

Educational Attainment

Headline

After increasing for decades, the percentage of 25- to 29-year olds who reported that they had completed high school declined slightly between 2000 and 2006. ([See Figure 1](#))

Importance

Young adults who have completed higher levels of education are more likely than those who have not to achieve economic success. Although many jobs have minimum educational requirements, completing more years of education protects against unemployment.¹ Further, higher levels of educational attainment lead to higher wages and income: In 2000, Americans with bachelor's degrees or higher earned a median income that was more than double that of their peers with only high school diplomas.² In the past few decades, earning differentials by education level have been increasing, especially among men.³ Adults with higher levels of education also report being in better health and having higher levels of socio-emotional well-being. They are also less likely to divorce.^{4,5}

Trends

The educational attainment levels of 25- to 29-year-olds increased between 1971 and the mid-1990s. ([See Figure 1](#)) The largest increase occurred among those completing at least some college, with 58 percent of 25- to 29-year-olds completing at least some college in 2000, up from 34 percent in 1971. Similarly, the percentage of those completing high school or more also rose during this time, from 78 percent in 1971 to 88 percent in 1998. In 2006, the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds who completed at least some college and the percentage of those who completed high school or more was 58 percent and 86 percent, respectively. Trends in higher educational attainment indicate that in 2006 the percentage of 25- to 29-year-olds holding a bachelor's degree or higher was 28 percent, up from 17 percent in 1971. ([See Figure 1](#))

Overall, educational gains have been particularly large among females, blacks, and Hispanics. For example, females were more than twice as likely to have completed a bachelor's degree or higher in 2006 than they were in 1971 (32 percent compared with 14 percent, respectively). Similar trends can be found among non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics.

Differences by Race and Ethnicity

In 2006, non-Hispanic whites were more likely than black and Hispanic young adults ages 25-29 to have completed higher levels of education. However, gains by blacks over the last 30 years have substantially reduced the black-white gap for high school completion (with 93 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 86 percent of blacks having

completed high school in 2006). Hispanics have also shown gains since the 1970s, but have not closed the gap with non-Hispanic whites (63 percent compared with 93 percent, respectively). ([See Figure 2](#))

These gaps are particularly apparent in rates of higher educational attainment. For instance, among young adults ages 25 to 29, the percentage of non-Hispanic whites who attained at least a bachelor's degree in 2006 was more than three times that of Hispanics (34 percent compared with 10 percent) and slightly less than two times that of blacks (19 percent). ([See Table 1](#))

Note: Estimates for 2002-2006 reflect the new Office of Management and Budget race definitions, and include only those who are identified with a single race. Hispanics may be of any race.

Differences by Gender

A slightly higher percentage of females than males completed high school in 2006 (89 percent compared with 84 percent, respectively). In 2006, females were also more likely than males to have completed some college (62 percent compared with 53 percent, respectively) and to have received at least a bachelor's degree (32 percent compared with 25 percent, respectively). ([See Table 1](#))

State and Local Estimates

2005 state-level estimates for young adults who are enrolled in or have completed college are available at http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/compare_results.jsp?i=470

2005 state-level estimates for high school graduates age 25-29 who have completed a bachelor's degree or higher are available at http://www.aecf.org/kidscount/sld/compare_results.jsp?i=480

State-level estimates for high school completion rates for selected years between 1994 and 2004 are available from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics: 2005*, NCES 2005, Table 11. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05_011.asp

Additional data about educational attainment by state are available from Bauman, Kurt. J and Nikki L. Graf (2003). *Educational Attainment: 2000*, US Census Bureau. C2KBR-24. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/c2kbr-24.pdf>

International Estimates

International estimates for OECD countries are available by gender for those completing secondary and tertiary education from *Education at a Glance, 2006*, Tables A1.1, A1.1a,

and A1.1b at

http://www.oecd.org/document/6/0,2340,en_2649_34515_37344774_1_1_1_1,00.html

National Goals

The *No Child Left Behind Act*, signed into law January 2002, aims to make sure that all children achieve academic proficiency and gain the educational skills necessary to succeed later in life. While it does not specifically discuss educational attainment beyond high school, it attempts to ensure that children are monitored at an early age to ensure that all children succeed and aims to reduce the achievement gap between subgroups. More information is available at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb>.

