

# Educational Attainment

ANDREA ADAMS

## The Nation's educational level has risen dramatically in the past 50 years.

Since the Bureau of the Census first collected data on educational attainment in the 1940 census, educational attainment among the American people has risen substantially. In 1940, one-fourth (24.5 percent) of all persons 25 years old and over had completed high school (or more education), and 1 in 20 (4.6 percent) had completed 4 or more years of college. By 1993, over four-fifths (80.2 percent) had completed 4 years of high school or more, and over one-fifth (21.9 percent) had completed 4 or more years of college.

The increase in educational attainment over the past half century is primarily due to the higher educational attainment of young adults, combined with the attrition of older adults who typically had less formal education. For example, the proportion of persons 25 to

29 years old who were high school graduates rose from 38.1 percent in 1940 to 86.7 percent in 1993, while for persons 65 years old and over, it increased from 13.1 to 60.3 percent.

## There is no difference in the educational attainment of young men and women.

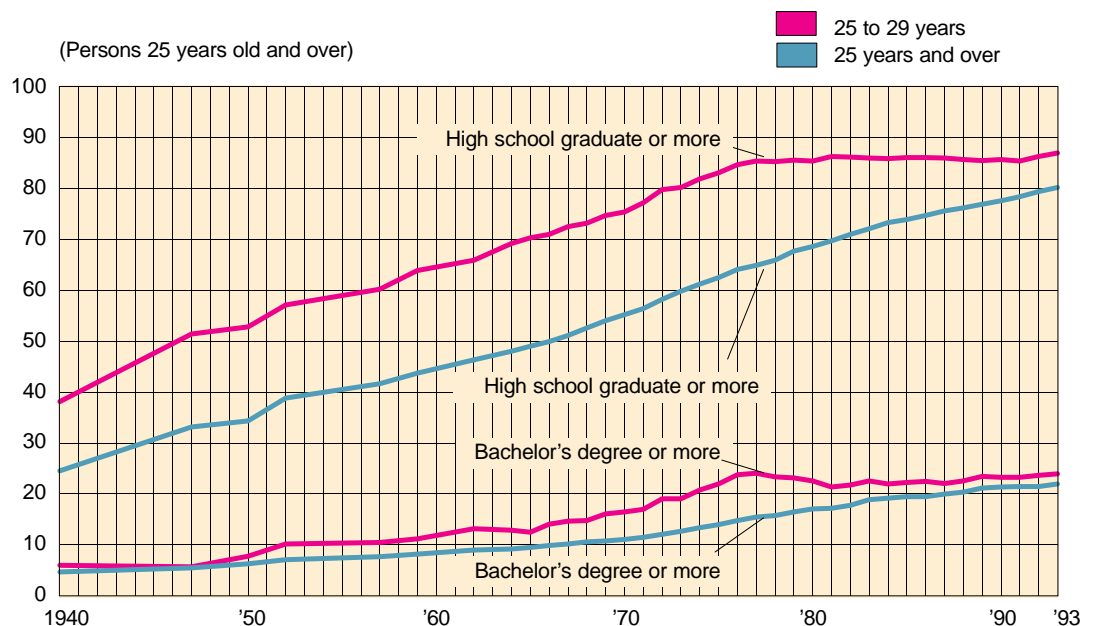
Differences in educational attainment between men and women have historically been attributed to differences in attainment at the college level. In 1940, the percentages of men and women 25 to 29 years old completing 4 or more years of college were close to equal, but at a very low level (6.9 percent compared with 4.9 percent). Between 1940 and 1970, both sexes increased their college attainment, but men's gains were significantly greater. The college completion rates for men and women 25 to 29 years old in 1970 were 20.0 and 12.9 percent,

respectively. Since 1970, however, the college gains of young adult women have outstripped those of young adult men, until by 1993, there was no statistical difference in the proportions of men and women 25 to 29 years old with 4 or more years of college (23.4 and 23.9 percent, respectively).

## Educational attainment levels continue to rise for race and Hispanic groups.

Blacks have made substantial progress in narrowing the educational attainment gap relative to Whites. In 1940, only 7.7 percent of Blacks 25 years old and over had completed high school, compared with 26.1 percent of Whites. In 1965, the corresponding figures were 27.2 and 51.3 percent, respectively. By 1993, 70.4 percent of Blacks 25 years old and over had completed high school, compared with 81.5 percent of Whites. Hence, the

Percent of Persons Who Have Completed High School or College: Selected Years 1940 to 1993



difference between the Black and White rates was smaller in 1993 than in the earlier years.

Among persons 25 to 29 years old in 1940, only 10.6 percent of Black and Other-races men had completed 4 years of high school, compared with 38.9 percent of White men. By 1993, there was no statistical difference in the proportions of Black men and White men who had completed high school: 85.0 and 86.0 percent, respectively. Similar gains were made by young Black women but they remained different from White women in 1993, when 80.9 percent of Black women 25 to

29 years old had completed 4 years of high school, compared with 88.5 percent of White women. In 1940, the proportions were 13.8 percent of Black and Other-races women and 43.4 percent of White women.

Although the proportion of Blacks 25 years old and over who have completed college has increased since 1940, it is about one-half the proportion of their White counterparts (12.2 percent compared with 22.6 percent in 1993). Among young adults 25 to 29 years old in 1993, Blacks were more than half as likely as Whites (13.2 percent compared with 24.7 percent)

to have completed 4 or more years of college. Data for persons of Hispanic origin<sup>1</sup> have not been collected for as long a period as for race groups, but the patterns also indicate some improvement in educational attainment over time. Among Hispanics 25 years old and over in 1993, 53.1 percent had completed high school, up from 36.5 percent in 1974. Completion of college stood at 9.0 percent, a significant increase from the level of 5.5 percent in 1974.

<sup>1</sup>Persons of Hispanic origin may be of any race. These data do not include the population of Puerto Rico.

**For Further Information**

See: Current Population Reports, Series P20-476, *Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1993 and 1992.*

Contact: Rosalind R. Bruno or Andrea Adams  
Education and Social Stratification Branch  
301-457-2464

**Educational Attainment of Persons 25 Years Old and Over, by Sex, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Age: March 1993**

