54 percent). Hispanics reported the lowest percentage at every level from high school graduate or more (67 percent) to advanced degrees (5 percent).

Disability Status. Adults who reported a disability had lower levels of educational attainment compared to those without a disability. Seventy-nine percent of adults who had a disability had at least a high school diploma while 90 percent of those without a disability had

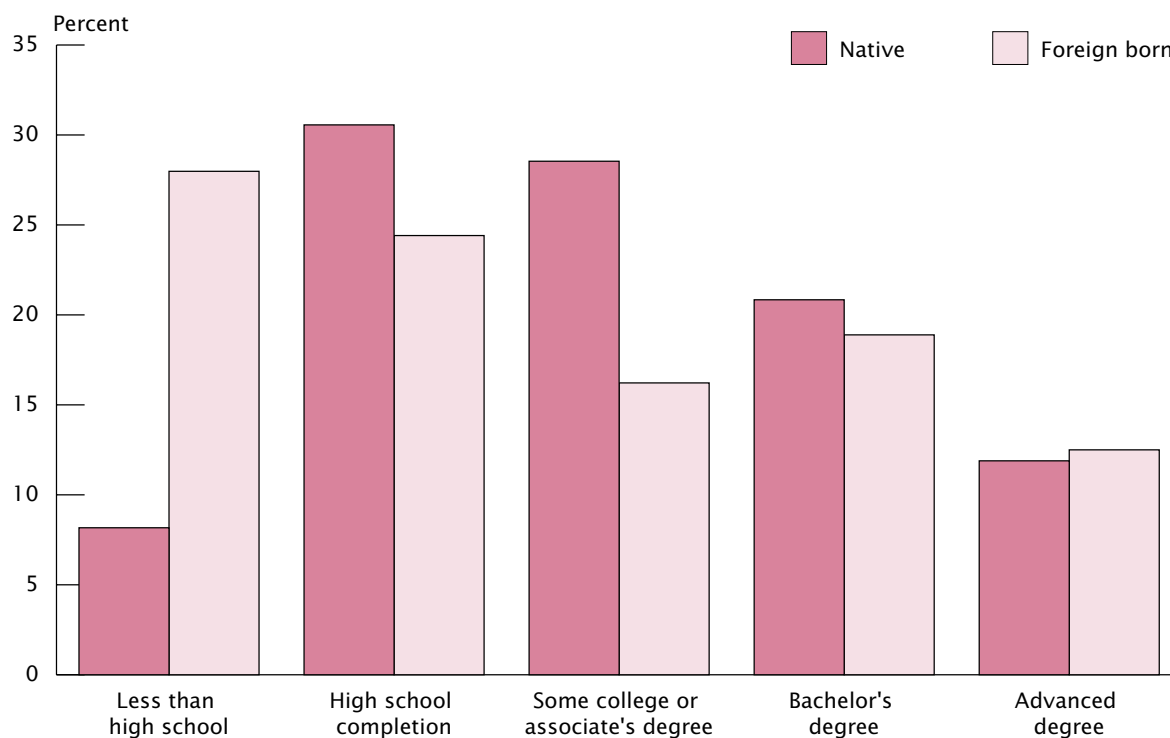
completed a high school education or more. In addition, the percentage of those who had completed a bachelor's degree or more was about twice as large for those without a disability compared to those with a disability. Thirty-five percent of adults without a disability held at least a bachelor's degree compared to 17 percent of adults with a disability.

Nativity Status. The educational attainment of the native and foreign-born populations differ in distribution (Figure 1). The foreign born had a higher proportion of

adults with less than a high school education (28 percent) compared to natives (8 percent). However, on the opposite end of the educational spectrum, the foreign born were just as likely as the native population to hold an advanced degree (13 percent versus 12 percent respectively, not significantly different).⁵

⁵ Educational attainment differences between the native and foreign born arise for many reasons. For example, educational attainment categories in other countries do not necessarily equate to the categories used to measure attainment in the United States.

Figure 1.
Educational Attainment of the Population Aged 25 and Older by Nativity: 2015



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

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Data on educational attainment were first collected by the U.S. Census Bureau in the 1940 Census. Since that time, data collection in the CPS has allowed a consistent, annual tracking of the educational attainment of the population.⁶ The increase in educational attainment can be seen at

⁶ See *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2007* (P20-560), available on the Census Bureau Web site at <www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p20-560.pdf>.

two levels of education: completing high school or higher (regular high school diploma or GED) and completing a bachelor's degree or higher (Figure 2). In 1940, one-fourth of the population aged 25 and older had completed high school. By 1967, over 50 percent of this population had reached this level. This percentage continued to increase, reaching 75 percent by 1986 and 88 percent in 2015.

