

# Population Characteristics

Series P-20, No. 415  
Issued November 1987

---

## **Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1982 to 1985**

by Rosalind R. Bruno



**U.S. Department of Commerce**  
**C. William Verity, Secretary**  
**Clarence J. Brown, Deputy Secretary**  
**Robert Ortner, Under Secretary**  
for Economic Affairs

**BUREAU OF THE CENSUS**  
**John G. Keane, Director**

---



## **BUREAU OF THE CENSUS**

**John G. Keane**, Director

**C.L. Kincannon**, Deputy Director

**William P. Butz**, Associate Director for  
Demographic Fields

**Roger A. Herriot**, Senior Demographic and  
Housing Analyst

## **POPULATION DIVISION**

**Paula J. Schneider**, Chief

---

### **Suggested Citation**

U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 415,  
*Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1982 to 1985*, U.S. Government  
Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 1987

---

For sale by Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office,  
Washington, D.C. 20402.

# Contents

---

	Page
Trends in educational attainment .....	1
Gender differences.....	1
Racial differences .....	2
Regional differences .....	2

## Text Tables

A. High school and college graduates by region: March 1970 and 1985.....	3
--	---

## Figures

1. Years of school completed: 1940 to 1985.....	4
2a. High school completion of men and women by age: 1940 to 1985 .....	5
2b. High school completion of Whites and Blacks by age: 1940 to 1985.....	5
3a. College completion of men and women by age: 1940 to 1985 .....	6
3b. College completion of Whites and Blacks by age: 1940 to 1985.....	6

## Detailed Tables

1. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1985, 1984, 1983, and 1982.....	7
2. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by single years of age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1985 .....	19
3. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, Spanish origin, and marital status: March 1985 .....	34
4. Years of school completed by all householders and family householders, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1985 .....	39
5. Education of husband by education of wife, for married couples, by age of husband: March 1985.....	41
6. Years of school completed by employed persons 25 to 64 years old, by major occupation group, age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1985.....	43
7. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, Spanish origin, and region: March 1985 .....	48
8. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin, for the 15 largest States: March 1985 .....	51
9. Years of school completed by persons 18 years old and over, by single years of age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1983 .....	53
10. Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, Spanish origin, and marital status: March 1983.....	70
11. Years of school completed by all householders and family householders, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1983.....	75
12. Education of husband by education of wife, for married couples, by age of husband: March 1983.....	77

13.	Years of school completed by employed persons 25 to 64 years old, by major occupation group, age, sex, race, and Spanish origin: March 1983.....	79
14.	Years of school completed by persons 18 years old and over, by metropolitan and nonmetropolitan residence, age, race, sex, and Spanish origin: March 1983 .....	83
15.	Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, Spanish origin, and region: March 1983 .....	91
16.	Years of school completed by persons 15 years old and over, by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin, for the 15 largest States: March 1983 .....	95
17.	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 1983.....	99
18.	Years of school completed by persons 25 years old and over, by age and sex: Selected years 1940 to 1985.....	103
19.	Percent of persons 25 years old and over who have completed high school or college, by race and sex: Selected years 1940 to 1985 .....	105
20.	Percent of persons 25 years old and over who have completed high school or college, by sex, for the Spanish-origin population: March 1974 to 1985.....	107

## Appendixes

A.	Definitions and explanations.....	109
B.	Source and reliability of estimates .....	113
	Source of data .....	113
	Reliability of estimates.....	114

## Appendix Tables

B-1.	Generalized standard errors for estimated numbers of persons for education characteristics—total or White .....	116
B-2.	Generalized standard errors for estimated numbers of persons for education characteristics—Black and other races .....	117
B-3.	Generalized standard errors for estimated numbers of persons for all characteristics other than education—total or White .....	117
B-4.	Generalized standard errors for estimated numbers of persons for all characteristics other than education—Black and other races.....	118
B-5.	Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages for education characteristics—total or White .....	118
B-6.	Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages for education characteristics—Black and other races.....	120
B-7.	Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages for all characteristics other than education—total or White .....	120
B-8.	Generalized standard errors of estimated percentages for all characteristics other than education—Black and other races. ....	121
B-9.	“a” and “b” parameters and “f” factors for calculating approximate standard errors of estimated numbers and percentages .....	122
B-10.	Factors to be applied to standard errors.....	123

