



## The transition from school to work: education and work experiences

*Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 found that the average worker, approximately 5 years after leaving school for the first time, starts a job that will last 3 years; however, there was considerable variation by education*

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Youths experience different trajectories in their transition from school to work. Some youths jump from job to job and do not develop a steady employment relationship until many years after leaving school, if at all. Others settle into a longer-term employment relationship soon after leaving school. Some policymakers and educators express concern that many new entrants to the job market tend to experience periods of churning, moving from one low paying job to another, without settling into a longer-term relationship.<sup>1</sup> This argument posits that the time, sometimes many years, spent moving from one short-term job to another is nonproductive and steps should be taken to eliminate it.

Other analysts see this period of short employment spells in a more positive light. They argue that early job mobility represents “job shopping” where young workers learn about different work environments and their own skills and interests.<sup>2</sup> As youths acquire different work experiences, they are able to move into jobs that better match their skills and interests, often with higher wages. In this light, the job-shopping phase can be beneficial for both workers and their employers.

Education is clearly linked to these employment processes. In high school, youths learn mainly general skills. These include not only hard skills such as literacy and numeracy, but soft skills such as punctuality, dependability, and following directions. Because of their youth, those seeking jobs just after high school may know less about the world of work and be less committed to a par-

ticular occupation. Likewise, employers of these youths have less information about their skills. Both employer and employee may look at entry-level jobs as a learning process by which each can evaluate the long-term potential of their “match.” College graduates, on the other hand, invest more in specific skills and may acquire a greater knowledge of the job market within their field. They can match their interests to skills and reject potential career paths before entering the labor market. Employers of new college graduates have potentially greater knowledge of the particular skills of their new hires, and, because of the higher wages they must pay, more incentive to find a good match. For these reasons, matches between new college graduates and their employers may be expected to last longer than those between new high school graduates and employers. Youths who have left school without a high school degree are doubly disadvantaged; they lack both general and job-specific skills, and they face employers who have low expectations and little incentive to invest in their matches. Consequently, schooling choices may dictate the speed and ease of the school-to-work transition.

This article documents the transition from school to work for a nationally representative sample of men and women from the time they first left school for a year or more until age 35. The tables in this article describe the duration of employment relationships and time since leaving school until holding a job for a specific number of years. This will help to answer a number of questions about the transition from school to work,

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such as: how does job changing evolve as individuals age; how does job mobility behavior vary by education level and other demographic characteristics; and finally, how long does it take an average individual to settle into a longer-term job.

Other researchers have used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) to study job changes, mostly focusing on men. Some of the articles have been more descriptive like this one, although for earlier time periods.<sup>3</sup> Others engage in detailed empirical analysis, and generally try to examine the causes and consequences of early job changes.<sup>4</sup> In this article, we use data through 2002, which allows us to trace individuals' careers until age 35. Thus we can show individuals' job transitions from the end of school into the workforce and up until mid-career.

## Data and methods

*The data.* To adequately measure the path an individual takes from the completion of schooling to stable employment, one needs longitudinal data that track respondents over their working lives. In this article, the education and employment histories are examined using NLSY79 data. These data describe a sample of men and women who were ages 14 to 22 in 1979 and 37 to 44 when interviewed in 2002. In 2002, the sample—which includes an overrepresentation of blacks and Hispanics—had 7,724 respondents. This article defines the transition from school to work to occur at the point when the individual leaves school for 12 months or more. However, work histories in the NLSY79 data generally begin in January 1, 1978, or the respondent's 16th birthday, whichever is later. Thus, in order to view the complete school-to-work transition without oversampling those with higher education, only respondents born between January 1, 1961, and December 31, 1964—that is, the last four birth cohorts of the NLSY79—are used.<sup>5</sup> After dropping respondents with incomplete data, there were a total of 3,845 respondents. In all computations, weights are used to adjust for different sampling rates and nonresponse rates so that the data are a nationally representative sample of all youths born between 1961 and 1964 and living in the United States in 1979.

A key feature of the NLSY79 data set is that it records much of the information as event histories; thus, the dates of transitions are documented and updated with each interview. In the event history of employment, or work history, the "start" and "stop" dates of each job the respondent has held are recorded, as well as dates of nonwork (such as maternity leave or layoff) within each job. This allows various job-related measures, such as the number of jobs held, weeks worked, and job tenure, to be calculated. In addition, because the dates of these job-related

behaviors are recorded for each individual, these variables can be calculated for a specific period—for example, the number of jobs each worker held during the 2 years before the start date of a certain job can be determined. Using the NLSY79 work history data, it is possible to construct and link monthly records of school attendance or nonattendance with employment.