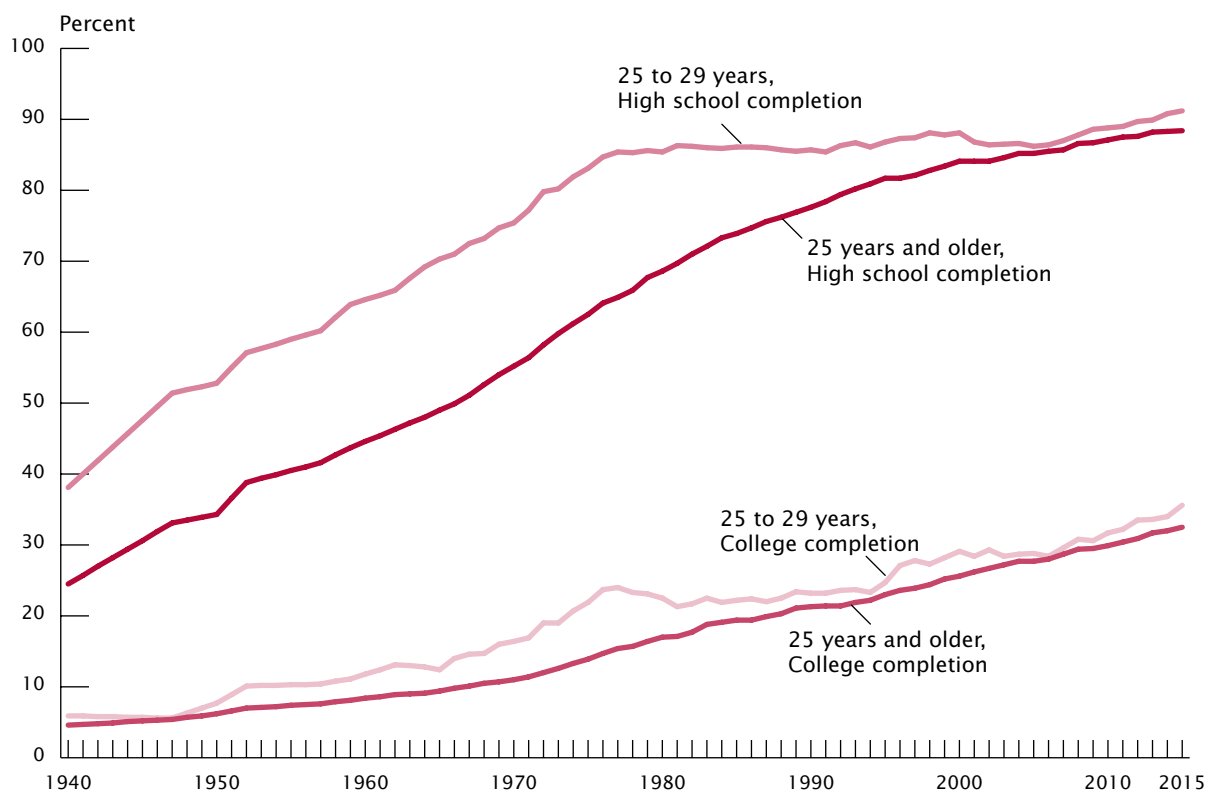
The percentage of the adult population with a bachelor's degree or higher also increased steadily from

1940 to 2015. In 1940, 5 percent of adults held a bachelor's degree or higher. By 2015, this percentage had increased more than five fold to 33 percent.

In 1947, a higher portion of people aged 25 to 29 had completed high school or higher than the total population 25 years and older. Fifty-one percent of the population aged 25 to 29 had completed high school compared to 33 percent of the total population 25 years and over. However, the rates for these two age groups began to converge

Figure 2.

Percentage of the Population 25 Years and Over Who Completed High School or College by Age Group: Selected Years 1940–2015



Note: Data for every individual year are not available for years prior to 1964.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1947–2015 Current Population Survey and 1940 Decennial Census.

in the 1990s. By 2015, the proportion of those who had completed high school was 88 percent for the total population 25 years and older and 91 percent for adults aged 25 to 29.

The younger population was ahead of the general population in the rate of college completion for much of the period since 1940. In 1976, 24 percent of people aged 25 to 29 had a bachelor's degree or higher, while 15 percent of the population 25 and older had that level of education. After that point, the attainment level of younger people flattened out. During the 20 years from 1975 to 1995, the proportion of 25 to 29 year olds who had

completed a bachelor's degree or higher stayed within the range of 21 to 25 percent. The rate for this age group climbed to 36 percent in 2015. The rate of college completion for the population 25 years and older grew to 33 percent in 2015.

