

# Young Black America Part Two: College Entry and Completion

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As documented in part one of this series, the high school completion rate of blacks is currently at the highest it has ever been.<sup>1</sup> This second installment turns to college entry and completion. The data show that blacks are starting—and finishing—college at higher rates than in the past, but they still lag far behind whites.

The figures below analyze Census Bureau data to determine college entry and completion rates using a methodology similar to that of Bailey and Dynarski (2011).<sup>2</sup> The college entry rate is defined as the percentage of 19-year-olds who have started college. The college completion rate is the percentage of 25-year-olds who have obtained a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>3</sup>

College entry rates rose significantly during the 1980s and have continued to rise at a slower pace since then. **Figure 1** displays college entry rates for all races, blacks, and whites from 1980 to 2013, using data from the Decennial Census in 1980, 1990, and 2000, and the American Community Survey (ACS) for more recent years. In 1980, the college entry rate for young blacks was 33.2 percent. This rate rose significantly to 57.5 percent in 1990 before falling slightly to 55.7 percent in 2000. By 2006, however, the rate had increased to 60.4 percent, and then jumped another 2.8 percentage points to 63.2 percent by 2013.

Although entry rates for blacks have increased 30.0 percentage points since 1980, this has not been enough to noticeably close the gap between whites and blacks. The gap between entry rates for

1 Bucknor, Cherrie. 2015. "Young Black America Part One: High School Completion Rates are at their Highest Ever." Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research. <http://www.cepr.net/documents/black-hs-grad-rates-2015-03.pdf>.

2 Bailey, Martha J. and Susan M. Dynarski. 2011. "Inequality in Postsecondary Attainment." In *Wither Opportunity*, eds. Greg J. Duncan and Richard J. Murnane, pp. 101–02). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

