

Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report

CHAPTER 1



Population Trends and Educational Attainment



Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report

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This chapter is part of a larger report by the American Council on Education (ACE) titled *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*. The report and its accompanying microsite provide a data-informed foundation for those working to close persistent equity gaps by providing a comprehensive review of the educational pathways of today's college students and the educators who serve them.

Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report and the microsite were made possible through the generous support of The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Visit www.equityinhighered.org to learn more about the project and to download the full report containing more than 200 indicators on race and ethnicity. Also available on the site are downloadable figures, detailed data, and other resources on race and ethnicity in higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 20 years spanning 1997 to 2017, the United States experienced great changes in both the racial and ethnic makeup and the educational attainment of its citizenry. During this time, the population grew by more than 50 million people, many of whom were people of color. The racial and ethnic group to experience the most growth was the Hispanic population, followed by Asians. Looking into the near future, these demographic trends will continue. There are currently more non-White than White children at every age from infant to nine years, producing the first minority-White generation at 49.6 percent (Frey 2018).

Over this 20-year period, the U.S. population also became more educated, as more adults completed postsecondary education than ever before. In 2017, roughly 44 percent of the population ages 25 and older had attained a postsecondary degree, an increase from about 31 percent in 1997. Yet despite this encouraging increase in educational attainment, disparities by race and ethnicity remain