*Defining school leaving groups.* In this analysis, individuals are grouped based on their education level when they first left school. Individuals were assigned to a school-leaving group based on the highest degree, if any, they reported earning as of the time they first left school for 12 months or longer.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if an individual dropped out of school but subsequently returned to finish high school within a 12-month period, they would be classified as a high school graduate and not a dropout. Similarly, individuals who completed high school and went to work full time, but within the 12-month period began taking night classes, would continue to be viewed as 'in school,' despite their work schedule, until they were no longer taking classes. Once determined that an individual had left school for 12 months, even if the person later returned to school and received a degree, the initial school-leaving group to which they were assigned was not changed.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 describes the sample used in this article by educational category as well as the average age respondents first left school.<sup>8</sup> Twelve percent of the sample first left school at approximately age 17 before attaining a high school degree and are assigned to the category of dropouts. Approximately 55 percent of the sample first left school for at least 12 months after attaining a high school degree; these respondents left school approximately 1 year later (age 18) than dropouts. Individuals with some college but who did not attain a bachelor's degree before first leaving school make up 22 percent of our sample, while 11 percent are those who attained a college degree before first leaving school. The educational outcomes of men were more dispersed than those of women; men were both more likely to drop out and more likely to complete college.<sup>9</sup> Ethnic and racial differences in initial educational attainment are quite pronounced. Whites were more likely than either blacks or Hispanics or Latinos to have either gone to college or earned a college degree and less likely to drop out.

While the date first left school is a useful point to measure the school-to-work transition, it does not always indicate the final degree earned. Many individuals return to school, either by combining work and schooling or by leaving the labor force altogether. Table 2 shows that a large number of individuals return to school at some point before they be-

**Table 1. Degree and age when first left school for 12 months or longer and degree when completed schooling, by school-leaving group**

Original school-leaving group and characteristic	Degree when first left school	Average age when first left school for 12 months or longer	Degree when completed schooling
High school dropouts .....	12.1	17.0	7.1
High school graduates .....	54.6	17.9	42.8
Some college .....	22.0	21.4	23.7
College graduates .....	11.3	23.8	26.5
Men .....	—	19.3	—
Less than a high school diploma .....	12.6	17.1	7.4
High school graduates, no college .....	54.2	18.0	44.4
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	19.6	21.6	21.1
Bachelor's degree or more .....	12.6	24.0	26.1
Women .....	—	19.2	—
Less than a high school diploma .....	10.6	16.9	6.1
High school graduates, no college .....	55.0	17.9	40.8
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	24.5	21.3	26.3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	9.9	23.6	26.7
White (non-Hispanic) .....	—	19.4	—
Less than a high school diploma .....	10.2	16.9	5.8
High school graduates, no college .....	54.0	17.9	41.4
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	23.0	21.5	22.4
Bachelor's degree or more .....	12.7	23.7	30.4
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	—	18.9	—
Less than a high school diploma .....	17.0	17.4	10.0
High school graduates, no college .....	58.7	18.1	49.0
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	19.1	21.3	28.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	5.1	24.2	12.1
Hispanic or Latino .....	—	18.7	—
Less than a high school diploma .....	22.7	16.9	15.4
High school graduates, no college .....	54.2	18.0	45.3
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	16.9	21.3	26.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	6.1	25.3	12.4

NOTE: Educational attainment is defined as of the time they first left school for 12 consecutive months. Our sample is 51 percent men; 49 percent

women; 77 percent non-Hispanic whites; 15 percent non-Hispanic blacks; and 7 percent Hispanics or Latinos.

come age 35; however, not everyone who returned to school eventually received a degree. Fifty-three percent of high school dropouts returned to school, as did 42 percent of high school graduates. While 58 percent of initial dropouts never received a high school diploma or GED (general equivalency diploma), 28 percent of dropouts did eventually earn a high school diploma; an additional 10 percent received some college education; and 4 percent went on to receive a college degree or more. Again, ethnic and racial differences are quite striking in this regard. When returning to school, whites in all education categories were more likely to complete their college degree. As already noted, whites generally had more education when they first left school. Thus, the process of returning to school to complete unfinished degrees did not close the racial gap in educational attainment, but instead seemed to widen it.

As seen in the last column of table 1, by age 35, whites are significantly less likely to have less than a high school diploma or GED and twice as likely to have completed college. Only 6 percent of whites had not received a high school de-

gree or GED by their 35th birthday compared with 10 percent of blacks and 15 percent of Hispanics or Latinos. In contrast, more than 30 percent of whites had received a college degree compared with only 12 percent of blacks and Hispanics or Latinos. In contrast, the gender gap in educational attainment is small; at 35, women have only slightly more education than men.

