



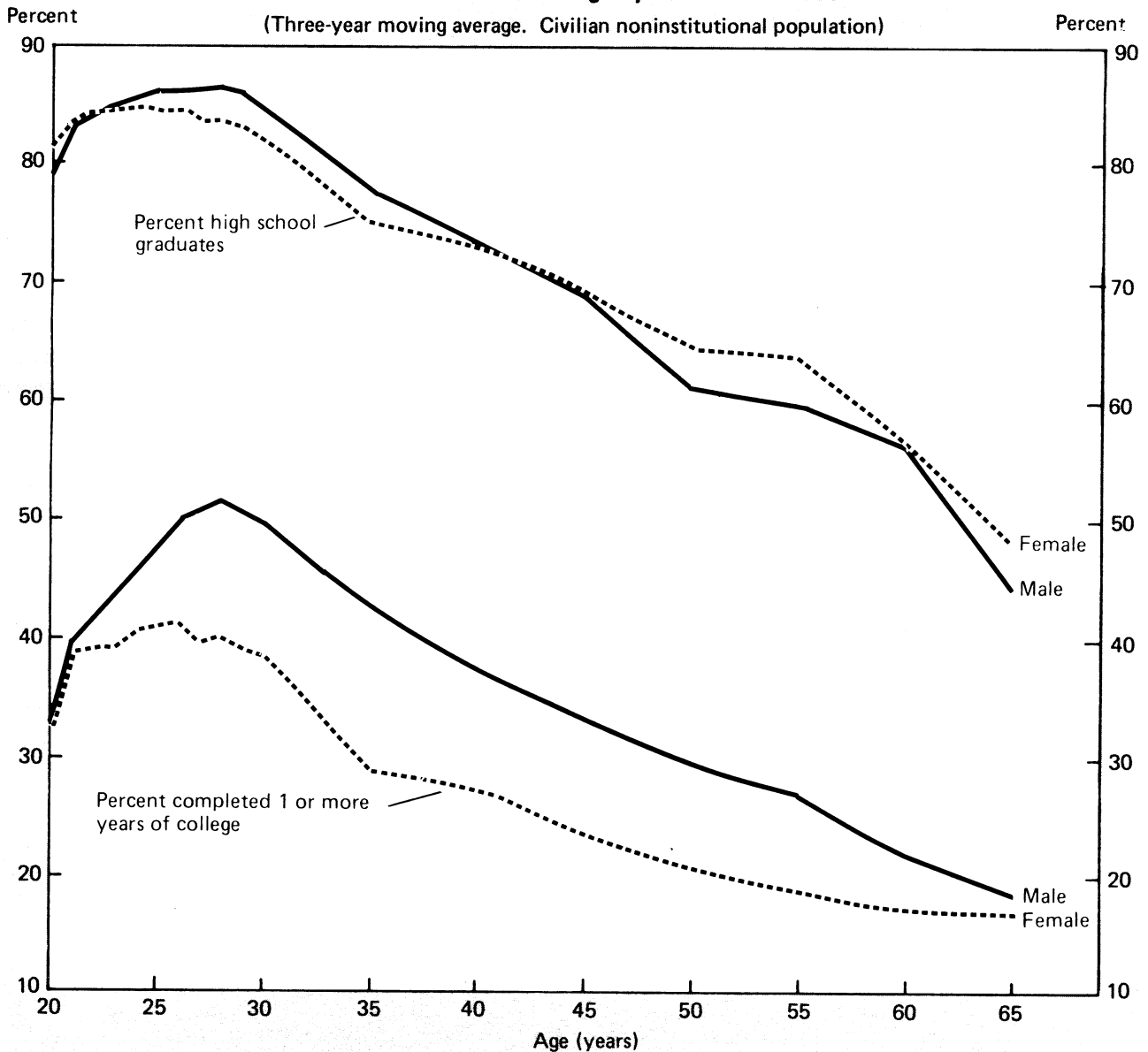
# Population Characteristics

U.S. Department of Commerce  
BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

Series P-20, No. 314  
Issued December 1977

## Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1977 and 1976

**Figure 1. Percent of Persons 20 to 65 Years Old Who Were High School Graduates and Percent Who had Completed 1 or More Years of College by Sex: March 1977**  
(Three-year moving average. Civilian noninstitutional population)



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# Population Characteristics

Series P-20, No. 314  
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## Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1977 and 1976

