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## **Educational Attainment Rises Among All Americans**

### **Demographic Shift Could Pose Challenges for Schools**

By [Erik W. Robelen](#)

Americans across major racial and ethnic groups became better educated over the past decade, though significant gaps remain in the rates at which blacks and Hispanics earn a high school diploma or college degree, a new analysis of U.S. census data finds.

The report from the Brookings Institution also highlights the continued “demographic transformation” of the United States, with nonwhites accounting for 83 percent of population growth between 2000 and 2008, a trend observers say heightens challenges for schools across the country.

The percentages of both Hispanic and black adults, age 25 and older, who hold at least a high school diploma climbed by about 8 percentage points between 2000 and 2008, the Brookings analysis finds. For Hispanics, it reached 61 percent, and for African-Americans, 81 percent. But those numbers were still well below the 90 percent of white adults with at least that credential. The figures count those who earned a General Educational Development certificate, or GED.

Meanwhile, college-completion rates also climbed for blacks and Hispanics, though by far smaller amounts, about 2 to 3 percentage points. In all, just 13 percent of Hispanic adults held a bachelor’s degree in 2008, and 17.5 percent of black adults, compared with nearly 31 percent of whites. For adults of Asian descent, the proportion was 50 percent.

Richard A. Fry, a senior research associate at the Pew Hispanic Center, in Washington, said he was especially struck by the “impressive” gains for Hispanics and blacks in getting a high school diploma.

"These are in some ways startling improvements over just eight years," he said. "There's both some hopeful signs here and ... one sort of ominous warning sign."

The warning sign is that as minority groups, especially Hispanics—who are projected to account for the vast majority of the growth in the nation's young-adult population over the next several decades—become a larger share of the population, the nation's overall educational attainment levels could slip, given how much ground Latinos still need to make up.

"What I find very worrisome is the marked gaps in educational attainment, particularly among Hispanics," Mr. Fry said. "One wonders whether sooner or later the demographics [will] overwhelm the other improvements."

### **300 Million-Plus**

The report from the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank, draws in large part on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey. About 3 million households each year receive and respond to the survey, allowing the agency to construct a detailed profile of states, metropolitan areas, and larger cities on an annual basis. The latest publicly available data are from 2008.

The report says that the U.S. population crossed the 300 million mark in 2006, and that the nation from 2000 to 2009 added some 25million people, with nonwhites representing the bulk of the growth.

Whites are still a majority of the population, at 66 percent, down from 76 percent in 1990. But, based on current Census Bureau projections, they will be in the minority by 2042, the report says, and that will be the case far sooner, in 2023, for the under-18 population.

On educational attainment, the study found overall that 85 percent of adults age 25 and older had at least a high school diploma in 2008—including those who earned a GED—up from 81.4 percent in 2000. The share holding a four-year college degree grew to 28 percent, up from 24 percent in 2000.

Enrollment at postsecondary institutions is also on the rise, the report says, climbing to 41 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds in 2008, compared with 34 percent in 2000.

Michael B. Webb, an associate vice president at Jobs for the Future, a Boston-based nonprofit group that advocates improved college- and work-preparedness for young people, said he sees some encouraging developments in the data, but plenty to worry about.

The rise in the percentages of blacks and Hispanics earning a high school diploma, for instance, is welcome news, he said, but must be kept in perspective.

"A high school diploma is just a step along the way," Mr. Webb said. "What is required is much more postsecondary training. We're just not seeing the increases that are commensurate with the need of the country."

**Deborah A. Santiago**, a vice president at *Excelencia* in Education, a Washington-based group that promotes accelerated college success for Latinos, said she sees the improved high school diploma rates for Hispanics as an important development.

"There has been progress," she said. "I think it speaks to some of the efforts that really have been made in addressing dropouts."

Alan M. Berube, a senior fellow at Brookings and the report's co-author, said another factor may be changes in the Latino population, which isn't just composed of immigrants, but also of those born in the United States.

"What we're seeing here is the maturation of the second generation, the third generation," he said. "While they still lag their white counterparts, they're getting more educated than their parents, their grandparents."

Stepping back, Mr. Berube suggested that educational attainment levels across the U.S. population may get an added lift once data for 2009 and beyond are available.

"A lot of the displaced workers during the recession are filling the halls of community colleges and four-year colleges," he said, producing a "potential silver lining."

The report also raises concerns about one apparent shift in attainment, as a lower share of 25- to 34-year-olds than 35- to 44-year-olds held a bachelor's degree in 2008, a reversal from 2000.

If that development persists, it "could threaten continued upward progress in U.S. living standards," the report says.

## **Metro-Area Gains**

The report also examines educational attainment in the 100 largest metropolitan areas and finds that even as the levels have risen in virtually all those places, the populace in some areas is far better educated. For instance, in the greater Washington metro area, nearly half of adults have a bachelor's degree. By contrast, only 15 percent of adults in Bakersfield and Modesto, Calif., have a college degree.

Daniel A. Domenech, the executive director of the American Association of School Administrators, said continued growth in the population of nonwhite students, many of whom come from low-income families and in some cases face language barriers, places considerable demands on schools.

"These are the students that require the most resources and the most focus in terms of getting them to achieve," he said.

Observers say another demographic change featured in the report also poses a challenge for schools: maintaining public support to pay for them.

"A demographic conflict is accelerating," said Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at Brookings not involved with the report. "The population of people who bear the primary burden of paying for education but with no other stake in it ... is growing."

The report notes an increased segment of the population is made up of older adults without school-age children, who tend to be wealthier, and white, in contrast to the growth of poor and immigrant children from nonwhite families.

"The paying and voting public," he said, "won't have the same emotional connection to schools as the public attending them."