TRENDS BY RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN

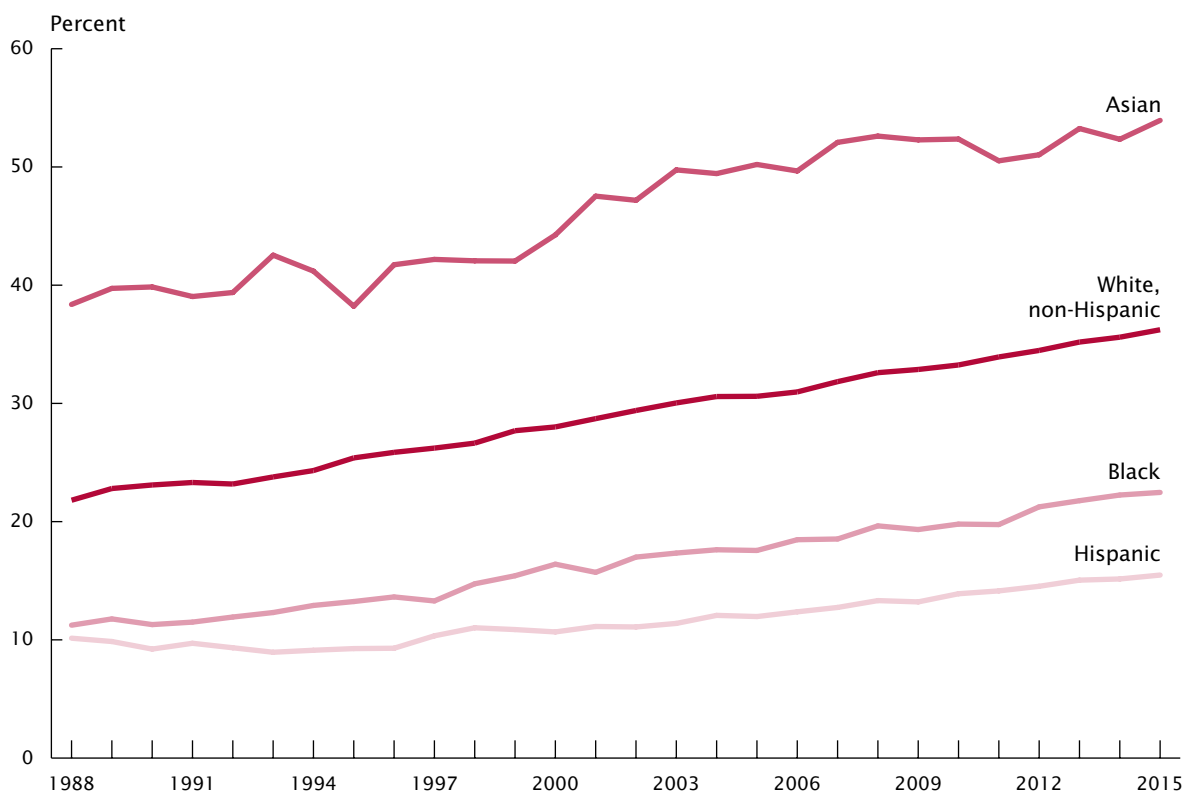
Educational attainment has increased for all race and Hispanic origin groups (Figure 3).⁷ Asians had the highest percentage of

adults with a bachelor's degree or higher in all years. In 1988, 38 percent of Asians held at least a bachelor's degree compared to 21 percent of non-Hispanic Whites, 11 percent of Blacks, and 10 percent of Hispanics.⁸ In 2015, a majority of Asians 25 years and older had a bachelor's degree or higher (54 percent). More than one-third of non-Hispanic Whites had a bachelor's degree or higher (36 percent), 22 percent of Blacks had this level of education, as did 15 percent of Hispanics.

⁷ Changes in the CPS questions and data collection procedures limit the ability to reliably report on Hispanic origin prior to 1973 and Asian racial identification prior to 1988.

⁸ The percentage of Blacks with a bachelor's degree was not statistically different from the percentage of Hispanics with a bachelor's degree.

Figure 3.
Percentage of the Population 25 Years and Older With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1988 to 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1988–2015 Current Population Survey.

Although educational attainment has increased over time for all race groups and Hispanics, the gap between these groups has remained the same for some and increased for others. In 1988, the percentage of Hispanics with a bachelor's degree or higher was about the same as that of Blacks. By 2015, the percentage had increased for both groups, but the gap between the two groups had also grown. In 2015, 15 percent of Hispanics had this level of education compared to 22 percent of Blacks—a difference of 7 percentage points. The gap between Whites and Blacks remained stable, between 11 and 14 percentage points from 1988 to 2015.

The gap between non-Hispanic Whites and Asians ranged between 13 and 20 percentage points and ended the period where it began (17 percentage points in 1988 and 18 percentage points in 2015, not statistically different).

