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RACE AND ETHNICITY: POPULATION, VITAL PROCESSES, AND EDUCATION

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At the beginning of the Republic, about four fifths of the population was white and one fifth black.¹ Most of the blacks at that time were slaves in the South. Importantly, people of no other race were enslaved in the United States at this time. For this reason, the presumptive status of blacks was enslaved. In 1820, the first census that distinguished slaves from free blacks, the free black population was 13 percent of the total black population. By 1860, this proportion had fallen to about 11 percent. The decline was largely due to the higher fertility of slaves relative to free blacks, but it also reflected the very low rate of manumissions.

The massive influx of European immigrants beginning in the 1840s caused the nonwhite share of the population to decline from about 20 percent in 1800 to just over 10 percent by 1930. Immigration from Asia began in the 1850s, but later was strictly limited, first by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and then by a series

of additional laws that expanded the geographic areas in Asia to which exclusion applied. These exclusionary laws culminated in 1924 with the passage of the Quotas Act, which imposed strict numerical limitations on immigration and plugged the last loopholes on all immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere (see the essay in Chapter Ad). Following the adoption of this Quota System, the white share of the population remained stable at about 89 percent until the mid-1960s.

The ethnicity of the white population changed considerably during the period of mass immigration from the 1880s through the adoption of the Quota System in 1924. The geographic source of immigration shifted away from Northern and Western Europe toward Southern and Eastern Europe (Table Ad90–97). This produced a large shift in the country of origin of the foreign-born population. Thus in 1850, 59.7 percent of the foreign-born originated in the British Isles and only 0.4 percent from Southern and Eastern Europe. By 1920, the percentages were 15.6 and 40.7, respectively (Table Ad354–443).

In 1965, the Congress replaced the Quota System with a new set of immigration laws called the Preference System. The Preference System raised the limit on the number of immigrants and shifted the criterion of admission from country of origin to family reunification. The number of immigrants increased and, unexpectedly, the country of origin of immigrants shifted away from Europe toward Asia and Latin America (see the essay in Chapter Ad). These legal changes in immigration law were reflected in an increase in the Asian and Pacific Islander share of the population from less than 1 percent in 1960 to almost 3 percent by 1990 (Table Aa145–184).

American Indians are another nonwhite group that displayed unusually rapid growth during the last years of the twentieth century. The growth in their numbers is due almost exclusively to ethnic reidentification (see Chapter Ag).

The Hispanic population comprises various races and is considered an ethnic, not a racial, category. This population has grown at rates of from 4 to 6 percent per year in the decades since 1940. A great deal of that growth more recently has been from persons of Mexican origin, who now comprise 58 percent of the Hispanic-origin population. The other important components are those of Puerto Rican and Cuban origin (9.6 and 3.5 percent of the Hispanic population, respectively) and, recently, a rapidly growing representation from Central and South America, including individuals from non-Spanish-speaking backgrounds.

The growth of the Mexican American population was stimulated by a migrant agricultural labor program, which was developed during World War II and continued into the 1950s and 1960s. Data on those engaged in this work during the World War II years are not available, but the number participating in the 1950s and through 1964 is included in series Ad1022 and constitutes most of the nonimmigrants reported in that series. During the peak years of this Braceros Program in the late 1950s, almost a half million people entered the country annually under its auspices – more than the number who entered as immigrants from all countries during these years. At the conclusion of the Braceros Program in 1964, the annual flow of migrant agricultural labor became undocumented. By the mid-1980s, the undocumented population was so large as to prompt legislation that legalized the status of this group while at the same time implementing controls to slow the future stream of such workers (see the essay in Chapter Ad).

The growth of the Cuban American population can be traced to the passage of the Cuban Refugees Act of 1966. Fidel Castro's 1959

¹ The racial and ethnic characteristics of the population and the impact of these characteristics on the growth and development of the American economy are subjects of a large scholarly literature. Key works of synthesis include Thompson and Welpton (1933); Taeuber and Taeuber (1958); Bean and Frisbee (1978); and Haines and Steckel (2000). Useful statistical compendia include Cummings (1918) and Smith and Horton (1995).

overthrow of the Cuban government produced a large number of Cuban refugees to the United States. The 1966 Act allowed Cuban refugees to adjust their status to permanent resident, but the shift in status was not automatic (for the numbers admitted under this program, see series Ad1000).