3 All data exclude immigrants.

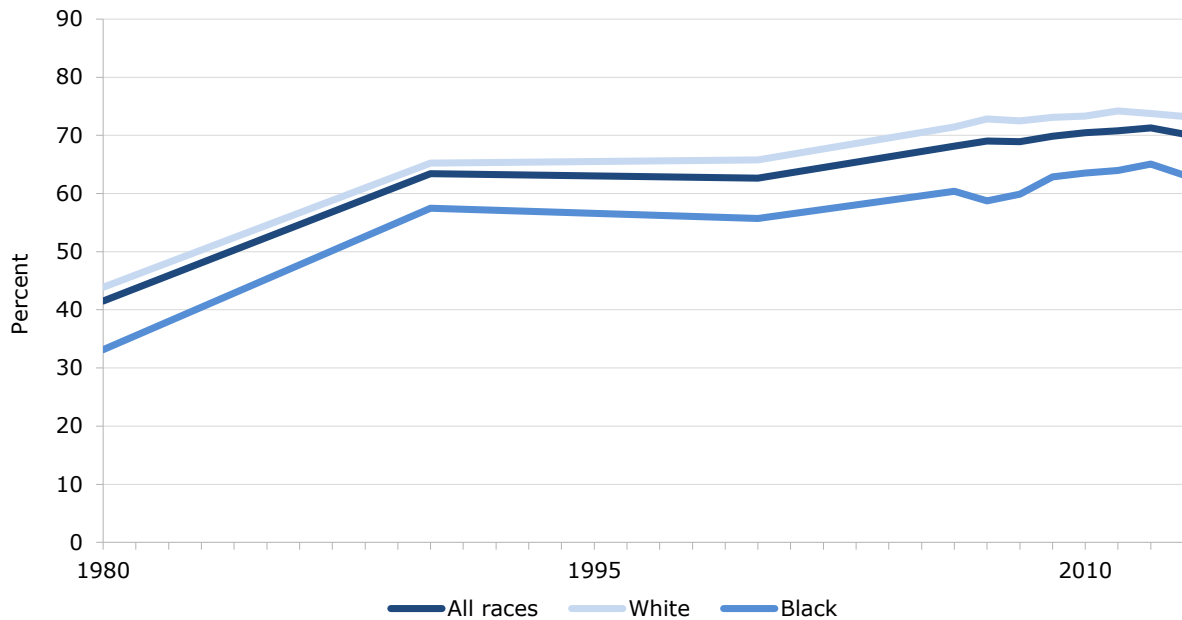


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blacks and whites was 10.8 percentage points in 1980 and fell slightly to 10.0 percentage points in 2000. While annual rates reflect some sampling variation, the black-white gap in college entry rates was 10.1 percentage points in 2013, only 0.7 percentage points below where it had been more than three decades earlier in 1980 (10.8 percentage points).

**FIGURE 1**  
College Entry Rate, 1980-2013



Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Entry rates were estimated using data on 19-year-olds in each year. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

Throughout the entire period, women of all races had higher college entry rates than their male counterparts. This is not surprising, given that women are more likely than men to graduate from high school.<sup>4</sup> **Figures 2** and **3** separately show college entry rates for the same period for women and men. For most of this period, the gap between black men and women was larger than the gap between white men and women. In 1980, the entry rate for black women was 40.0 percent, only 6.9 percentage points lower than white women, but 14.1 percentage points higher than black men. During this same year, the gender gap in entry rates for whites was only 6.0 percentage points (in favor of white women).

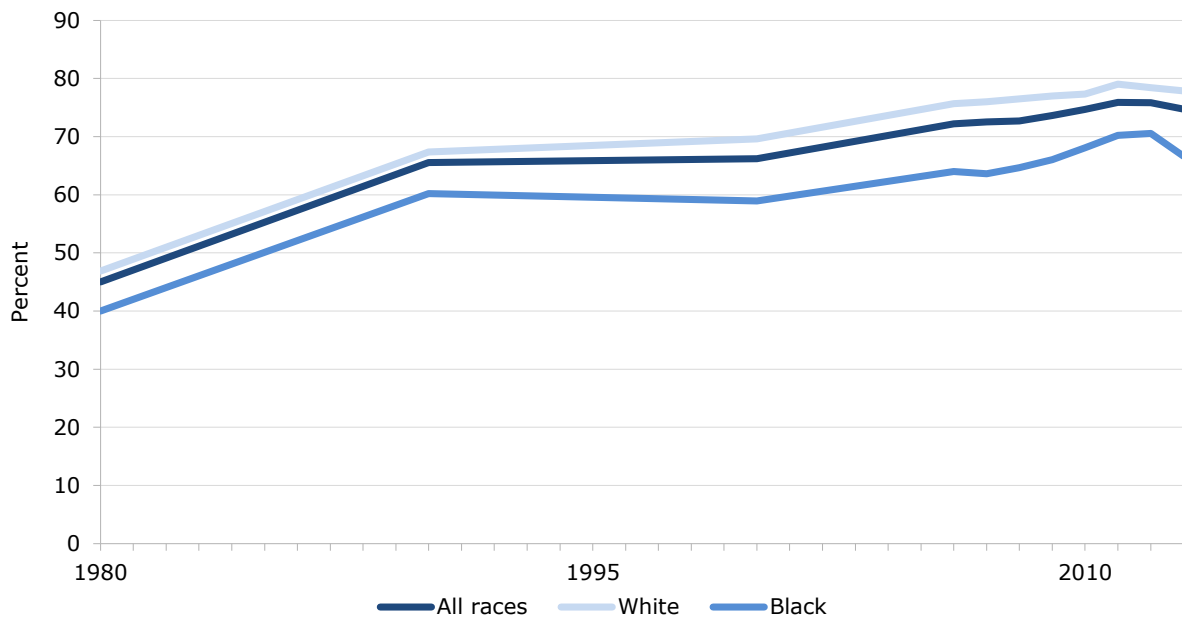
After making significant progress between 1980 and the mid-2000s, the entry rate for black women has only increased slightly over the last decade. Between 1980 and 2006, the entry rate for black women increased 24.0 percentage points. Since 2006, it has increased just 2.6 percentage points, to

<sup>4</sup> See Bucknor (2015).