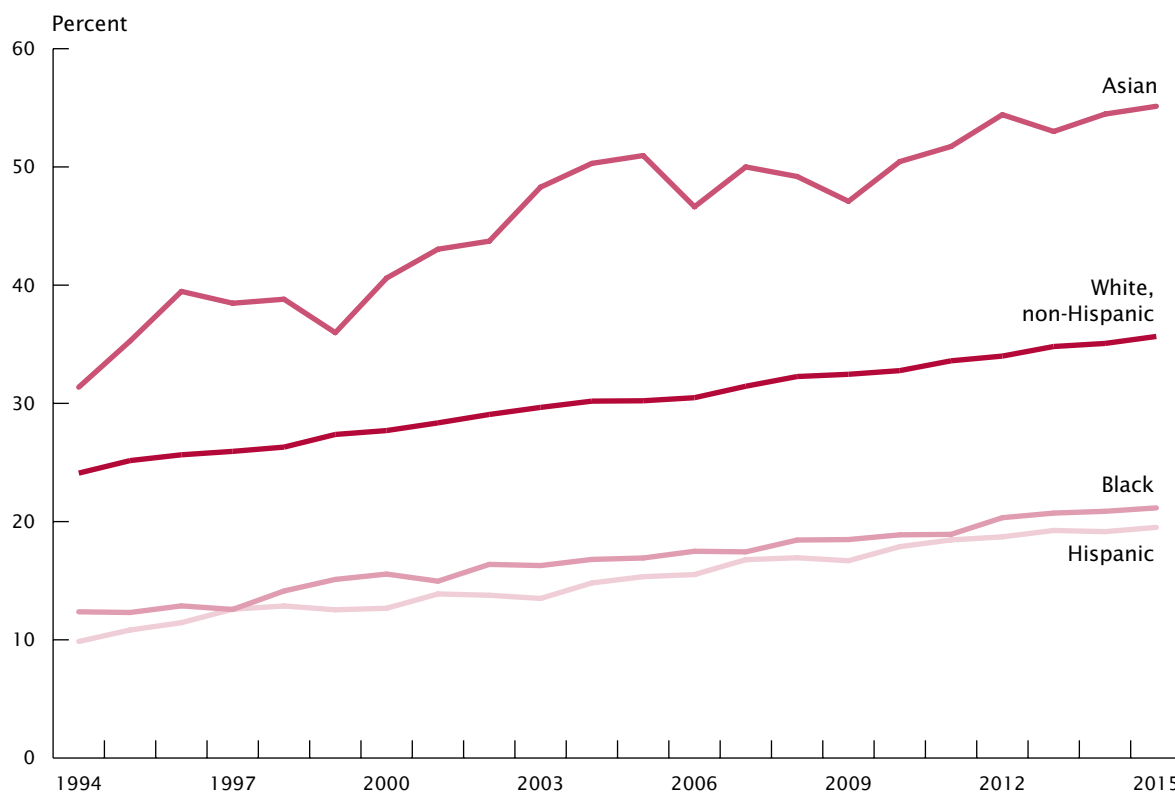
EDUCATION BY RACE, HISPANIC ORIGIN, AND NATIVITY

The Current Population Survey first collected data about nativity in 1994. While education levels of the foreign born differ from those of natives, these differences vary by race and Hispanic origin.

Trends in education among Hispanics are greatly influenced by

the presence of the foreign-born population. In the previous section, it was observed that the gap in college completion between the total population of Blacks and Hispanics has grown over time. On the other hand, once the influence of the foreign-born population is taken away, it can be seen that native Hispanics have kept up with Blacks and others. Native Blacks and native Hispanics have had similar growth in the percentage with a bachelor's degree (Figure 4). The percentage of native Blacks with at least a bachelor's degree rose from 12 percent in 1994 to 21 percent in 2015. In 1994, 10 percent of native Hispanics held a bachelor's degree

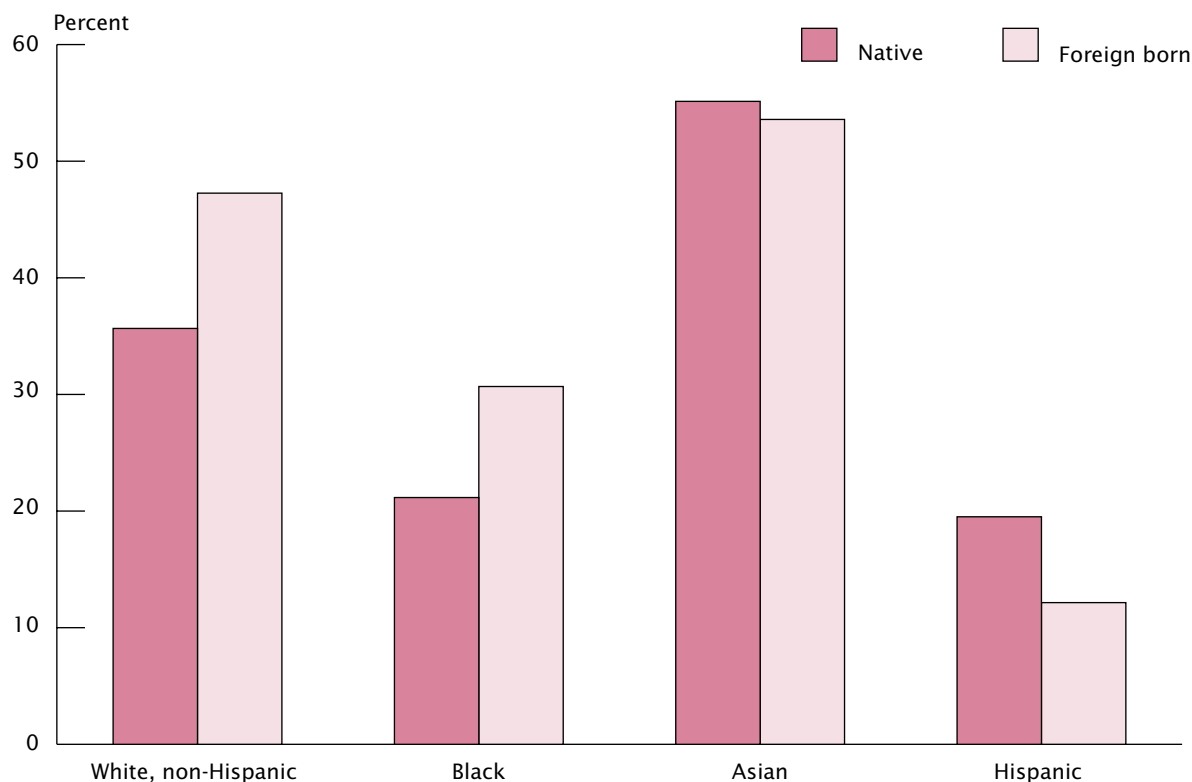
Figure 4.
Percentage of the Native Population Aged 25 Years and Older With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1994 to 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1994–2015 Current Population Survey.

