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Record Shares of Young Adults Have Finished Both High School and College

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Record Shares of Young Adults Have Finished Both High School and College

By Richard Fry and Kim Parker

OVERVIEW

Record shares of young adults are completing high school, going to college and finishing college, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of newly available census data. In 2012, for the first time ever, one-third of the nation's 25- to 29-year-olds have completed at least a bachelor's degree.

These across-the-board increases have occurred despite dramatic immigration-driven changes in the racial and ethnic composition of college-age young adults, a trend that had led some experts to expect a decline in educational attainment.

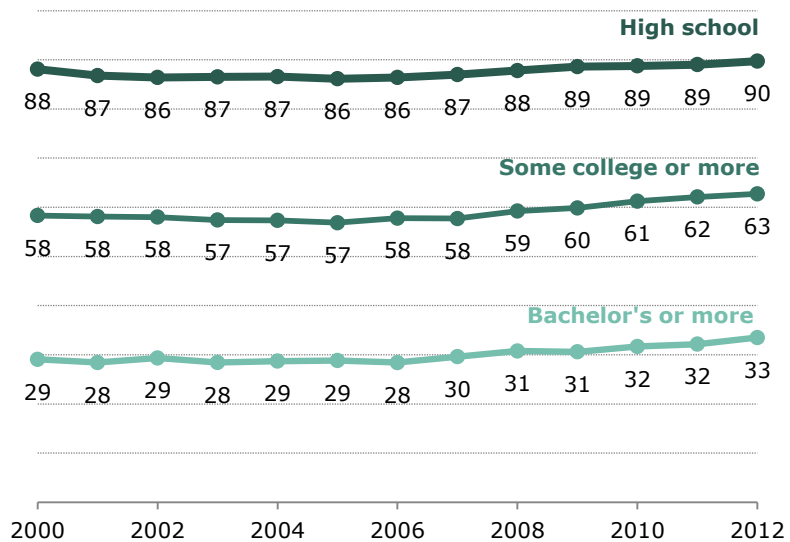
College completion is now at record levels among key demographic groups: men and women; blacks, whites and Hispanics; and foreign-born and native-born Americans.

Also, a record share of the nation's young adults ages 25 to 29 (90%) has finished at least a high school education. And another record share—63%—has completed at least some college.

Some of the “credit” for recent increases appears to go to the Great Recession of 2007-2009

Educational Attainment of 25- to 29-Year-Olds, 2000-2012

% completing



Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 2000-2012

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and the sluggish jobs recovery since. With young adults facing sharply diminished labor market opportunities, their rate of high school and college completion has been rising slowly but steadily since 2007, after having been stagnant during better economic times earlier in the decade.

Changing public attitudes about the importance of going to college to succeed in an increasingly knowledge-based labor market may also have played a role. In 1978, the public was evenly divided over whether a college education was necessary to get ahead in life. Roughly 30 years later, a lopsided majority firmly endorsed the necessity of a college degree. In a 2009 Pew Research Center survey, 73% of American adults agreed that, in order to get ahead in life these days, it is necessary to get a college education. Similarly, when the Gallup Organization asked about the importance of college in 2010, 75% of Americans said a college education is “very important.” In 1978, only 36% said the same.

The nation’s college-age population is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse – today some 44% of 18- to 25-year-olds are non-white, up from 17% in 1971. Historically, Hispanic and black youths have trailed white and Asian youths in educational attainment. That remains the case, but rates for all four groups are rising at a similar pace.

The trends on college attainment are not all positive, however. The recent increases in the U.S. come at a time when other advanced economies are registering similar or greater gains, leading experts and college presidents to question whether the U.S. has been losing its competitive position as the global leader in higher education. In 2011 the Pew Research Center conducted a [survey](#) of more than 1,000 college presidents nationwide. Among those college presidents surveyed, only 19% said the U.S. system of higher education is currently the best in the world, and just 7% said they believe it will be the best in the world 10 years from now. A plurality of presidents (51%) described the U.S. system as one of the best in the world.

That same survey also found that college presidents are concerned about the quality, preparedness and study habits of today’s college students. Overall, 52% of presidents say college students today study less than their predecessors did a decade ago; just 7% say they study more.

About the Report

Estimates of educational attainment in this report are based on the March Current Population Survey (CPS). The specific files used in this report are from March 1971 to March 2012. Conducted jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the CPS is a monthly survey of approximately 75,000 households (in March) and is the source of the nation's official statistics on unemployment. With the exception of an important change in the educational attainment question in 1992, the Census Bureau has consistently collected educational attainment data in the CPS since 1947. The Census Bureau's long-standing historical series on educational attainment are based on the March CPS (<http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/data/cps/historical/index.html>).

The CPS is nationally representative of the civilian non-institutionalized population, and therefore does not include people living in institutions or Armed Forces personnel (except those living with their families). Exclusion of the military does not materially alter the estimates because it is a relatively small proportion of the population. Exclusion of the institutionalized population does not bias overall estimates of educational attainment. But the exclusion of the institutionalized population does affect estimates for specific demographic groups, in particular black males (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007).