high. This is a troubling trend given what we know from research, namely, that those with a postsecondary education are more likely to be employed, earn higher salaries, own homes, vote, live healthier lifestyles, and volunteer in their communities (McMahon 2009; Ma, Pender, and Welch 2016; Turk 2019). These disparities suggest that large groups of Americans are left out of opportunities to improve their lives and to maximize their contributions to society.

KEY FINDINGS

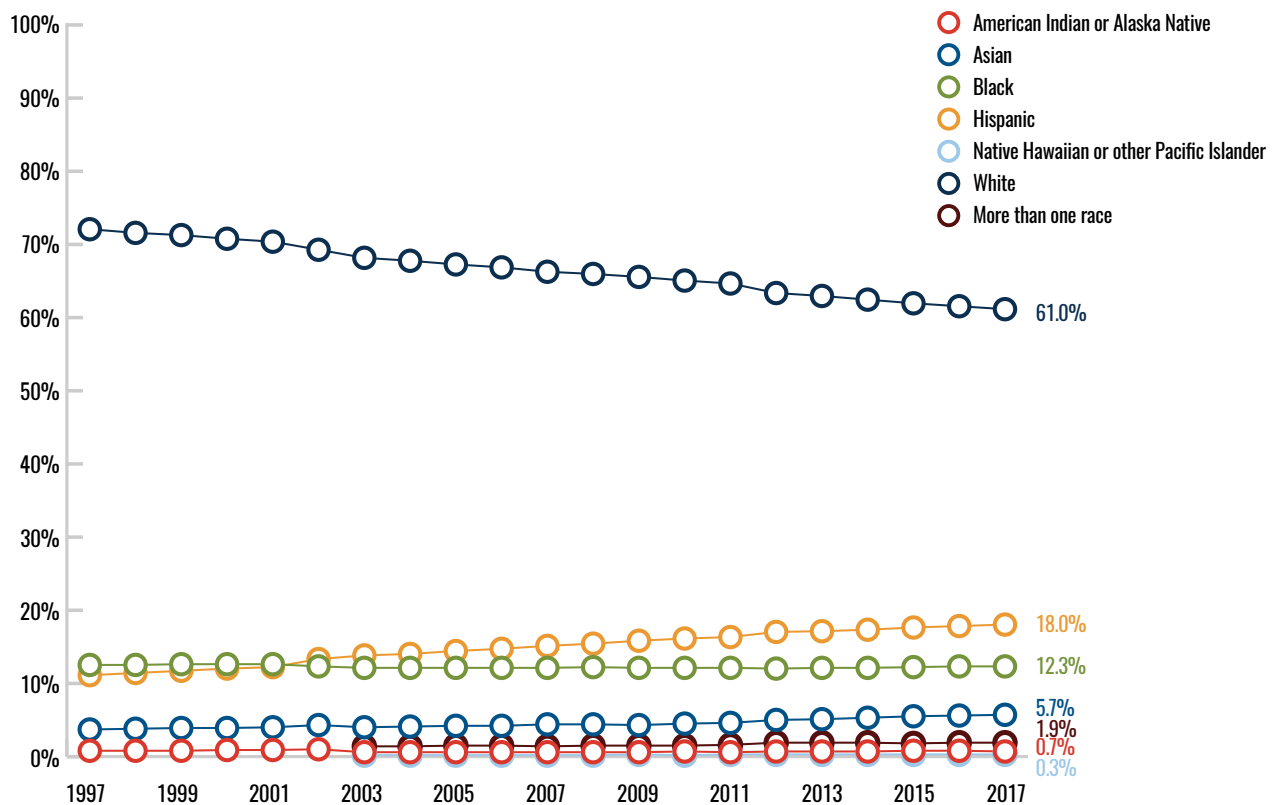
- As the U.S. population increased, the nation became more racially and ethnically diverse. Overall, Hispanics had the largest increase in their total share of the population, increasing from 11.1 percent in 1997 to 18.0 percent in 2017, followed by Asians, whose share increased from 3.7 percent to 5.7 percent.
- Although Whites continued to represent the largest racial and ethnic group in the U.S., their share of the overall population decreased from 71.9 percent in 1997 to 61.0 percent in 2017.
- Some areas across the country experienced greater demographic changes than others. For example, the share of Whites decreased in all but two states (Mississippi and Montana) and the District of Columbia. The greatest increases by any one racial and ethnic group occurred in the Hispanic populations in Florida, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Washington.
- The overall educational attainment of adults ages 25 and older increased, as more of the population enrolled in and completed some level of postsecondary education. In 2017, Asians were the racial and ethnic group with the highest levels of postsecondary attainment.
- Hispanic men and women and American Indian or Alaska Native men had the lowest levels of educational attainment, with more than half having attained a high school credential or less.
- Across all racial and ethnic groups, adults ages 35 to 44 had the highest levels of educational attainment. However, Hispanics followed a different pattern than any other racial and ethnic group, with each 10-year age cohort having higher rates of college attainment than the next-oldest group.