### The school-to-work transition

*Duration of employment.* The longitudinal nature and event history data collection of the NLSY79 make the data set ideal for studying job duration. A job-shopping model would suggest that the quality of job matches would increase with each subsequent job. Thus the probability that one would find a better match and switch jobs would decrease over time. This tendency is reinforced by the development of job-specific skills, which may not be valued by another employer. Theoretically, then, a successful transition to the labor market should be characterized by increasing job tenure. Therefore,

**Table 2.** Distribution of completed schooling, by school-leaving group

	Ever returned to school	Highest degree ever reported receiving			
		High school dropout	High school graduates (or GED)	Some college	College graduates
High school dropouts .....	53.2	58.3	28.2	9.7	3.7
High school graduates .....	42.1	—	72.1	22.9	5.0
Some college .....	54.6	—	—	45.5	54.5
College graduates .....	41.0	—	—	—	100.0
<b>Men</b>					
High school dropouts .....	50.1	58.8	27.7	9.1	4.4
High school graduates .....	37.2	—	75.5	20.3	4.2
Some college .....	54.8	—	—	45.6	54.4
College graduates .....	34.5	—	—	—	100.0
<b>Women</b>					
High school dropouts .....	57.4	57.7	28.8	10.7	2.8
High school graduates .....	47.1	—	68.6	25.6	5.8
Some college .....	54.5	—	—	45.5	54.6
College graduates .....	49.7	—	—	—	100.0
<b>White (non-Hispanic)</b>					
High school dropouts .....	50.4	56.8	27.5	10.9	4.9
High school graduates .....	42.1	—	71.5	22.6	5.9
Some college .....	53.4	—	—	39.5	60.5
College graduates .....	41.2	—	—	—	100.0
<b>Black (non-Hispanic)</b>					
High school dropouts .....	61.8	58.6	31.5	8.4	1.5
High school graduates .....	42.3	—	74.3	23.6	2.1
Some college .....	58.7	—	—	71.2	28.8
College graduates .....	26.5	—	—	—	100.0
<b>Hispanic or Latino</b>					
High school dropouts .....	49.9	67.8	23.3	7.2	1.8
High school graduates .....	39.9	—	73.7	23.8	2.5
College graduates .....	38.6	—	—	—	100.0

NOTE: Educational attainment is defined as of the time they first left school for 12 consecutive months.

tenure of the longest job ever held can be used as an indicator of the successful transition from school to work and into a stable employment relationship.

Table 3 shows the duration of the longest job held. Youths with a high school degree or less can learn about interests and gain job-specific skills while on the job, and those with some post high school education can gain job-specific skills in the classroom. If these schooling choices are equally suited for preparing youths for stable employment, then the duration of their longest job by age 35 should be similar. A period of churning or job shopping would be expected from those who do not yet know their skills and preferences. However, high school dropouts and graduates should eventually obtain job- or employer-specific skills; find a compatible career path; and settle into long-term jobs. From that point on they would, theoretically, have labor market behavior similar to youths who spent that time gaining those skills in a classroom. Again, the data disprove this. Even though high school dropouts

left school the earliest, were in the labor market for the longest time—and therefore had the most time to start down a career path—they are the least likely to have had stable employment relationships lasting more than 2 years. At age 20, 14 percent of dropouts have never held a job and 58 percent had yet to hold a job for more than 1 year. At age 35, approximately 18 years after leaving school for the first time, 2 percent of dropouts have never held a job; 9 percent of dropouts have never held a job for more than a year; and an additional 15 percent have never held a job for 2 years or longer. Only 36 percent of high school dropouts had held a job for 5 years or more by age 35.

In contrast, those with at least some college or a bachelor's degree make the transition to stable employment—that is, a job lasting more than 2 years—the fastest. By age 30, nearly 86 percent of those with some college and 82 percent with a bachelor's degree or more have held a job for more than 2 years. And by age 35, about 95 percent of individuals in these two education categories have

**Table 3. Duration of employment relationship with a single employer, for longest held job from first time left school to age 35, by age and educational attainment**

Age and characteristic	No job	Duration of longest employment relationship			
		Less than 1 year	More than 1 year but less than 2 years	More than 2 years but less than 5 years	5 years or more
Through age 20 .....	10.3	57.4	27.8	4.4	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a high school diploma .....	14.2	58.1	21.8	6.0	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	9.4	56.4	30.4	4.2	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	12.7	84.1	3.2	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )
Through age 25 .....	2.2	19.6	28.8	41.3	8.3
Less than a high school diploma .....	4.2	28.2	24.5	36.7	6.4
High school graduates, no college .....	1.7	15.5	24.4	45.4	12.9
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1.5	18.3	36.2	43.4	.6
Bachelor's degree or more .....	2.2	37.6	45.0	15.2	( <sup>1</sup> )
Through age 30 .....	1.0	6.2	13.8	44.3	34.6
Less than a high school diploma .....	2.2	15.9	18.7	41.9	21.3
High school graduates, no college .....	1.0	5.7	14.2	42.2	36.9
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.2	3.5	10.6	46.0	39.6
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.7	3.6	12.5	53.7	28.4
Through age 35 .....	.7	2.9	6.9	33.1	56.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	1.8	9.1	14.5	39.0	35.7
High school graduates, no college .....	.6	2.6	7.4	33.7	55.7
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.1	1.5	3.1	28.8	66.4
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.1	.4	4.1	31.8	62.5

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are not presented for these categories because most sample members had not been out of school long enough to hold a job of this length.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates are not presented because most sample members in this education category are not yet out of school.

done so. At age 35, 66 percent of those with some college and 63 percent of those with a college degree had held a job for 5 years or more.