The CPS microdata used in this report are the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) provided by the University of Minnesota. The IPUMS assigns uniform codes, to the extent possible, to data collected in the CPS over the years. More information about the IPUMS, including variable definition and sampling error, is available at <http://cps.ipums.org/cps/documentation.shtml>.

This report was written by Richard Fry and Kim Parker, senior economist and associate director, respectively, of Pew Research Center's Social and Demographic Trends project. Paul Taylor, executive vice president of Pew Research Center and director of Pew Social and Demographic Trends project, provided editorial guidance. Research assistant Seth Motel provided assistance with preparing charts and formatting the report. The report was number-checked by research assistant Seth Motel. The report was copy-edited by communications associate Molly Rohal.

Notes on Terminology

College completion: College completion refers to those who have completed at least a bachelor's degree or four-year college degree. Prior to 1992 it refers to those who have completed at least four years of college.

Some college completion: Persons finishing some college have finished at least some college education, including those completing associate degrees and bachelor's degrees. Prior to 1992 the person must have completed at least one year of college. Since 1992 those completing any college at all are designated as finishing some college.

High school completion: A high school completer refers to those who have at least obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent (such as a General Educational Development (GED) certificate). Prior to 1992 it refers to those who have completed at least four years of high school.

Race/Ethnicity: Hispanics are of any race. Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. In order to have a consistent series on Asian educational attainment, Asian refers to those of Asian or Pacific Islander origin.

Nativity: Native born refers to persons who are U.S. citizens at birth. Foreign born or immigrant refers to those who are not U.S. citizens at birth.

SECTION 1: OVERALL EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Using the criteria of high school and college completion, U.S. adults are better educated than ever before. In 2012, 31% of all adults ages 25 and older have completed at least a bachelor's degree, up from 30% in 2011. In 1971 only 12% of adults ages 25 and older had completed at least a four-year college degree.

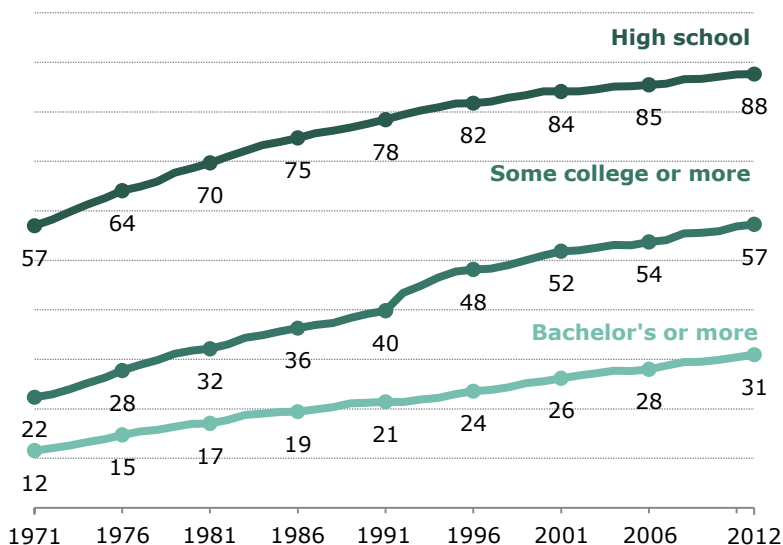
In 2012 57% of adults ages 25 and older had finished at least some college education (including those finishing a bachelor's or associate degree as well as those completing college credits but not a degree). This matched the level attained in 2011. In 1971 only 22% of adults had finished at least some college. The rising share of adults with some college education is reflective, at least in part, of the development of mass higher education in the U.S.

A high school education is becoming increasingly universal. In 2012, 88% of adults ages 25 and older had at least completed high school, matching the 2011 level and far surpassing the 57% of adults who had at least finished high school in 1971.

Changes in educational attainment among the overall population are linked to a number of demographic factors – some working at cross purposes. Over time, older, less educated cohorts have died off. This has tended to boost the overall attainment of the remaining population. At

Educational Attainment of the Population Ages 25 and Older, 1971-2012

% completing



Notes: Completing high school includes those who attained a degree by equivalence (e.g., GED) as well as those obtaining a high school diploma. The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, persons completing at least four years of high school are considered to have completed high school, persons completing at least one year of college are considered to have completed some college, and persons completing at least four years of college are considered to have completed at least a four-year college degree.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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the same time, the influx of new immigrants has changed the demographic makeup of the population. In the latter part of the 20th century, immigrants have tended not to be better educated than the native population (except perhaps at the highest levels of educational attainment) and thus have not contributed to the overall rise in educational attainment (Betts and Lofstrom, 2000; Little and Triest, 2001). In the last few years, however, newly arrived immigrants to the United States have tended to be better educated than the native population, partly reflecting the growing importance of immigrants from Asia in the immigration flow. More than 40% of recently arrived immigrants to the U.S. ages 25 to 64 have completed at least a bachelor's degree ([Pew Research Center, 2012](#)).

