

III. Education

Educational attainment is one of the most important indicators of lifetime economic opportunities. Higher educational attainment is associated with lower unemployment and higher wages, higher family income, and better health for adults and their children. A substantial portion of gaps in well-being among racial and ethnic groups can be accounted for by differences in educational opportunities and attainment. Studies find that improvement in the economic status of blacks in the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in part from improvements in educational attainment and school quality, especially in the South.¹

Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians continue to experience educational disadvantages. Black and Hispanic children are more likely than non-Hispanic white children to be poor (Economic Status 3) and to have parents with lower education levels. As a result, they often begin life with disadvantages related to family financial and educational resources. Research is mounting about the importance of a stimulating environment for early childhood development, starting in infancy. This education begins at home. It is not until age three that children typically enter preschools or Head Start programs designed to promote school readiness. The most important teachers for children under the age of five are family members. For example, reading to young children helps them learn to speak and, later, to read and write.²

Young non-Hispanic black and Hispanic children are less likely than their non-Hispanic white counterparts to be read to by family members or to be told a story (Education 1). Because reading to children increases sharply with parent's educational attainment,³ some differences in reading to children across racial and ethnic groups are likely to be related to parental education.

Some social policies attempt to improve educational opportunities by providing enriched early childhood educational opportunities through programs such as Head Start, the largest federal program for early childhood education of economically disadvantaged children. Partly as a result of such policies, non-Hispanic black children aged four are significantly more likely than non-Hispanic white children to be enrolled in a preschool program (Education 2). Research has found that Head Start and other preschool programs promote children's cognitive development and achievement. Some research has found that the effects of Head Start are largest for Hispanics, perhaps because it provides an advantage in English language acquisition for children from homes where English is not the primary language spoken. The research literature is unsettled on the question of whether the beneficial effects of preschool interventions persist or fade as children age. One recent study reported that gains found for black children in the Head Start program fade if the children enter poor quality elementary schools but persist if their elementary schools are of good quality.⁴

Computing skills are valued in the labor market, and demand for workers with computer skills has increased markedly over the past 25 years.⁵ Computer use by children, whether at home or at school, grew between 1984 and 1993 (Education 3). However, the increase in use at home was greatest for non-Hispanic whites, and in 1993 non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics were considerably less likely to use a computer at home or at school than non-Hispanic whites. Lower levels of computer usage among non-Hispanic black and Hispanic children are probably related to lower income levels among these groups; in general, children from families with higher incomes were more likely to have used a computer at home or at school than children from families with lower incomes.

Higher scores on math and reading proficiency tests are associated with higher future educational attainment; they are also associated with future success in the labor market, even among individuals with similar levels of education.⁶ Non-Hispanic black and Hispanic children score lower on achievement tests, on average, than non-Hispanic white children at similar ages (Education 4 and 5). Like many other indicators of educational progress, however, between-group differences in achievement test scores may be influenced by differences in a variety of social and economic factors, including school quality, parental education, and family income.

Higher educational attainment is associated with improved socioeconomic status, higher wage rates, and better health. In addition, parents' education is associated with better health, development, and educational attainment for their children. Educational attainment has been steadily increasing (Education 6). The fraction of the population aged 25 and older who completed high school (or equivalent) exceeded 50 percent for all groups in 1997 and is 75 percent or higher for blacks, non-Hispanic whites, and Asians. The increase in attainment has been faster among blacks, non-Hispanic whites, and Asians than among Hispanics. Attainment has increased markedly among blacks since the 1940s, and between 1980 and 1997 the fraction of blacks who did not complete high school dropped from nearly half to one quarter. Nonetheless, in 1997 blacks were considerably less likely than non-Hispanic whites to have completed a college, professional, or doctoral degree. Asians have by far the highest level of educational attainment of any of these groups. Generally, Asians' educational attainment increased since 1980 as more attended and completed college.