### CONTENTS

	Page
Introduction . . . . .	1

### TEXT TABLES

Table	
A. Percent of persons 18 to 29 years old who completed 4 years of high school and 1 or more years of college: March 1970 and 1977 . . . . .	1
B. Percent of persons who completed 4 years of high school and 1 or more years of college by year of birth and sex as reported in March 1970 and 1977 . . . . .	4

### CHARTS

Figure	
1. Percent of persons 20 to 65 years old who were high school graduates and percent who had completed 1 or more years of college by sex: March 1977 . . . . .	cover
2. Percent high school graduates by age and sex: March 1977 and 1970 . . . . .	2
3. Proportion of male and female high school graduates who completed 1 or more years of college by single years of age: March 1977 . . . . .	3
4. Percent of high school graduates who completed 1 or more years of college by age and sex: March 1977 and 1970 . . . . .	5
5. Percent high school graduates by race for persons 20 to 65 years old: March 1977 . . . . .	6

### DETAILED TABLES

Table	
1. Years of school completed by persons 14 years old and over, by age, race, Spanish origin, and sex: March 1977 and 1976 . . . . .	7
2. Years of school completed by persons 18 years old and over, by single years of age, race, Spanish origin, and sex: March 1977 . . . . .	19
3. Years of school completed by persons 14 years old and over, by sex and age: March 1970 . . . . .	29
4. Years of school completed by persons 14 years old and over, by age, race, sex, Spanish origin, and marital status: March 1977 . . . . .	30
5. Years of school completed by persons 14 years old and over by age, sex, and household relationship: March 1977 . . . . .	35
6. Education of husband by education of wife for married couples 14 years old and over, by age of husband: March 1977 . . . . .	39

## CONTENTS—Continued

### DETAILED TABLES—Continued

Table	Page
7. Years of school completed for persons 14 years old and over, by sex, race, Spanish origin, and age, for the United States and regions: March 1977 . . . . .	41
8. Years of school completed for persons 14 years old and over, by sex, race, Spanish origin, and age, for the 15 largest States: March 1977. . . . .	43
9. Years of school completed for persons 14 years old and over, by sex, race, Spanish origin, and age, for the 15 largest standard metropolitan statistical areas: March 1977 . . . . .	47

### APPENDIX

Definitions and explanations . . . . .	51
Source and reliability of the estimates . . . . .	53

### APPENDIX TABLES

Table		Page
A-1. Standard errors for estimated numbers of persons (total or White population). . . . .		55
A-2. Standard errors for estimated numbers of persons (Black and other races) . . . . .		55
A-3. Standard errors of estimated percentages (total or White population). . . . .		57
A-4. Standard errors of estimated percentages (Black and other races) . . . . .		57
A-5. Factors to be applied to standard errors in tables A-1 through A-4 . . . . .		58

#### SYMBOLS USED IN TABLES

- Represents zero or rounds to zero.
  - B Base less than 75,000.
  - . . . Not applicable.

# Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1977 and 1976

Since the beginning of this century, the educational level of the population of the United States has been rising as larger proportions of each new age group have graduated from high school and as some of them have entered college.<sup>1</sup> Thus, by 1977, there was a considerable difference between the educational levels of older and younger persons in the United States; persons 25 to 29 years old in 1977 were twice as likely to be high school graduates as persons 60 years old and over (85 percent as compared with 42 percent).

The changes in the proportion of men and women 20 to 65 years old who have graduated from high school or completed at least 1 year of college during the past four decades are shown in figure 1.<sup>2</sup> This chart and other evidence in this report indicate that differences in educational levels between age groups will be smaller in the future. For example, while the high school graduation level rose by about 10 percentage points between ages 40 and 30 and between ages 50 and 40, there was no meaningful significant difference in the proportion of high school

graduates among persons between 20 and 30 years of age in 1977 (see figure 1 and table 2). Therefore, if high school graduation rates remain at the 85 percent level, as they have for the past several years, the proportion of the entire adult population under 65 years of age who are high school graduates will be about the same 35 to 40 years from now.

Figure 2 presents further evidence of the stabilization of the proportion of persons graduating from high school by showing the percentage of persons 20 to 29 years old who were high school graduates at two points in time, 1970 and 1977. Note that the proportions for both men and women generally decreased for persons between the ages of 23 and 29 in 1970, but tended to remain at about the same level for those ages in 1977, evidently because the proportion of high school graduates had reached the saturation point.

