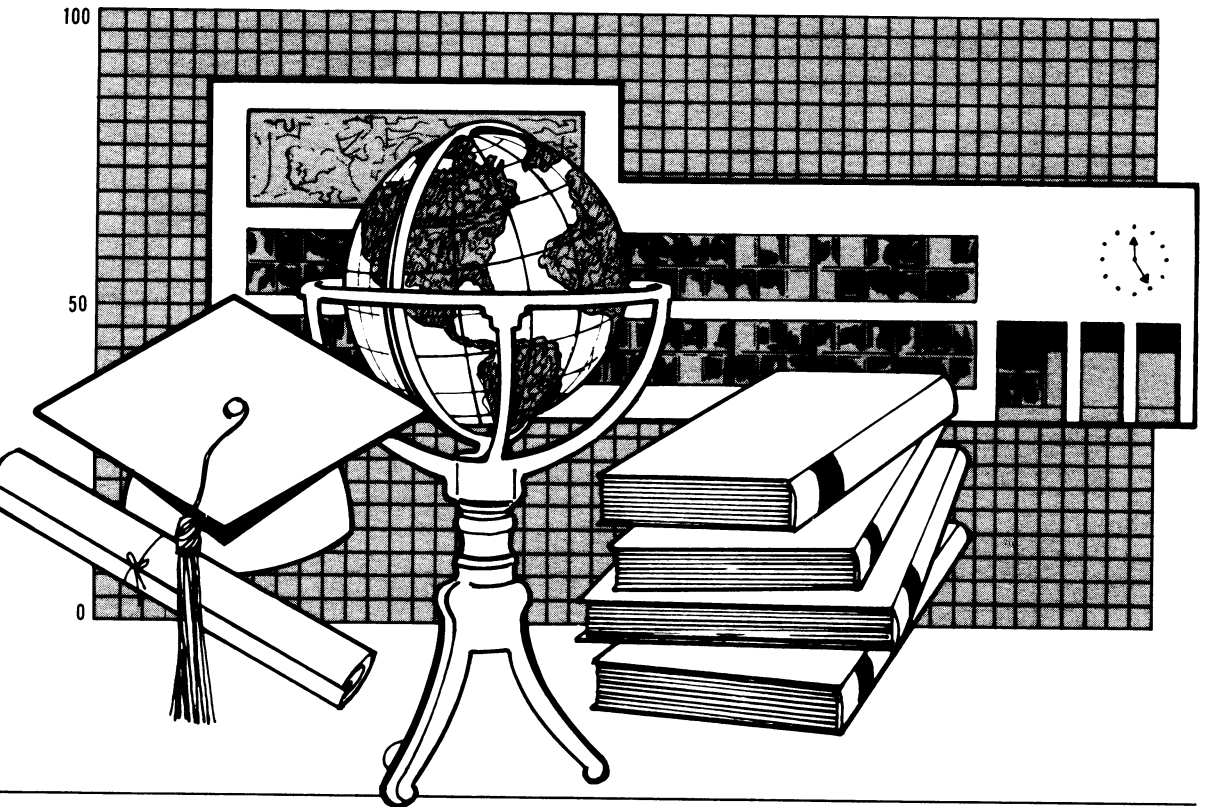


Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1981 and 1980



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**Educational
Attainment in the
United States:
March 1981 and 1980**

by Rosalind R. Bruno



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Contents

	Page
Recent trends for men and women	1
Regional differences in attainment	3
Black-White differences	6

TEXT TABLES

A. College attainment at 25 to 29 and 30 to 34 years old, for four cohorts, by sex: March 1966, 1971, 1976, and 1981	4
B. Percent high school graduates and college graduates, by age and region: March 1981 ..	5
C. Attainment of persons 20 to 65 years old, by single year of age and race: March 1981	6

CHARTS

Figure

1. College attainment at 25 to 29 years old, for four birth cohorts, by sex: March 1966, 1971, 1976, and 1981	3
2. Percent high school graduates and college graduates, for persons 25 to 34 and 45 to 54 years old, by region: March 1981	5
3. Educational attainment, by single year of age and race: March 1981	7

DETAILED TABLES

1. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1981 and 1980	9
2. Years of school completed by persons 18 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1981	27
3. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, race, Spanish origin, and marital status: March 1981	44
4. Years of school completed by all householders and family householders, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1981	49
5. Education of husband, by education of wife, for married couples 15 years old and over, by age of husband: March 1981	51
6. Years of school completed by employed persons 25 to 64 years old, by major occupation group, age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1981	53
7. Years of school completed by persons 18 years old and over, by metropolitan— nonmetropolitan residence, age, race, Spanish origin, and sex: March 1981	57
8. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, Spanish origin, and region: March 1981	65
9. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin, for the 15 largest States: March 1981	69
10. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin, for the 15 largest standard metropolitan statistical areas: March 1981 ..	73
11. Years of school completed by persons 25 years and over, by age and sex: April 1940 to March 1981	77
12. Percentage of persons 25 years old and over who have completed high school or college, by race and sex: April 1940 to March 1981	79