Puerto Rico is a self-governing commonwealth of the United States, and its citizens are American citizens who are free to enter and leave the United States proper as they please. (For the population of Puerto Rico, see series Aa100.) The movement of Puerto Ricans to the United States is thought to be a response to the relatively more favorable economic opportunities in the States. This population moves into and out of the United States on a regular basis.

Geographic Distribution

The geographic distribution of the population has a strong racial and ethnic character. At the time of the first census in 1790, more than 90 percent of all blacks (but only 40 percent of all whites) lived in the South.

The end of slavery did not immediately end this geographic concentration, as illiteracy, lack of savings, and racial violence made long-distance travel difficult and dangerous for ex-slaves (for evidence on these factors, see Tables Ae97–127, Bc793–797, Ec251–289, and Ec343–357). It wasn't until the boll weevil infestation – which began in the first decade of the twentieth century and which, over a fifteen-year period, ultimately destroyed much of the cotton crop – that large numbers of blacks began the “Great Migration” out of the South, mostly into Northern industrial cities (see Tables Ac1–42 and Ac206–413) (Ransom and Sutch 2001). At the end of that tumultuous half century of movement, there were no longer any black-majority states, as there had been in 1900, and this form of geographic concentration had become far less distinct. Beginning in the 1960s, many blacks living in the North and West migrated to the South. By the decade of the 1990s, net migration of blacks to the South was the predominate direction of the migration flow (see Table Ac206–413) (Wright 1986; Frey 2001).

The migration of blacks out of the South during the first part of the twentieth century had a profound effect on the rural–urban distribution of the races. In 1880, when statistics on urban residence by race first become available, blacks were only half as likely as whites to live in an urban environment (12.9 percent for blacks compared with 28.3 percent for whites). By 1950, the likelihood of urban residence was similar for whites and blacks (at about 43 percent), but then, following 1950, the black propensity for urban living grew so rapidly that by 1990 blacks were far more likely than whites to live in urban areas (87.2 percent versus 72.0 percent; see Table Aa776–823). This concentration of the black population in the urban centers occurred at a time when the white population and the better-paying jobs were moving to suburbia. A number of analysts point to this central-city concentration of blacks as a root of many of the social and economic difficulties that blacks experience today (Wilson 1987).

For immigrants, the key geographic distinctions have been urban living and, until the 1960s (which brought the large Cuban immigration), an avoidance of the South. When statistics on urban residence by nativity first become available in 1890, the percentage of the foreign-born living in cities (places of 2,500 persons or more) was almost double that for the native-born (61.4 versus 31.3 percent). In 1990, the latest year for which we have data,

the foreign-born continue to outpace the native-born in urban living by a 30 percentage-point margin (see Table Ad707–710). The Hispanic population has an especially strong geographic concentration, with Mexicans in California and Texas, Cubans in Florida, and Puerto Ricans in New York. This geographic distinctiveness of the population distribution by race and ethnicity has had numerous implications for vital processes and for educational, employment, occupational, and income differentials that run along race and ethnic lines.

Fertility

Evidence on fertility by race is presented in Tables Ab40–117 and Ab315–346, which report the crude birth rate, the general fertility rate, the total fertility rate, and the census-based child–woman ratio (see the table documentation for definitions of these terms). These tables reveal two distinctive features of the demography of the early Republic. One is the high fertility of white women. As Table Ab40–51 shows, the crude birth rate is estimated at 55 per thousand in 1800, which implies a total fertility rate of about seven live births per woman in her reproductive lifetime. A second feature is the even higher fertility of the black population. Information for the black population becomes available in 1820 in the form of a child–woman ratio (Table Ab315–346) and in 1850 in the form of the crude birth rate and the total fertility rate (Tables Ab40–117). All of these fertility measures suggest that black women's fertility in the mid-nineteenth century was even higher than that of white women. In fact, these high rates are close to what demographers have calculated as “maximum” fertility for large heterogeneous populations.

Beginning in 1800, white fertility declined fairly steadily until the onset of the “baby boom” in the 1940s, while black fertility remained rather stable up to the Civil War. The standard explanation for the high level and the constancy over time of the black fertility rate emphasizes the financial incentives to slave owners for slave-breeding and the power of the slaveholder, even in such intimate matters as reproduction. Evidence suggests that slave owners implemented a variety of measures that enhanced the fertility of their female slaves and that they did so consciously in an effort to enhance their profits (Gutman and Sutch 1976).