Table A provides additional information on changes in the percentage of high school graduates and the percentage completing at least 1 year of college in 1970 and 1977. Especially noteworthy is the fact that a smaller proportion of men 18 to 21 years of age in 1977 had completed at least 1 year of college than men of the same age in 1970. As a consequence, there is some evidence that women 18 to 19 years old in 1977 had a higher proportion with at least 1 year of college than men of the same age.

<sup>1</sup>John Folger and Charles Nam, *Education of the American Population*, U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1967.

<sup>2</sup>Small variations in proportions should not necessarily be interpreted as significant differences in attainment levels of population groups because of the small size of the sample for single years of age.

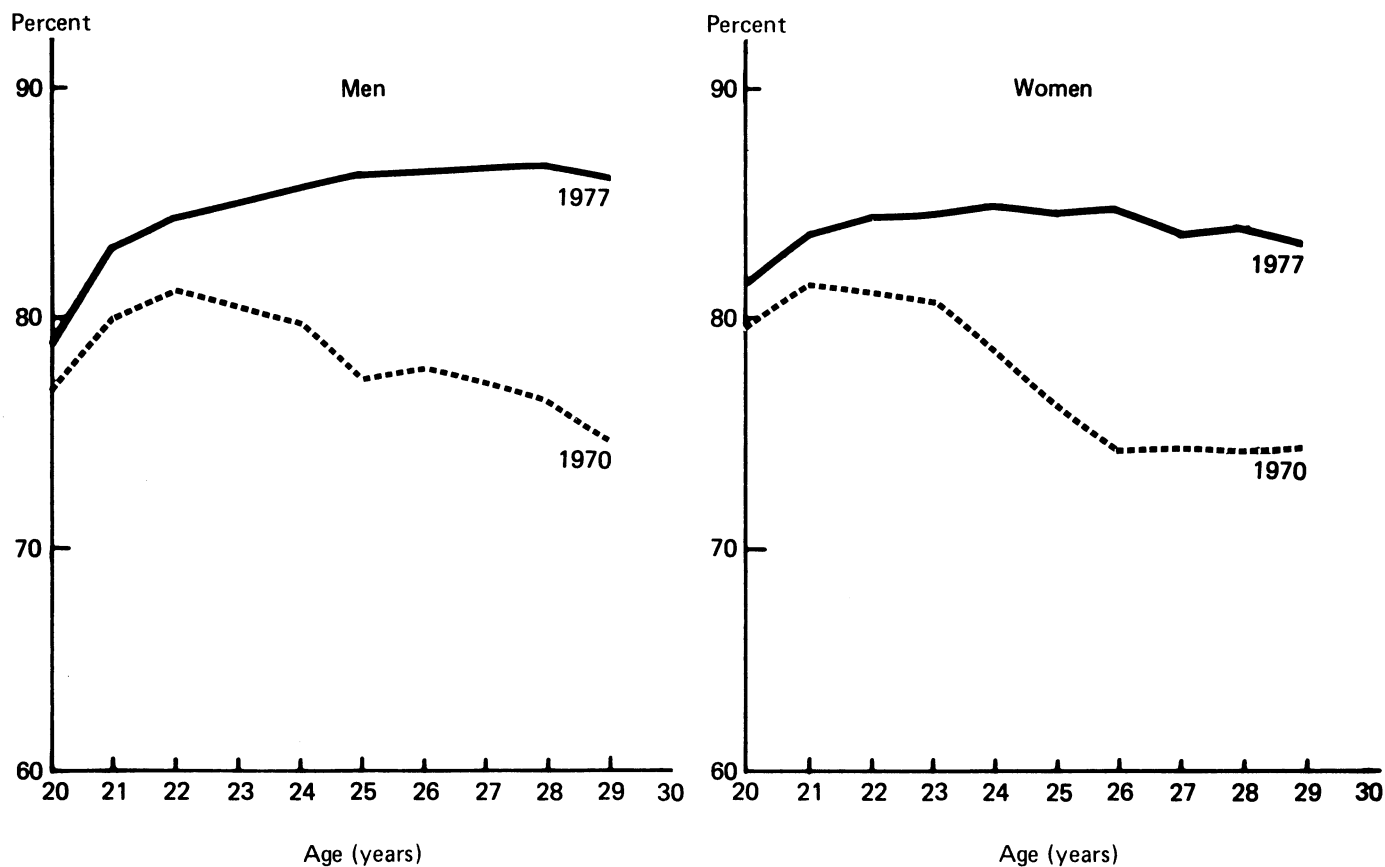
**Table A. Percent of Persons 18 to 29 Years Old Who Completed 4 Years of High School and 1 or More Years of College: March 1970 and 1977**