Definition

This indicator defines educational attainment as the highest grade or degree completed, as reported in the March Current Population Survey (CPS). Before 1992, educational attainment was measured in the CPS as the number of years of completed schooling. Completed high school includes both those with high school diplomas as well as those with high school equivalency certificates.⁶ All estimates refer only to the civilian, non-institutionalized population.

Data Source

Data for 2006: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2006, Detailed Tables*: Table 1. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.html>

All other 2006 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2006, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.html>

Data for 2005: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2005, Detailed Tables*: Table 1. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2005.html>

All other 2005 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2005, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2005.html>

Data for 2004: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2004, Detailed Tables*: Table 1. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2004.html>

All other 2004 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: 2004, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2004.html>

Data for 2003: Stoops, Nicole, (June 2004). “Educational Attainment in the United States, 2003,” *Current Population Reports*, P20-550. Available at: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-550.pdf>

Data for 2002: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables: Table 1*. All other 2002 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables: Table 1a*.

Data for 1971-2001: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2002*, NCES 2002-025, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002. Tables 25-1, 25-2, 25-3.

Raw Data Source

March Current Population Survey
<http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/ads/adsmain.htm>

Approximate Date of Next Update

Summer 2008

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. *Digest of Education Statistics, 2006*. Figure 22. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d06>. Caspi, A., Wright, B.E., Moffit, T.E., and Silva, P.A. (1998). “Childhood Predictors of Unemployment in Early Adulthood.” *American Sociological Review*, 63 (3), 424-451.

² Havemen, R., and Smeeding, T. (2006). “The Role of Higher Education in Social Mobility.” *The Future of Children*, 16 (2), 125-150; Day, J., and Newburger, E. (2002) “The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings.” U.S Bureau of the Census, P23-210.

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23-210.pdf>. Sewell, W., Hauser, R., & Wolf, W. (1980). “Sex, Schooling, and Occupational Status.” *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(3), 551 – 583; Miller, P., Mulvey, C. and Martin, N. (1995). “What Do Twins Studies Reveal about the Economic Returns to Education? A Comparison of Australian and U.S Findings.” *The American Economic Review*, 85(3), 586-599.

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P60-203, *Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change Using the March Current Population Survey*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1998: Figures 1.10 and 1.11. <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/98pubs/p60-203.pdf>.

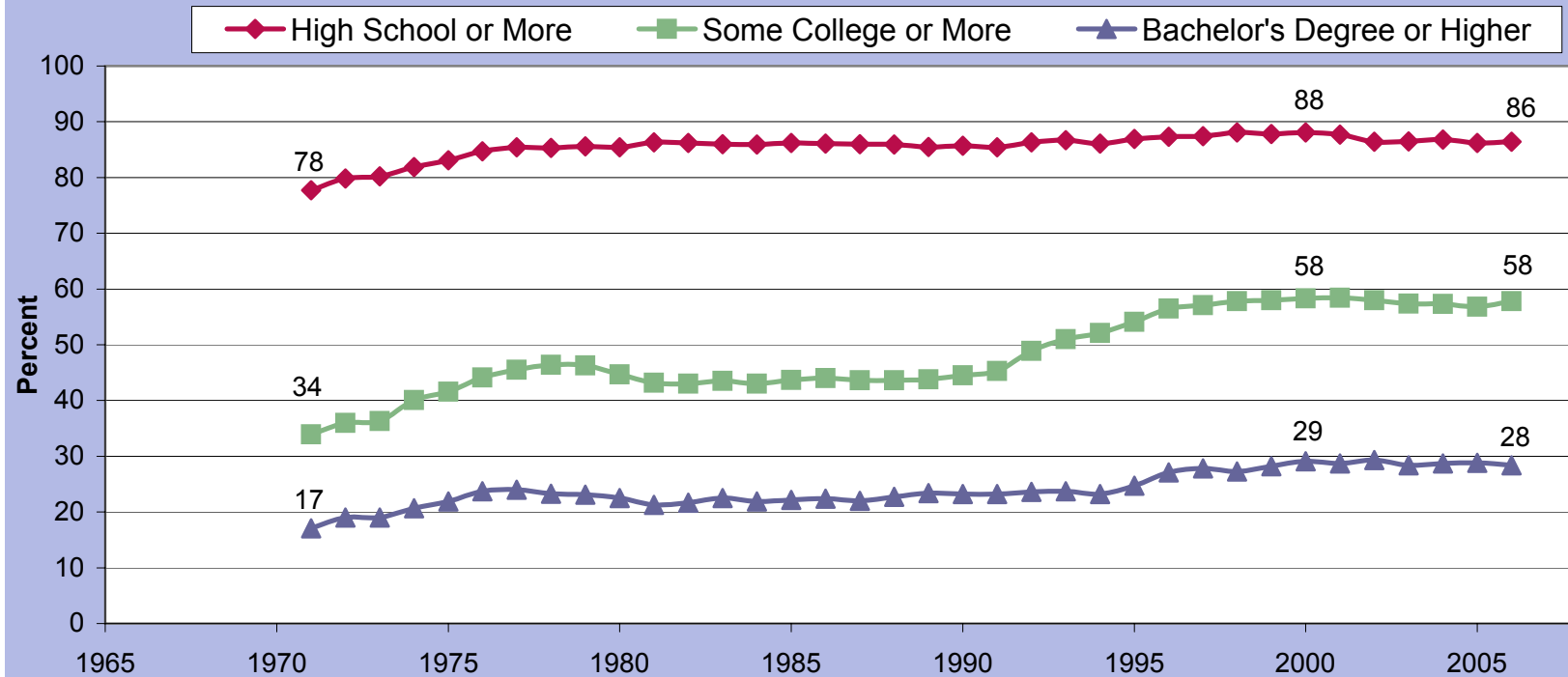
⁴ Ross, C. E., & Wu, C. (1995). “The Links Between Education and Health.” *American Sociology Review* 60, 719-745; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2002). *The Condition of Education 2001*, NCES 2001-072. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/>