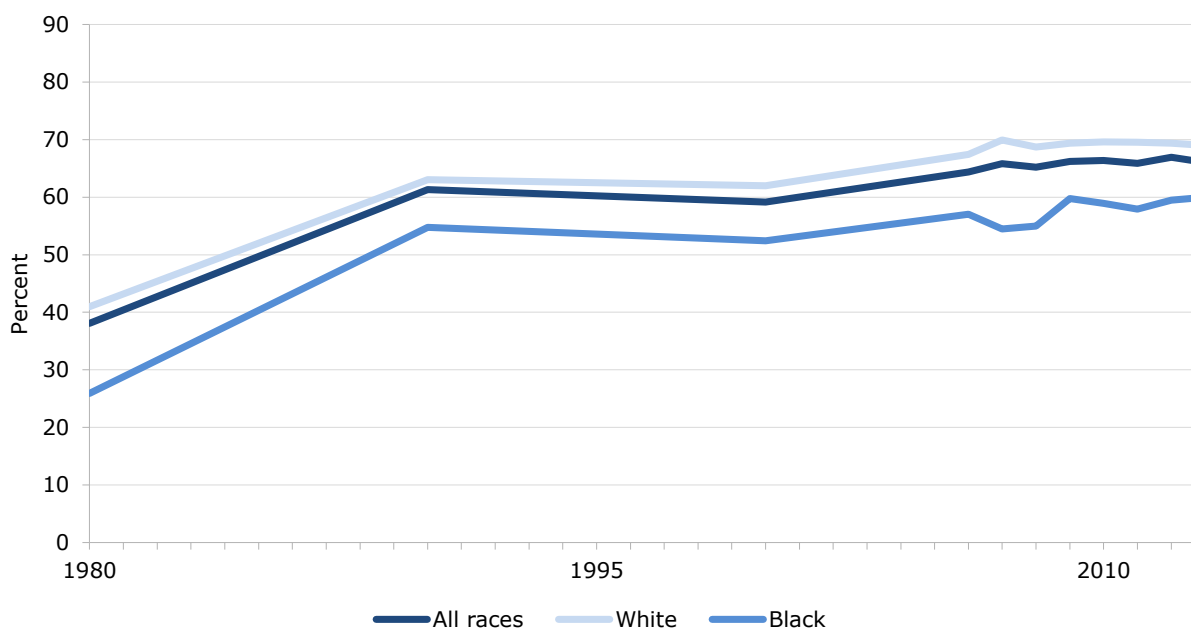
66.6 percent in 2013. The rate in 2013 for black women was 6.6 percentage points higher than the rate for black men in the same year, but black women remained 11.3 percentage points behind white women.

The college entry rate for black men in 1980 was 25.9 percent, 15.0 percentage points lower than the rate for white men. This rate rose sharply over the next 25 years, reaching 57.0 percent by 2006. Since then, however, the rate has been mostly stagnant, reaching 60.0 percent in 2013. This increase closed some of the gap between black men and white men, which stood at 9.0 percentage points in 2013, down from 15.0 percentage points in 1980.