*Women in the labor market.* During the last several decades, the “working mother” has become the norm rather than the exception.<sup>10</sup> While women no longer automatically withdraw from the labor force upon marrying or after having a child, it remains common for women with young children to interrupt their careers for both childbearing and childrearing. Women may also choose more intermittent or seasonal work that correlates with school or other childrearing activities. It is reasonable to expect that their work trajectory will be different from men. However, much of the difference between the school-to-work trajectory of men and women—at least in the measures presented here—appears to stem from the variability of work experience in female dropouts.

Table 4 breaks down the duration of longest held employment relationship by sex as well as age. At all ages, female high school dropouts are significantly more likely to have never held a job, and held jobs for less time. At age 20, 21 percent of female dropouts had never held a job, while approximately 13 percent had held a job for between 1 and 2 years. Only 9 percent of male dropouts, in comparison, had never been employed, and 28 percent had held their longest job between 1 and 2 years. While the differ-

ence in employment duration shrinks with age, it never equalizes. At their 35th birthday, 4 percent of female dropouts had never held a job and only a quarter had held a job more than 5 years. In comparison, nearly 44 percent of male dropouts had held a job more than 5 years by age 35, and almost all had held a job.

The work experiences of dropouts contrasts to the employment histories of those with more education. At age 25, women with some college or a college degree are more likely to have held a job since leaving school for the first time, and were equally and often more likely to have held a job of a specific duration as similarly educated men. However, differences emerged with age. These differences are probably due to the fact that some women leave and re-enter the workforce due to household responsibilities as they age. At age 35, only 1 percent of male or female college graduates had never held a job, but 68 percent of the men had held a job for more than 5 years, compared with 55 percent of the women. Only 3 percent of male college graduates had never held a job for 2 or more years, compared with 9 percent of women with a college degree.

*Racial differences.* Table 5 examines the duration of employment relationships for the longest held job by race and ethnicity. Compared with similarly educated whites or Hispanics, blacks consistently have less tenure. However, blacks in particular benefit from increases in education. At

**Table 4.** Duration of employment relationship with a single employer, for longest held job from first time left school to age 35—by sex, age, and educational attainment

Age and characteristic	No job	Duration of longest employment relationship			
		Less than 1 year	More than 1 year but less than 2 years	More than 2 years but less than 5 years	5 years or more
Men only through age 20 .....	9.8	58.0	28.7	3.5	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a high school diploma .....	8.7	57.6	28.3	5.4	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	10.1	57.7	29.1	3.1	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )
Women only through age 20 .....	10.9	56.9	27.0	5.3	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a high school diploma .....	21.2	58.6	13.3	6.8	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	8.7	55.1	31.0	5.2	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	13.3	85.4	1.3	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )
Men only through age 25 .....	1.7	19.4	28.3	42.5	8.1
Less than a high school diploma .....	1.1	20.7	24.6	47.0	6.5
High school graduates, no college .....	1.7	15.1	24.3	46.5	12.5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	2.0	21.9	35.9	39.7	.4
Bachelor's degree or more .....	2.4	38.6	41.5	17.4	( <sup>2</sup> )
Women only through age 25 .....	2.3	19.9	29.4	40.0	8.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	8.3	38.1	24.4	23.0	6.2
High school graduates, no college .....	1.8	16.0	24.6	44.3	13.3
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1.1	15.2	36.4	46.5	.7
Bachelor's degree or more .....	2.0	36.3	49.1	12.6	( <sup>2</sup> )
Men through age 30 .....	.8	5.0	11.9	45.2	37.1
Less than a high school diploma .....	.1	11.1	15.7	47.1	25.9
High school graduates, no college .....	.9	4.0	12.6	42.8	39.7
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.4	3.4	10.1	45.3	40.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.6	5.1	7.7	53.9	31.7
Women through age 30 .....	1.3	7.5	15.7	43.3	32.1
Less than a high school diploma .....	4.9	22.2	22.6	35.1	15.2
High school graduates, no college .....	1.0	7.5	15.9	41.6	34.0
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.1	3.5	11.0	46.7	38.0
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.9	1.5	18.9	53.6	24.1
Men through age 35 .....	.5	2.3	5.0	31.2	60.9
Less than a high school diploma .....	.1	7.3	10.0	39.0	43.5
High school graduates, no college .....	.6	1.9	5.8	31.9	59.8
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.1	1.7	2.0	25.0	71.1
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.4	.0	1.1	29.4	68.1
Women through age 35 .....	.8	3.5	8.9	35.0	51.7
Less than a high school diploma .....	4.0	11.5	20.4	38.9	25.3
High school graduates, no college .....	.6	3.3	9.1	35.6	51.4
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.1	1.4	4.0	32.0	62.5
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.7	1.0	8.1	35.1	55.1

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are not presented for these categories because most sample members had not been out of school long enough to hold a job of this length.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates are not presented because most sample members in this education category are not yet out of school.