Figure 5.

Percentage of Population 25 Years and Older With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Race, Hispanic Origin, and Nativity: 2015



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

or higher. By 2015, this percentage had doubled to 20 percent.

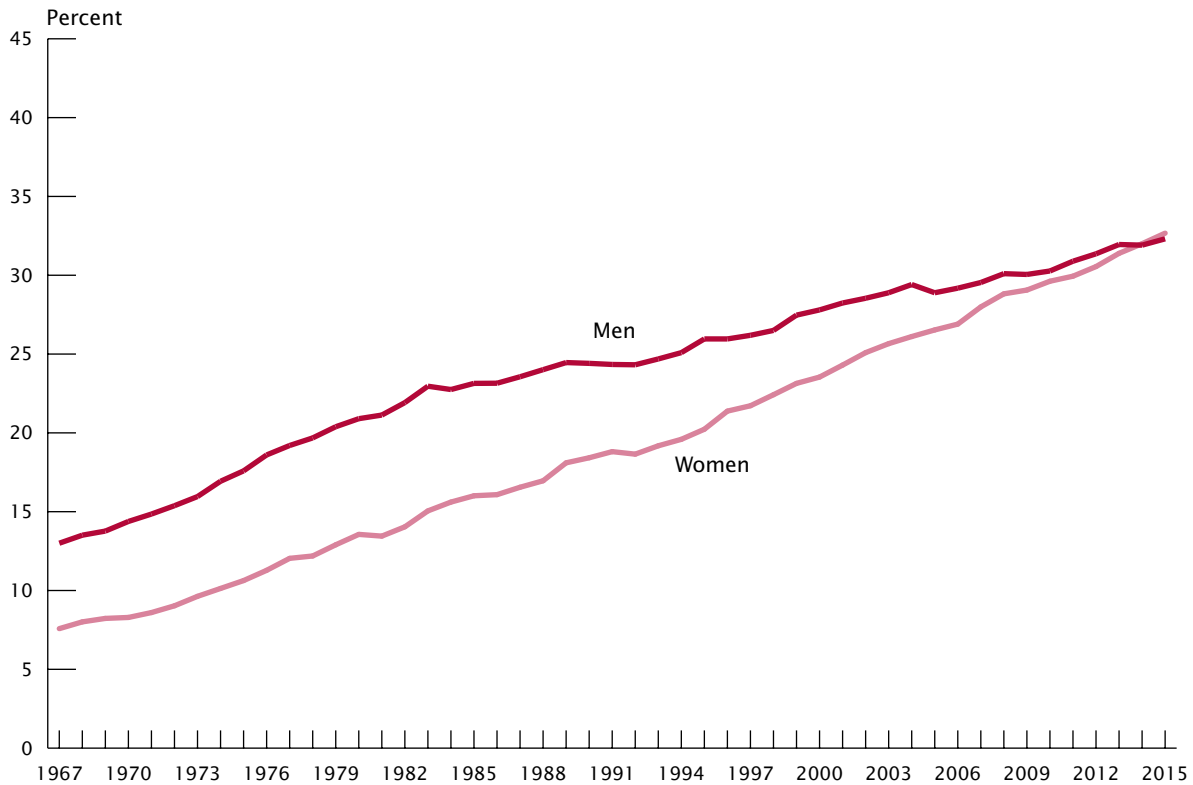
The percentage with a college education differs by nativity within race and Hispanic origin groups (Figure 5). Among Asians, non-Hispanic Whites, and Blacks, the percentage of the foreign-born population with a bachelor's degree or higher was as high or higher than the percentage of native adults with that same level of education. The percentage of the native Asian

population with a bachelor's degree or higher (55 percent) was not statistically different from the percentage of the foreign-born Asian population (54 percent). Among White non-Hispanics and Blacks, foreign-born adults were more likely to hold a bachelor's or higher than native adults, with a difference of 12 percentage points for non-Hispanic Whites and 10 percentage points for Blacks.

Hispanics were the only group where the percentage of the native population with a bachelor's degree or higher was higher than the percentage of the foreign-born population with this level of education. Twenty percent of native Hispanics had a college education compared to 12 percent of foreign-born Hispanics.

Figure 6.

Percentage of the Population 25 Years and Older With a Bachelor's Degree or Higher by Sex: 1967 to 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1967–2015 Current Population Survey.