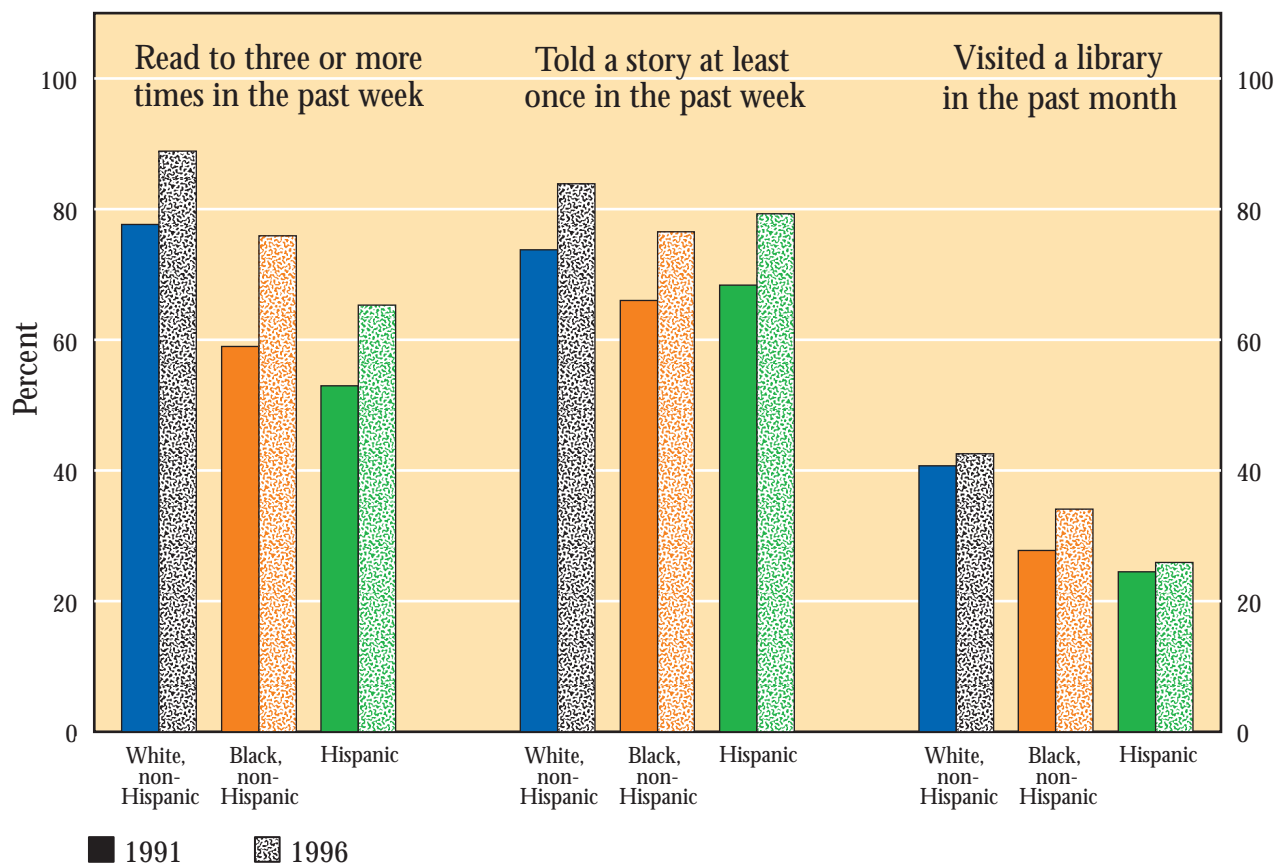
In 1997, about 45 percent of Hispanic adults 25 and older had not completed high school. High school attainment of Hispanic adults has improved only slowly over the past 15 years (Education 6), and progress has also been slow among Hispanics aged 25 to 29 (Education 7). Among those who have completed high school, however, the fraction completing at least some college rose from 31 percent in 1971 to 54 percent in 1997. Educational attainment has increased faster for native-born Hispanics than for the Hispanic population as a whole. In 1990 the high school completion rate of native-born Hispanics was comparable to that of non-Hispanic blacks, whereas that of Hispanic immigrants was considerably lower.⁷ Thus, the slow increase in average educational attainment of Hispanics is at least partly due to the increasing representation of immigrants with lower educational attainment in the Hispanic population.

Since education is usually completed at younger ages, data on attainment among younger adults provide a better sense of current educational opportunities and conditions. The percentage of 25- to 29-year olds with a high school diploma is nearly as high among non-Hispanic blacks as among non-Hispanic whites (Education 7). However, Hispanics aged 25 to 29 continue to have lower rates of high school completion. And, although young blacks are attending college at increasing rates, the gap in college completion between young non-Hispanic blacks and non-Hispanic whites did not narrow appreciably over the 1980s (Education 8).

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2. Wells, Gordon. 1985. "Preschool Literacy-Related Activities and Success in School." In *Literacy, Language, and Learning: The Nature and Consequences of Literacy*, ed. David R. Olson, Nancy Torrance, and Angela Hildyard. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
3. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. 1997. *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
4. Currie, Janet and Duncan Thomas. 1996. "Does Head Start Help Hispanic Children?" RAND Labor and Population Working Paper No. 96-17; Currie and Thomas. 1995. "Does Head Start Make a Difference?" *American Economic Review* 85 (3):341-64; Currie and Thomas. 1998. "School Quality and the Longer-Term Effects of Head Start." National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 6362.
5. Autor, David H., Lawrence F. Katz, and Alan B. Krueger. 1997. "Computing Inequality: Have Computers Changed the Labor Market?" National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 5956.
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1. Participation in Literacy Activities with a Parent or Family Member by Children Aged Three to Five