**Table 5. Duration of employment relationship with a single employer, for longest held job from first time left school to age 35—by age, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, and educational attainment**

Age and characteristic	No job	Duration of longest employment relationship			
		Less than 1 year	More than 1 year but less than 2 years	More than 2 years but less than 5 years	5 years or more
<b>Through age 20</b>					
White (non-Hispanic) .....	6.7	56.9	31.5	4.9	(1)
Less than a high school diploma .....	10.5	58.3	25.2	6.1	(1)
High school graduates, no college .....	6.0	55.5	33.6	4.9	(1)
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
Bachelor's degree or more .....	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	25.1	58.4	14.3	2.2	(1)
Less than a high school diploma .....	25.7	56.7	13.2	4.4	(1)
High school graduates, no college .....	24.6	58.6	15.1	1.7	(1)
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
Bachelor's degree or more .....	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
Hispanic or Latino .....	12.7	60.9	22.3	4.2	(1)
Less than a high school diploma .....	16.0	56.0	19.5	8.5	(1)
High school graduates, no college .....	10.9	62.3	24.4	2.4	(1)
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)	(2)
Bachelor's degree or more .....	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)
<b>Through age 25</b>					
White (non-Hispanic) .....	1.3	17.6	29.1	43.2	8.8
Less than a high school diploma .....	2.3	23.3	26.5	41.7	6.2
High school graduates, no college .....	1.0	13.4	23.5	47.6	14.4
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	2.3	16.5	37.5	44.6	.4
Bachelor's degree or more .....	2.4	37.9	43.4	16.2	(2)
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	5.7	27.5	30.2	31.0	5.7
Less than a high school diploma .....	11.0	37.8	23.3	21.5	6.5
High school graduates, no college .....	4.6	23.6	29.9	34.9	7.0
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	5.2	26.9	33.8	32.3	1.8
Bachelor's degree or more .....	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)
Hispanic or Latino .....	2.2	22.3	24.7	43.6	7.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	3.2	32.5	18.0	38.7	7.7
High school graduates, no college .....	1.6	19.1	33.0	45.5	9.8
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	2.2	18.2	28.9	50.8	.0
Bachelor's degree or more .....	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)
<b>Through age 30</b>					
White (non-Hispanic) .....	.5	4.5	13.0	45.2	36.8
Less than a high school diploma .....	.8	11.5	17.6	47.8	22.2
High school graduates, no college .....	.4	4.3	13.4	42.4	39.5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.9	2.6	10.0	46.4	41.0
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.7	3.5	12.9	52.3	29.7
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	3.1	12.7	18.3	40.3	25.6
Less than a high school diploma .....	6.5	25.3	23.3	27.0	18.0
High school graduates, no college .....	2.8	11.1	19.3	41.5	25.3
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1.4	9.3	12.8	44.6	31.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.7	2.2	10.2	55.0	30.9
Hispanic or Latino .....	1.8	9.1	13.5	44.2	31.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	2.5	18.7	15.8	39.6	23.4
High school graduates, no college .....	1.3	7.6	12.8	43.7	34.5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1.2	.4	12.0	47.1	39.3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)	(3)
<b>Through age 35</b>					
White (non-Hispanic) .....	.4	1.9	5.7	32.6	59.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	.6	6.0	13.9	29.7	29.7
High school graduates, no college .....	.5	2.0	5.8	31.6	60.0
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.5	1.4	2.6	31.3	64.2
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1.2	.1	3.8	31.8	62.4

See notes at end of table.

**Table 5.** Continued—Duration of employment relationship with a single employer, for longest held job from first time left school to age 35—by age, race, Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, and educational attainment

Age and characteristic	No job	Duration of longest employment relationship			
		Less than 1 year	More than 1 year but less than 2 years	More than 2 years but less than 5 years	5 years or more
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	1.7	7.1	13.8	34.0	43.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	4.6	18.0	18.9	34.7	23.9
High school graduates, no college .....	1.5	5.5	15.2	35.0	42.7
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.0	4.2	7.3	29.4	59.1
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.0	.0	4.5	37.6	58.0
Hispanic or Latino .....	1.5	4.4	6.7	34.5	52.9
Less than a high school diploma .....	2.5	9.6	12.0	39.5	36.4
High school graduates, no college .....	1.1	4.1	6.1	33.0	55.7
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	2.0	.4	3.0	31.8	63.2
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are not presented for these categories because most sample members had not been out of school long enough to hold a job of this length.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates are not presented because most sample members in this education category are not yet out of school.

