

A Half Century of Learning: State Trends in Educational Attainment, 1940 to 2000

By Jennifer Cheeseman Day, Claire Shook-Finucane, and Nicole Stoops
U.S. Census Bureau

Introduction

Educational attainment increased dramatically during the second half of the 20th century for the entire nation and for all states. In 1940, only 25 percent of the US population had a high school diploma, and just 5 percent earned a bachelors degree or more. By the close of the twentieth century, this had increased to 80 percent and 24 percent, respectively.

Events during the century helped push states to offer more opportunities for all citizens. However, this national achievement varied in its impact from state to state, and among different demographic groups.

Objective

The purpose of this analysis is to examine the improvements in educational attainment during the 2nd half of the 20th century. Specifically, we will look at the variation among demographic groups (race and sex), for the nation and across states.

Data

Data in this paper derives from decennial censuses, 1940 to 2000.

The decennial census began asking about educational attainment in 1940, with a question which asked about a person's highest grade of school completed. Respondents answered with the number of years of school attended. This question appeared on decennial censuses through 1980. The 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses asked, "How much school has this persons completed?" and provided answer categories showing degrees, such as 'High School Diploma', or 'Bachelors degree'.

As part of an ongoing effort, we have created historical tables showing the rates of educational attainment by race and Hispanic origin, sex, and age, for each state and the national as a whole. The tables show attainment for high school or more, and Bachelor's degree or more. This is the first time these state level data have been consolidated in a form conducive to this sort of detailed analysis.

Methods

First, this analysis examines the national level data over the past 60 years for both the population with a high school diploma or more, and those with a bachelor's degree or more, by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin. This section shows the overall trend in educational attainment and compares the differential improvement among groups for each educational level.

Next, we show high school and college attainment at the regional and state level, displaying the variations among states in the rates of increase in education, and the relative changes among these geographies.

Finally, we look at variations among sex and race groups at the regional and state level. We examine the differences in black and white attainment increases during each decade, showing which states experienced rapid improvement, and which did not.

Sample graphic attached below:

Figure 1. Percentage-Point Improvement During Decade: High School