Sex and age	Percent high school graduates <sup>1</sup>			Percent completed 1 or more years of college		
	1977	1970	Change, 1970-77	1977	1970	Change, 1970-77
MALE						
18 and 19 years.....	58.8	57.1	1.7	10.9	13.6	-2.7
20 and 21 years.....	82.3	79.7	2.6	38.5	46.8	-8.3
22 and 23 years.....	84.7	81.3	3.4	42.2	39.5	2.7
24 and 25 years.....	85.9	78.4	7.5	46.9	38.4	8.5
26 and 27 years.....	86.3	77.4	8.9	50.7	36.0	14.7
28 and 29 years.....	87.2	74.6	12.6	51.0	34.9	16.1
FEMALE						
18 and 19 years.....	65.1	64.7	0.4	13.2	12.9	0.3
20 and 21 years.....	82.8	81.0	1.8	38.4	35.8	2.6
22 and 23 years.....	84.7	81.0	3.7	38.9	32.6	6.3
24 and 25 years.....	85.1	77.4	7.7	41.6	29.5	12.1
26 and 27 years.....	84.0	73.7	10.3	40.0	26.1	13.9
28 and 29 years.....	83.3	74.3	9.0	40.0	26.4	13.6

<sup>1</sup>Also includes persons who completed 1 or more years of college

Figure 2. Percent High School Graduates by Age and Sex: March 1977 and 1970

(Three-year moving average)



While the overall proportion of a birth cohort that will graduate from high school is well established by the time those persons reach their early twenties, further increases in the proportion of persons acquiring a high school diploma can occur because some persons remain in high school and others obtain a diploma after passing a high school equivalency examination.<sup>3</sup> Apparent changes between 1970 and 1977 in the proportion of persons graduating from high school are shown in table B. The 10- or 12-percentage-point increases in the proportion of some cohorts completing 1 or more years of college after age 21 are of no great surprise, as college attendance is not confined to a narrow age range. However, the increases of 2 to 4 percentage points in the proportion receiving a high school diploma after this age is of

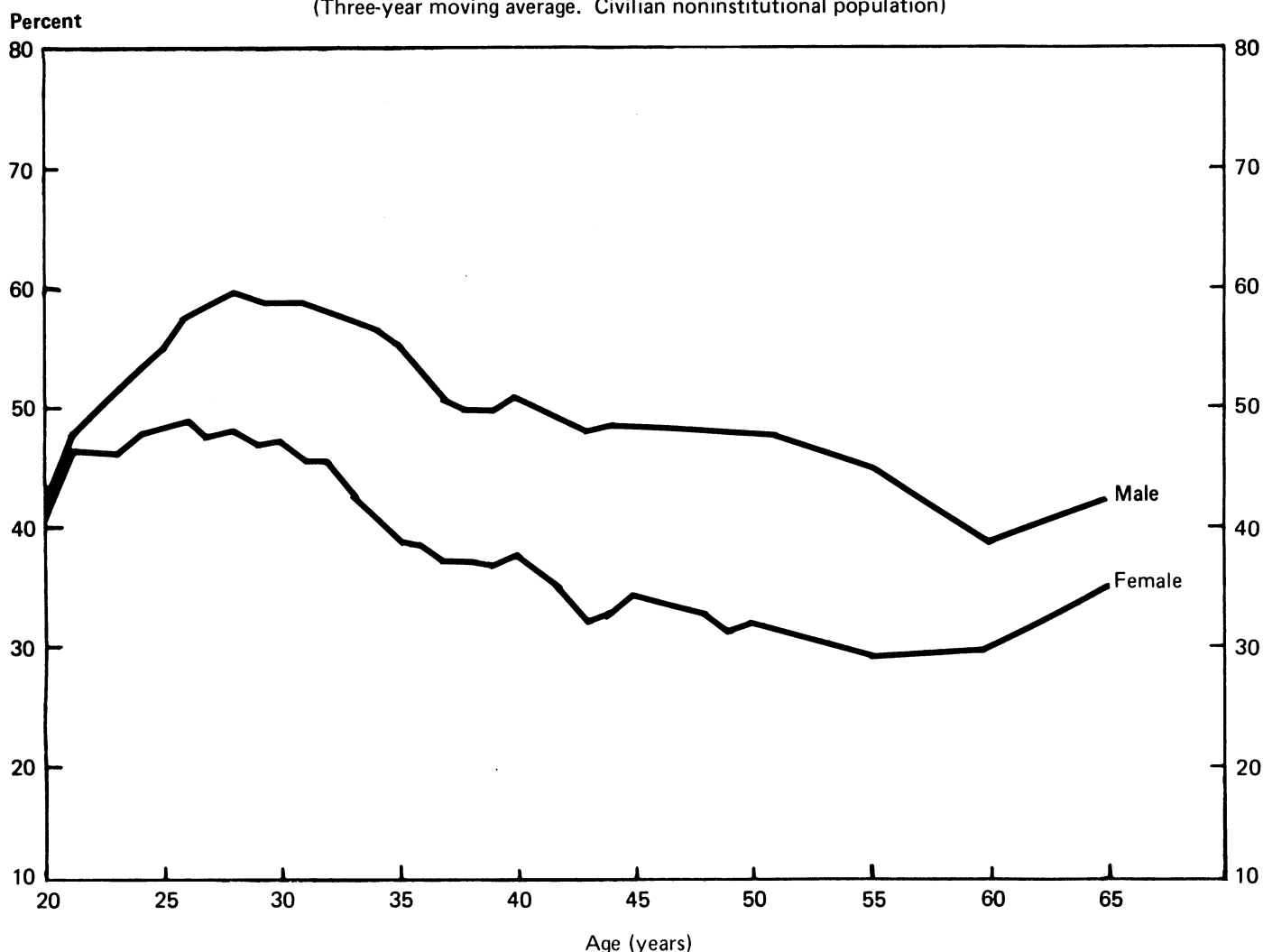
greater interest. Every birth cohort of males born between 1941 and 1950 reported an increase between 1970 and 1977 in the proportion graduating from high school. Thus, the slightly lower proportion of high school graduates at ages 20 and 21 in 1977, as shown in figure 1, will undoubtedly approach the proportion for older cohorts within a few years. The lower proportion of men in 1977 who completed at least 1 year of college before age 27 is probably due to some extent to the late entry of many men into college. Thus, if the experience of the 1941 to 1950 birth cohorts in the 1970-77 period is a guide, part of the gap in educational levels by age may be closed in the future.