This chapter analyzes data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS). Prior to 2003, the CPS reported only on Hispanic; White; Black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; and Asian or Pacific Islander groups. In 2003, the Census Bureau changed the CPS to include new categories for Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders and individuals of more than one race, aligning CPS data with the outcomes of Census 2000. Because these changes provide individuals the opportunity to select the racial and ethnic groups with which they most identify, they present a more complete picture of the evolving demographics of the U.S. population (Bowler et al. 2003).

THE U.S. POPULATION BY RACE: 1997 TO 2017

Between 1997 and 2017, the U.S. population grew from almost 267 million to 320 million, an increase of almost 54 million people, or 20 percent. Although Whites continued to represent the largest racial and ethnic group in the U.S., their share of the overall population decreased as the country became more diverse. Hispanics experienced the largest growth in their total share of the overall population, while the share of Asians grew slightly, and the share of Blacks¹ and American Indians or Alaska Natives declined slightly.

Figure 1.1: The U.S. Population, by Race and Ethnicity: 1997 to 2017

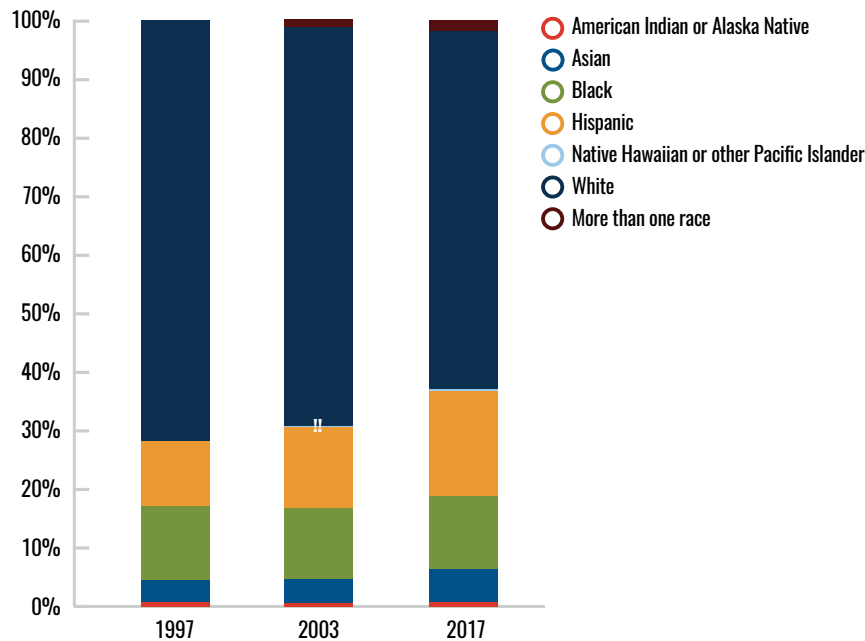


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1997–2017

Notes: Years prior to 2003 only report the following racial demographic categories: Hispanic; White; Black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; and Asian or Pacific Islander. | Interpret data for Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders between 2003 and 2013 with caution. Ratio of standard error is >30%.

¹ The terms Black and African American are used interchangeably.

Figure 1.2: Percentage Distribution of the U.S. Population, by Race and Ethnicity: 1997, 2003, 2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1997, 2003, and 2017

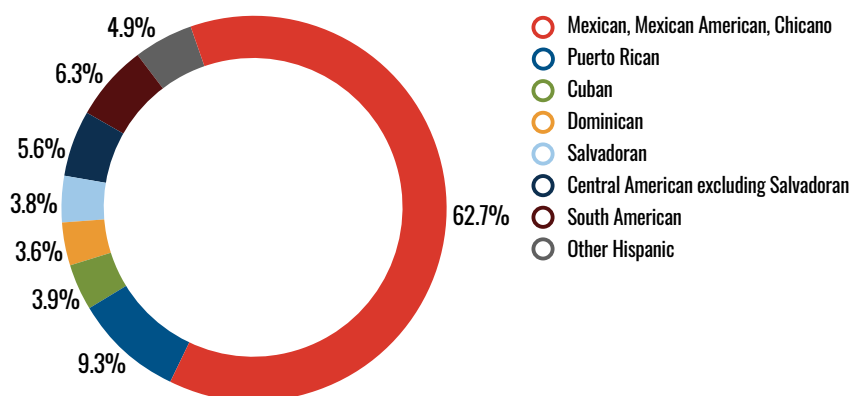
Notes: In 1997, the only racial demographic categories reported were: Hispanic; White; Black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; and Asian or Pacific Islander. | !! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error is >50%.

- Whites remain the largest racial and ethnic group in the United States, but their total share of the population has decreased. In 1997, Whites represented 71.9 percent of the total population, compared with 61.0 percent in 2017.
- The overall share of Hispanics grew from 11.1 percent in 1997 to 18.0 percent in 2017—the largest growth among all racial and ethnic groups.
- The overall share of Asians grew slightly, from 3.7 percent in 1997 to 5.7 percent in 2017.
- Blacks remained relatively constant as a share of the total population, declining slightly from 12.5 percent to 12.3 percent.
- As a share of the total population, the share of American Indians or Alaska Natives held fairly constant, declining from 0.8 percent in 1997 to 0.7 percent in 2017.
- Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders represented 0.2 percent of the total population in 2003 and 0.3 percent in 2017.
- The share of the total population who were of more than one race increased slightly from 1.4 percent in 2003 to 1.9 percent in 2017.

HISPANIC ORIGIN AND ASIAN ORIGIN SUBGROUPS: 2017

The country's Hispanic and Asian populations are often portrayed as monolithic racial and ethnic groups, when in fact they consist of many different subgroups. A closer look reveals great diversity, including their own majority subgroups.