APPENDIXES

	Page
A. Definitions and Explanations	81
B. Source and Reliability of Estimates	85
Source of data	85
Reliability of estimates	85

APPENDIX TABLES

B-1. Generalized standard errors for estimated numbers of persons—total or White	87
B-2. Generalized standard errors for estimated numbers of persons—Black and other races . . .	88
B-3. Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages—total or White	89
B-4. Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages—Black and other races	89
B-5. "a" and "b" parameters and "f" factors for calculating approximate standard errors of estimated numbers and percentages	90
B-6. Factors to be applied to standard errors	91

SYMBOLS USED IN TABLES

—	Represents zero or rounds to zero.
B	Base is less than.
NA	Not available.
X	Not applicable.

Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1981 and 1980

In March 1981 about 70 percent of all adults 25 years old and over were high school graduates. Ten years earlier the figure was 56 percent, and in 1950, only 34 percent were high school graduates. The change reflected the rapidly increasing high school graduation rate of young people (table 12), mortality among the older, less well-educated population and the larger relative size of the younger cohorts. Of young adults 25 to 29 years old, 86 percent were high school graduates in 1981, and only 53 percent were high school graduates in 1950. The proportion of adults who had completed 4 or more years of college also grew, as college completion rates of young adults increased. In the three decades from 1950 to 1981, the percentage of all adults 25 years old and over who had completed college rose from 6 percent to 17 percent. Among young adults (25 to 29 years old), college completion rose from 8 to 21 percent in the same period.

This report contains data from supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the Bureau of the Census in March 1981 and 1980 and earlier years. The detailed tables present data on years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over by age, sex, race, Spanish origin, type of residence, region of residence, occupation, marital status, and education of spouse. Survey data for 1981 were inflated to independent population estimates based on the 1980 census. Survey data for 1980 were inflated separately to independent estimates based on the 1980 census and on the 1970 census. Therefore, two sets of data are shown for 1980, with the census on which each is based always noted. The 1970 census-based estimates are included in order to show consistent time series with data for earlier years.

RECENT TRENDS FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Thirty and forty years ago men and women differed very little in the proportion who were college graduates because so few of each group completed college: 5.5 percent and 3.8 percent, respectively, in 1940 and 7.3 percent and 5.2 percent, respectively, in 1950 (table 12). During the next three decades, the proportions of adults with college educations increased rapidly. However, the proportion of men who completed 4 years of college grew more than that for women, so that by 1981, 21 percent of men and 13 percent of women 25 years and over were college graduates. These summary figures for all adults 25 years old and over obscure recent changes in college attendance and completion patterns, which

are evident in the achievements of the youngest age group. Among persons 25 to 29 years old, 23 percent of the men and 20 percent of the women were graduates in 1981, up from 20 percent and 13 percent, respectively, in 1970. The closeness of the 1981 figures shows the recent convergence of attainment levels for men and women.

Changes in attainment patterns occurred at different times for men and women. Prior to World War II, a college degree was a rare commodity, but men were somewhat more likely than women to be graduates (table 12). For a short time during World War II, there were more women than men enrolled in college,¹ but this did not change the relative position of men and women as college graduates. After World War II, the GI Bill allowed a large number of men to pursue college careers at reduced cost, and few women were eligible for GI Bill benefits. The stimulus provided by the Russian launching of Sputnik in 1957 caused new interest in college enrollment and subsequent college completion.

Although the proportion of women who were college graduates grew, it did not keep up with the growth for men. In 1940, 7 percent of young adult men (25 to 29 years old) were college graduates, compared with 5 percent of young adult women. By 1959, about twice the proportion of young adult men as women were college graduates (15 percent versus 8 percent). The beginning of the Vietnam Era influenced new growth in enrollment for men in the mid-1960's and enrollment stayed high into the early 1970's.² The enrollment of women accelerated in the 1960's and 1970's, and the proportion who had completed college grew by half from 1970 to 1981, from 13 percent to 20 percent. During the same period, the proportion for men changed by one-sixth from 20 percent to 23 percent. For 25- to 29-year-old women, the proportion who were college graduates has been around 20 percent since 1976.

For men, completion rates appeared to decline in the late 1970's. While a commonly offered explanation is the reported decline in the economic attractiveness of a college education—that there is a glut of college graduates, that a college diploma is no longer a ticket to a professional job, and that new college graduates have not been recruited as en-

¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, Series P-S, No. 9, *School Attendance of the Civilian Population: October 1945*.

²U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 360, *School Enrollment--Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1979*.

thusiastically by private industry as in the past³—the decline may be a return to “normal” levels.