<sup>3</sup> Unpublished data from the October 1975 Current Population Survey show that about 3 percent of persons 20 to 34 years old graduated from high school by taking an equivalency examination, and another 1 percent graduated by attending night school. About 1 percent of 20- and 21-year-olds are enrolled in school below the college level. These data will appear in *Current Population Reports, "School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1976."*

In addition to the factors listed previously, some of the increases in educational levels for birth cohorts may be due to changes in the composition of the Current Population Survey (CPS) sample between 1970 and 1977, since the survey is restricted to the civilian noninstitutional population plus only those members of the Armed Forces who live off post or with their families on post in the United States. During the early 1970's, many men returned to the civilian population after a period of residence in Armed Forces barracks or in overseas service. Thus, some of the increase in

**Figure 3. Proportion of Male and Female High School Graduates Who Completed 1 or More Years of College by Single Years of Age: March 1977**

(Three-year moving average. Civilian noninstitutional population)



educational attainment of a birth cohort as reported in the CPS between 1970 and 1977 could have been a result of the return of highly educated military personnel to the civilian population covered by the CPS sample.<sup>4</sup> However, any increases for women (see table B) would not be due to a significant shift in population composition but to more women completing some schooling after the age of 21.

Although the proportion of persons who receive a high school diploma may be stabilizing, the CPS results suggest

<sup>4</sup> A discussion of the effect on educational levels of the male population due to the omission of Armed Forces members from the CPS coverage is presented in "Educational Attainment of the United States: March 1973 and 1974," *Current Population Reports*, P-20, No. 274, pp. 6 and 7. In 1970, 18 percent of the U.S. male population 20 to 24 years old were in the Armed Forces, as compared with only 8 percent in 1977.

that lower proportions of high school graduates, especially men in the younger age groups, are completing at least 1 year of college, as shown in figures 3 and 4. The proportion of men 20 and 21 years old who completed some college in 1977 was about 12 percentage points lower than that for men 8 and 9 years older and 8 percentage points lower than that for men 20 and 21 years old in 1970 (table A). The sharp decline in the proportion of young men completing at least 1 year of college between ages 28 and 20 might be due to a decrease in the attraction of a college education.<sup>5</sup> This downward curve may be raised in later years if a significant number of persons have only delayed their entry into college