The total fertility rate, shown in Table Ab52–117 and in Figure Pa-C, indicates that in 1880 the rate for blacks was more than 70 percent higher than that for whites. The two rates declined and converged until about 1920. Over the next forty years there was some widening of the racial gap in fertility to about one birth per woman by the end of the baby boom in the early 1960s. Since about 1960, the gap has once again begun to close, with much of the decline occurring in the 1990s. Some of the decline has come from declines in birth rates among very young black women. For instance, birth rates for black women aged 15–17 declined from 82.3 per 1,000 in 1990 to 56.8 in 1998, and from 152.9 to 126.8 for black women aged 18–19 (see series Ab88–89). There has been some decline in age-specific rates at older ages as well.

The comparative fertility of native- and foreign-born women is shown in Table Ad744–751. In 1900, when the first statistics become available, they reveal considerably higher fertility among the foreign-born (almost entirely white) population relative to that of native-born whites. The statistics in Table Ad744–751 show that the fertility of foreign-born women remained substantially higher than that of native-born white women throughout the period of

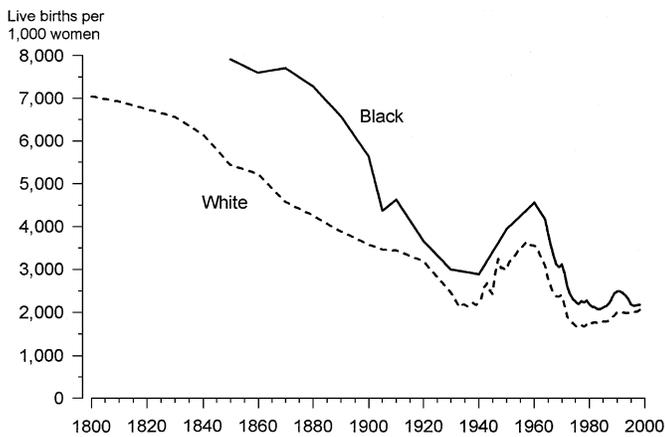


FIGURE Pa-C Total fertility rate, by race: 1800–1998

Sources

Series Ab63 and Ab85.

mass migration around the turn of the twentieth century, although research by King and Ruggles reveals that the fertility of the second generation was considerably *below* that of other native-born whites (King and Ruggles 1990). During the period of severely restricted migration in the middle of the twentieth century, the fertility of the foreign-born was indistinguishable from that of native-born whites. The resumption of mass migration at the end of the twentieth century is associated with a slight rise in the relative fertility of the foreign-born.

Vital statistics for American Indian and Asian populations are available from 1980 onward; they are available from 1989 onward for the Hispanic-origin population. These statistics show initially higher fertility for these groups as compared with native-born whites, but more rapid rates of decline. This means that convergence between the fertility of these groups and the white population has been taking place. Indeed, the fertility of Asian and Pacific Islanders is now below that for the white population, and the fertility of the Hispanic-origin population is very close to that of non-Hispanic whites (see Table Ab40–51). Total fertility rates stabilized in the 1970s and began a slow increase to more than two births per woman (or 2,000 per 1,000 women) in the late 1990s. The increased representation of the somewhat higher-fertility Hispanic women in the white population was certainly playing some role. Simultaneously, the total fertility rates for black, American Indian, and Asian women declined a bit. Finally, the fertility of Hispanic-origin women has remained roughly stable since 1989.

It remains an open question why minorities should have different fertility from the non-Hispanic white population. We know that blacks, Hispanics, and the American Indian populations have lower incomes, less wealth, less stable employment, and less education on average than the majority white population. These factors are often associated with higher birth rates. But there is also the “minority group status hypothesis,” which conjectures that minority groups strive to improve their status (Bean and Marcum 1978). This may be achieved using the labor of children, thus providing parents with an incentive for higher birth rates. A competing view holds that the desire to be upwardly mobile may spur more efforts to limit family size in order to conserve family resources and invest more human capital in each child. Thus, the predicted direction of the differential is unclear. The American case would

seem to support the view that lower socioeconomic status has had the effect of raising fertility, but this effect is diminishing over time, as birth rates come close to replacement levels.