# Educational Attainment in the United States: March 1982 to 1985

This report contains data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the Bureau of the Census in March of 1982 to 1985. Summary data on years of school completed by age, sex, race, and Spanish origin are shown for 1982 to 1985 in table 1. Detailed data are shown for 1985 in tables 2 through 8 and for 1983 in tables 9 through 17. This allows for the continuation of the biennial series of detailed tables as presented in previous reports. Tables 18 to 20 contain a time series of the data collected from 1940 to 1985 in the decennial censuses and CPS.

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. Also, summary data are presented for the 15 largest States and metropolitan areas.

## TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Between 1940, when the Bureau of the Census began to collect data on educational attainment, and 1985, there has been a remarkable increase in the proportion of the U.S. population who completed at least 4 years of high school. Figure 1 shows that the proportion of the adult population 25 years old and over who completed high school increased from roughly one-quarter in 1940 to nearly three-quarters in 1985. The proportion who were college graduates also rose considerably during the same period.

While the opportunity to complete high school is now nearly universal, the chance of continuing on through college is not. Nearly half of all high school graduates attend college, but only slightly more than half of those complete 4 years of college. In March 1985 about 74 percent of all adults 25 years old and over were high school graduates (completed 4 years of high school or more), about 36 percent completed at least 1 year of college and 19 percent completed 4 or more years of college. In 1940 about 24 percent were high school graduates and 5 percent had completed 4 or more years of college.

A picture of recent changes in educational attainment can be seen in the experience of young adults, 25 to 29 years old. The proportion of young adults who were high school graduates rose from 38 to 86 percent between 1940 and 1985. The proportion has

been at least 75 percent since 1970 and 85 percent since 1977. The proportion of young adults who were college graduates rose from 6 percent in 1940 to 22 percent in 1985.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

By 1980, gender differences in the proportion of the population who completed high school were virtually nonexistent—86 percent of young men (25 to 29 years old) and young women had completed high school. As late as the 1950's, more young women than young men were high school graduates (figure 2a). In the 1970's, the relationship was reversed for a short time, with higher proportions of men than women high school graduates. The higher proportions for men at that time may be attributed to the high proportion of men in that cohort who served in the Armed Forces, which had a pay incentive for high school completion.

For both men and women, the proportions who completed college increased since 1940, but the differences between them also increased (figure 3a). In 1940, young men were more likely than young women to have completed college, but the difference was small (7 percent vs. 5 percent). By the 1950's, the gap had widened to 7 percentage points, and the proportion for men was twice that for women (14 percent vs. 7 percent). Perhaps the combination of the GI Bill for men and the lowered marriage age and increased fertility for women resulted in the increased difference: enrollment of men increased but enrollment of women did not.<sup>1</sup> Although, in the two decades that followed, increased proportions of both men and women completed college, some difference remained—in 1975, 25 percent of young men and 19 percent of young women had completed 4 or more years of college. By 1985, there was a slight decrease in the proportion of young men and an increased proportion of young women who completed college, which resulted in a decrease in the gap between the groups—23 percent of men and 21 percent of women were college graduates. The decline for men can be explained in part by the passing of the "Vietnam cohort" from

<sup>1</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1940 Census of Population, and Current Population Reports, Series P-20, Nos. 1, 19, 413 (annual school enrollment series).

the 25 to 29 year old age group. This cohort includes men who were of traditional college age and draft-eligible age during the Vietnam period, when the largest proportion of that age group was in the Armed Forces. Some men remained in college longer when college provided a draft deferment; others took advantage of the education benefits of the GI Bill following their military service. While changes in enrollment trends in recent years have reduced the difference in the proportions of young men and young women who are college graduates, a substantial difference remained among all adults 25 years old and over—23 percent of men and 16 percent of women were college graduates in 1985.