The very high enrollment rates shown for young men from 1967 to 1972 and the subsequent rapid decline in rates reported in the 1970’s were somewhat overstated but led to speculation about the cause and effect of the observed decline. The statistics presented for those years may be misleading because enrollment rates presented in Current Population Reports are based on the civilian population, and during the Vietnam Era a large proportion of young men were in the Armed Forces. Induction into the Armed Forces and college enrollment are most common at the same ages, and fluctuations in the proportion of an age group in the Armed Forces can affect the reported college enrollment rate with little change in the numbers of students. When the population base changed because of a rapid decrease in the size of the Armed Forces in the early 1970’s, there was a rapid reduction in the reported enrollment rate of young men.⁴

However, there was a real increase in enrollment rates among young men in the 1960’s and a slight decrease in the 1970’s in addition to the “artificial” changes discussed above, as enrollment rates based on the total population rather than civilian population show. College attendance to maintain a draft deferment most likely caused increased college enrollment rates among young men in the 1960’s, and the elimination of the draft in the early 1970’s probably had some negative impact on enrollment rates in the succeeding years. The enrollment rate for all men 18 to 24 years old (including those in the Armed Forces) rose from 20 percent to 29 percent between 1960 and 1969, then dropped to 25 percent in the mid 1970’s. (For civilians the figures were 24, 36, and 27 percent, respectively.) In addition, veterans with GI Bill benefits attended college in the mid-1970’s, but as these benefits expired, attendance declined; evidence of this is the rapid increase and decrease in enrollment of men 25 to 34 years old in the 1970’s.⁵ The result appears to have been that men eligible for the draft during the Vietnam Era received more education than they would have under normal circumstances. On the one hand, some men had additional incentive to remain in school to maintain their draft deferments, while on

the other hand, some received additional years of education because of the GI Bill. The group of men who were probably most affected by the experience as reflected in their higher college graduation rates were about 29 to 36 years old in 1981 (table 2). In the following paragraphs, a 5-year cohort of this group (30- to 34-year-olds in 1981) is compared with older and younger cohorts.

College enrollment rates for young men fell slightly in the mid-1970’s. Consequently, the proportion of men who were college graduates was not as great for men reaching college age after the Vietnam Era as for the immediately older group. The proportion of college graduates among 25- to 29-year-olds was highest in the latter half of the 1970’s (table 12). A comparison of the educational attainment of 5-year birth cohorts at the same age, but measured at different times, gives some indication of differences. Figure 1 shows the proportion who completed at least 1 year of college and 4 or more years of college for each of four birth cohorts at age 25 to 29. The higher rate of college attendance by young men during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s led to the higher attainment levels achieved by the cohort of men born from 1947 to 1951 (19 to 23 years old in 1970). Figure 1 compares this cohort’s achievement with that of earlier and later cohorts. By age 25 to 29, a higher proportion of the 1947-51 cohort had attended and completed college than that of the preceding and succeeding cohorts. In 1976, when they were 25 to 29 years old, 50 percent of the 1947-51 cohort had completed at least 1 year of college and 28 percent were college graduates. The next older cohort, born in 1942-46 and who were 25 to 29 years old in 1971, recorded 38 percent as having completed at least 1 year of college and 20 percent college graduates. The proportions were slightly higher for this cohort than for the one immediately preceding it, but the differences were not as large as those between the 1942-46 cohort and the succeeding one. Of the youngest cohort shown, born in 1952-56, 46 percent had completed 1 or more years of college and 23 percent were college graduates by 1981 when the cohort was 25 to 29 years old. Clearly the 1947-51 cohort had attained higher educational achievement than its adjacent cohorts. By 1981, the proportions who attended and completed college in the earlier cohorts had not caught up with the 1947-51 cohort. Even at older ages there is some evidence (at the 90 percent level of confidence) that the immediately preceding cohort had not caught up with its successor.

Although it is possible that men of the 1952-56 cohort will attend college at higher rates and older ages and eventually graduate in the same proportion as the 1947-51 cohort, there is presently no evidence that the younger cohort will match the 1947-51 cohort; in fact, the most recent enrollment statistics do not give any indication of an increase in enrollment for older men (25 years old and over).⁶ Therefore, all evidence suggests that men in the 1947-51 cohort will maintain higher attainment levels than both younger and older

³For example: Richard Freeman, *The Overeducated American*, New York: Academic Press, 1976; American Council on Education, Policy Analysis Service Reports, Vol. 1, No. 4, June 1975, *The Labor Market for College Graduates* (Report of a Seminar held September 12, 1974); *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 11, 1982, “Job Offers to Graduates Said to Fall 18 Pct.” (College Placement Council survey).