⁵The National Marriage Project. (November 2004). “Ten Important Research Findings on Marriage and Choosing a Marriage Partner – Helpful Facts for Young Adults.” Information Brief. <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/pubTenThingsYoungAdults.pdf>

⁶ For a discussion on current and proposed methods of computing high school graduation rates see the National Center for Education Statistics publication, “User’s Guide to Computing High School Graduation Rates, Volume 1: Review of Current and Proposed Graduation Indicators”. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubinfo.asp?pubid=2006604>.

Figure 1

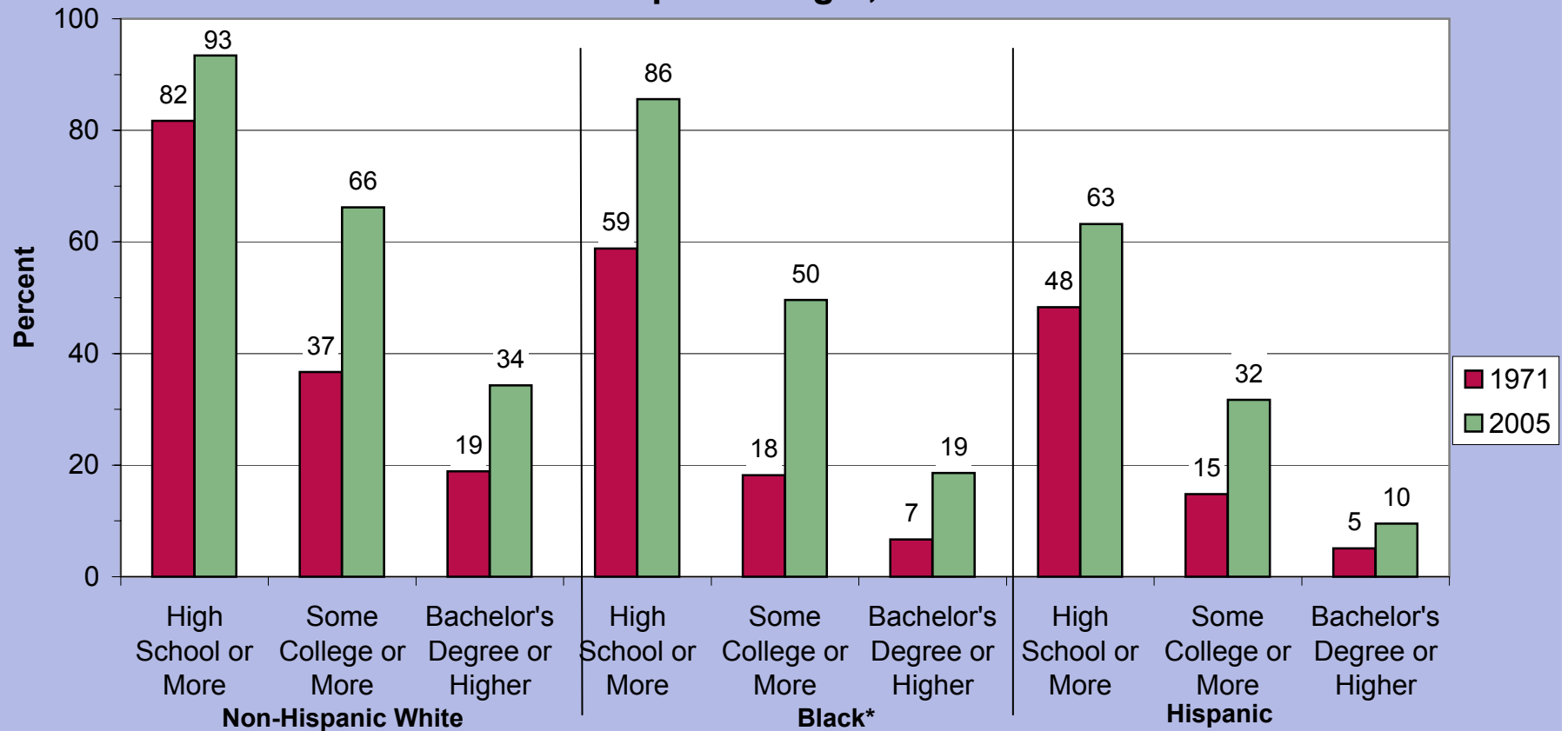
Percentage of Young Adults Ages 25 to 29 by Educational Attainment, 1971-2006



Sources: Data for 1971-2001: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2002*, NCES 2002-025, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002. Tables 25-1, 25-2, 25-3. Data for 2002: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables*: Table 1. All other 2002 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. Data for 2003: Stoops, Nicole, (June 2004). *Educational Attainment in the United States, 2003, P20-550*. Data for 2004: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables*: Table 1. All other 2004 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2004, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. Data for 2005: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2005, Detailed Tables*: Table 1. All other 2005 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2005, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html> Data for 2006: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006 Detailed Tables*: Table 1. All other 2006 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006, Detailed Tables*: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html>

Figure 2

Level of Education Completed by Young Adults Ages 25 to 29 by Race and Hispanic Origin, 1971 and 2006