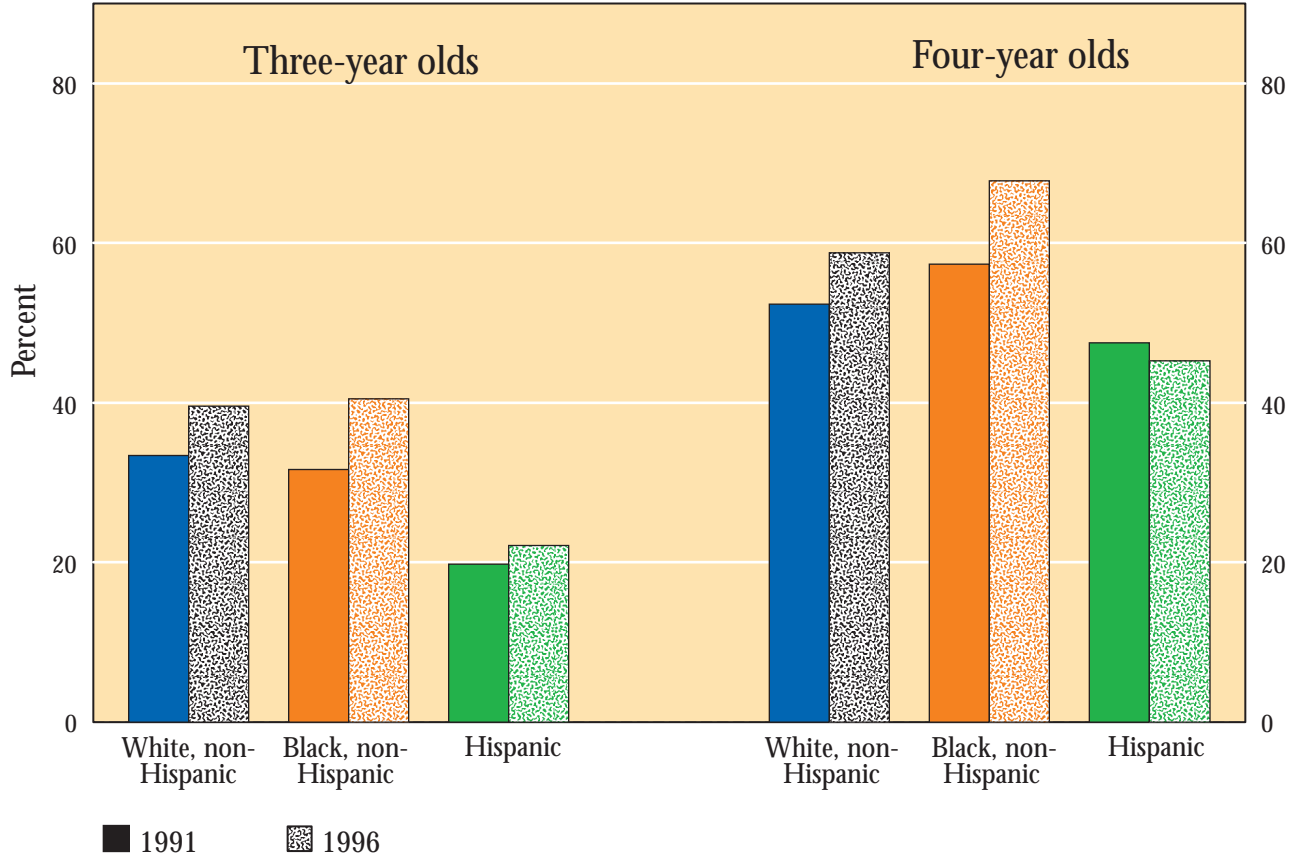
Source: National Center for Education Statistics



- Young children's interactions with others are critical to their development. Reading to children or telling them stories helps them learn to read and improves their verbal communication skills. This chart shows children's reported participation in various literacy activities with a parent or family member.
- In 1996, non-Hispanic white children were more likely to have been read to than their non-Hispanic black or Hispanic counterparts, and they were also more likely to have been told a story and to have visited a library in the past month. Some of these differences likely reflect the higher levels of educational attainment of parents in the non-Hispanic white population.
- Parents in all groups shown above were more likely to report that they participated in these literacy activities with their children in 1996 than in 1991.