Figure 1.3: The Hispanic Population, by Hispanic Origin: 2017

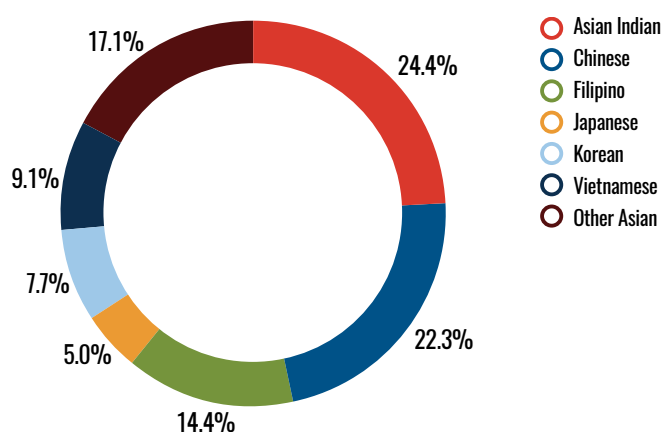


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017

Notes: "Central American excluding Salvadoran" includes respondents of Central American, Central American Indian, Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, or Panamanian origin. | "South American" includes respondents of Argentinian, Bolivian, Chilean, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Paraguayan, Peruvian, South American, South American Indian, Uruguayan, or Venezuelan origin. | "Other Hispanic" includes respondents who reported "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," and who subsequently indicated that they belong to one of 24 Hispanic-origin subgroups (e.g., Castilian) that fall outside the other seven Hispanic origin groups listed in this figure.

- Within the Hispanic population in 2017, the largest subgroup was Mexican, Mexican American, and/or Chicano (62.7 percent), followed by Puerto Rican (9.3 percent), South American² (6.3 percent), Central American excluding Salvadoran³ (5.6 percent), other Hispanic⁴ (4.9 percent), Cuban (3.9 percent), Salvadoran (3.8 percent), and Dominican (3.6 percent).

Figure 1.4: The Asian Population, by Asian Origin: 2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017

Note: "Other Asian" includes all CPS respondents who reported they were "Asian" but who did not identify as a member of any of the six Asian origin groups listed in this figure.

² "South American" includes respondents of Argentinian, Bolivian, Chilean, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Paraguayan, Peruvian, South American, South American Indian, Uruguayan, or Venezuelan origin.

³ "Central American excluding Salvadoran" includes respondents of Central American, Central American Indian, Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, or Panamanian origin.

⁴ "Other Hispanic" includes respondents who reported they were of "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin," and who subsequently indicated that they belong to one of 24 Hispanic origin subgroups (e.g., Castilian) that fall outside the other seven Hispanic origin groups listed in this chapter.

- Within the Asian population in 2017, the largest subgroup was Asian Indian (24.4 percent), followed by Chinese (22.3 percent), other Asian⁵ (17.1 percent), Filipino (14.4 percent), Vietnamese (9.1 percent), Korean (7.7 percent), and Japanese (5.0 percent).

WHERE POPULATIONS ARE GROWING

While the U.S. population has become more diverse over time, some states have experienced greater demographic change than others. Comparing the distribution of racial and ethnic groups⁶ in each state and the District of Columbia between 1997 and 2017 shows where each racial and ethnic group has experienced the largest change.

Table 1.1: Change of the U.S. Population, by Location and Race and Ethnicity: 1997 and 2017

| American Indian or Alaska Native | Asian | Black | Hispanic | White |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alaska (3.2 pp) | New Jersey (5.2 pp) | Maryland (3.1 pp) | Nevada (15.6 pp) | District of Columbia (13.3 pp) |
| South Dakota (2.1 pp) | New York (5.1 pp) | North Dakota (3.0 pp) | Washington (10.3 pp) | Mississippi (1.0 pp) |
| New Mexico (1.8 pp) | Massachusetts (4.4 pp) | Indiana (2.7 pp) | Oklahoma (10.1 pp) | Montana (0.4 pp) |
| | | | Florida (10.0 pp) | |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1997 and 2017

Note: Table depicts states where each racial and ethnic group experienced the largest percentage point (pp) growth in their share of the population.

- The total share of American Indians or Alaska Natives rose in Alaska (3.2 percentage points), South Dakota (2.1 percentage points), and New Mexico (1.8 percentage points).
- The total share of Asians grew by 4 percentage points or more in New Jersey (5.2 percentage points), New York (5.1 percentage points), and Massachusetts (4.4 percentage points).
- The share of Blacks grew by about 3 percentage points in Maryland (3.1 percentage points), North Dakota (3.0 percentage points), and Indiana (2.7 percentage points).
- The total share of Hispanics grew in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, but grew the most in Nevada (15.6 percentage points), Washington (10.3 percentage points), Oklahoma (10.1 percentage points), and Florida (10.0 percentage points).
- Between 1997 and 2017, the total share of the White population decreased throughout the nation, with the exception of the District of Columbia (13.3 percentage point increase), Mississippi (1.0 percentage point increase), and Montana (0.4 percentage point increase).