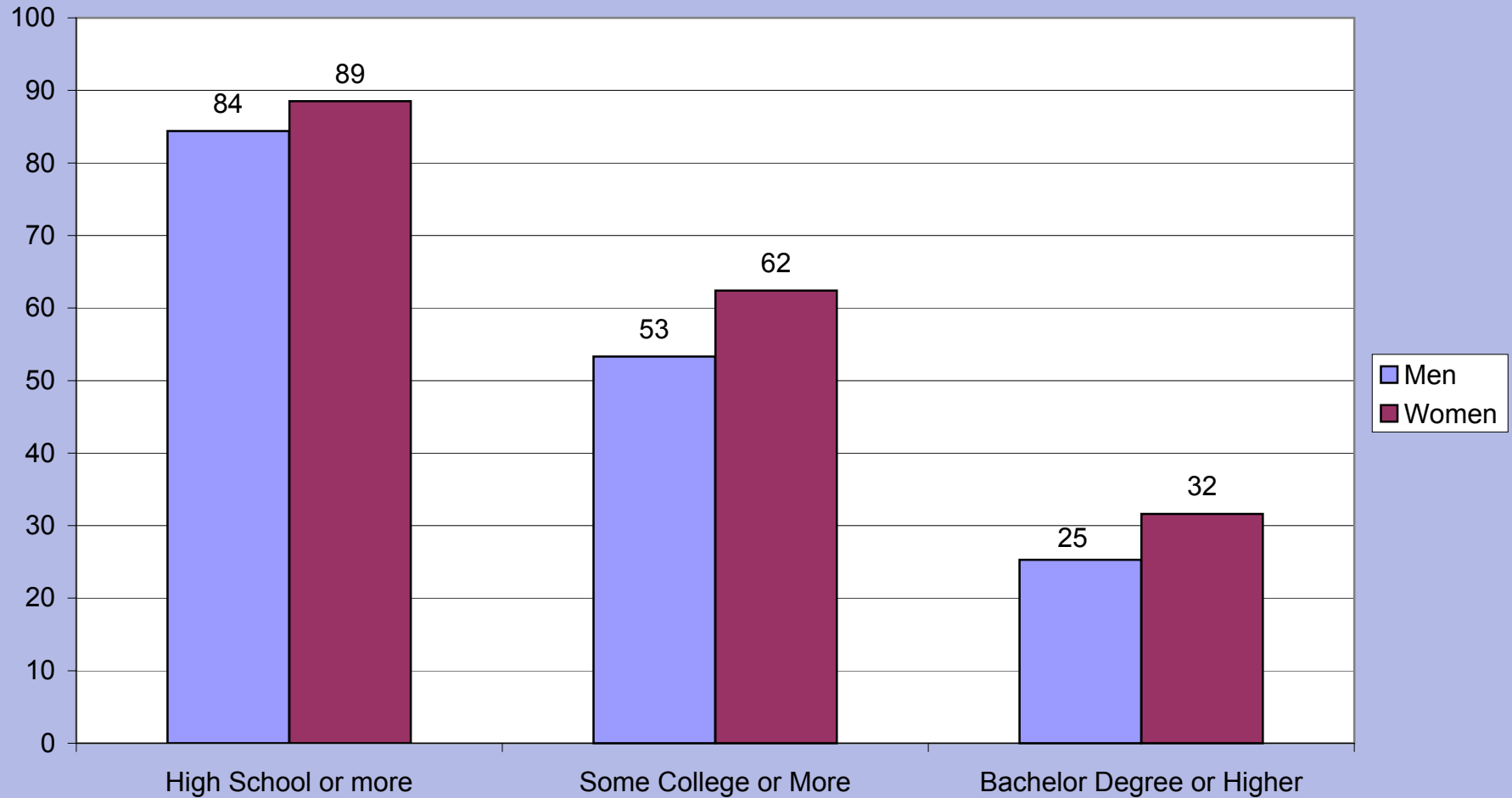


Estimates for 1971 are for the category "non-Hispanic black" and estimates for 2004 are for the category "black alone". The two categories are not strictly comparable.

¹Estimates for 2002-2004 reflect the new Office of Management and Budget race definitions, and include only those who are identified with a single race. Hispanics may be of any race. Data for 1971: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Condition of Education 2002*, NCES 2002-025, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002. Tables 25-1, 25-2, 25-3. Data for 2006: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006*, Detailed Tables: Table 1. All other 2006 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006*, Detailed Tables: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.html>.

Figure 3

Level of Education Completed by Young Adults Ages 25 to 29, by Gender, 2006



Data for 2006: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006*, Detailed Tables: Table 1. All other 2006 data: U.S. Census Bureau, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006*, Detailed Tables: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.html>.



Table 1

Percentage of 25- to 29-Year-Olds by Level of Education Completed, Race/Ethnicity and Gender, Selected Years 1971–2006