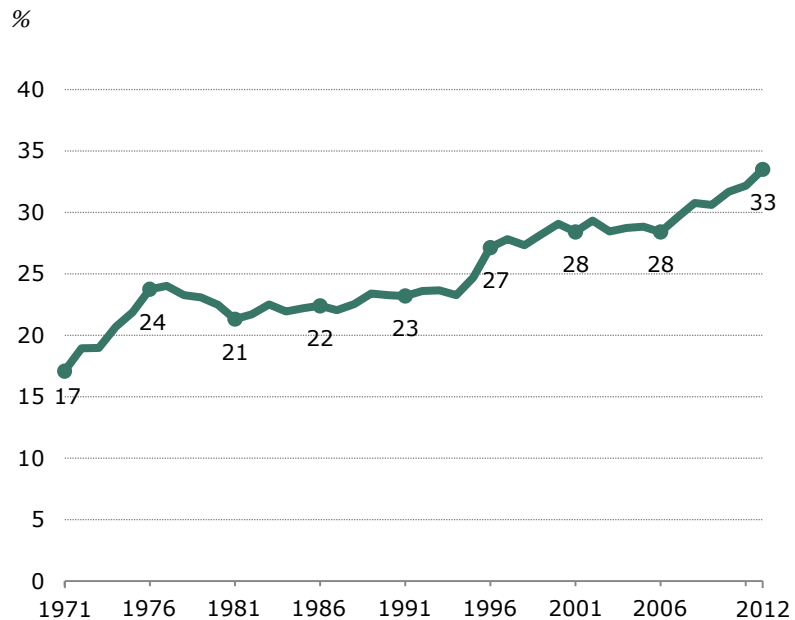
A common way to adjust for the changing age structure of the population is to focus on the educational attainment of a narrow age group. The remainder of this report follows U.S. Census Bureau practice and focuses on the educational attainment of 25- to 29-year-olds. While these young adults have not necessarily completed their education, they do serve as a recent indicator of the levels of U.S. educational attainment.

SECTION 2: BACHELOR'S DEGREE COMPLETION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Completion of four-year college degrees is up sharply in the past five years among the nation's young adults. In 2012 a record one-third of adults ages 25 to 29 have attained at least a bachelor's degree. As recently as 2006 fewer than 30% of 25- to 29-year-olds had finished at least a bachelor's degree.

Record levels of bachelor's degree attainment in 2012 are apparent for most basic demographic groups.

Share of 25- to 29-Year-Olds Completing Four-Year College Degrees, 1971-2012



Note: The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, persons completing at least four years of college are considered to have completed at least a four-year college degree.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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The Public's Views on the Importance of Higher Education

These trends in educational attainment reflect the growing importance the American public places on a college education. In a July 2009 Pew Research Center survey, 73% of adults agreed with the following statement: In order to get ahead in life these days, it's necessary to get a college education. When CBS News and The New York Times asked the same question in 1978, only 49% of adults agreed.

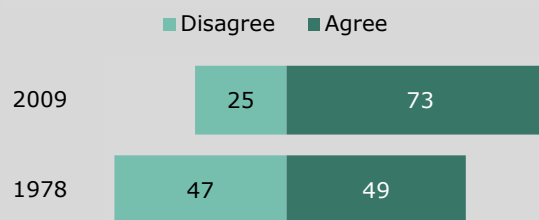
A December 2009 survey by the Public Agenda Foundation asked more specifically about the link between a college degree and career success. A narrow majority (55%) said a college education is necessary to be successful in today's work world, while 43% said there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education. Ten years earlier, the balance of opinion had been much different. In 1999, only 31% of adults said a college education is necessary to succeed in the work world, while 67% said there are many ways to succeed without a college degree.

Other survey questions reveal a similar evolution of opinion. In June 2010, the Gallup Organization asked how important a college education is today. Fully three-quarters of adults said a college education is "very important." When Gallup asked the same question in 1978, only 36% said a college education was very important.

In spite of these trends, the public remains of two minds about the value of college. On the one hand, strong majorities say a college education is important. On the other hand, many question the value of college given the rising costs. In [a March 2011 Pew Research survey](#), 57% of adults said the higher education system in the U.S. fails to provide students with good value for the money they and their families spend.

In Order to Get Ahead in Life These Days, It's Necessary to Get a College Degree

% who ...



Note: "Don't know/Refused" and "No opinion" responses not shown.