5 “Other Asian” includes respondents who reported they were “Asian” but who did not identify as a member of any of the six Asian origin groups listed in this chapter.

6 “Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander” and “more than one race” were not official classifications until 2003. As a result, a 20-year comparison is not possible.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF THE TOTAL U.S. POPULATION: 1997 TO 2017

Educational attainment measures the highest credential earned by an individual, at a specific point in time (e.g., a given year). Between 1997 and 2017, overall educational attainment for the U.S. population ages 25 and older increased as more of the population enrolled in and completed some level of postsecondary education.

Table 1.2: Educational Attainment of Adults Ages 25 and Older, by Race and Ethnicity: 1997 and 2017

| | | Less than High School | High School Graduate | Some College, No Degree | Associate Degree | Bachelor's Degree | Master's Degree | Professional Degree | Doctoral Degree |
|------|---|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1997 | All racial and ethnic groups | 17.9% | 33.8% | 17.2% | 7.3% | 16.0% | 5.4% | 1.4% | 1.0% |
| | American Indian or Alaska Native | 25.8% | 35.8% | 18.1% | 8.1% | 7.8% | 3.7% | 0.2%!! | 0.5%!! |
| | Asian | 14.8% | 23.1% | 12.8% | 6.7% | 27.5% | 9.6% | 3.2% | 2.4% |
| | Black | 24.7% | 36.1% | 19.1% | 6.7% | 9.5% | 3.0% | 0.5% | 0.3% |
| | Hispanic | 45.3% | 25.9% | 13.3% | 5.2% | 7.4% | 1.8% | 0.6% | 0.5% |
| | Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| | White | 13.7% | 34.8% | 17.6% | 7.6% | 17.5% | 5.9% | 1.6% | 1.1% |
| | More than one race | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| 2017 | All racial and ethnic groups | 10.4% | 28.8% | 16.3% | 10.3% | 21.3% | 9.5% | 1.5% | 1.9% |
| | American Indian or Alaska Native | 14.7% | 35.2% | 17.6% | 11.9% | 13.4% | 5.1% | 1.4%! | 0.6%! |
| | Asian | 9.1% | 19.9% | 9.3% | 6.4% | 30.7% | 17.9% | 2.1% | 4.7% |
| | Black | 11.9% | 33.0% | 20.4% | 10.3% | 15.3% | 7.1% | 0.7% | 1.1% |
| | Hispanic | 29.5% | 31.0% | 14.4% | 8.0% | 12.2% | 3.9% | 0.5% | 0.7% |
| | Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 10.7% | 35.1% | 19.2% | 9.9% | 18.5% | 5.3% | 0.8%!! | 0.6%!! |
| | White | 5.9% | 28.3% | 16.6% | 11.2% | 23.7% | 10.5% | 1.8% | 2.0% |
| | More than one race | 6.6% | 27.9% | 22.4% | 10.4% | 20.9% | 8.5% | 1.6% | 1.6% |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1997 and 2017