## RACIAL DIFFERENCES

Racial differences in the ratio of proportions of persons who were high school graduates narrowed considerably between 1940 and 1985. The proportion for Whites 25 years old and over was 1.3 times that for Blacks in 1985, compared with 3.6 times in 1940. About 76 percent of Whites and 60 percent of Blacks were high school graduates in 1985 (figure 2b). In 1940, the proportions were 26 percent and 7 percent. Among young adults 25 to 29 years old, the difference between Whites and Blacks was very small by 1985: 87 percent of White young adults and 81 percent of comparable Blacks were high school graduates in 1985 compared with 41 percent of Whites and 12 percent of Blacks in 1940. In the 45-year period, the proportion of Whites who were high school graduates slightly more than doubled, while the proportion of Blacks with a comparable level of attainment grew to about 7 times its original size.

While progress was made in the proportions of Whites and Blacks who completed high school and college, the difference between the race groups was greater at the college completion level than high school completion level in 1985, as demonstrated by the White to Black ratios. It is much easier for all racial, ethnic, and economic groups to converge at the high school completion level, since all States provide public education through the 12th grade. College, on the other hand, usually entails greater costs in both direct payments and foregone wages. While the ratio of the proportions of Whites to Blacks who completed 4 years of college has decreased (in 1985 Whites were nearly twice as likely as Blacks to have completed college compared with almost 4 times as likely in 1940), the percentage point gap has widened (figure 3b). In 1985, 20 percent of White adults and

11 percent of Blacks were college graduates; 45 years earlier the proportions were 5 percent and 1 percent. For Whites, the proportion of young adults who were college graduates in 1985 was barely different from that for all White adults, while for Blacks the proportions were not significantly different—23 percent of Whites and 12 percent of Blacks. For young Blacks, the proportion grew from about 2 percent in 1940 to about 11 percent in 1975 and has not changed significantly since. Among young Whites, there has been a slight decrease since 1977 when the “Vietnam cohort” was 25 to 29 years old.

## REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Regional differences in the proportions of adults who completed high school and college have remained over time, but the magnitude of the differences changed (table A). The proportion who were high school graduates was highest in the West and lowest in the South in both 1970 and 1985; the difference had declined by 1985, however. Over the period, the proportion grew from 62 percent to 80 percent in the West and from 45 percent to 69 percent in the South. In both years, the proportion who were college graduates was highest in the West, 24 percent in 1985, and lowest in the South and Midwest, 18 percent in 1985; the difference increased since 1970.

In all regions, over 80 percent of young adults were high school graduates in 1985; the proportion was lowest for the South in both 1970 and 1985. Significant changes have occurred in the proportions who were college graduates: whereas, in 1970, no one region stood out from the others in the proportion of young adults who were college graduates, in 1985, the proportion was significantly higher among young adults residing in the Northeast than in other regions—27 percent vs. an average of 21 percent in the other regions. At a time when there was evidence of significant outmigration of young adults from the Northeast,<sup>2</sup> the economic opportunities for college graduates were apparently relatively greater in the Northeast than in other regions. In addition, the higher enrollment rates of the traditional college-age population in the Northeast,<sup>3</sup> provides evidence of greater educational opportunities in the Northeast than in other regions.

<sup>2</sup>Population estimates in table A show the increase for the 25- to 29-year-old age group in the Northeast from 1970 to 1985 was less than half the rate of increase for the rest of the country. See 1980 census data on migration by age in U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population, PC80-1-D1-B, table 315.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980 Census of Population, PC80-1-C1, table 186 and October 1984 Current Population Survey, unpublished data.