Source: 2009 data are from a nationwide Pew Research Center survey conducted July 20-Aug 2, 2009 (N=1,701 adults); 1978 data are from a CBS News/New York Times survey conducted April 3-7, 1978 (N=1,417)

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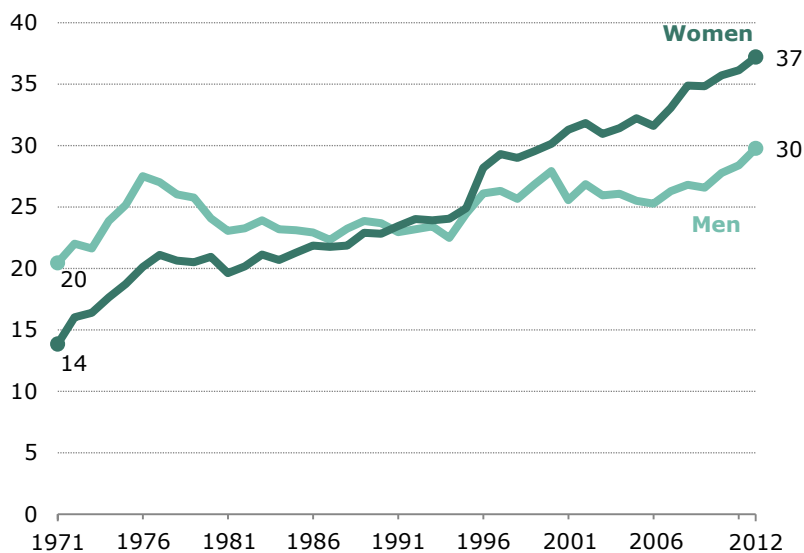
By Gender

In 2012, record levels of both young men and young women had finished college. The widely observed stagnation in male attainment (Dynarski, 2007) has at least temporarily receded as 30% of men ages 25 to 29 had finished college in 2012. In 2011 28% of men in this age group had finished at least a bachelor's degree, the same level of male attainment recorded in 1976.¹

By contrast, women's educational levels have grown steadily over the past 40 years and by 2012 reached their highest level at 37% completing at least a bachelor's degree.

College Completion at a Record Level Among Men and Women

% of 25- to 29-year-olds



Note: The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, persons completing at least four years of college are considered to have completed at least a four-year college degree.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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¹ Several factors may be responsible for the prior peak in collegiate attainment reached among men in 1976. Male college enrollment and attainment may have reflected the desire to avoid the Vietnam War military conscription. In addition, the perception that the labor market returns to a college education were declining may have depressed male college enrollments during the 1970s (Card and Lemieux, 2001).

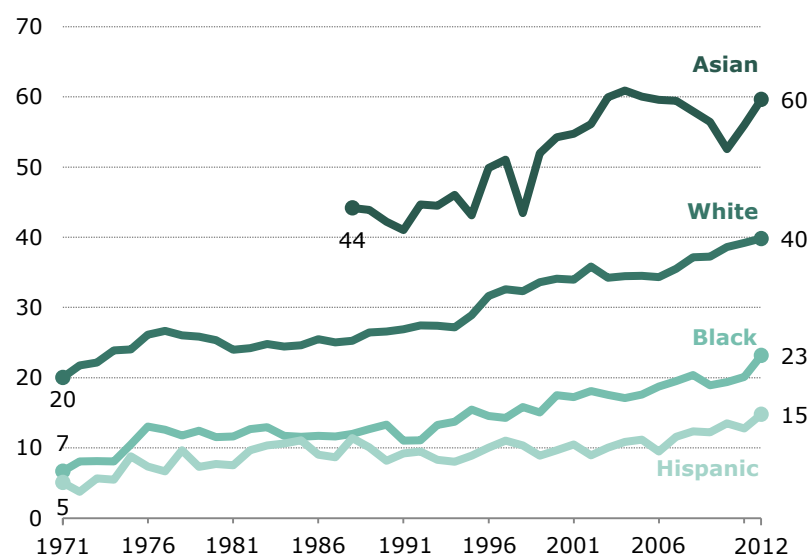
By Race and Ethnicity

College attainment reached a record level in 2012 among most of the major racial and ethnic groups in the U.S.

Among whites ages 25 to 29, 40% had completed at least a bachelor's degree in 2012, up from 39% in 2011 and 20% in 1971. Blacks and Hispanics were much less likely than whites to have finished at least a bachelor's degree in 2012, but their levels of college attainment also reached unprecedented levels. In 2012 23% of blacks ages 25 to 29 had completed at least a bachelor's degree, an increase from 20% in 2011. Bachelor's degree attainment among young Hispanics increased to 15% in 2012, up from 13% in 2011. College completion among Asians ages 25 to 29 remained far above other groups in 2012 (60%), but this level was below the level observed among Asians in 2004 (61%).

College Completion at a Record Level Among Whites, Blacks and Hispanics

% of 25- to 29-year-olds



Note: The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, persons completing at least four years of college are considered to have completed at least a four-year college degree.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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Rising college completion rates within racial and ethnic groups of young adults suggest that changing demographics in the U.S. are not inhibiting an overall increase in educational attainment. Some scholars have surmised that the increasing share of minorities among the young adult population would result in a “plateau in educational attainment.” This projection raised doubts about the ability of the country to further increase educational attainment in the face of growing minority populations (Kodrzycki, 2002; Ellwood, 2002; Gordon, 2012).