**FIGURE 2**  
College Entry Rate of Women, 1980–2013

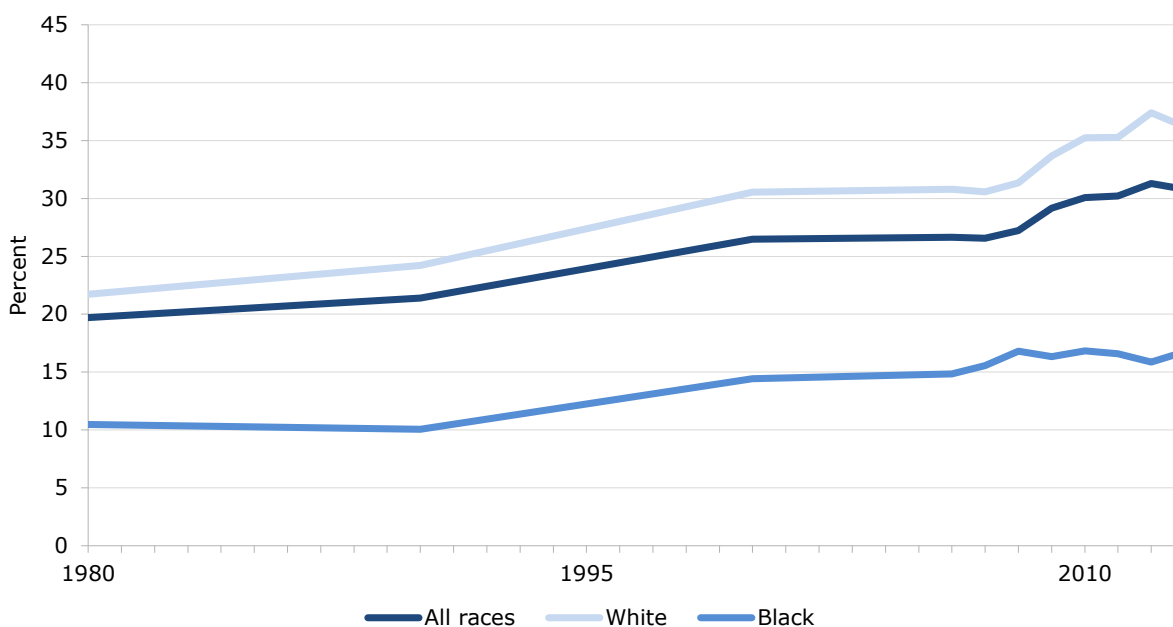


Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Entry rates were estimated using data on 19-year-olds in each year. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

**FIGURE 3****College Entry Rate of Men, 1980–2013**

Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Entry rates were estimated using data on 19-year-olds in each year. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

While the data on college entry suggests that black teens have made substantial progress, black men and women in their twenties continue to lag far behind their white counterparts in college completion rates. In fact, the college completion gap between blacks and whites is bigger now than it was in 1980. **Figure 4** displays college completion rates for all races, blacks, and whites from 1980 to 2013. In 1980, only 10.5 percent of 25-year-old blacks had completed college. In the same year, 21.7 percent of whites of the same age had completed college, yielding a black-white completion gap of 11.2 percentage points. Although blacks have completed college at increasing rates since 1980, the gap relative to whites has grown by 8.3 percentage points. In 2013, the completion rate for blacks was 16.7 percent, less than half of the 36.2 percent rate for whites.

**FIGURE 4****College Completion Rate, 1980–2013**

Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Completion rates were estimated using data on 25-year-olds in each year. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

As with college entry rates, black women had higher completion rates than black men throughout the entire period. **Figures 5** and **6** show completion rates by gender. In 1980, 11.5 percent of 25-year-old black women and 9.3 percent of black men had completed college. In the same year, the black-white completion gap was smaller for women than for men. In 1980, young black women were 9.8 percentage points less likely than white women to have a college degree. For black men, the gap relative to white men was 12.9 percentage points.