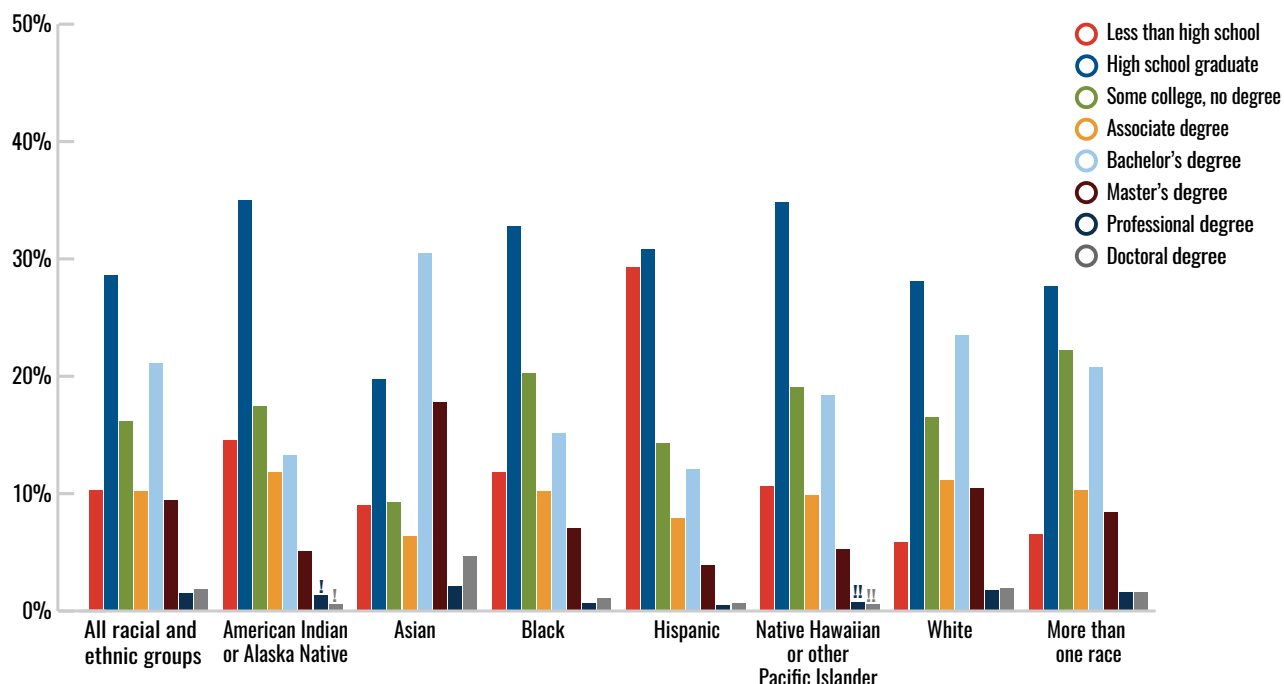
Notes: In 1997, the only racial demographic categories reported were: Hispanic; White; Black; American Indian, Eskimo, or Aleut; and Asian or Pacific Islander. | ! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error to estimate >30% but <50%. | !! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error is >50%.

- In 2017, 44.4 percent of the total population ages 25 and older had attained an associate degree or higher, an increase from 31.1 percent in 1997.
- The percentage of the total population who had some college education but had not completed a credential decreased slightly from 17.2 percent in 1997 to 16.3 percent in 2017.
- In 2017, 28.8 percent of the total population had completed a high school diploma or equivalent as their highest level of educational attainment, a decrease from 33.8 percent in 1997. The percentage of the total population who had less than a high school education fell from 17.9 percent in 1997 to 10.4 percent in 2017.
- Bachelor's degree attainment increased from 16.0 percent of adults ages 25 and older in 1997 to 21.3 percent in 2017. Among racial and ethnic groups, Whites saw the largest increase (17.5 percent in 1997 to 23.7 percent in 2017), followed by Blacks (9.5 percent in 1997 to 15.3 percent in 2017) and American Indians or Alaska Natives (7.8 percent in 1997 to 13.4 percent in 2017).

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY RACE AND ETHNICITY: 2017

In 2017, more than four in 10 adults in the U.S. ages 25 and older had attained an associate degree or higher (44.4 percent), followed by 28.8 percent whose highest level of education was completing high school, 16.3 percent who had some college but no degree, and 10.4 percent who had less than a high school education. However, large differences in attainment exist at all levels by racial and ethnic groups.

Figure 1.5: Educational Attainment of Adults Ages 25 and Older, by Race and Ethnicity: 2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017

Notes: ! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error to estimate >30% but <50%. | !! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error is >50%.

- Asians had higher levels of degree attainment than other racial and ethnic groups. A little less than one-third of all Asians had attained a bachelor's degree (30.7 percent), 17.9 percent had attained a master's degree, and 6.8 percent had attained a professional⁷ or doctoral degree.⁸
- Hispanics had the lowest level of degree attainment among racial and ethnic groups. The majority of Hispanics (60.5 percent) had attained only a high school credential or less, compared with 49.9 percent of American Indians or Alaska Natives, 45.8 percent of Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, 45.0 percent of Blacks, 34.5 percent of individuals of more than one race, 34.2 percent of Whites, and 29.0 percent of Asians.