Blacks and Hispanics, on average, have lower levels of college attainment. The Hispanic population, in particular, is a growing share of the population. In March 1988 more than three-

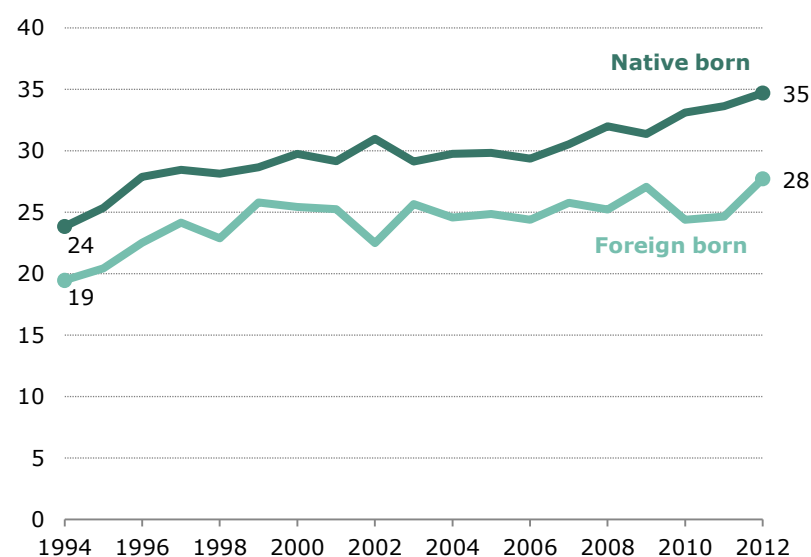
quarters of adults ages 25 to 29 were white or Asian. By March 2012 the share of adults ages 25 to 29 that was white or Asian was less than two-thirds. Absent increases in educational attainment within racial and ethnic groups, this “demographic headwind” would be expected to dampen further increases in educational attainment. But the envisioned plateau or decline in the overall attainment of the nation’s young adults has not materialized in part because collegiate attainment has increased among black and Hispanic young adults.

By Nativity

Trends in bachelor’s degree attainment by nativity are available back to 1994. Among native-born 25- to 29-year-olds, collegiate attainment reached a record high in 2012 (35%). Among immigrant young adults, a record 28% have at least finished a bachelor’s degree in 2012, eclipsing the prior high of 27% observed in 2009. Some of the increase in the educational attainment of foreign-born 25- to 29-year-olds may reflect changes in the source countries of recent immigrants to the United States. Immigrants from Asia have recently eclipsed Hispanic immigrants as the largest source of new immigrants to the United States ([Pew Research Center, 2012](#)).

Bachelor’s Degree Completion at a Record Level Among Native-born and Foreign-born Young Adults

% of 25- to 29-year-olds



Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1994-2012

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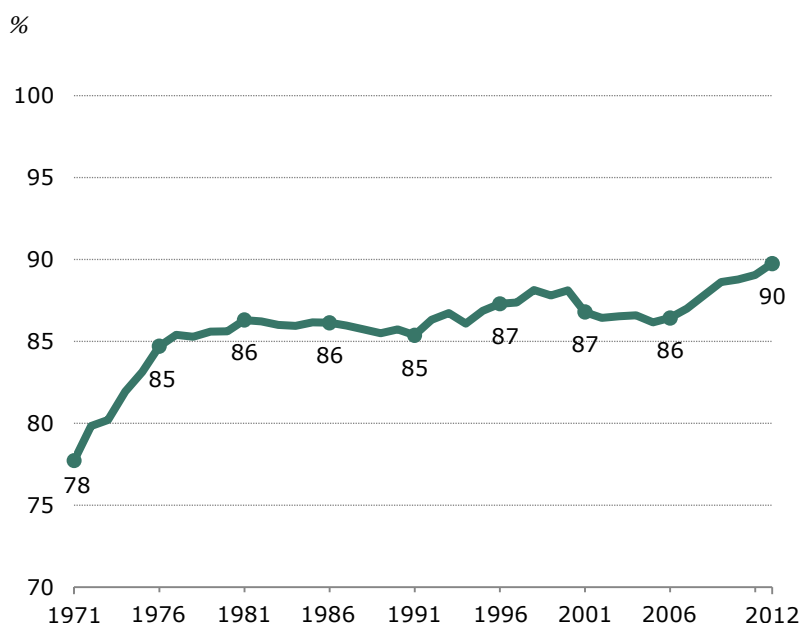
SECTION 3: HIGH SCHOOL COMPLETION AMONG YOUNG ADULTS