Mortality

In contrast to the trends in fertility, racial differences in mortality have not converged. Although there have been absolute improvements for both whites and blacks, the racial differential in mortality remained quite substantial at the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, some mortality measures display a *relative* growth in the racial differential over time. For example, while the difference between blacks and whites in the number of infant deaths per 1,000 live births has been reduced from 46 in 1910 to 8.3 in 1998, the relative situation has deteriorated. In 1910, black infant mortality was 42 percent higher than that for whites, whereas in 1998 it was 137 percent higher. The record for neonatal mortality and low-birth-weight infants is similar (Tables Ab912–927 and Bd688–693; Preston and Haines 1991, 1997; Haines 1998).

Maternal mortality for both whites and nonwhites also declined significantly over the first half of the twentieth century, with the absolute decline for nonwhites even greater than that for whites (see Table Ab912–927). Nonetheless, at the end of the twentieth century, maternal mortality was still more than three times higher in the black population than in the white population. Relative progress for blacks ended about 1960; since then the racial differential in rates shows no trend.

Table Ab644–655 demonstrates that overall mortality for blacks, as measured by the expectation of life at birth, was higher than that for whites throughout the period 1900 to 1998. Although real progress has been made, in 1998 black males still had an estimated life expectancy at birth that was 6.9 years below that for white males. Black females showed a deficit of 5.2 years. The racial difference in 1900 had been 8.1 and 7.4 years, respectively.

Table Ab952–987 provides data on age-adjusted death rates by race and sex from 1900 to 1998. The record indicates only modest progress for the African American population (the overwhelming share of the “other race” category until the 1950s). In 1998, the age-adjusted death rate for blacks was 53 percent higher than that for whites. Outcomes for the American Indian and Asian populations were better. Indeed, the younger populations of those groups did relatively well, with the rates for American Indians close to those for whites and the rates for Asians and Pacific Islanders substantially below those for the white population (58 percent of the rates for whites).

To some extent, racial differences in mortality appear to reflect racial differences in overall health. Blacks endure more “restricted activity,” “bed-disability,” and “work-loss” days per person than whites despite the fact that the black population is younger and the number of such days per person rises with age. For a fraction of the black population greater than that of the white population, chronic medical conditions mean a major limitation in some physical activity. Blacks are also more likely than whites to be afflicted with acute digestive conditions. The only areas where blacks appear to have a health advantage is in afflictions from acute infective and parasitic conditions and in acute respiratory conditions (Tables Bd694–1085).

Homicide accounts for another portion of the racial differential in mortality. Blacks are far more likely than whites to be victims of homicide (but not suicide). This is true despite the fact that

blacks are less likely than whites to own firearms (Table Ec1139–1158).

The current mortality disadvantage of the black population is due in significant part to their low income and relatively poor coverage by health insurance (see Table Bd306–317). For example, the excess infant and maternal mortality of the black population could be largely prevented with proper health care.

Nuptiality

Relative racial and ethnic differentials in nuptiality are presented in Tables Ae481–506. The statistic in Table Ae481–488 is the median age at first marriage, defined here as the age at which half of the never-married population is older and half is younger. The statistic in Table Ae489–506 is the singulate mean age at marriage, an estimate of the mean number of years lived by a cohort before its first marriage. Both statistics are widely used indicators of age at first marriage.

These rates suggest a complex pattern of change in marriage behavior over the last two hundred years (see Figure Pa-D). From the mid-nineteenth century (and possibly earlier) the age at first marriage rose, as did the fraction of the population never marrying, with marriage age and nonmarriage among whites noticeably higher than among blacks. Over the first half of the twentieth century, marriages were increasingly at younger ages, and nonmarriage became less common for all groups, but especially for whites. In fact, the decline in the age of marriage for whites was so dramatic that by the mid-twentieth century, whites were marrying earlier than blacks and forgoing marriage less frequently. Then, beginning about 1960, age at marriage rose dramatically for all groups. By the end of the twentieth century, age at first marriage for all groups, but especially among blacks, were at all-time highs. Analysts explain this development in terms of improved employment opportunities for women, which made it possible for women to delay marriage if they wished. For the black population, scholars also cite the high and growing rate of incarceration of young black men, a situation that has left black women without eligible marriage partners (for racial differences in incarceration, see Tables Ae97–127 and Ec309–327, and Figure Pa-E).