2. Children Aged Three to Four Enrolled in Center-Based Programs or Kindergarten

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

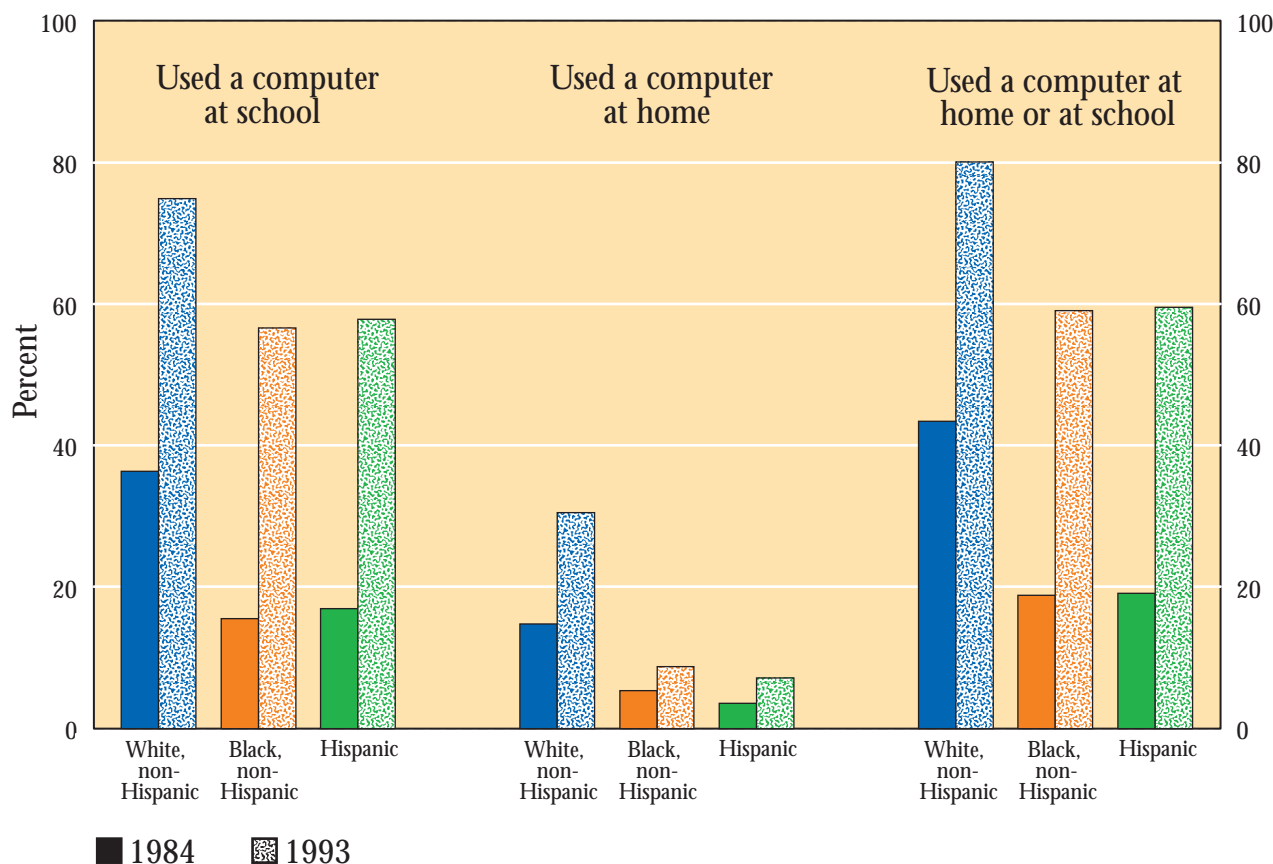


- Enrollment in prekindergarten programs and kindergarten is generally correlated with greater progress in the early years of elementary school.
- In 1996, non-Hispanic black children aged three and four were more likely than non-Hispanic white children to be enrolled in center-based learning programs or kindergarten. Hispanic children were less likely than non-Hispanic blacks or non-Hispanic whites to be enrolled.
- Enrollment in these programs increased for nearly all groups between 1991 and 1996.

Note: Center-based programs are nursery schools, prekindergarten, and Head Start.

3. Computer Use by Children in First through Sixth Grade

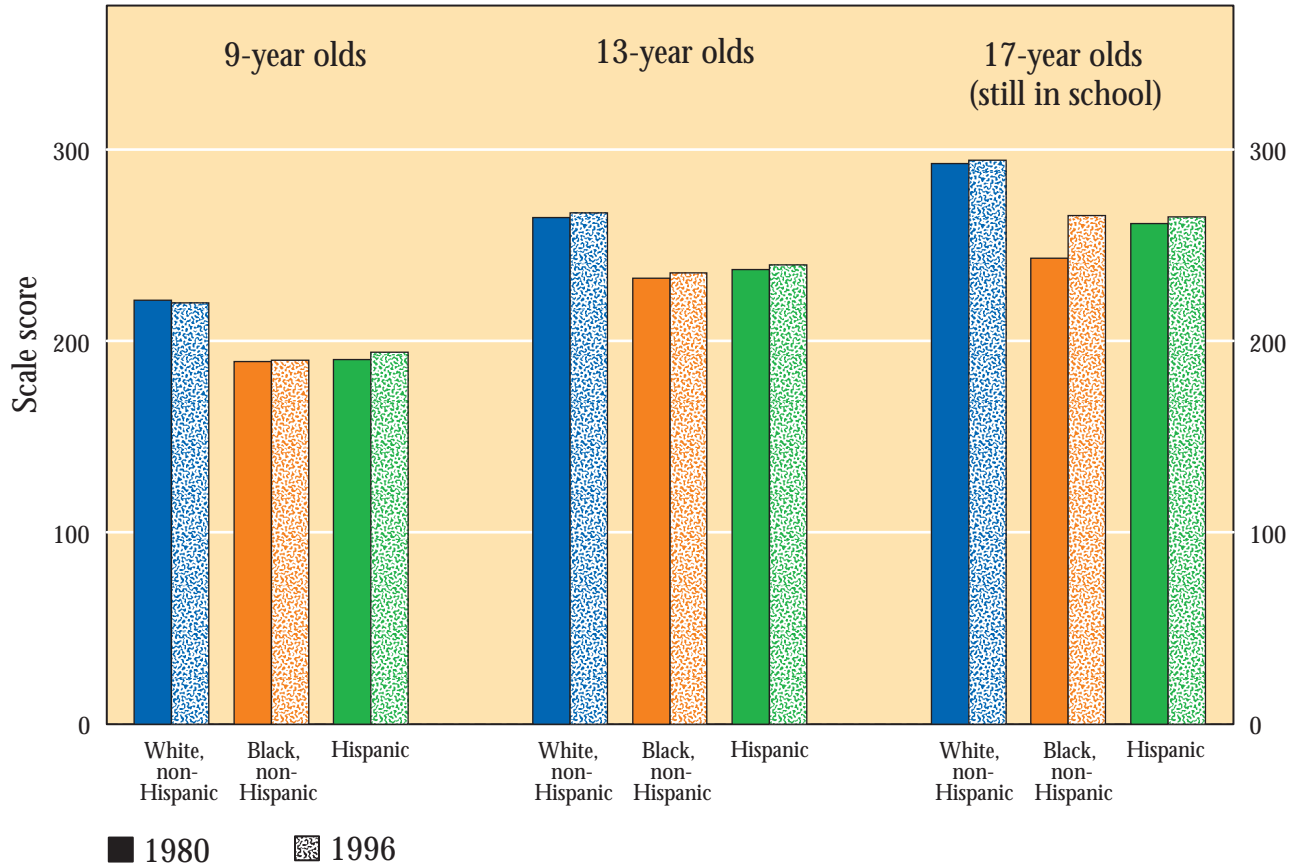
Sources: Bureau of the Census and National Center for Education Statistics