Increases in high school completion have been quite modest. Nonetheless, high school completion among young adults is at its highest level ever in 2012 at 90%, up from 89% in 2011. Gains in high school completion have been incremental, however, as the share of adults ages 25 to 29 completing high school had reached 86% as early as 1979.²

As the accompanying table shows, noteworthy changes in high school attainment include:

- Male high school completion reached its highest level on record in 2012 (88%).³
- Three-quarters of Hispanics ages 25 to 29 had completed at least a high school education in 2012, and Hispanic high school attainment significantly increased over the previous record of 71% in 2011.
- 2012 marks the first time 76% of foreign-born young adults

Share of 25- to 29-Year-Olds Completing High School



Notes: Completing high school includes those who attained a degree by equivalence (e.g., GED) as well as those obtaining a high school diploma. The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, persons completing at least four years of high school are considered to have completed high school.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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² The trend in high school completion presented counts GED recipients as high school completers. This inclusion may be of consequence. Studies that attempt to measure the high school graduation rate, counting only those who receive a high school diploma as "graduates," find that high school graduation rates have either stagnated or fallen over time (Heckman and LaFontaine, 2007).

³ Trends in male high school completion are noteworthy because much of the moribund performance of the U.S. in secondary education is attributed to male outcomes. For example, "Notably, the stagnation of the overall U.S. high school graduation rate among post-1950 birth cohorts is similarly driven by declines among males" (Acemoglu and Autor, 2012). The male high school completion rate had either been at 87% or less between 1977 and 2011.

have completed at least a high school education. Immigrant high school attainment in 2012 was significantly above the prior record (71%) reached in 2011.

High School Completion among 25- to 29-Year-Olds, 1971-2012

%

Year	All	Gender		Race/Ethnicity				Nativity	
		Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native born	Foreign born
2012	90	88	91	95	89	75	96	93	76
2011	89	87	91	94	88	71	95	93	71
2010	89	87	90	95	90	69	94	93	69
2009	89	87	90	95	89	69	95	92	70
2008	88	86	90	94	88	68	96	92	70
2007	87	85	89	93	88	65	97	92	67
2006	86	84	88	93	86	63	96	91	67
2005	86	85	87	93	87	63	96	91	66
2004	87	85	88	93	89	62	96	92	66
2003	87	85	88	94	88	62	96	91	67
2002	86	85	88	93	88	62	95	91	66
2001	87	85	88	94	87	62	95	91	67
2000	88	87	89	94	87	63	94	92	68
1999	88	86	89	93	89	62	93	91	69
1998	88	87	90	94	88	63	90	92	68
1997	87	86	89	93	87	62	91	91	66
1996	87	86	88	93	86	61	90	91	65
1995	87	86	87	92	87	57	91	91	62
1994	86	85	88	91	84	60	92	89	64
1993	87	86	87	92	83	61	94	---	---
1992	86	86	87	91	81	61	96	---	---
1991	85	85	86	90	82	57	91	---	---
1990	86	84	87	90	82	58	90	---	---
1989	85	84	87	89	82	61	87	---	---
1988	86	84	87	90	81	62	89	---	---
1987	86	85	86	90	84	60	---	---	---
1986	86	86	86	90	83	59	---	---	---
1985	86	86	86	90	81	61	---	---	---
1984	86	86	86	90	79	59	---	---	---
1983	86	86	86	90	80	58	---	---	---
1982	86	86	86	89	81	61	---	---	---
1981	86	87	86	90	78	60	---	---	---
1980	86	86	86	90	77	59	---	---	---
1979	86	86	85	90	75	57	---	---	---
1978	85	86	85	89	77	57	---	---	---
1977	85	87	84	89	74	58	---	---	---
1976	85	86	83	88	74	58	---	---	---
1975	83	85	82	87	71	53	---	---	---
1974	82	83	81	86	68	54	---	---	---
1973	80	81	80	86	64	52	---	---	---
1972	80	81	79	85	63	48	---	---	---
1971	78	79	76	83	58	48	---	---	---