<sup>3</sup> Estimates are not presented because cell size is less than 50.

their 20th birthday, 27 percent of black dropouts and 24 percent of blacks with a high school degree had never held a job. By their 25th birthday, 11 percent of black dropouts had yet to hold a job, compared with 6 percent of blacks with a high school degree. By their 35th birthday, 4 percent of black dropouts had still never held a job, and less than a quarter had ever held a job for 5 years or more. On the other hand, less than 2 percent of black high school graduates had never held a job, and 43 percent had held a job for 5 years or longer. Moreover, at age 35 nearly all blacks with some college or those with college degrees had held jobs, and approximately 60 percent had held jobs for 5 years or more.

A second way to use job duration to study the school-to-work transition is to look at the tenure of all jobs ever held, not just the longest job. Table 6 presents a measure of job mobility or churning by averaging the tenure across all jobs held since first leaving school. At their 25th birthday, 55 percent of the sample changed jobs, on average, at least once a year, while approximately 7 percent had an average tenure of 3 years or more. However, even at age 35, nearly a quarter of the sample had average tenure of less than a year, meaning a nontrivial portion of the sample continued to have a relatively large number of short-duration jobs as they approached middle age. What is striking is that at age 35, half of all dropouts have an average tenure across all jobs that is 1 year or less, while only 10 percent have average tenure of 3 years or more. While table 3 shows

that the majority of dropouts at some point have held a job that lasted more than 2 years, table 6 indicates that for most dropouts, jobs of long duration are accompanied by many more jobs of short duration.

Again, the differences in the employment histories of men and women became apparent with age. At age 25, the average tenure across all jobs for men and women is roughly the same: 55 percent of men and 56 percent of women had average tenure less than 1 year, while 6 percent of men and 7 percent of women had average tenure of more than 3 years. By age 35, approximately 22 percent of men had average tenure of less than 1 year, compared with 27 percent of women—and 28 percent of men had average tenure of more than 3 years, compared with 22 percent of women. More importantly, this difference holds true for all education categories. Even female college graduates consistently have less average tenure than similarly educated men. While 3 percent of college-educated men have average tenure of less than 1 year, 13 percent of college-educated women have the same. Moreover, 47 percent of these men have average tenure of more than 3 years, compared with only 30 percent of college-educated women.

*Years or jobs until 'stable employment.'* As already demonstrated, individuals have a great deal of job mobility in their first years out of school. Brief and intermittent periods of employment are common among many young workers, especially those with low levels of education. The



**Table 6. Percentage of individuals who have average tenure across all jobs less than a specific duration**

Characteristic	Percent of people with average tenure length of:								
	To 25th birthday			To 30th birthday			To 35th birthday		
	1 year or less	More than 1 year but less than 3 years	3 years or more	1 year or less	More than 1 year but less than 3 years	3 years or more	1 year or more	More than 1 year but less than 3 years	3 years or more
Total .....	55.3	38.0	6.7	35.4	48.5	16.1	24.2	50.3	25.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	70.1	25.9	4.0	61.5	31.7	6.8	50.4	40.0	9.7
High school graduates, no college .....	52.0	39.2	8.8	38.1	46.9	15.1	26.6	50.5	22.9
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	52.2	42.6	5.2	21.7	57.3	21.0	12.9	54.2	32.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	64.5	35.0	.5	21.4	56.6	22.0	7.2	53.2	39.6
Men .....	55.1	38.6	6.3	33.7	48.9	17.4	22.0	49.7	28.3
Less than a high school diploma .....	65.2	30.4	4.4	56.9	35.9	7.2	43.5	45.9	10.5
High school graduates, no college .....	52.1	40.3	7.7	36.7	48.0	15.3	25.0	50.5	24.6
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	52.2	41.6	6.2	20.0	55.0	25.0	11.2	49.9	38.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	64.5	34.6	1.0	16.5	57.4	26.0	2.8	50.2	47.0
Women .....	55.6	37.3	7.1	37.2	48.0	14.8	26.5	51.0	22.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	77.1	19.5	3.4	67.8	26.0	6.2	59.8	31.8	8.5
High school graduates, no college .....	51.9	38.2	9.9	39.5	45.7	14.8	28.2	50.5	21.3
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	52.1	43.4	4.5	23.1	59.2	17.6	14.3	57.9	27.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	64.5	35.5	.0	27.9	55.5	16.6	13.0	57.1	29.9
White (non-Hispanic) .....	53.2	40.1	6.7	32.6	49.7	17.7	21.5	50.8	27.8
Less than a high school diploma .....	68.4	28.6	3.0	58.3	34.8	6.9	46.6	42.7	10.7
High school graduates, no college .....	49.1	41.6	9.3	35.8	47.4	16.8	24.0	50.9	25.2
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	51.8	43.7	4.5	20.0	58.4	21.6	12.2	53.6	34.3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	64.2	35.3	.6	21.0	56.0	22.9	7.4	51.9	40.7
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	65.4	28.0	6.5	47.4	41.9	10.7	36.3	47.3	16.4
Less than a high school diploma .....	74.2	19.3	6.5	68.6	23.7	7.7	59.3	32.0	8.7
High school graduates, no college .....	64.5	29.0	6.5	49.2	42.2	8.7	38.5	47.3	14.3
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	59.7	32.5	7.8	30.7	52.6	16.7	17.6	57.7	24.7
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	22.6	57.2	20.2	9.1	57.7	33.2
Hispanic or Latino .....	57.4	34.6	8.0	40.9	49.0	11.2	27.8	52.5	19.7
Less than a high school diploma .....	70.1	24.4	5.5	64.0	30.9	5.1	51.9	41.5	6.6
High school graduates, no college .....	56.4	35.3	8.3	38.7	51.5	9.7	26.5	54.8	18.7
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	39.9	48.2	11.9	20.0	58.0	22.0	9.1	53.4	37.5
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are not presented because cell size is less than 50.