**COLLEGE COMPLETION
AMONG MEN AND WOMEN**

Historically, a higher percentage of men have held a bachelor's degree or higher compared to women (Figure 6). In 1967, 13 percent of men 25 years and older held a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 8 percent of women. However, the gap has narrowed over time. From 1970 through 1990, the gap was in the range of 6 to 8 percent—a 6-percentage point difference in 1970, a 7-percentage point gap in 1980, and 6 points

again in 1990.⁹ In 2000, the gap had fallen to 4 percentage points, and to 1 point in 2010 (both men and women rounding to 30 percent). In 2015, the percentage of men aged 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher was not statistically different from that of women, with men's rate rounding

to 32 percent and women's to 33 percent.¹⁰

The convergence in college completion between men and women in the United States is the culmination of a long process of educational advance led by younger women. An earlier report noted that young women aged 25 to 29 began to have higher college attainment rates than young men in 1996.¹¹ By contrast, prior to 1986, young

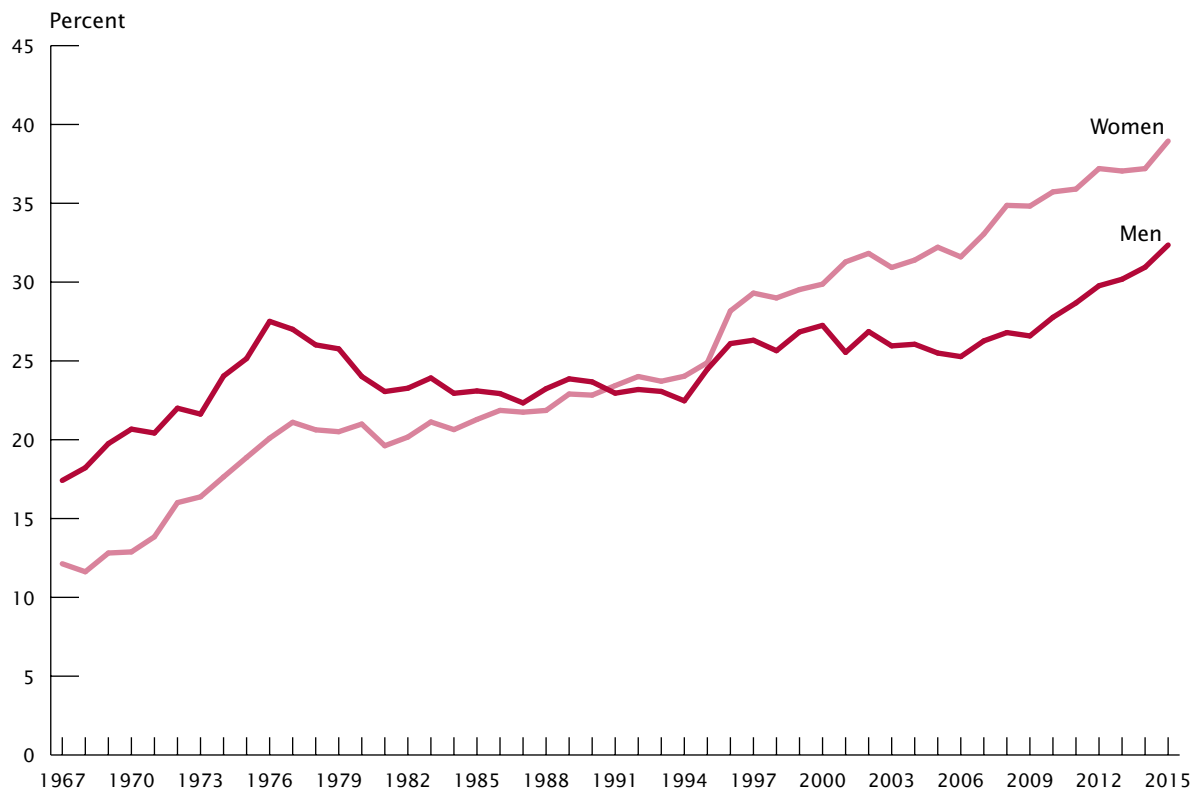
⁹ The gap between men and women in 1967, 1970, 1980, and 1990 were not statistically different from one another with the exception of 1967 versus 1980. The 2000 and 2010 gaps were significantly different from earlier gaps and from each other, with the exception of 1967 versus 2000 which was not significant.

¹⁰ As previously discussed (see footnote 4, p. 2), 2014 ACS data show women with higher levels of college completion than men.

¹¹ Nicole Stoops, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2003*, Washington, DC, U.S. Census Bureau, 2004. <www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf>.

Figure 7.

Percentage of the Population Aged 25 to 29 With a Bachelor's or Higher Degree, by Sex: 1967 to 2015



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1967–2015 Current Population Survey.

men had higher rates of college completion. From 1967 to 1977, men aged 25 to 29 had a rate of college completion that was 5 to 8 percentage points higher than that of women (Figure 7). Young men's college completion reached 27 percent in 1976 and 1977, but subsequently fell, and did not rise above 27 percent again until 2011.¹² This marks a 35-year period when bachelor's degree attainment by young men failed to climb overall.