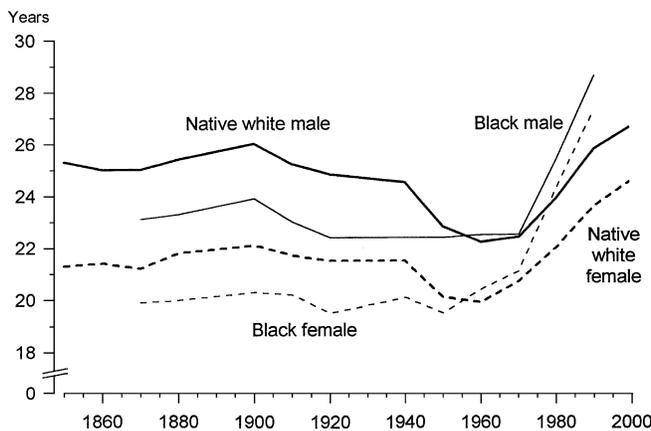


FIGURE Pa-D Median age at first marriage, by sex and race: 1850–1999

Sources
Series Ae485–488.

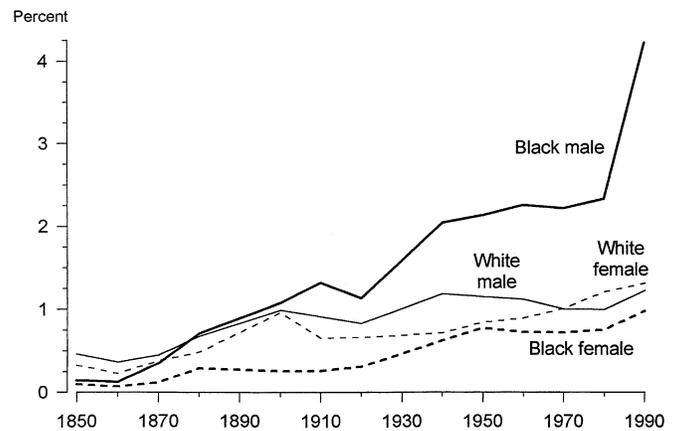


FIGURE Pa-E Institutional inmates as a percentage of the population, by sex and race: 1850–1990

Sources
Series Ae106–107 expressed as a percentage of series Aa160–161, and series Ae112–113 expressed as a percentage of Aa173–174.

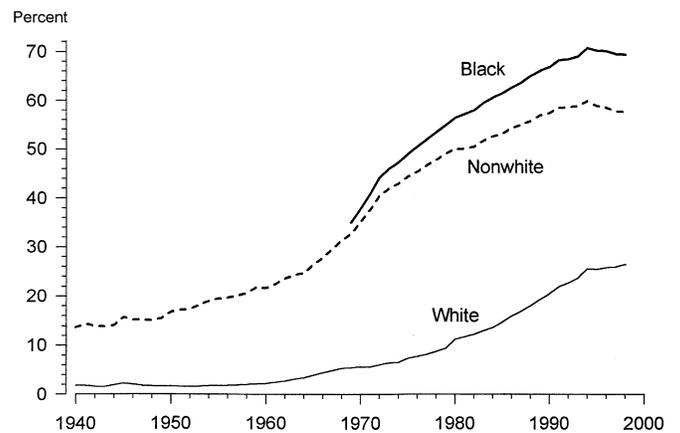


FIGURE Pa-F Live births to unmarried women as a percentage of all live births, by race: 1940–1998

Sources
Series Ab274, Ab285, and Ab296, each as a percentage of series Ab12–14, respectively.

The recent increase in age at first marriage for whites and blacks has been associated with an increase in births to unmarried women and a marked widening of the gap between blacks and whites in this regard. By the late twentieth century, nearly 70 percent of all births among blacks were to unmarried women. This compares with 26 percent of births among whites (see Tables Ab11–30 and Ab264–305, and Figure Pa-F). This widening of the racial differential in the marital status of mothers has implications for racial differences in many aspects of the American economy and society. Perhaps the most important has to do with the experience of children. In recent years, only 33 percent of black children younger than five years of age have been living with both parents; the comparable figure for white children is 80 percent (Table Ae128–190). The overwhelming majority of these single-parent children live with their mothers. They are at much greater risk of poverty than are children who live in two-parent families. Female-headed households are almost six times more likely to be in poverty than are married-couple households (series Be298 and

Be300). The substantial increase in the proportion of black children living in households headed by women has contributed to the large and stable racial differential in children living in poverty (Table Be323–342). Despite the decline in poverty overall, the poverty of black children has remained high and stubbornly persistent over time.