question remains: how long does it take for young workers to find stable employment or a longer-term employment relationship?

Table 7 presents the median number of years from first leaving school until a worker holds a job for either 1, 3, or 5 years. Comparing the four school-leaving groups, it is apparent that the transition from school to work was quicker as education increased. For example, the median high school dropout took more than 3 years to start a job that would last a full year, and nearly 11 years before they started a job that would last 3 years. Because less than 50 percent of the high school dropout sample had yet to hold a job for 5 years at age 35, we cannot determine the median number of years. In comparison, the median high school graduate took 6 years to start a job that would last 3 years and 10 years to start one lasting 5 years. Those with a college degree settled into stable

employment much more quickly; within a year and a half they started a job that would last 3 years—and less than 4 years to start a job that would last 5 years.

In other words, the median high school dropout started a job that would last 3 years at age 29; the median high school graduate, at age 24; and the median college graduate, age 26. In addition, the median high school dropout had yet to hold a job lasting 5 years by age 35, while a high school graduate started one at age 28. A college graduate started a job lasting 5 years at age 27. It appears that high school graduates are able to use the general skills gained in high school to obtain additional on-the-job skills. While this article does not analyze the wage potential of jobs and cannot determine if the career paths are similar, the median high school graduate started jobs of a significant duration—5 years—at approximately the same age as the median college graduate.

**Table 7. Median number of years between leaving school for the first time and starting a job that lasts a set amount of time, to age 35, 1978–2002**

Characteristic	Median number of years between leaving school for the first time and starting a job that will last at least:		
	1 year	3 years	5 years or more
Total .....	.9	4.6	9.2
Less than a high school diploma .....	3.3	10.8	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1.3	5.8	10.1
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.5	2.7	5.0
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.2	1.3	3.5
Men .....	.8	4.1	8.0
Less than a high school diploma .....	2.3	7.6	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1.2	5.4	9.1
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.4	2.5	4.1
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.1	1.0	2.3
Women .....	1.0	5.3	10.9
Less than a high school diploma .....	5.9	14.9	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1.3	6.4	11.7
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.5	3.0	5.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.2	2.5	5.4
White (non-Hispanic) .....	.8	4.1	8.1
Less than a high school diploma .....	2.9	8.7	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1.0	5.3	9.2
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.4	2.6	4.7
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.1	1.3	3.3
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	2.3	8.0	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a high school diploma .....	6.2	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	3.1	9.1	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.9	3.8	6.5
Bachelor's degree or more .....	.3	1.9	3.2
Hispanic or Latino .....	1.5	5.7	10.5
Less than a high school diploma .....	4.0	10.5	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1.8	6.2	10.3
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	.2	.2	4.9
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are not presented because less than 50 percent of the sample had held a job of this length.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates are not presented because cell size is less than 50.

Female dropouts took longer to find stable employment than male dropouts. It took the median female dropout approximately twice as long to hold jobs lasting 1 or 3 years than male dropouts; 5.9 years versus 2.3 years before starting a job that would last 1 year; and 14.9 years versus 7.6 years before starting a job that would last 3 years. While women with a college education started a job that lasted at least 1 year at the same time as similarly educated men, it took them significantly longer to start a job that lasted 5 years (5.4 years versus 2.3 years).

Compared with whites and Hispanics or Latinos, blacks fared poorly in the labor market. At their 35th birthday, more than 50 percent of both black high school dropouts and graduates had never held a job for 5 years or more, and more than 50 percent of black dropouts had never held a job lasting at least 3 years. It took white dropouts nearly 9 years to start a job that would last 3 years, while Hispanic or Latino dropouts took more than 10 years. In comparison, white college graduates started a job that would last 3 years approximately 1 year

after leaving school; blacks with a college degree took approximately 1 extra year—but started a job lasting at least 3 years the same time as whites did.