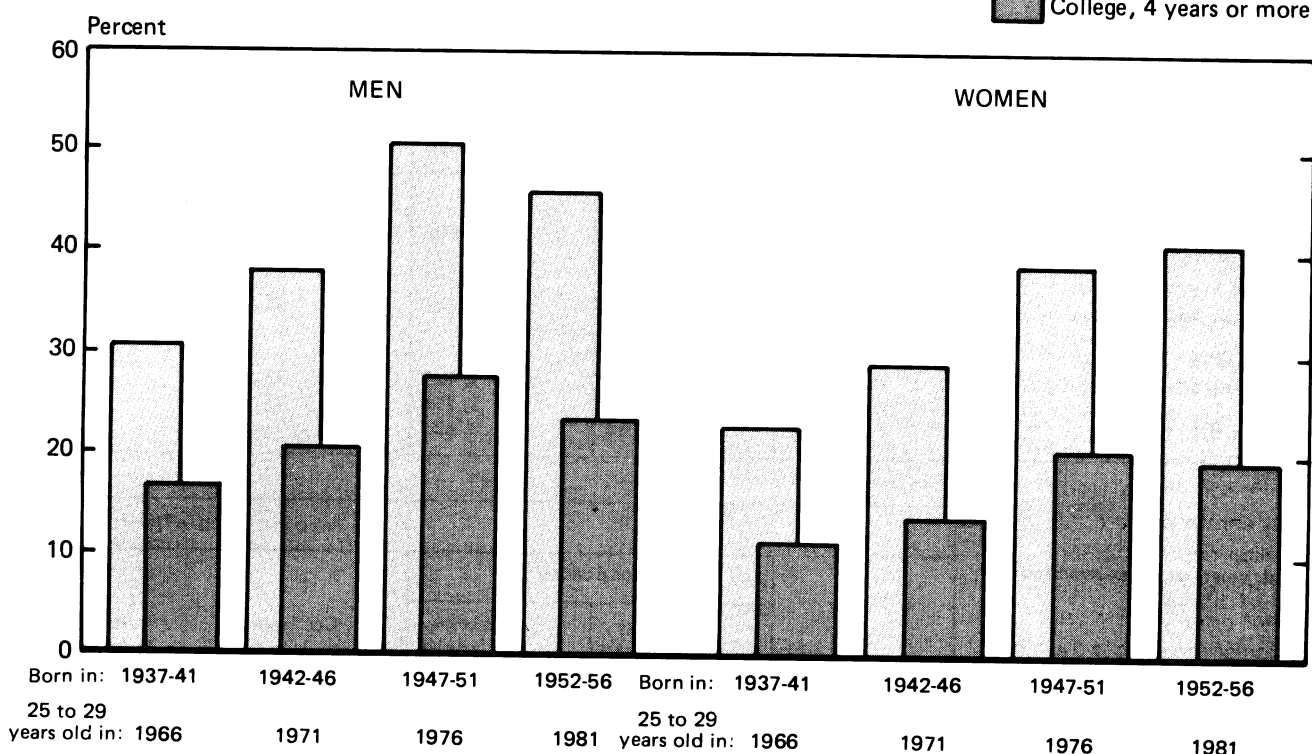
⁴Most of the decline can be explained by the change in the civilian population base. In 1968, 30 percent of 20- and 21-year-old males were in the Armed Forces; in 1976, 9 percent were in the Armed Forces. In that period the civilian enrollment rate for men 20 and 21 years old dropped from 44 to 32 percent. Based on the total population, it dropped from 30 to 29 percent (not a statistically significant decline). U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 319, *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1976*.

⁵U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 373, *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1981 (Advance Report)*; Series P-20, No. 360, *School Enrollment—Social and Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1979*; and Veterans Administration, Reports and Statistics Monograph, 70-82-1, *Veterans Benefits Under Current Educational Programs, Fiscal Year 1981*.

⁶U.S. Bureau of the Census, Series P-20, No. 373, op. cit.

FIGURE 1.

College Attainment at 25 to 29 Years Old, for Four Birth Cohorts, by Sex: March 1966, 1971, 1976, and 1981



men.⁷ In addition to this cohort being affected by the events of the Vietnam Era, they also represented the beginning of the baby boom. Their parents were more affluent than the parents of earlier cohorts and perhaps could better afford college educations. At the same time, they were part of a group so much larger than that preceding them and were subject to increased competition in school, which may have resulted in higher aspirations. Theories abound on this generation.⁸

In contrast to the pattern for men, women showed a nearly continuous pattern of increase in the proportion who completed college. The proportions of each cohort who attained the levels displayed in figure 1 and table A have remained more modest than for men, however. Between the first three cohorts shown, there were significant differences in the proportions attaining the college levels shown. The proportion of the 1952-56 cohort who completed 4 or more years of college was not significantly different from its immediate predecessor, the 1947-51 cohort. There is

⁷Note that there is no absolute beginning and end to the group of men who are more highly educated, but there is a gradual increase and decrease by age in the proportions who are college graduates, and the cohort most affected by the Vietnam Era enrollments may be 28 to 37 in 1981 rather than 30 to 34 years old. Five-year age groups were used for ease of comparison and discussion. If the larger group had been used, the differences from other groups would have been even larger.