Notes: Completing high school includes those who attained a degree by equivalence (e.g., GED) as well as those obtaining a high school diploma. The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, persons completing at least four years of high school are considered to have completed high school. "----" indicates data not available.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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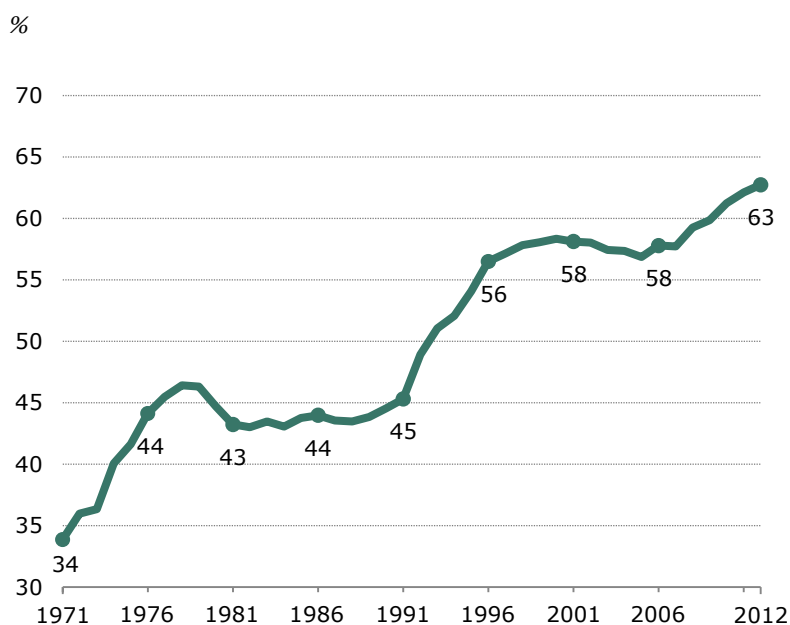
SECTION 4: ATTAINMENT OF SOME COLLEGE EDUCATION

Finally, there has been a recent surge in the share of young adults who have completed at least some college education. In 2012 a record 63% of adults ages 25 to 29 have finished at least some college. As recently as 2008, fewer than 60% of young adults had been to college. In 1971 a little more than a third of young adults had some college education. Since a record 42% share of 18- to 24-year-olds was enrolled in college in 2011 ([Fry and Lopez, 2012](#)), one might expect that the attainment of at least some college education will continue to rise over the near term.

Record levels of attainment of at least some college education are being driven by:

- In 2012 58% of men ages 25 to 29 had completed at least some college, up from the prior record level of 57% in 2011.
- In 2012 record shares of black and Hispanic adults ages 25 to 29 had completed at least some college education. Among young blacks 59% had at least completed some college education, up substantially from the prior record level (55%) observed in 2010 and 2011. For the first time in 2012 more than 40% of young Hispanics have completed at least some college education.

Share of 25- to 29-Year-Olds Completing at Least Some College



Note: Some college includes those completing bachelor's and associate degrees as well as those completing some college credits but no degree. The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, some college meant completing at least one year of college. Since 1992, the term means completing any college at all.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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- Completion of some college education among young immigrant adults reached its highest level on record in 2012 (47%).

Some College Completion Among 25- to 29-Year-Olds, 1971-2012

%

Year	All	Gender		Race/Ethnicity				Nativity	
		Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Native born	Foreign born
2012	63	58	68	69	59	41	81	66	47
2011	62	57	68	70	55	39	80	66	44
2010	61	56	67	69	55	37	76	65	42
2009	60	55	65	68	53	34	79	63	44
2008	59	54	65	67	51	36	80	63	43
2007	58	53	63	66	50	34	80	61	42
2006	58	53	62	66	50	32	81	62	41
2005	57	52	61	65	49	33	80	61	41
2004	57	53	61	65	52	32	83	62	40
2003	57	54	61	66	51	31	80	61	42
2002	58	54	62	66	54	31	80	62	41
2001	58	54	63	66	51	32	81	61	44
2000	58	55	61	64	52	33	78	61	44
1999	58	55	61	64	51	31	79	60	45
1998	58	55	61	64	50	32	70	61	42
1997	57	55	59	63	47	33	74	60	42
1996	56	55	58	62	48	31	75	59	43
1995	54	52	56	60	45	29	76	56	39
1994	52	50	54	57	42	31	71	54	39
1993	51	50	53	56	40	30	69	---	---
1992	49	48	50	54	36	29	73	---	---
1991	45	44	46	50	35	24	65	---	---
1990	45	44	45	49	36	23	63	---	---
1989	44	44	44	47	35	27	60	---	---
1988	43	43	43	47	33	28	68	---	---
1987	44	43	44	47	36	27	---	---	---
1986	44	44	44	47	36	25	---	---	---
1985	44	44	43	47	35	27	---	---	---
1984	43	44	43	46	33	27	---	---	---
1983	43	45	42	47	33	25	---	---	---
1982	43	44	42	46	37	24	---	---	---
1981	43	46	41	47	33	24	---	---	---
1980	45	48	42	49	33	24	---	---	---
1979	46	50	43	50	31	25	---	---	---
1978	46	51	42	50	35	25	---	---	---
1977	45	50	41	49	31	24	---	---	---
1976	44	50	38	48	28	21	---	---	---
1975	42	47	36	45	28	22	---	---	---
1974	40	45	36	44	24	21	---	---	---
1973	36	41	31	41	22	17	---	---	---
1972	36	41	31	40	21	15	---	---	---
1971	34	39	29	38	18	15	---	---	---

Note: Some college includes those completing bachelor's and associate degrees as well as those completing some college credits but no degree. The educational attainment question was changed in 1992. Before 1992, some college meant completing at least one year of college. Since 1992, the term means completing any college at all. "---" indicates data not available.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 1971-2012

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SECTION 5: THE REVERSING OF THE “EDUCATION REVERSAL”

In terms of both high school completion and bachelor’s degree completion, today’s young adults are outpacing earlier generations of young adults. Educational attainment has continued to increase, although the gains are not as large as they were in the first half of the 20th century (Goldin and Katz, 2008). In recent years, some analysts have argued that educational gains among young adults had actually stalled, resulting in an “education reversal,” i.e., that older Americans are more educated than younger Americans (Evans and Breznau, 2010).