Education

Educational opportunities differed greatly by race in nineteenth-century America. American whites enjoyed unusually high rates of schooling opportunities. Boys and girls, rich and poor, children of natives and children of foreigners, city dwellers and frontiersmen, all had access to schooling and did in fact attend. By the middle of the century, literacy was almost universal among whites. No other country in the world at the time could match this achievement. Schooling was less accessible in the rural South, yet even this region showed substantial progress in literacy among whites beginning in the 1840s (see Table Bc793–797, the essay in Chapter Bc, and Fishlow 1966).

By contrast, literacy was rare in the black population. This was because approximately 90 percent of the black population was enslaved, and in most slave states masters were forbidden to educate their slaves. Despite this obstacle, a few slaves managed to learn to read and write. We know, for example, that Nat Turner, the leader of a famous slave revolt in Virginia in 1831, was literate (see Table Bb252–254). But such individuals were rare (Bullock 1970). Roger Ransom and Richard Sutch estimate that on the eve of the Civil War, illiteracy was practically universal among slaves in the countryside and no more than 2–5 percent of urban slaves could read and write (Ransom and Sutch 2001, p. 15).

Education emerged as one of the foremost goals of the newly emancipated freedmen, and it is remarkable how successful they were in achieving it. From an estimated level of 80 percent of the black population illiterate in 1870, the rate dropped to less than half (44.2 percent) by 1900 (Table Bc793–797). This improvement was achieved through a variety of strategies. One was the educational commitment of black parents who withdrew children and mothers from field labor to allow them time to devote to education (Tables Ba1–24 and Ba50–63) (Ransom and Sutch 2001). Others were the establishment of special segregated schools for blacks, the recruitment of teachers from the North, and the development of institutions for training black teachers. In addition, many black adults who had been denied educational opportunities in their youth learned to read alongside their children.

In the late nineteenth century, political forces in the South began to limit blacks' further educational progress. Southern blacks were increasingly disenfranchised, and public educational funds were diverted from segregated schools for blacks to those for whites (Kousser 1974). Robert Margo measures substantial declines in the relative quality of education for black children between 1890 and 1910. These include reductions in the black–white ratio of per-pupil expenditures on instruction, length of the school year, and teacher salaries and substantial increases in class size (Margo 1990, Tables 2.5, 2.6, 4.1, 2.7, pp. 21–22, 26, 54, 27). These findings suggest that the statistics on racial differences in school enrollment shown in Table Bc438–446 may overstate the relative quality of improvement in the education of blacks around the turn of the twentieth century.

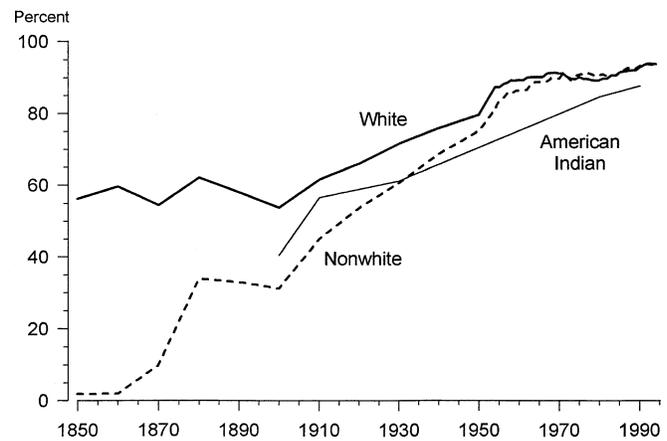


FIGURE Pa-G School enrollment rates, by race: 1850–1994

Sources

Series Ag917 and Bc439–440.

In the twentieth century, three major developments altered racial differences in educational attainment. The Great Migration of blacks out of the rural South into Northern cities from the 1910s through the 1960s provided the children of black migrants with access to better-quality Northern schools and also prompted Southern school boards to improve their services to black children in an effort to stem the outward tide (Margo 1990). By 1954, when the Supreme Court ruled against the “separate but equal” doctrine that had legitimated segregated schools for close to a half century, the racial differential in school attendance had already narrowed considerably. The black school enrollment rate for 5- to 19-year-olds was 80.8 percent, as compared with 87.0 percent for whites. After the Supreme Court ruling against segregated schools, the racial gap in education through high school closed further still (see Table Bc438–446 and Figure Pa-G). Nonetheless, the quality of Southern schools – as measured by class size, qualifications of teachers, and other similar measures – remained below that of schools in other parts of the country at the close of the twentieth century (Card and Krueger 1992).