⁸For example, Richard A. Easterlin, *Birth and Fortune*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980; and Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations*, New York: Coward, McCann, and Geoghegan, 1980.

evidence in figure 1 that there was an acceleration in growth in college attainment in the 1970's: the differences between the 1947-51 and 1942-46 cohorts were greater than the differences between the 1942-46 cohort and its predecessor.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTAINMENT

Regional differences in educational attainment levels of the adult population have persisted over time; no doubt one could find even larger differences between smaller areas such as States or cities than those between major geographic regions. This educational diversity reflects present and past regional differences in educational systems and the attainment levels of natives who remained in the region as well as inmigrants and outmigrants. Populations may migrate out of areas of limited opportunities and into areas of greater potential, with higher per capita incomes and industries requiring a work force of particular education levels.⁹ Many high technology industries of the West have required a relatively highly skill-

⁹Henry S. Shryock, Jr. and Charles B. Nam, "Educational Selectivity of Interregional Migration," *Social Forces*, Volume 43, Number 3, March 1965, pp. 299-310; Larry H. Long, Kristin A. Hansen, "Migration Trends in the United States," unpublished paper, U.S. Bureau of the Census, April 1977; and Ann R. Miller, "Interstate Migrants in the United States: Some Social-Economic Differences by Type of Move," *Demography*, Vol. 14, No. 1, February 1977, pp. 1-17.

Table A. College Attainment at 25 to 29 and 30 to 34 Years Old, for Four Cohorts, by Sex: March 1966, 1971, 1976, and 1981

(Numbers in thousands)

Age and year at observation (years of birth)	Men				
	Number			Percent completed--	
	All persons	Completed		College, 1 year or more	College, 4 years or more
		College, 1 year or more	College, 4 years or more		
25 to 29 years old in--					
1966 (1937-41).....	5,410	1,626	908	30.1	16.8
1971 (1942-46).....	6,866	2,601	1,379	37.9	20.1
1976 (1947-51).....	8,465	4,240	2,329	50.1	27.5
1981 (1952-56).....	9,713	4,434	2,240	45.7	23.1
30 to 34 years old in--					
1971 (1937-41).....	5,730	1,910	1,127	33.3	19.7
1976 (1942-46).....	6,801	2,932	1,758	43.1	25.8
1981 (1947-51).....	8,912	4,614	2,623	51.8	29.4
Age and year at observation (years of birth)	Women				
	Number			Percent completed--	
	All persons	Completed		College, 1 year or more	College, 4 years or more
		College, 1 year or more	College, 4 years or more		
25 to 29 years old in--					
1966 (1937-41).....	5,786	1,315	656	22.7	11.3
1971 (1942-46).....	7,049	2,070	972	29.4	13.8
1976 (1947-51).....	8,754	3,358	1,759	38.4	20.1
1981 (1952-56).....	9,978	4,079	1,957	40.9	19.6
30 to 34 years old in--					
1971 (1937-41).....	5,901	1,409	691	23.9	11.7
1976 (1942-46).....	7,128	2,327	1,195	32.6	16.8
1981 (1947-51).....	9,225	3,852	1,961	41.8	21.3

ed work force, and even among the older population of the West (45 to 54 years old in figure 2 and table B), both Whites and Blacks (table 8), the proportions who were high school and college graduates have been higher than for the remainder of the country.

In the South, educational attainment of the adult population 25 years old and over was significantly below the remainder of the country with 64 percent high school graduates in 1981. The West was significantly above with 77 percent (table B). For both Whites and Blacks, the proportions who were high school graduates were highest in the West and lowest in the South (table 8). In all regions the likelihood of graduating from high school has increased since 1940, the first census in which such data were collected.

Regional differences show some evidence of change in recent decades. Although less precise than comparing different cohorts at the same ages in that it overlooks the effect of selective migration, selective mortality, and the possibility of schooling at older ages, comparison of two age groups in