**Table A. High School and College Graduates by Region: March 1970 and 1985**

(Numbers in thousands)

Age and region	1985			1970		
	Population	Percent completed		Population	Percent completed	
		High school, 4 or more years	College, 4 or more years		High school, 4 or more years	College, 4 or more years
<b>25 years and over</b>						
United States .....	143,524	73.9	19.4	109,899	52.3	10.7
Northeast .....	31,184	74.0	20.8	27,685	52.9	11.2
Midwest .....	35,548	75.5	17.5	30,292	53.7	9.6
South .....	48,649	69.0	17.5	33,331	45.1	9.8
West .....	28,144	80.2	23.5	18,591	62.3	13.2
<b>25 to 29 years</b>						
United States .....	21,106	86.1	22.2	13,395	73.8	16.3
Northeast .....	4,097	88.9	26.9	3,143	75.1	18.1
Midwest .....	5,250	87.9	21.4	3,643	77.1	15.8
South .....	7,192	82.7	20.1	4,147	66.9	14.3
West .....	4,568	87.1	22.1	2,463	79.2	18.2

Source: 1970 data—U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1970 Census of Population, Volume I, Chapter D, "Detailed Characteristics," tables 199 and 276.

Figure 1.  
**Years of School Completed:  
1940 and 1985**  
(Persons 25 years and over)

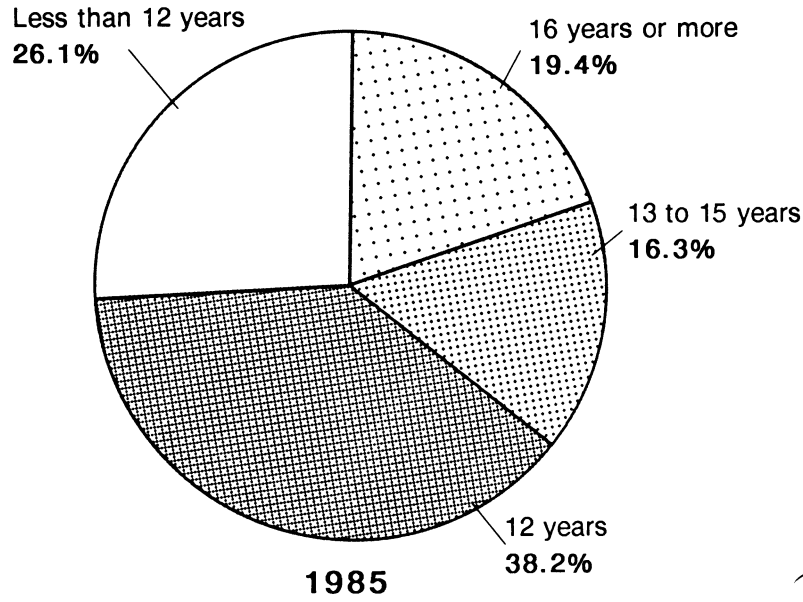
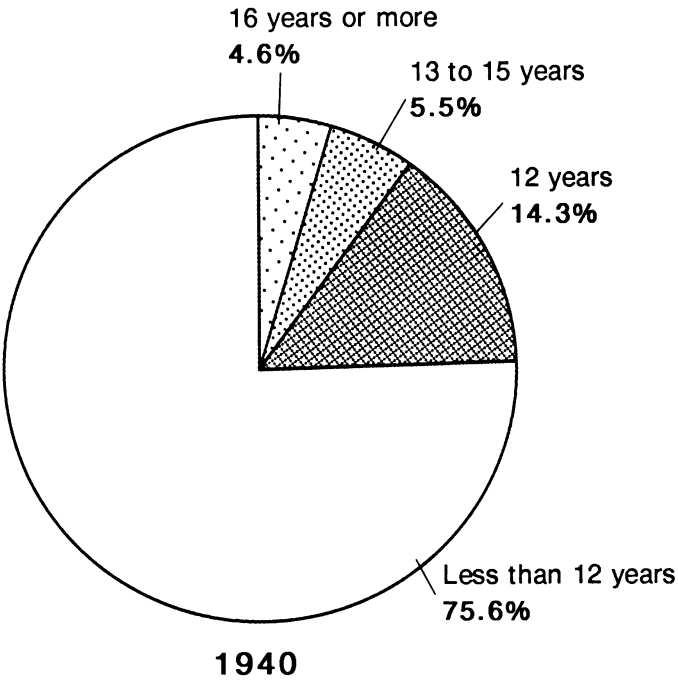