	1971	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
High School or More																	
Total¹	77.7	83.1	85.4	86.2	85.7	86.9	87.3	87.4	88.1	87.8	88.1	87.7	86.4	86.5	86.6	86.2	86.4
Gender																	
Male¹	79.1	84.5	85.4	85.9	84.4	86.3	86.5	85.8	86.6	86.1	86.7	86.8	84.7	84.9	85.2	85.0	84.4
Female¹	76.5	81.7	85.5	86.4	87.0	87.4	88.1	88.9	89.6	89.5	89.4	88.6	88.1	88.2	88.0	87.4	88.5
Race/Ethnicity²																	
Non-Hispanic White	81.7	86.6	89.2	89.5	90.1	92.5	92.6	92.9	93.6	93.0	94.0	93.3	93.0	-	-	-	-
Non-Hispanic White alone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	93.7	93.3	92.8	93.4
Non-Hispanic Black	58.8	71.1	76.7	80.5	81.8	86.8	86.0	86.9	88.2	88.7	86.8	87.0	87.6	-	-	-	-
Black alone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	87.6	87.9	86.5	85.6
Hispanic	48.3	53.1	57.9	61.0	58.2	57.2	61.1	61.8	62.8	61.6	62.8	63.2	62.4	61.7	62.4	63.3	63.2
Some College or More																	
Total	33.9	41.6	44.7	43.7	44.5	54.1	56.5	57.1	57.8	58.0	58.3	58.4	58.0	57.4	57.3	56.9	57.8
Gender																	
Male	38.5	47.4	47.6	44.2	43.7	52.3	54.5	54.9	54.6	54.7	55.1	54.4	54.5	53.8	53.4	52.3	53.3
Female	29.4	36.0	41.9	43.3	45.3	55.8	58.5	59.4	61.0	61.3	61.5	62.5	61.6	61.1	61.3	61.5	62.4
Race/Ethnicity																	
Non-Hispanic White	36.7	44.3	48.0	46.4	48.3	59.8	62.0	63.3	64.1	63.9	64.1	64.8	65.8	-	-	-	-
Non-Hispanic White alone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	65.5	64.7	64.5	66.2
Non-Hispanic Black	18.2	27.5	32.4	34.4	36.1	45.1	48.1	46.6	50.0	51.3	52.7	50.5	53.4	-	-	-	-
Black alone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	50.2	51.4	48.5	49.6
Hispanic	14.8	21.8	23.1	26.9	23.3	28.7	31.1	33.3	32.5	31.2	32.8	32.2	30.9	31.1	32.3	32.7	31.7
Bachelor's Degree or Higher																	
Total	17.1	21.9	22.5	22.2	23.2	24.7	27.1	27.8	27.3	28.2	29.1	28.7	29.3	28.4	28.7	28.8	28.4
Gender																	
Male	20.4	25.1	24.0	23.1	23.7	24.5	26.1	26.3	25.7	26.8	27.9	26.2	26.9	26.0	26.1	25.5	25.3
Female	13.8	18.7	21.0	21.3	22.8	24.9	28.2	29.3	29.0	29.5	30.1	31.1	31.8	30.9	31.4	32.2	31.6
Race/Ethnicity																	
Non-Hispanic White	18.9	23.8	25.0	24.4	26.4	28.8	31.6	32.6	32.3	33.6	34.0	33.0	35.9	-	-	-	-
Non-Hispanic White alone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	34.2	34.5	34.5	34.3
Non-Hispanic Black	6.7	10.5	11.5	11.6	13.4	15.4	14.6	14.2	15.8	15.0	17.9	17.9	18.0	-	-	-	-
Black alone	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	17.2	16.9	17.4	18.6
Hispanic	5.1	8.8	7.7	11.1	8.2	8.9	10.0	11.0	10.4	8.9	9.6	11.1	8.9	10.0	10.9	11.2	9.5

¹Included in the totals but not shown separately are those from other racial/ethnic categories.

²Estimates for 2002-2005 reflect the new Office of Management and Budget race definitions, and include only those who are identified with a single race. Hispanics may be of any race.

Note: The Current Population Survey (CPS) questions used to obtain educational attainment were changed in 1992. In 1994, the survey instrument for the CPS was changed and weights were adjusted.

Source: 1971-2001: Reproduced from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, The Condition of Education 2002, NCES 2002-025, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002. Tables 25-1, 25-2, 25-3. Based on March Current Population Surveys analysis. Data for 2002: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables: Table 1. All other 2002 data: U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2002, Detailed Tables: Table 1a. Data for 2003: Stroops, Nicole, (June 2004). Educational Attainment in the United States, 2003, P20-550. Data for 2004: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2004, Detailed Tables: Table 1. All other 2004 data: U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2004, Detailed Tables: Table 1a. Data for 2005: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2005, Detailed Tables: Table 1. All other 2005 data: U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2005, Detailed Tables: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/educ-attn.html> Data for 2006: Some college or more: Child Trends calculations using U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006, Detailed Tables: Table 1. All other 2006 data: U.S. Census Bureau, Educational Attainment in the United States: March 2006, Detailed Tables: Table 1a. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/education/cps2006.html>