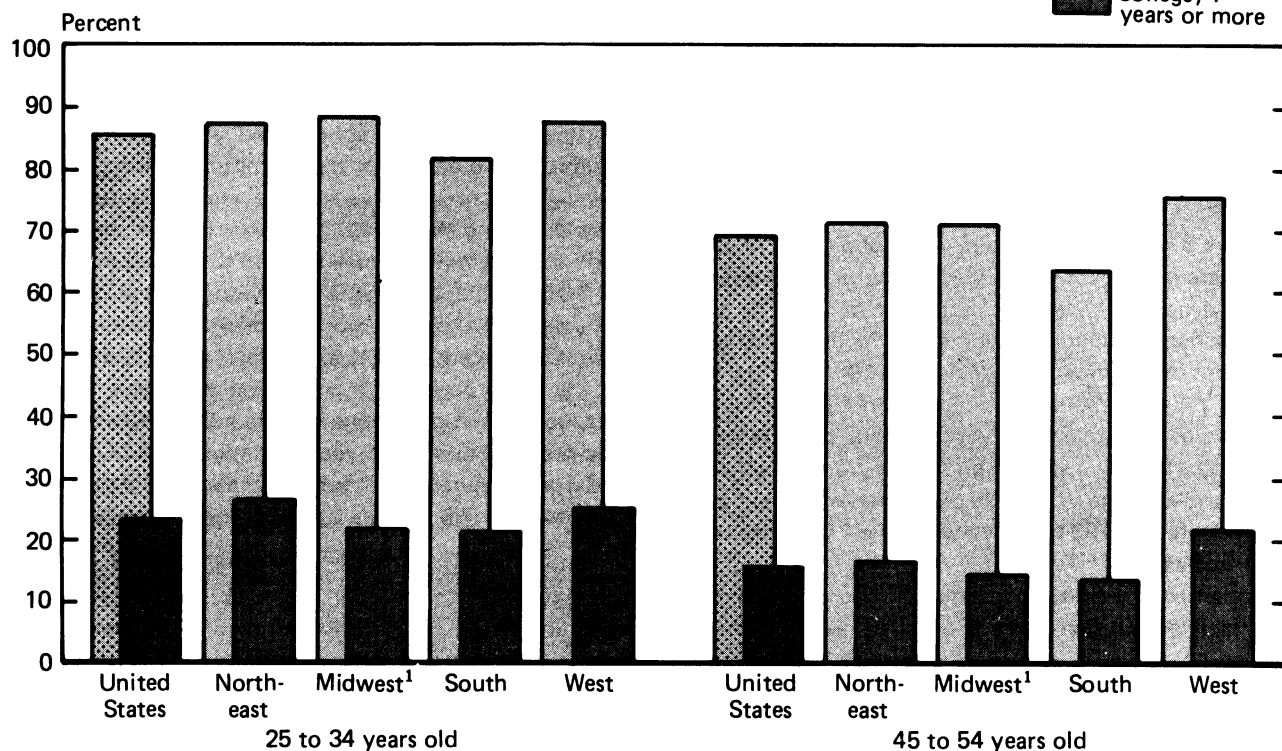
cross-sectional data can usefully demonstrate changes over time. In all regions in 1981, the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds who had completed high school was greater than the proportion of persons 45 to 54 years old who had completed the same level (table B); the proportions who had completed college was also greater for the younger than older group. The differences between older and younger persons show intergenerational gains of 11 to 18 percentage points for high school graduates and 4 to 10 percentage points for college graduates so that each region exhibited some improvement between generations in educational achievement.

For both educational levels shown in table B, the interregional differences were greater, in general, for persons 45 to 54 years old than for those 25 to 34 years old. Although the proportion of persons who were high school graduates was greater in the West than in other regions, the differential was more a characteristic of the older than younger populations. The proportion of young persons who had attained that level was not different from the corresponding pro-

FIGURE 2.

Percent High School Graduates and College Graduates, for Persons 25 to 34 and 45 to 54 Years Old, by Region: March 1981

High school, 4 years or more
College, 4 years or more



¹ Formerly the North Central Region.

portions in the Northeast and Midwest¹⁰ Regions (around 87 percent), and it was only slightly higher than the proportion for the South (82 percent). For older persons, 45 to 54, however, those in the West were significantly more

likely than those in all other regions to have completed high school. In addition, for older persons in the West, the proportion who were college graduates was higher than for all other regions. For the youngest age group, this was not true (table B). In fact, the proportion of young adults who were college graduates was highest in the Northeast and the West.

¹⁰Formerly the North Central Region.

Table B. Percent High School Graduates and College Graduates, by Age and Region: March 1981

Age	High school, 4 years or more				
	United States	Northeast	Midwest ¹	South	West
25 years old and over.....	69.7	69.6	71.6	64.3	76.6
25 to 34 years old.....	85.6	87.1	88.2	81.7	87.2
35 to 44 years old.....	79.0	80.5	81.3	73.2	84.5
45 to 54 years old.....	69.6	71.6	71.5	63.3	75.8
55 to 64 years old.....	62.6	62.2	66.4	54.2	72.6
65 years old and over.....	41.8	40.1	41.1	38.3	51.8
Age	College, 4 years or more				
	United States	Northeast	Midwest ¹	South	West
25 years old and over.....	17.1	17.3	15.4	15.8	21.1
25 to 34 years old.....	23.2	26.4	21.8	21.1	25.0
35 to 44 years old.....	21.5	21.5	19.4	19.5	27.3
45 to 54 years old.....	15.8	16.3	14.1	13.7	21.5
55 to 64 years old.....	12.0	10.6	10.5	11.9	16.3
65 years old and over.....	8.5	7.6	7.0	9.3	10.6

¹Formerly the North Central Region.

Whereas the proportion of persons who were high school graduates and college graduates was substantially greater for the younger than the older group in the Northeast, Midwest and South, the differences in the West were not as great. The advantage the West seemed to have in educational achievement appears to be disappearing as younger cohorts in other regions have been "catching up."

BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES

Changes over time in the educational attainment of the White and Black populations are shown in the cross-sectional data in figure 3 which show the proportion of persons of each age who were high school graduates and who had attended college. As described earlier, the proportion of all adults who were high school graduates has increased rapidly in the past 30 years, but even among persons 65 to 69 years old, the majority of White persons were high school graduates by 1981. Only among persons 70 years old and over (table 2) was the proportion who were high school graduates below one-half. For Blacks, however, the proportion who were high school graduates by 1981 fell below one-half for persons in their late forties.

The proportion of the adult population 25 years old and over who are high school graduates is a widely used summary

measure of educational attainment. However, changes in this measure depend mostly on differences in the proportion who completed high school among the component age groups; most importantly, the entering population (the youngest group) and the leaving population (the oldest group) as well as the relative sizes of the various age groups rather than on recent changes in high school graduation rates. Since the oldest groups typically have much lower than average proportions who are high school graduates, and the youngest much higher proportions, the overall proportion of adults who are high school graduates has been increasing rapidly. For example, among Whites 25 and over, the percent who were high school graduates rose from 59 to 72 percent from 1971 to 1981 (table 12), but in the youngest age group (25 to 29 years old), the proportions were higher and increased less: about 80 percent in 1971 and 88 percent in 1981. For Blacks in the same period, the proportion who were high school graduates among all adults rose from 35 to 53 percent, while the proportions for the youngest group of (25- to 29-year-olds) were higher but about the same number of percentage points apart: 58 percent in 1971 and 77 percent in 1981.

Attainment levels (in terms of proportions of persons who completed high school and attended college) have increased proportionately more for Blacks than for Whites in the past

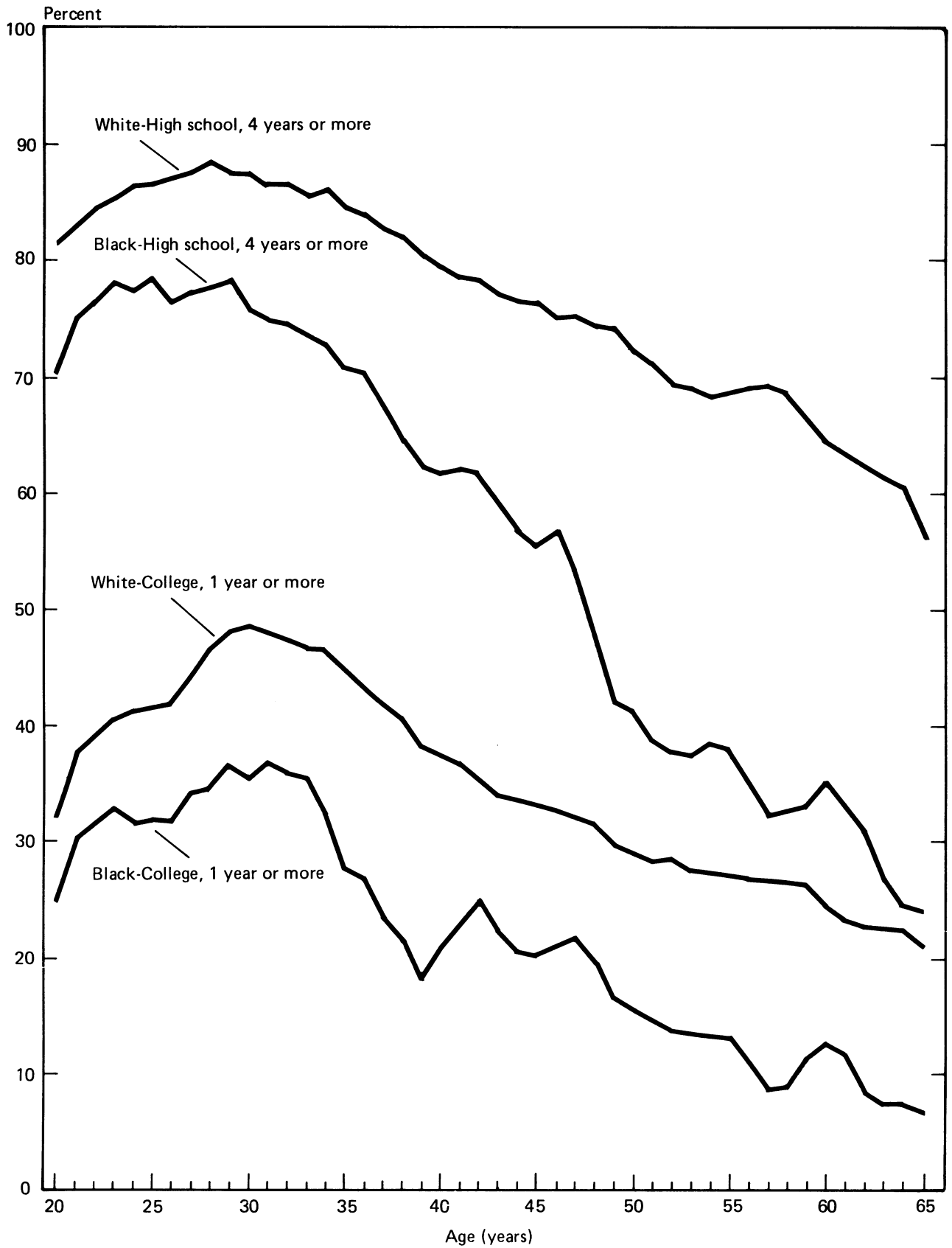
Table C. Attainment of Persons 20 to 65 Years Old, by Single Year of Age and Race: March 1981