Figure 2a.  
**High School Completion of Men  
 and Women by Age: 1940 to 1985**  
 (Completed 4 years of high school or more)

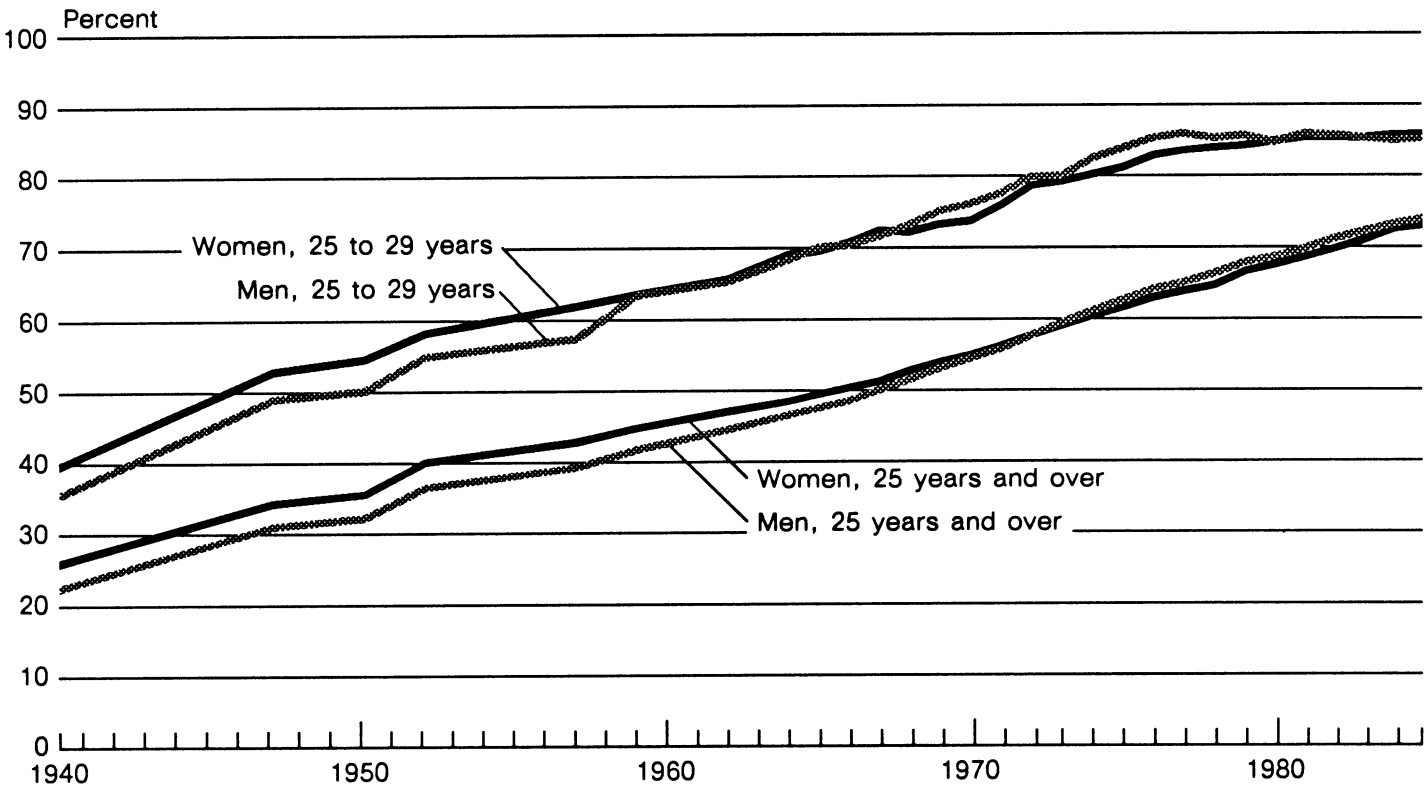


Figure 2b.  
**High School Completion of Whites  
 and Blacks by Age: 1940 to 1985**  
 (Completed 4 years of high school or more)