The second development was the “high school movement,” the effort to make high school completion the norm among youths. Among the birth cohort of 1900, only about 10 percent eventually graduated from high school; among the birth cohort of 1930, the high school graduation rate was more than 50 percent (Tables Bc468–479 and Bc492–500). There are only limited data available on high school graduation rates by race for the early twentieth century. Available data suggest that although blacks were less likely than whites to graduate from high school, they experienced more dramatic improvements in high school graduation rates over time. In 1940, when statistics on the educational attainment of the population by race first become available, whites reported high school completion rates of 24.2 and 28.0 percent for males and females, respectively; the comparable numbers for blacks were 6.9 and 8.4 percent. The racial differential in these rates is smaller than were illiteracy rates fifty years earlier. While blacks still remained at a substantial educational disadvantage, these data suggest that they benefited differentially from the high school movement. Nonetheless, at the end of the twentieth century, a racial gap in high school completion rates still remained (see Table Bc737–792 and Figure Pa-H).

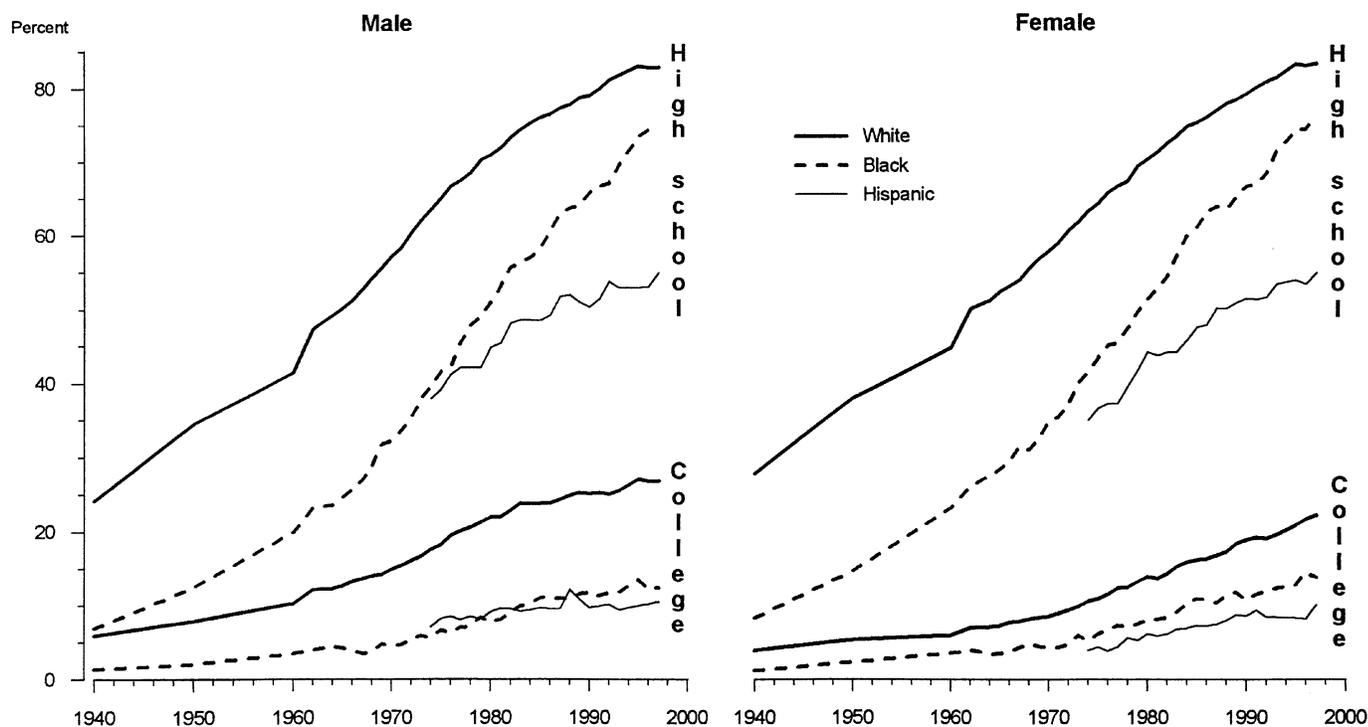


FIGURE Pa-H Educational attainment, by sex, race, and ethnicity: 1940-1997

Source

Calculated from Table Bc737-792.