- Familiarity with computers is increasingly important at school and at work.
- Computer use increased markedly from 1984 to 1993 for all groups. In both years, non-Hispanic whites were more likely than non-Hispanic blacks or Hispanics to have used a computer both at home and at school.
- Relatively few non-Hispanic black and Hispanic children used a computer at home in 1993. However, over 55 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics and about 75 percent of non-Hispanic whites used a computer at school.
- Lower levels of computer usage at home among non-Hispanic black and Hispanic children are probably related to lower income levels among these groups. In general, children from higher income families are more likely to have used a computer at home or at school than children from families with lower incomes.

4. Average Reading Proficiency Scores

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

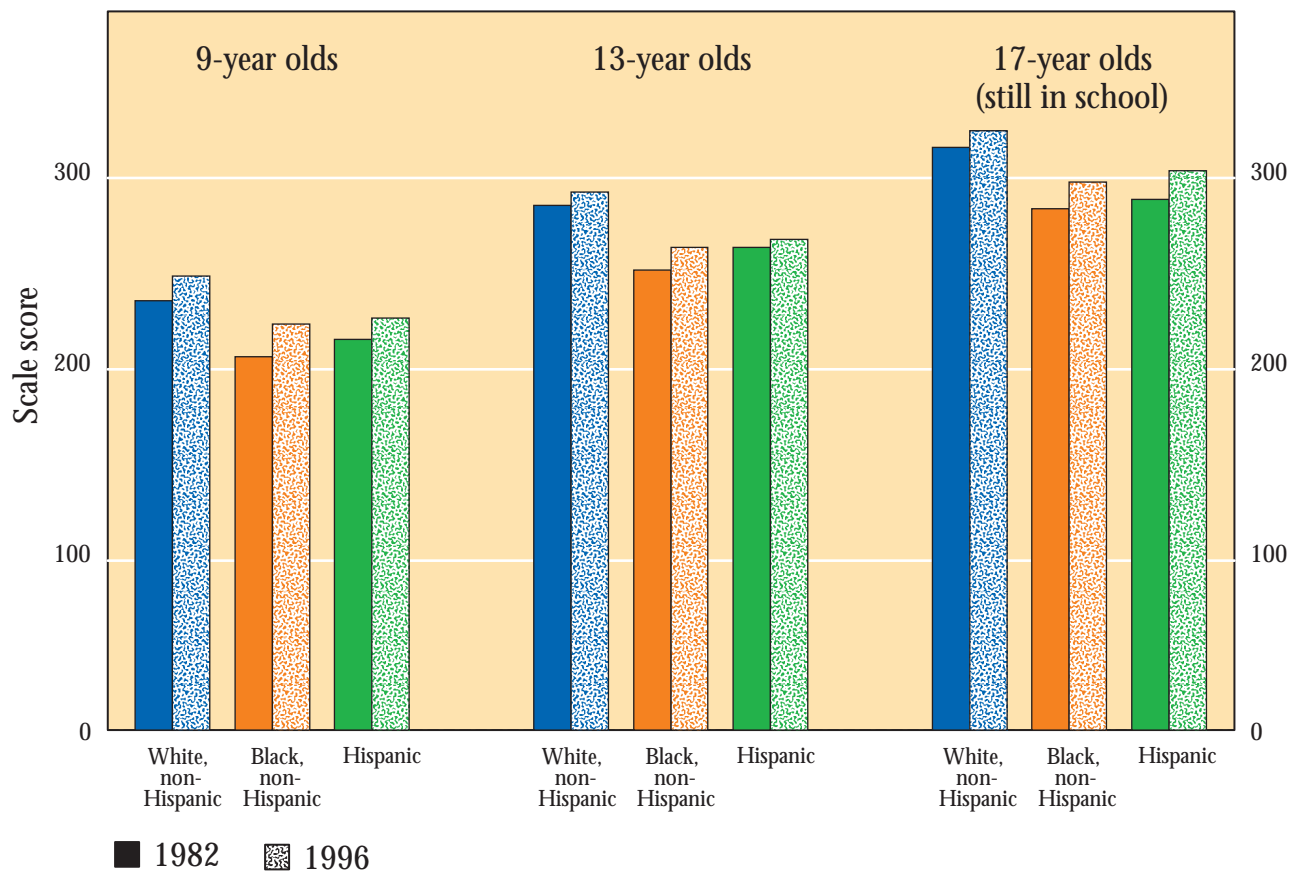


- This chart presents data on reading proficiency scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This survey is designed to monitor the knowledge, skills, and performance of the nation's children and youth.