(3-year moving average)

Age	Percent completed--				Age	Percent completed--			
	High school, 4 years or more		College, 1 year or more			High school, 4 years or more		College, 1 year or more	
	White	Black	White	Black		White	Black	White	Black
20 years.....	81.5	70.3	32.2	25.0	45 years.....	76.5	55.1	33.2	20.2
21 years.....	83.1	75.1	37.5	30.1	46 years.....	75.3	56.8	32.5	21.2
22 years.....	84.7	76.3	39.3	31.6	47 years.....	75.3	53.4	32.1	21.8
23 years.....	85.3	78.3	40.3	33.0	48 years.....	74.5	47.7	31.5	19.8
24 years.....	86.3	77.7	41.2	31.3	49 years.....	74.2	42.0	29.9	16.9
25 years.....	86.4	78.3	41.3	31.6	50 years.....	72.1	41.2	29.0	15.5
26 years.....	87.0	76.3	42.0	31.7	51 years.....	71.4	38.8	28.5	14.7
27 years.....	87.7	77.5	44.0	34.2	52 years.....	69.5	37.8	28.5	13.8
28 years.....	88.2	77.8	46.6	34.4	53 years.....	69.2	37.4	27.6	13.6
29 years.....	87.8	78.2	48.2	36.4	54 years.....	68.1	38.5	27.5	13.5
30 years.....	87.3	75.9	48.8	35.6	55 years.....	68.7	38.1	27.3	13.4
31 years.....	86.3	74.8	48.2	36.6	56 years.....	69.3	35.4	26.8	11.2
32 years.....	86.7	74.7	47.8	35.8	57 years.....	69.5	32.0	26.9	8.8
33 years.....	85.8	73.6	47.0	35.4	58 years.....	68.9	32.4	26.6	9.0
34 years.....	86.0	72.9	46.6	32.2	59 years.....	67.0	32.9	26.3	11.4
35 years.....	84.4	70.4	45.0	27.7	60 years.....	64.8	35.2	24.5	13.0
36 years.....	84.0	70.2	43.5	26.6	61 years.....	63.3	33.2	23.4	11.9
37 years.....	82.8	67.4	41.9	23.5	62 years.....	62.4	30.6	22.7	8.5
38 years.....	82.1	64.5	40.3	21.6	63 years.....	61.5	26.3	22.9	7.2
39 years.....	80.2	62.8	38.2	18.3	64 years.....	60.4	24.7	22.4	7.3
40 years.....	79.6	61.4	37.5	21.1	65 years.....	56.6	24.0	21.0	6.9
41 years.....	78.8	62.1	36.5	23.0					
42 years.....	78.4	61.6	35.6	25.3					
43 years.....	77.2	59.2	33.9	22.5					
44 years.....	76.7	56.3	33.6	20.6					

Source: Table 2.

FIGURE 3.
Educational Attainment, by Single Year of Age and Race: March 1981
(3-year moving average)



40 years, as can be observed comparing two 5-year birth cohorts, about 40 years apart. For Blacks, the proportion who were high school graduates was 24 percent for persons 65 to 69 years old, compared with 77 percent for persons 25 to 29 years old; among Whites the proportions were 53 percent and 87 percent, respectively. The attainment differences between age groups were greater for Blacks than Whites, and the differences between racial groups were greater for the older than the younger groups. Therefore, Blacks experienced a greater rate of increase in high school graduation than Whites and the difference between the races has decreased.

The substantial rise in the proportion of Blacks who were high school graduates, from one-fourth to approximately three-fourths, increased the share of the Black population eligible for higher education, and concurrently, the proportion who completed 1 or more years of college increased. For Blacks, the proportion who completed 1 or more years of college was four times higher for the younger group than the

older group: 8 percent among persons 65 to 69 years old and 33 percent for those 25 to 29 years old (table 1). For Whites, the proportion who completed 1 or more years of college little more than doubled: 20 and 44 percent for the older and younger age groups, respectively.

Much of the growth in college attendance can be attributed to the increase in the eligible population (high school graduates). While for the total Black population, the proportion who attended college (completed 1 year or more) quadrupled from the older to the younger group, the proportion of Black high school graduates who attended increased by only one-third (from 32 to 43 percent) which is not significantly different from the change for White high school graduates (37 to 51 percent).¹¹

¹¹The difference between proportions of White and Black 65- to 69-year-old high school graduates who attended college is not statistically significant.