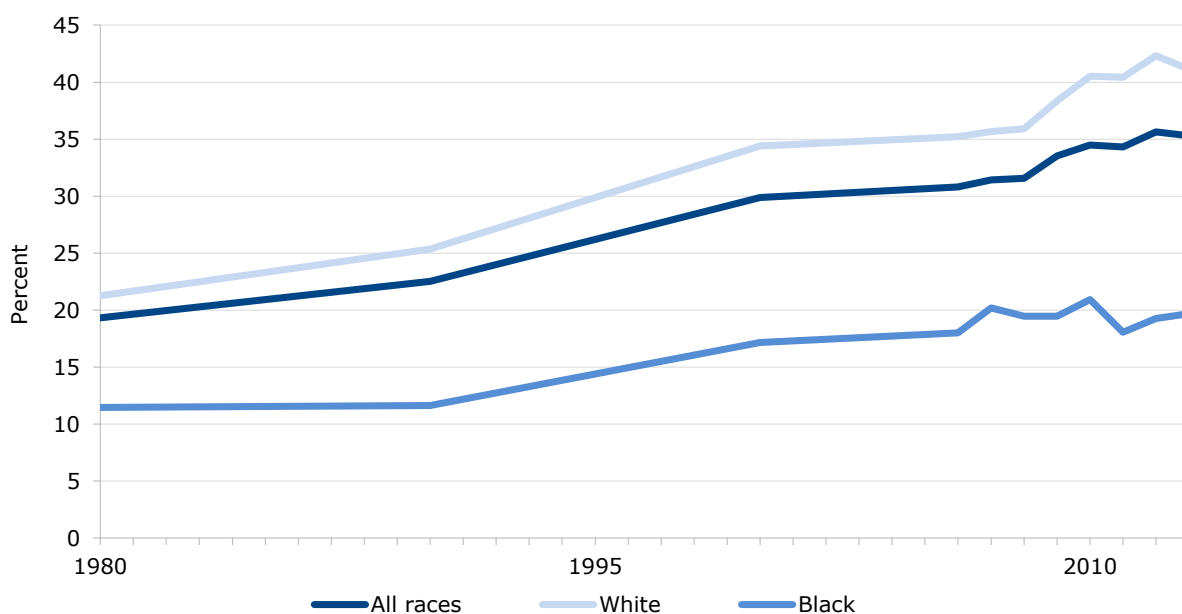
The completion rate for black women was 11.6 percent in 1990 and increased 5.6 percentage points in the 1990s to reach 17.2 percent by 2000. During the 2000s, however, black women made little progress, reaching 19.7 percent in 2013. Meanwhile, the completion rate for young white women continued to rise, hitting 41.1 percent in 2013, 21.4 percentage points higher than the corresponding rate for black women. The 2013 completion gap for women was over twice as large as it was in 1980 (9.8 percentage points).

The completion rate for black men has always lagged behind that of white men, and the size of the gap has grown since 1980. In 1980, 9.3 percent of 25-year-old black men had finished college, 12.9 percentage points below their white, male counterparts. The size of this gap has increased in the

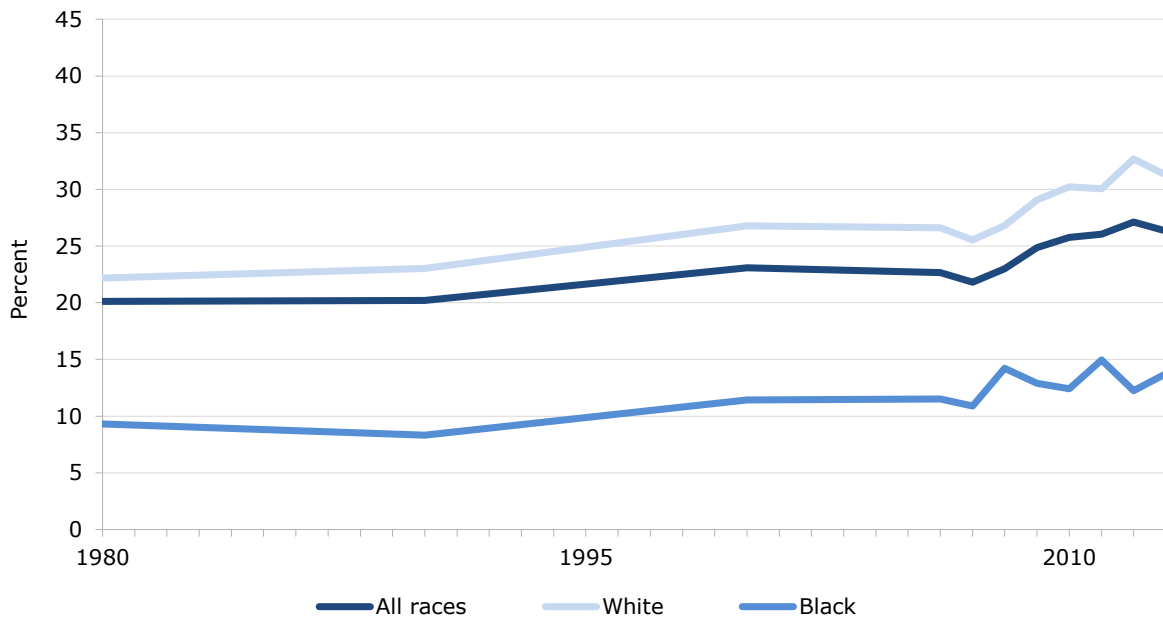
ensuing years, albeit at a slower pace than the black-white completion gap for women. In 2013, the completion rate for black men was 13.7 percent, less than half of the 31.3 percent rate for white men.