Documentation

The figures indicate the percentage of the given population (age 25 or older) that completed four years of high school or at least four years of college.

The third development was the movement to mass higher education, which began following World War II. In 1950, only 1.9 percent of black males and 2.6 percent of black females 25-64 years of age were college graduates, as compared with 8.8 and 6.1 percent of native-born white males and females, respectively. By 1997, the rates had climbed to 16.3 and 16.5 percent for blacks and 30.1 and 26.6 percent for native-born whites. Thus, while the percentage gains for blacks were greater than for native-born whites, the proportionate gap was larger at the end of the century than it was in 1950.

There remain stubborn racial differentials in educational accomplishments by race. Since 1971, when national statistics on proficiency levels in different subjects become available by race and age, we observe large and stable differences in children's academic achievement by race and ethnicity. These differentials extend across all age groups. Table Bc273-428 indicates, for example, a 15 percentage-point differential in the percentage of non-Hispanic white nine-year-olds scoring in the top reading level compared with black and Hispanic nine-year-olds. The race and ethnic differentials for math are even greater. Although there is some year-to-year variation in these differentials, there is no discernible trend over the three decades following 1971.

Literacy and educational attainment differ by ethnicity as well as by race. For the years 1880 through 1940, we can compare the literacy of native- and foreign-born whites (Table Bc793-797). In 1880, when data first become available, the native-born show only a slight advantage over the foreign-born in literacy rates (Perlmann 1988). Over time up through 1940, the literacy of the foreign-born remained essentially unchanged, while the literacy rate of the

native-born population improved considerably. The literacy differential began to be reversed in the 1930s, when the composition of immigration from abroad changed to reflect a new flow of refugees fleeing the fascist governments that were taking over in Europe at that time. Refugees admitted to the United States as immigrants at that time were primarily of middle-class origins, and they worked in business and the professions. Twelve of these immigrants had already received the Nobel Prize, most famously Albert Einstein. Many others who immigrated at this time went on to win the Nobel Prize after their arrival in the United States (see Table Ad938-949). A large number of less well connected refugees who wished to emigrate to the United States were not permitted to enter (Gemery 1994). One consequence of this change in policy preferences was that the educational attainment of the foreign-born grew rapidly, not only absolutely but also relative to the native-born population.

After the replacement of the Quota System with the Preference System in 1965, the educational attainment of the immigrant population changed once again. Instead of uniformity, a bimodal pattern emerged. On the one hand, there was a large fraction of immigrants with educational levels above the national average. These were the scientists, engineers, and graduate students who remained in the country after completing their advanced degrees in order to teach and do research. At the opposite end of the spectrum were colleagues, family, and friends of agricultural workers and political refugees whose educational levels averaged at about the elementary school level.

One of the most poorly educated of the numerically important immigrant groups in the second half of the twentieth century were the Mexicans. Data on their educational attainment are available

beginning in the mid-1970s. These data reveal low rates of educational attainment compared with the native-born population, white and black. By the mid-twentieth century, when the vast majority of Americans were high school graduates, the majority of Mexican immigrants to the United States had barely completed the sixth grade. The impact of this educational differential shows up in a variety of areas, including the occupational distribution of the Hispanic population and the educational achievement of Hispanic children born in the United States (Table Bc 737–792).

The role of the public school as a tool of democracy and as an “Americanizer” has a large and complex history. The high rates of public school attendance throughout the period of rapid immigration played a large role in assimilating the children of the foreign-born into American society and culture. Public schools have been the educators of the majority of the population at least since the 1840s. When statistics become available in 1890, they indicate that a little more than 90 percent of kindergarten through eighth-grade enrollments were in these public schools. That proportion declined slightly over the twentieth century, and recent data indicate a share of about 87 percent today. When high school attendance was relatively rare, as it was throughout the nineteenth century, many high school students attended private institutions. However, the high school revolution of the first half of the twentieth century was accomplished by the expansion of public high schools and a consequent shift in high school enrollment share out of the private sector. There was a rapid increase in the public school share of high school enrollment up to about 1920 and relative stability since then. The overwhelming majority of private high schools are Catholic.

At the end of the twentieth century, and despite notable improvements along a variety of dimensions, American race and ethnic differences remained pronounced in the areas covered by this essay – population, vital processes, and education. Racial and ethnic differences were also prominent in other areas of American life. For additional discussions of racial and ethnic difference in opportunities and outcomes, see Chapters Ba, Be, Dc, and Ed.

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