- On average, non-Hispanic white children score higher than non-Hispanic black or Hispanic children in reading proficiency at each age.
- Non-Hispanic black 17-year olds made substantial progress in reading proficiency between 1980 and 1996. Reading proficiency changed little among other groups and ages from 1980 to 1996.

Note: A reading score of 300 means the student can understand complicated information. A score of 250 means the student can interrelate ideas and make generalizations. A score of 200 means the student has partially developed skills and understanding.

5. Average Mathematics Proficiency Scores

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

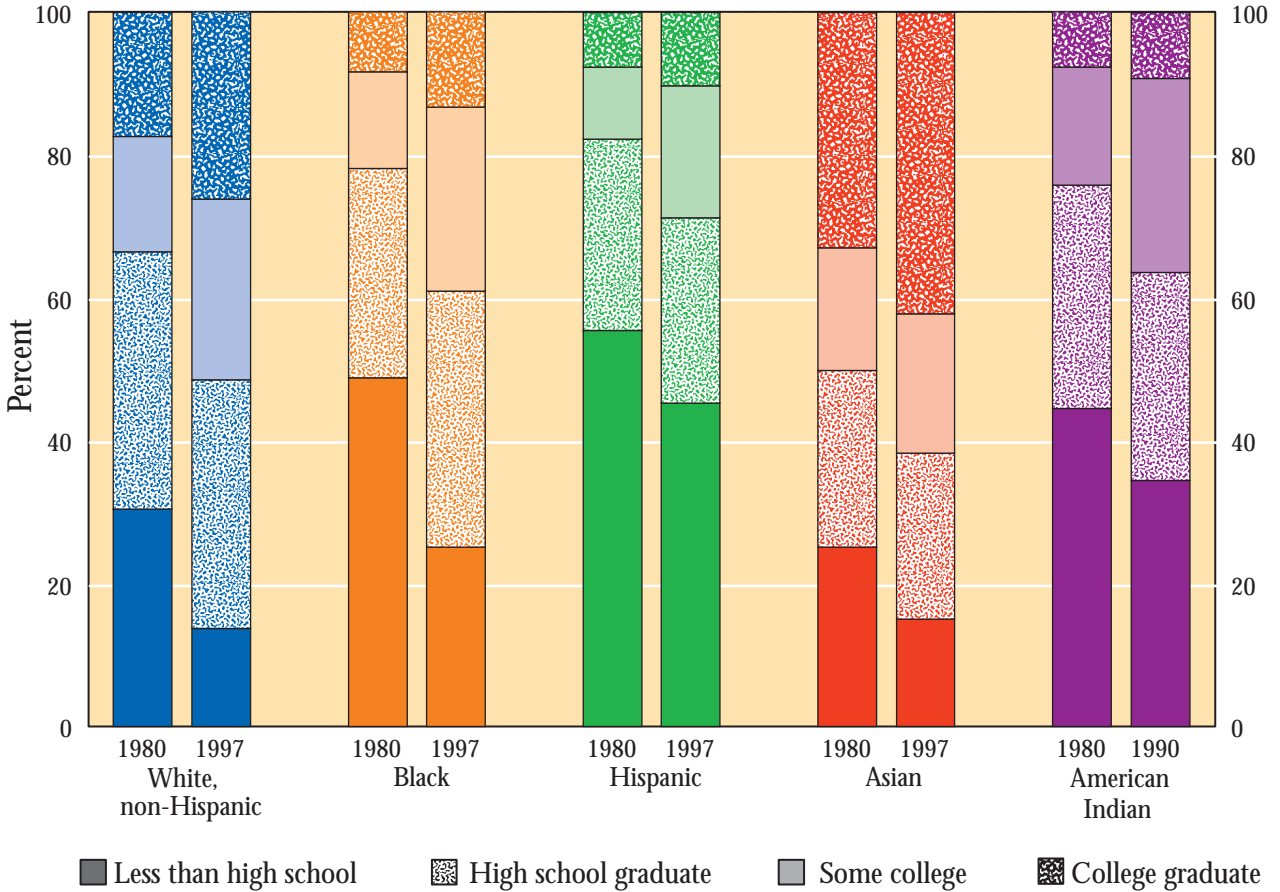


- This chart shows mathematics proficiency scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress.
- On average, non-Hispanic whites tend to score higher on tests of mathematics proficiency than non-Hispanic blacks or Hispanics at each age.
- Mathematics proficiency scores generally increased between 1982 and 1996 at all ages among all groups shown above.