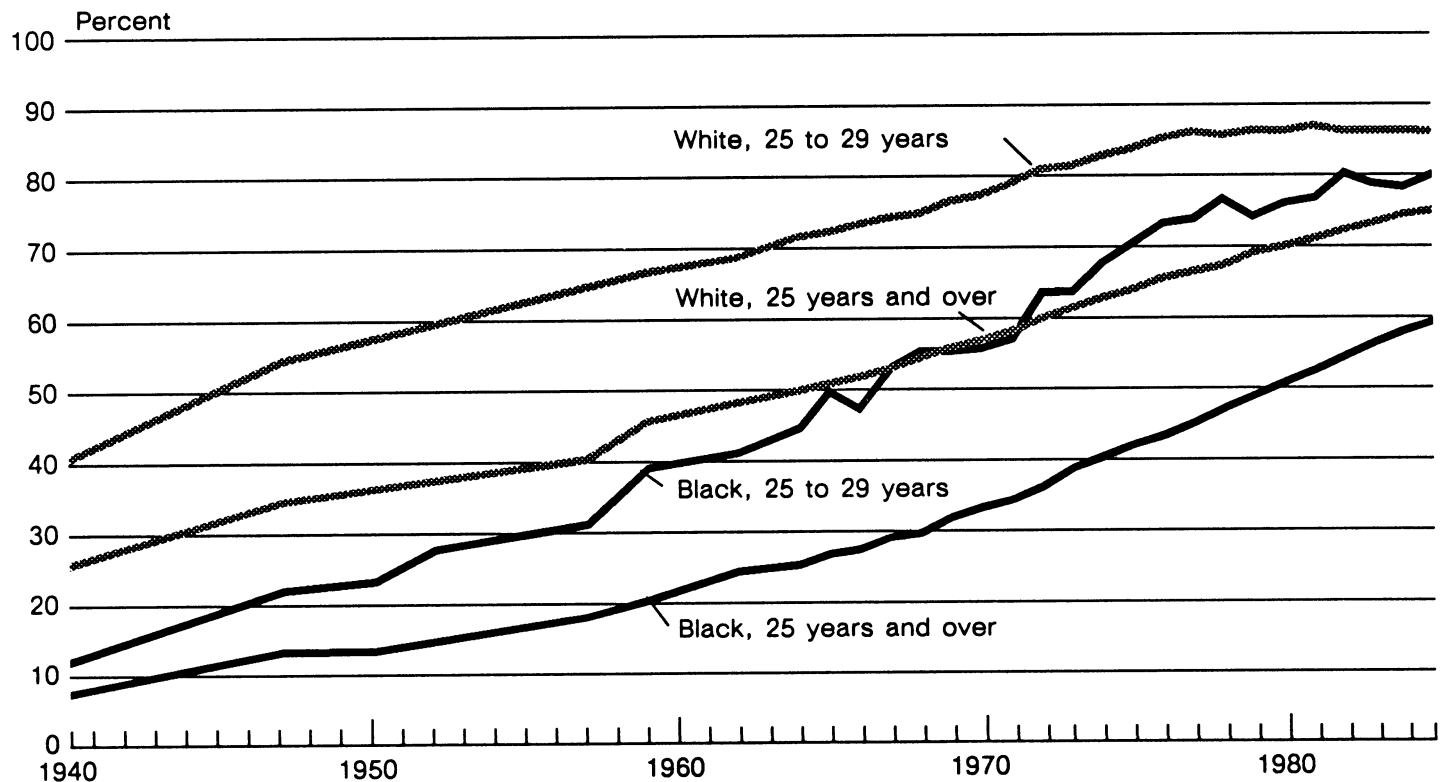


Figure 3a.  
**College Completion of Men  
 and Women by Age: 1940 to 1985**  
 (Completed 4 years of college or more)