¹² Bachelor's attainment of men aged 25 to 29 was significantly lower than the level of 1976 and 1977 from 1980 through 1995. In 1978 and 1979, there was no significant difference from the levels of 1976 or 1977.

The story for women is somewhat different. The attainment of women aged 25 to 29 rose along with men up to 1976–1977 and paused, but did not significantly fall back in the following years. The rate of college completion climbed back above the 1977 level in 1989. Indeed, the entire period shown here is characterized by growth in women's bachelor's attainment. In at least 32 of the 44 years from 1972 to 2015, young women were ahead of where they had been 5 years earlier, and in no year was there a significant 5-year decline. During the 37-year period, 1976 to 2010, when young men were at or below 27 percent completion, women went from 20

percent to 36 percent with a bachelor's degree.

COLLEGE COMPLETION BY SEX, RACE, AND HISPANIC ORIGIN

It is clear that women, especially younger women, have gained relative to their male counterparts in college completion over the period from 1967 to 2015. It is interesting to see if these trends for young women were the same across race and Hispanic origin groups. Because sample size becomes smaller as we interact more and more variables, we use a broader age group (25 to 34 rather than

25 to 29) and use the average level of college attainment over a 3-year period to show these trends (Figure 8). The figure shows women's college attainment relative to men for each race and Hispanic origin group—a rise in the curve showing an increase in women's attainment compared to men. During the period from 1976 to 1989, non-Hispanic White women aged 25 to 34 were less likely than non-Hispanic White men of that age to have a college degree. However, this was not true for 25 to 34 year old Black or Hispanic women, who were generally not behind their male counterparts (the exception being 1974–1976 and 1980–1981 when the difference between the sexes for Hispanics was briefly

statistically significant). During a large part of this 16-year period, the line on the graph was lower for non-Hispanic Whites, meaning the degree to which men were ahead of women was greater among non-Hispanic Whites than among Blacks or Hispanics.¹³

In 1990, Asian women were less likely than Asian men to have a college degree, and the gap was larger than for non-Hispanic White, Black, or Hispanic women.¹⁴ From 1990 to 2000, the gap between women and men was small for non-Hispanic

White, Black, and Hispanic origin groups.¹⁵ In addition, the gaps for non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics were not significantly different from each other, with the non-Hispanic White gap differing significantly from the Black gap only in 1996 and from the Hispanic gap only in 1993 (in both cases the chance of having a bachelor's degree relative to women of the same group was higher for non-Hispanic Whites).

Since 2000, 25- to 34-year-old non-Hispanic White, Black, and Hispanic

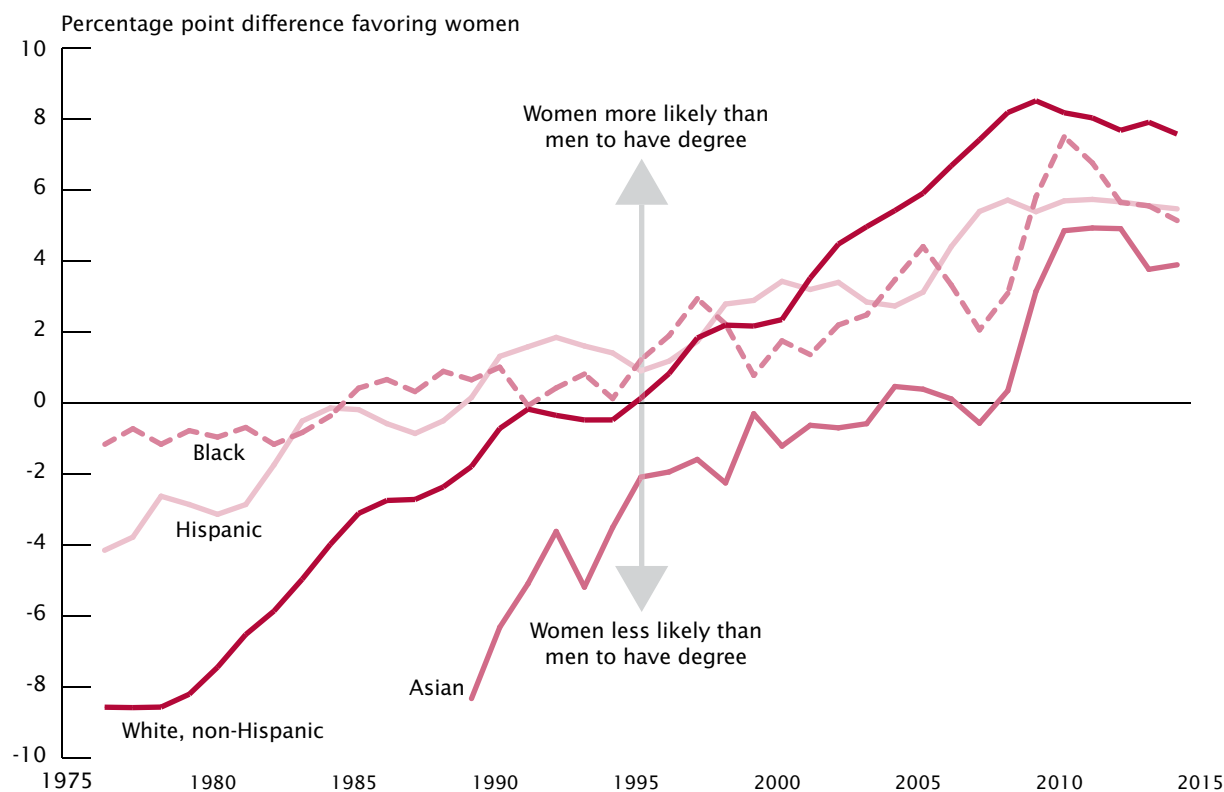
¹³ The difference was significant in 12 out of 16 years when comparing Blacks and non-Hispanic Whites and in 10 out of 16 years when comparing Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites.