Note: A mathematics score of 300 means a student can do moderately complex procedures and reasoning. A score of 250 indicates a student can do basic operations and beginning problem solving. A score of 200 demonstrates a student's beginning skills and understanding of math.

6. Educational Attainment of Adults Aged 25 and Over

Source: Bureau of the Census

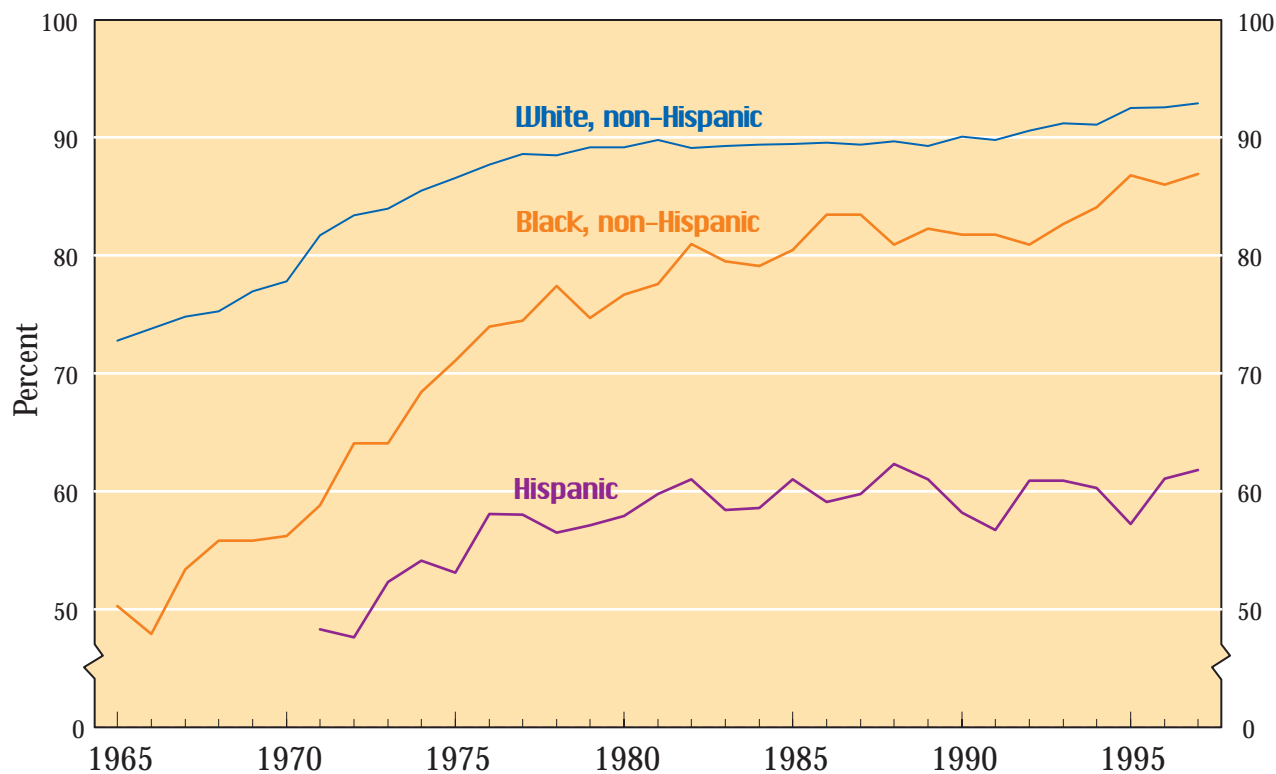


- Educational attainment is predictive of economic status and health.
- Asians and non-Hispanic whites are more likely to have completed education beyond high school than are blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians. In 1997, nearly half of Hispanics aged 25 and older had not completed high school.
- Educational attainment has increased for all groups since 1980. Increases for blacks have been most marked. Increases for Hispanics have been relatively small.
- In 1997, 9 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 15 percent of Asians held master's, professional, or doctoral degrees, compared with 4 percent of blacks and 3 percent of Hispanics and American Indians (not shown in chart).

Note: Data for 1980 are based on years of school completed, rather than on the highest diploma or degree received. In 1997, high school graduates include those with a GED or equivalent. Data for 1997 are not available for American Indians.