Similar patterns existed for the median number of jobs held from time first left school until workers settled into stable employment. (See table 8.) In all cases, measuring number of jobs held from first leaving school until starting a job that lasted 1, 3, or 5 years, college graduates made the transition to stable employment with the least amount of churning or job shopping. A high school dropout, on the other hand, seems to do a fair amount of churning. The median high school dropout held two jobs before starting a job that lasted 1 year and held five jobs before starting a job that lasted 3 years. A high school graduate, in comparison, held one job before holding a job for 1 year and five jobs before holding a job for 5 years. Finally, those with a college degree or more found a long-lasting job with relatively little job shopping or churning. College graduates held only two jobs before starting a job that lasted 5 years or more.

**Table 8.** Median number of jobs held between leaving school for the first time and starting a job that will last a set amount of time, to age 35, 1978–2002

Characteristic	Median number of jobs held between leaving school for the first time and starting a job that will last at least:		
	1 year	3 years	5 years or more
Total .....	1	3	5
Less than a high school diploma .....	2	5	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1	4	5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1	2	3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	0	1	2
Men .....	1	3	4
Less than a high school diploma .....	2	5	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1	4	5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1	2	3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	0	1	2
Women .....	1	4	5
Less than a high school diploma .....	3	6	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1	4	5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1	3	4
Bachelor's degree or more .....	0	2	3
White (non-Hispanic) .....	1	3	4
Less than a high school diploma .....	3	6	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	1	4	5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1	2	3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	0	1	2
Black (non-Hispanic) .....	2	4	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a high school diploma .....	2	( <sup>1</sup> )	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	2	4	( <sup>1</sup> )
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	1	3	3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	1	2	2
Hispanic .....	1	4	5
Less than a high school diploma .....	3	5	( <sup>1</sup> )
High school graduates, no college .....	2	4	5
Less than a bachelor's degree .....	0	2	3
Bachelor's degree or more .....	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )	( <sup>2</sup> )

<sup>1</sup> Estimates are not presented because less than 50 percent of the sample had held a job of this length.

<sup>2</sup> Estimates are not presented because cell size is less than 50.

IT TAKES APPROXIMATELY 5 YEARS after leaving school for the first time before the average worker starts a job that will last 3 years. However, college graduates found stable, long-term employment almost immediately, while high school dropouts continued to have many short-term jobs 15 years after leaving school. By age 35, more than 62 percent of college graduates had held a job for more than 5 years; at the median, this group had started their career job less than 4 years after leaving school. In contrast, most high school dropouts took many years to overcome their

lack of skills: at age 35, only 36 percent of them had held a job for more than 5 years, and more than 50 percent had an average tenure of 1 year or less. The data also show significant differences by sex and race in the work experiences of individuals between the end of schooling and age 35. While many of the racial differences become insignificant with increases in education, the disparity between men and women often remain. Across both genders and all races, increases in education smooth the transition from school to work. □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Report by the Commission on the skills of the American Workforce, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Robert H. Topel and Michael P. Ward, "Job Mobility and the Careers of Young Men," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1992, pp. 439–479; Boyan Jovanovic, "Job Match-

ing and the Theory of Turnover," *Journal of Political Economy*, May 1979, pp. 972–990; William R. Johnson, "The Theory of Job Shopping," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, May 1978, pp. 261–278.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Alex Klerman and Lynn A. Karoly, "Young Men and the Transition to Stable Employment," *Monthly Labor Review*, August 1994,

pp. 31–48; Jonathan R. Veum and Andrea B. Weiss, “Education and the Work Histories of Young Adults,” *Monthly Labor Review*, April 1994, pp. 11–20.

<sup>4</sup> Rosella Gareecki and David B. Neumark, “Order from Chaos? The Effects of Early Labor Market Experiences on Adult Labor Market Outcomes,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, January 1998, pp. 299–322; and Audry Light, Kathleen McGarry, “Job Change Patterns and the Wages of Young Men,” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, May 1998, pp. 276–286.

<sup>5</sup> If we do not restrict the sample to these birth cohorts, only individuals who had not exited school before 1978 would be included in the 1957 to 1960 sample. As a result, the sample including all cohorts would have a much higher percentage of college graduates and a lower percentage of high school dropouts.

<sup>6</sup> An individual must be out of school for 12 consecutive months before their education status is determined. However, once that 12-month period has been reached, jobs and duration are measured retroac-

tively from the beginning of the 12 months, that is, from the very first week they left school.

<sup>7</sup> To account for individuals who initially overstate their educational attainment, the highest degrees are compared to questions, asked in 1998 and afterwards, of highest degree ever earned and the date these degrees were obtained. Approximately 100 individuals were reassigned to lower categories based on their answers to this question.

<sup>8</sup> Approximately 3 percent of the sample was still attending school at their 35th birthday. However, much of this schooling appears to be a use of leisure time as compared to the pursuit of a degree. These individuals are characterized by intermittent school attendance, taking only a few credits, and never completing any additional degree.

<sup>9</sup> All comparisons are statistically significant.

<sup>10</sup> According to the Current Population Survey (CPS) at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 64 percent of women with children under age 6 were in the civilian labor force in 2003, as were 72 percent of women with children under age 18.