¹⁴ Data for Asian attainment is only available from 1988 forward.

¹⁵ Young non-Hispanic White women had higher rates of bachelor's degree attainment than non-Hispanic White men in only 2 years, 1997 and 1998. Young Black women had higher rates than Black men in 1996 and 1997. Young Hispanic women had higher rates than Hispanic men only in 1998–2000.

Figure 8.

Percentage Point Difference Between Bachelor's Degree Attainment of Women and Men Aged 25 to 34, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1976 to 2015 (3-Year Running Average)



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

women were significantly ahead of their male counterparts, with the exception of four instances where Black women and men were not statistically different (2002, 2003, 2007, and 2008). Asian women did not pull significantly ahead of Asian men until 2010. In terms of differences between race and Hispanic origin groups, there was a switch from the period before 1990. In the earlier period, it was among non-Hispanic Whites that women had the lowest percentage with a bachelor's degree relative to men of the same group (with the possible exception of Asian women, about whom we don't have sufficient data). In the period after 2000, young non-Hispanic White women often had the highest percentage with a bachelor's degree relative to men of the same group, compared to Black, Asian, or Hispanic women.¹⁶

SOURCE OF ESTIMATES

The data in this report are from the 2015 Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) and earlier years of the supplement (prior to 2003, known as the Annual Demographic Supplement or the March Supplement). Data from the 2015 CPS ASEC were collected in

the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The data do not represent residents of Puerto Rico and U.S. Island Areas.

The data are based on a sample of about 100,000 addresses. The estimates in this report are controlled to independent national population estimates by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin for March 2015. Beginning with 2010, estimates are based on 2010 Census population counts and are updated annually taking into account births, deaths, emigration, and immigration. The CPS is a household survey primarily used to collect employment data. The sample universe for the basic CPS consists of the resident civilian noninstitutionalized population of the United States. People in institutions, such as prisons, long-term care hospitals, and nursing homes, are not eligible to be interviewed in the CPS. Students living in dormitories are included in the estimates only if information about them is reported in an interview at their parents' home. Since the CPS is a household survey, people who are homeless and not living in shelters are not included in the sample. The sample universe for the CPS ASEC is slightly larger than that of the basic CPS since it includes military personnel who live in a household with at least one other civilian adult, regardless of whether they live off post or on post. All other Armed Forces are excluded. For further documentation about the CPS ASEC, see <www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsmar15.pdf>.

Most of the data from the CPS ASEC were collected in March, with some data collected in February and April. The estimates in this report are based on responses from a sample of the population and may differ from actual values because of sampling variability or

other factors. As a result, apparent differences between the estimates for two or more groups may not be statistically significant. All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90 percent confidence level, unless otherwise noted. In this report, the variances of estimates were calculated using both the Successive Difference Replication (SDR) method and the Generalized Variance Function (GVF) approach. Further information about the source and accuracy of the estimates is available at <<ftp://ftp2.census.gov/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252sa.pdf>>.

MORE INFORMATION

Detailed tabulations, related information, and historic data are available on the Internet at the Educational Attainment page on the Census Bureau's Web site at <www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/index.html>.

CONTACT

U.S. Census Bureau Customer Services Center

1-800-923-8282 (toll free)

<<https://ask.census.gov/>>

¹⁶ The female-male gap was larger for non-Hispanic Whites than Blacks in 2002, 2007, 2008, and 2014, larger for non-Hispanic Whites than for Asians in 2001–2002, 2004–2006, 2008–2010, 2012–2013, and 2015 and larger for non-Hispanic Whites than for Hispanics in 2004–2006, 2008–2010, 2012–2013, and 2015. Some sources report that Black women are still at least tied for the lead relative to men (compared with non-Hispanic White, Asian, and Hispanic women) because Black women form a high proportion of total Black graduates (see, for example, Antoine M. Garibaldi, "Four Decades of Progress...and Decline: An Assessment of African American Educational Attainment," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 66, No. 2, Spring 1997, pp. 105–120. This apparent contradiction is resolved by the difference between "percentage point gap" and "proportion of total" as measures. The same percentage point difference will represent a larger share when the overall proportion in the group is smaller.