⁷ Professional degrees reflect those classified as doctorate-professional practice, including chiropractic, dentistry, law, medicine, pharmacy, veterinary medicine, and other degrees for which a credential or license is required for professional practice.

⁸ Doctoral degrees reflect those classified as doctorate-research/scholarship degrees, including PhD, EdD, DMA, and other research-based degrees.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY GENDER: 2017

Data from 2017 show that gender differences in educational attainment exist at each education level when examined among all racial and ethnic groups, usually showing greater percentages of attainment for women. Overall, a larger share of women than men had an associate degree or higher (45.9 percent versus 42.9 percent). The gaps were largest among American Indians or Alaska Natives (36.9 percent of women versus 27.2 percent of men) and those of more than one race (45.5 percent of women versus 40.1 percent of men). However, the pattern was reversed among Asians, with 62.9 percent of men and 60.8 percent of women holding an associate degree or higher, and among Native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, among whom 35.4 percent of men and 34.7 percent of women had at least an associate degree.

Table 1.3: Educational Attainment of Adults Ages 25 and Older, by Gender and Race and Ethnicity: 2017

| | | Less than High School | High School Graduate | Some College, No Degree | Associate Degree | Bachelor's Degree | Master's Degree | Professional Degree | Doctoral Degree |
|-------|---|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Men | All racial and ethnic groups | 10.9% | 30.0% | 16.2% | 9.3% | 21.0% | 8.7% | 1.7% | 2.3% |
| | American Indian or Alaska Native | 17.0% | 37.5% | 18.3% | 9.5% | 12.4% | 3.7% | 0.9%!! | 0.7%!! |
| | Asian | 7.3% | 19.3% | 10.5% | 5.7% | 28.9% | 19.6% | 2.3% | 6.3% |
| | Black | 12.6% | 35.9% | 19.7% | 9.2% | 15.2% | 5.8% | 0.6% | 1.1% |
| | Hispanic | 30.5% | 32.9% | 13.9% | 6.9% | 11.4% | 3.3% | 0.5% | 0.7% |
| | Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 10.9% | 31.8% | 21.9% | 9.2% | 19.8% | 5.3%! | # | 1.1%!! |
| | White | 6.3% | 29.2% | 16.6% | 10.1% | 23.6% | 9.5% | 2.1% | 2.5% |
| | More than one race | 6.8% | 31.9% | 21.2% | 9.8% | 19.9% | 7.2% | 1.0%! | 2.1%! |
| Women | All racial and ethnic groups | 10.0% | 27.7% | 16.5% | 11.2% | 21.6% | 10.3% | 1.2% | 1.5% |
| | American Indian or Alaska Native | 12.8% | 33.2% | 17.0% | 14.0% | 14.4% | 6.2% | 1.7%! | 0.5%!! |
| | Asian | 10.6% | 20.4% | 8.2% | 7.0% | 32.2% | 16.3% | 1.9% | 3.3% |
| | Black | 11.4% | 30.6% | 21.0% | 11.2% | 15.4% | 8.3% | 0.9% | 1.1% |
| | Hispanic | 28.4% | 29.2% | 14.9% | 9.0% | 12.9% | 4.5% | 0.4% | 0.7% |
| | Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 10.5% | 37.8% | 17.0% | 10.5% | 17.4% | 5.2%! | 1.5%!! | 0.1%!! |
| | White | 5.5% | 27.5% | 16.6% | 12.1% | 23.9% | 11.4% | 1.4% | 1.6% |
| | More than one race | 6.4% | 24.4% | 23.6% | 11.0% | 21.7% | 9.6% | 2.1%! | 1.1%! |