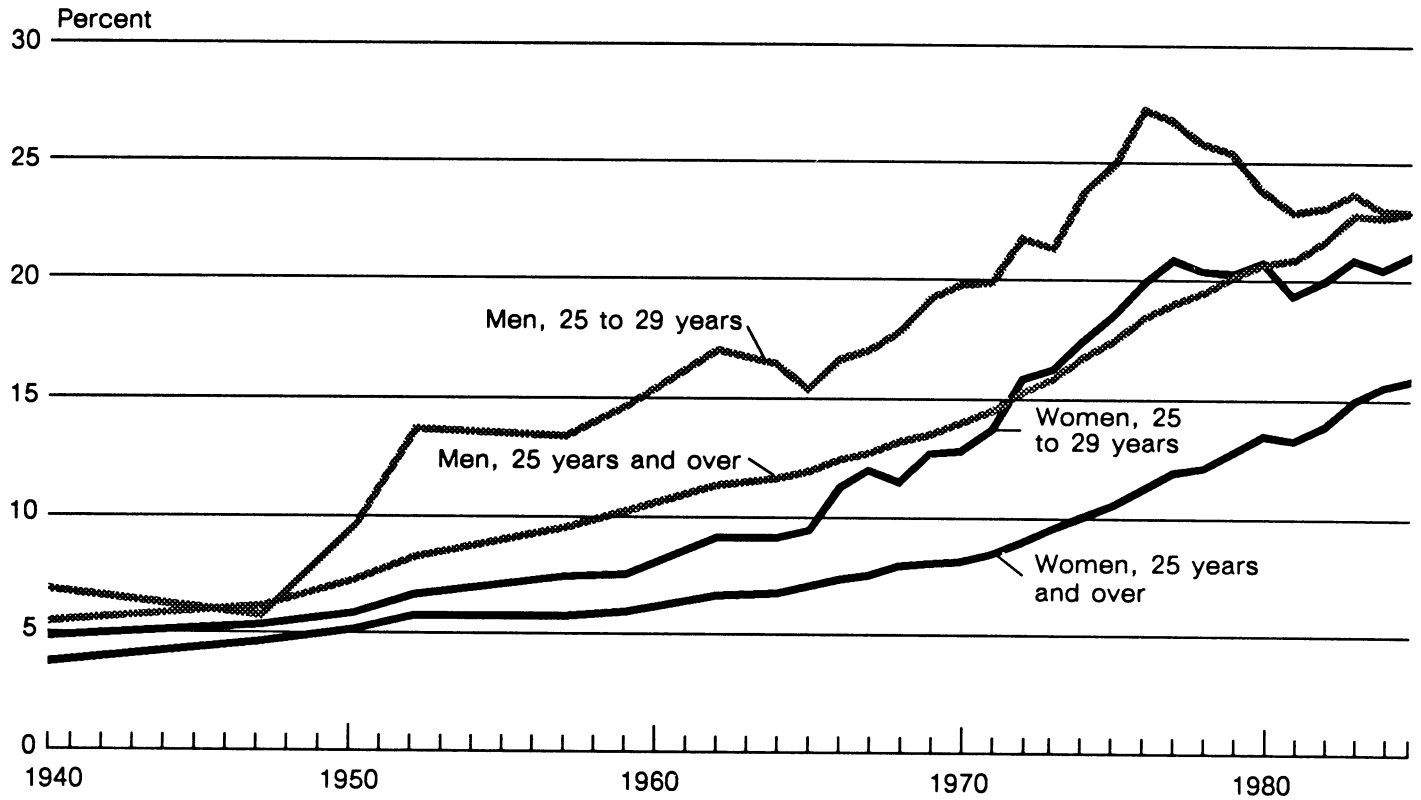


Figure 3b.  
**College Completion of Whites  
 and Blacks by Age: 1940 to 1985**  
 (Completed 4 years of college or more)