<sup>5</sup> See Richard Freeman, *The Overeducated American*, New York: Academic Press, 1976; and Larry Suter, "Trends in College Enrollment in the post-Vietnam Era," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, New York, August 1976.

for a few years after high school graduation. However, if the proportion of men 20 and 21 years old in 1977 is to reach the same educational level achieved by men 28 and 29 years old in 1977, an additional 12 percent of men in the younger age group would have to enter and complete 1 year of college in the next 8 years. That much change would be equal to the increase which occurred for men 22 and 23 years old in 1970 (see table B). Although such large changes are not inconceivable in the future, they were not common among the birth cohorts selected for table B.

Another explanation for the apparent decline in the college educational level of young men is that an unusually

large proportion of men who were 25 to 29 years old in 1977 may have acquired a college education as a result of the Vietnam Conflict. Many may have attended college during the 1960's to take advantage of draft deferments and those who served in the Armed Forces may have returned to college in the 1970's to take advantage of GI benefits. The uniqueness of the high educational achievement of men born between 1947 and 1950 is apparent in figures 1 and 3. However, if the same level of funding through the GI benefits program that was available to these men is not available to future cohorts of men, smaller proportions are likely to enter college in the years to come.

**Table B. Percent of Persons Who Completed 4 Years of High School and 1 or More Years of College by Year of Birth and Sex as Reported in March 1970 and 1977**

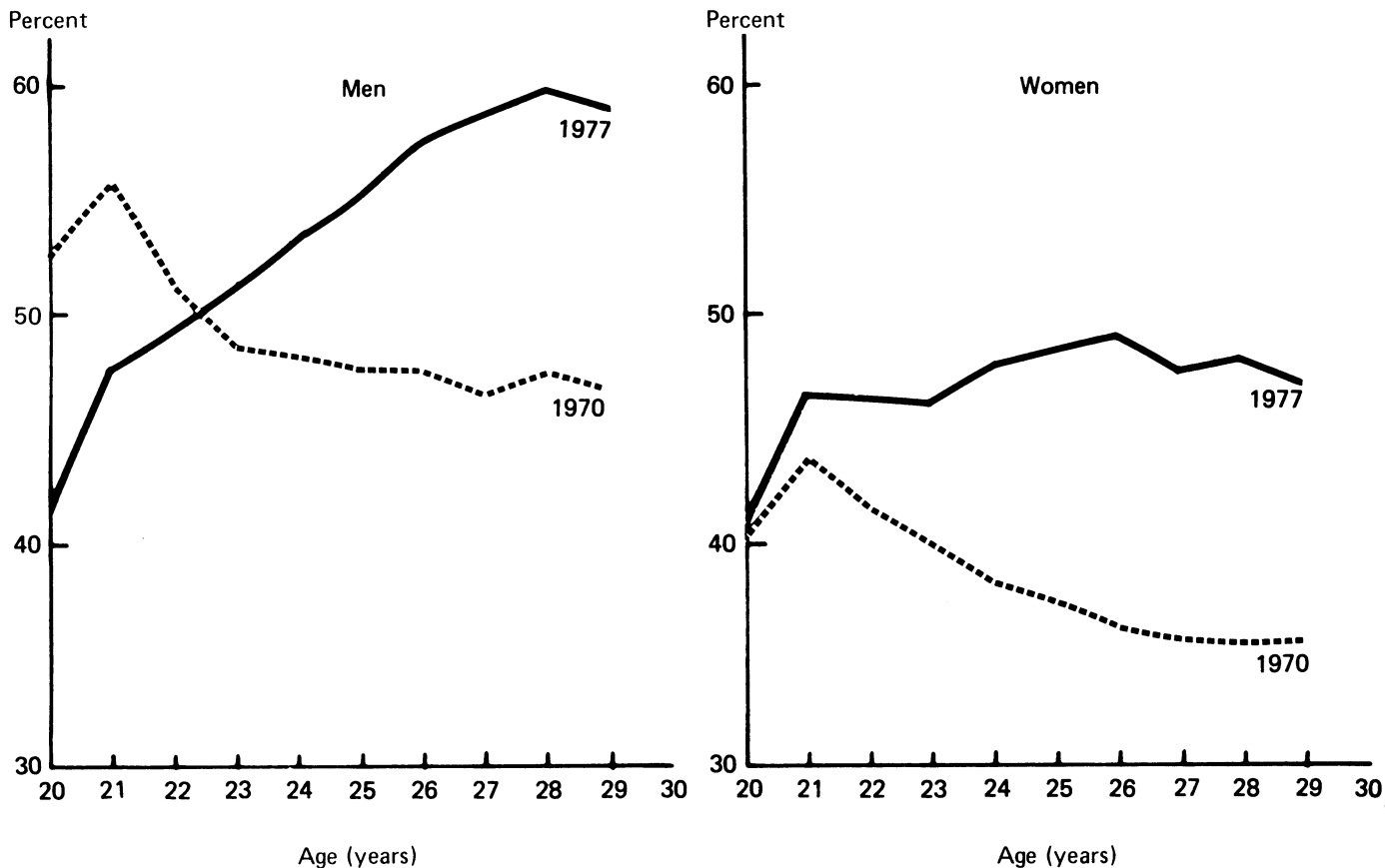
Year of birth, and sex	Percent high school graduates <sup>1</sup>			Percent completed 1 or more years of college		
	1977	1970	Change, 1970-77	1977	1970	Change, 1970-77
MALE						
1951-1952..(18 and 19 years in 1970)...	86.6	57.1	29.5	48.2	13.6	34.6
1949-1950..(20 and 21 years in 1970)...	86.2	79.7	6.5	52.0	46.8	5.2
1947-1948..(22 and 23 years in 1970)...	85.6	81.3	4.3	50.5	38.5	12.0
1945-1946..(24 and 25 years in 1970)...	82.4	78.4	4.0	47.9	38.4	9.5
1943-1944..(26 and 27 years in 1970)...	81.3	77.4	3.9	46.6	36.0	10.6
1941-1942..(28 and 29 years in 1970)...	76.6	74.6	2.0	41.4	34.9	6.5
FEMALE						
1951-1952..(18 and 19 years in 1970)...	84.8	64.7	20.1	41.8	12.9	28.9
1949-1950..(20 and 21 years in 1970)...	83.8	81.0	2.8	39.8	35.8	4.0
1947-1948..(22 and 23 years in 1970)...	83.1	81.0	2.1	39.0	32.6	6.4
1945-1946..(24 and 25 years in 1970)...	79.6	77.4	2.2	36.7	29.5	7.2
1943-1944..(26 and 27 years in 1970)...	78.0	73.7	4.3	32.5	26.1	6.4
1941-1942..(28 and 29 years in 1970)...	73.4	74.3	-0.9	28.1	26.4	1.7