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017

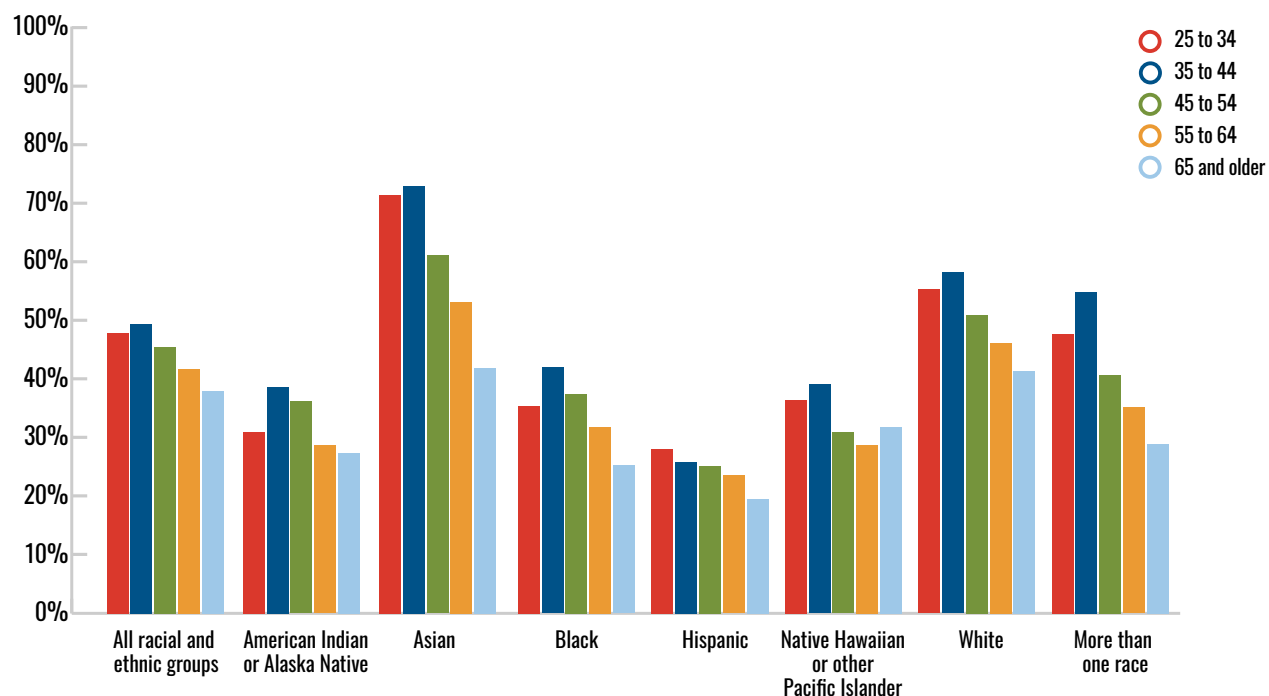
Notes: ! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error to estimate >30% but <50%. | !! Interpret with caution. Ratio of standard error is >50%. | # Zero observations.

- The gender gap in bachelor's degree attainment was smallest among White and Black individuals. For Whites, roughly 24 percent of men and women attained bachelor's degrees. For Blacks, roughly 15 percent of men and women attained bachelor's degrees.
- American Indian or Alaska Native women, Asian women, Hispanic women, and women of more than one race were slightly more likely than men within these same racial and ethnic groups to have attained a bachelor's degree, with gender differences within these racial and ethnic groups ranging from approximately 1 to 3 percentage points.
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander men were more likely than women to have attained a bachelor's degree as their highest level of educational attainment (19.8 percent and 17.4 percent, respectively).
- Hispanic men and women and American Indian or Alaska Native men had the lowest levels of educational attainment, with more than half of these groups having attained a high school credential or less.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY AGE: 2017

Educational attainment varied by age. Across all racial and ethnic groups, adults ages 35 to 44 had higher levels of educational attainment than other age groups in 2017. Hispanics followed a different pattern than other racial and ethnic groups in that each 10-year age cohort had higher rates of college attainment than the next-oldest group. Regardless of age, Asians had the highest level of educational attainment when compared with other racial and ethnic groups.

Figure 1.6: Percentage of Adults with a College Degree, by Age and Race and Ethnicity: 2017



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2017

- Across all racial and ethnic groups, adults ages 35 to 44 were the most likely to have attained an associate degree or higher (49.3 percent), while adults ages 65 and older were the least likely to have attained an associate degree or higher (37.9 percent).
- More than half of Asians had attained a college degree in every age group, with the exception of adults ages 65 and older.
- Hispanics were the only group where educational attainment of a college degree gradually increased as age decreased, with 25- to 34-year-olds the most likely to have attained a college degree (28.0 percent), compared with 35- to 44-year-olds (25.8 percent), 45- to 54-year-olds (25.1 percent), 55- to 64-year-olds (23.5 percent), and adults ages 65 and older (19.5 percent).

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