7. Persons Aged 25 to 29 with a High School Degree or Equivalent

Sources: Bureau of the Census and National Center for Education Statistics

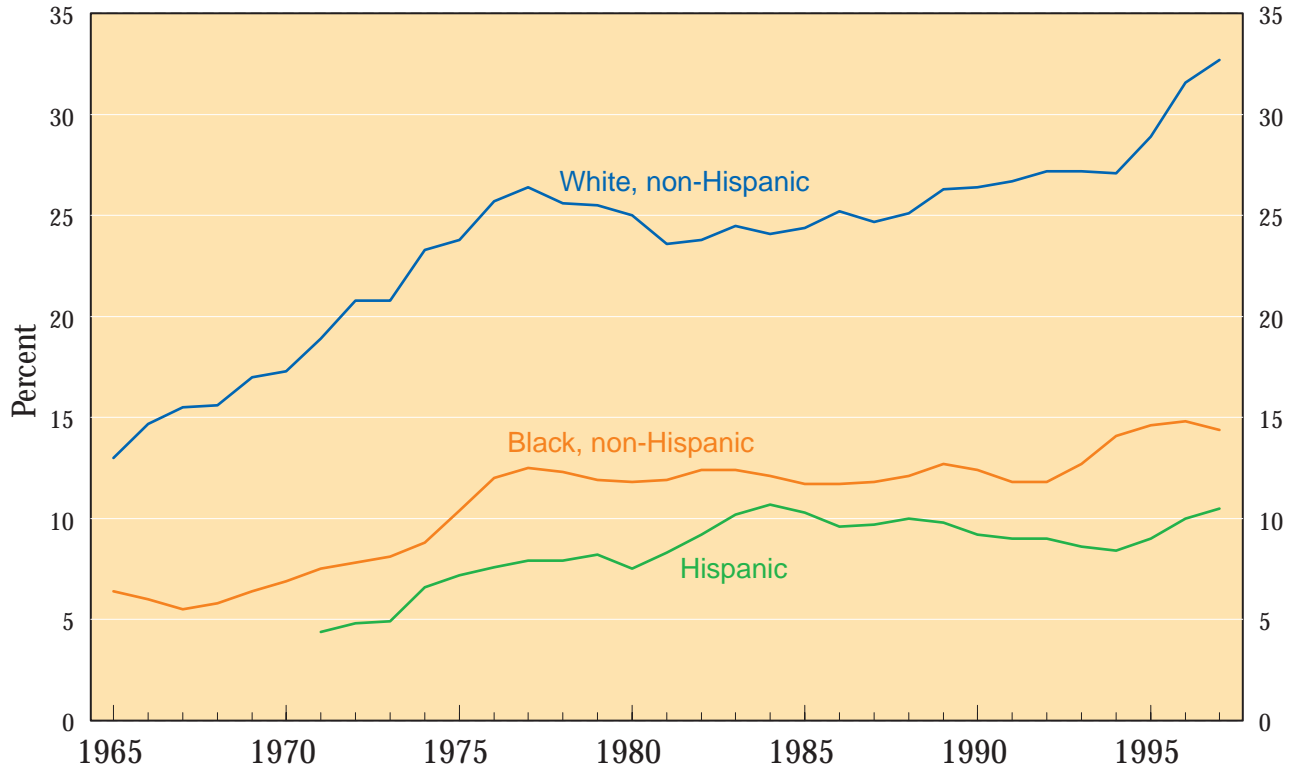


- High school completion rates for 25- to 29-year olds provide a sense of change in educational attainment over time, since education is usually completed at younger ages.
- High school completion rates have increased for 25- to 29-year olds in all groups over the past 30 years. However, rates for Hispanics have grown little since the early 1980s.
- The percentage of non-Hispanic blacks aged 25 to 29 who have completed high school (87 percent) is nearly as high as that of non-Hispanic whites (93 percent). Hispanic 25- to 29-year olds continue to have considerably lower rates of high school completion (62 percent), however. The lower rates among Hispanics primarily reflect the lower average levels of education among Hispanic immigrants; completion rates of native-born Hispanics (not shown separately in chart) are comparable to those of non-Hispanic blacks.

Note: Prior to 1971, data for whites include Hispanic whites, and data for blacks include Hispanic blacks. Prior to 1992, data are for persons having completed four or more years of high school; data for 1992 and beyond include persons with a GED or equivalent.

8. Persons Aged 25 to 29 with a Four-Year College Degree or Higher

Sources: Bureau of the Census and National Center for Education Statistics



- Completion of a four-year college degree has become increasingly associated with economic status and success in the labor market.
- The percentage of 25- to 29-year olds who have completed college increased sharply in the 1960s and early 1970s for non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic blacks. Between the mid-1970s and the early 1990s, college completion rose more slowly for all groups shown above. College completion appears to have picked up again in the mid-1990s.
- Non-Hispanic whites are more than twice as likely as non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics to have completed a four-year college degree. Nearly 33 percent of non-Hispanic whites had completed a four-year college degree in 1997, compared with only about 14 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and 11 percent of Hispanics.

Note: Prior to 1971, data for whites include Hispanic whites, and data for blacks include Hispanic blacks. Data for non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics are three-year centered averages. Prior to 1992, data are for persons having completed four or more years of college.