<sup>1</sup>Also includes persons who completed 1 or more years of college.



**Figure 4. Percent of High School Graduates Who Completed 1 or More Years of College by Age and Sex: March 1977 and 1970**

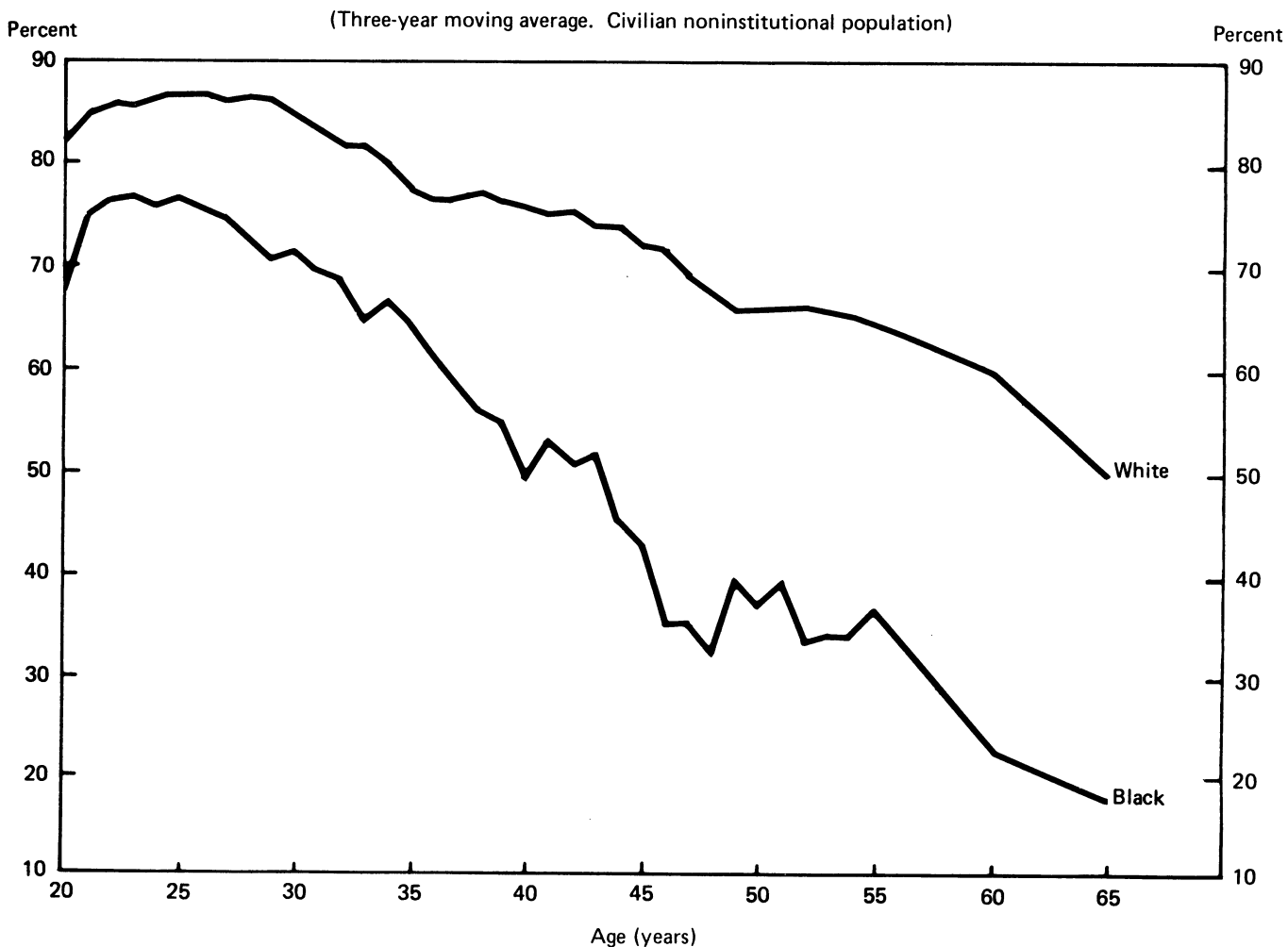
(Three-year moving average)



The changes in the proportion of high school graduates who completed at least 1 year of college are shown in figures 3 and 4 for both men and women. For persons between 21 and 29 years of age in 1977, there is little difference in the proportion of persons who graduated from high school (figure 2). But, as figure 4 shows, the percentage of female high school graduates in this age group completing 1 or more years of college did not vary by more than 2 percentage points from 47 percent in 1977, while the level

for men declined from 60 percent for 28 and 29 year olds to about 47 percent for 21 year olds (figures 3 and 4). Thus, the declining level of college attendance for male high school graduates had contributed to the equalizing of differences in educational attainment between men and women. The lack of any parallel decline in the completion of some college for women further supports the interpretation that the decline in the proportion of men who completed some college may be due to an expiration of draft deferments and GI benefits.

Figure 5. Percent High School Graduates by Race for Persons 20 to 65 Years Old: March 1977



The more rapid increase of Blacks as compared with Whites in the proportion who are high school graduates is displayed in figure 5. This chart shows that the high school graduation rates of Whites and Blacks begin to converge in successively younger age groups of persons between 65 and 25 years old in 1977. It is impossible to determine from these data alone whether the future high school graduation rates of Whites and Blacks will eventually be equal in the younger age groups. However, the numbers presented in figure 5 clearly demonstrate the rapidity of the change in educational levels among the young Black population during

the past 20 years or so, as measured by the changes in the proportion of persons 20 to 65 years old who were high school graduates in March 1977. The lack of change in the level of high school graduation for Whites under age 30, which follows the trend discussed earlier for the total population, suggests that further increases for that population may be unlikely. Perhaps in another 35 years, when persons who are currently 30 years of age reach 65, the working age population of both racial groups who are high school graduates will eventually level out at 85 percent or move upward toward 90 percent.

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#### NOTE

In the past the Census Bureau has designated a head of household to serve as the central reference person for the collection and tabulation of data for individual members of the household (or family). However, recent social changes have resulted in a trend toward recognition of more equal status for all members of the household (or family), making the term "head" less relevant in the analysis of household and family data. As a result, the Bureau is currently developing new techniques of enumeration and data presentation which will eliminate the concept of "head." While much of the data in this report are based on the concept of "head," methodology for future Census Bureau reports will reflect a gradual movement away from this traditional practice.

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