As evidence for the “education reversal,” scholars pointed to data from 2007 and compared the educational attainment of adults across age groups. As the table below shows, in 2007 29.9% of adults ages 45 to 64 had finished at least a bachelor’s degree. In comparison, 29.6% of 25- to 29-year-olds had finished at least a bachelor’s degree. A similar “education reversal” was apparent in 2007 in regard to high school attainment; 88.1% of the older age group had finished high school compared with 87% of young adults.

The 2012 data suggest that recent developments have reversed the “education reversal.” Young adults are better educated than they were in 2007. In 2012 33.5% of young adults had at least attained a bachelor’s degree in comparison with 30.9% of 45- to 64-year-olds. Similar gains in high school attainment have occurred since 2007. So the “education reversal” that arose in the first decade of the 2000s has vanished or been reversed by recent improvements in the educational attainment of young adults.

Trends in educational attainment cannot be properly ascertained by point-in-time comparisons of educational attainment across different age groups. To judge how well the U.S. education system is performing it does not make sense to compare older Americans to younger Americans. The basic problem is that the education levels of any particular age group change as they age. Trends in educational attainment are better gauged by comparing older Americans when they were the same age as younger Americans to today’s younger Americans. Effectively, one should follow over time the education levels of a similarly aged group of Americans, which is precisely what was done in sections 2 and 3 of this report in tracing out the education levels of 25- to 29-year-olds.

In 2007 29.9% of adults ages 45 to 64 had at least finished a bachelor’s degree. But that does not mean that roughly 30% of these older Americans had finished college back when they were 25 to 29 years of age. What has happened to this age group as it aged from 25-29 to 45-64? Ignoring momentarily educational change, there have been demographic changes. Some

of the 25- to 29-year-olds from earlier decades have died, and those that have died tended to be less educated. In addition, as the 25- to 29-year-olds age their ranks are changed by arriving immigrants, and the new immigrants likely have a different education profile than the native population. Finally, in addition to demographic change, there is also educational change in that educational attainment tends to increase as a group ages. Although we often assume that most formal education is completed by age 30, this is not always a safe assumption. “Educational attainment has ceased to be fixed in early adulthood, especially among members of ethnic and racial minorities” (Day and Bauman, 2000).

As others have concluded (Day and Bauman, 2000), trends in educational attainment are better gauged

by examining the education of older Americans and younger Americans when they were the same age, not older Americans and younger Americans at the same point in calendar time.

Educational Attainment of Selected Age Groups, 2000-2012

%

Share Completing High School Education

Year	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-64	Difference:
					25-29 minus 45-64
2012	89.7	88.8	89.0	89.5	0.3
2011	89.0	89.0	89.1	89.5	-0.4
2010	88.8	88.0	88.3	89.6	-0.8
2009	88.6	87.9	88.4	89.0	-0.4
2008	87.8	88.5	88.6	89.0	-1.2
2007	87.0	87.3	88.2	88.1	-1.1
2006	86.4	87.6	88.1	88.0	-1.6
2005	86.2	87.3	88.4	88.0	-1.8
2004	86.6	87.5	88.0	88.3	-1.8
2003	86.5	87.6	88.0	87.5	-1.0
2002	86.4	87.3	88.4	86.9	-0.5
2001	86.8	88.0	88.4	86.6	0.2
2000	88.1	88.2	88.6	86.1	2.0

Share Completing a Bachelor's Degree or More

Year	25-29	30-34	35-44	45-64	Difference:
					25-29 minus 45-64
2012	33.5	34.8	34.7	30.9	2.6
2011	32.2	33.9	34.2	30.8	1.4
2010	31.7	34.1	33.1	30.5	1.2
2009	30.6	33.8	32.9	30.2	0.4
2008	30.8	34.0	33.1	30.2	0.5
2007	29.6	32.6	32.6	29.9	-0.3
2006	28.4	31.5	31.1	29.3	-0.9
2005	28.8	32.0	29.9	29.1	-0.3
2004	28.7	31.6	29.5	29.6	-0.9
2003	28.4	31.5	29.4	29.1	-0.7
2002	29.3	31.7	28.5	28.4	0.9
2001	28.4	30.8	28.2	28.0	0.5
2000	29.1	29.5	27.0	27.6	1.5

Notes: Completing high school includes those who attained a degree by equivalence (e.g., GED) as well as those obtaining a high school diploma. “Difference” calculated before rounding.

Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of March Current Population Surveys, 2000-2012

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