Although black women have lagged far behind white women in completion rates (especially in recent years), they have mostly been able to keep pace with white men. (Both black women and white men have pulled further away from black men.) In 1980, the gap between black women and white men was 10.7 percentage points. During the past 13 years, this gap has been as low as 5.4 percentage points (in 2007), and stood at 11.6 percentage points in 2013. Meanwhile, the gap between black women and black men has increased from 2.2 percentage points in 1980 to 6.0 percentage points in 2013.

**FIGURE 5**  
College Completion Rate of Women, 1980–2013



Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Completion rates were estimated using data on 25-year-olds in each year. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

**FIGURE 6****College Completion Rate of Men, 1980–2013**

Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Completion rates were estimated using data on 25-year-olds in each year. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

The data also allow us to examine the entry and completion rates for the two cohorts of young people born in 1987 and 1988. These are the only years of birth for which we have data that cover a birth-cohort at both age 19 (the year for our entry measure) and at age 25 (the year for our completion measure). For example, for those born in 1988, the entry rate was calculated using survey data from the American Community Survey for 2007, when they were 19 years old. For the same group born in 1988, we can then estimate the completion rate at age 25 using the American Community Survey from six years later in 2013. Dividing the completion rate by the entry rate gives us the “persistence rate,” which measures the percent of 19-year-old college entrants who went on to graduate by age 25.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1** shows the college entry and completion rates for the cohort of young people born in 1988.<sup>6</sup> For blacks, 58.8 percent had started college by age 19, and 16.7 percent completed college by age 25. These numbers imply that only 28.4 percent of black college entrants in this cohort went on to graduate by age 25. For whites born in 1988, 72.8 percent entered college by age 19, and 36.2 percent finished college by age 25. These numbers imply that just under half (49.7 percent) of white

5 See Bailey and Dynarski (2011).

6 Although not displayed in Table 1, the data for the cohort born in 1987 showed similar results.

college entrants in this cohort went on to graduate by age 25, a substantially higher cohort completion rate than for blacks born in the same year.

Black men in the 1988 birth cohort had lower entry and completion rates than black women, and were also 5.9 percentage points less likely to persist through college and graduate. For black men born in 1988, the entry rate was 54.5 percent, and the completion rate was 13.7 percent, for a persistence rate of 25.1 percent. For black women born in 1988, the persistence rate was 31.0 percent.

**TABLE 1**  
College Entry, Completion, and Persistence Rates of Those Born in 1988

(percent)

	Entry (by age 19)	Completion (by age 25)	Persistence (completion/entry)
<b>Men and Women</b>			
All races	69.0	30.8	44.6
White	72.8	36.2	49.7
Black	58.8	16.7	28.4
<b>Men</b>			
All races	65.8	26.3	40.0
White	70.0	31.3	44.7
Black	54.5	13.7	25.1
<b>Women</b>			
All races	72.5	35.3	48.7
White	76.0	41.1	54.1
Black	63.6	19.7	31.0

Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Entry rates were estimated using data on 19-year-olds in 2007 (who were born in 1988). Completion rates were estimated using data on 25-year-olds in 2013 (who were born in 1988). Persistence rates are calculated by dividing the completion rate by the entry rate. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

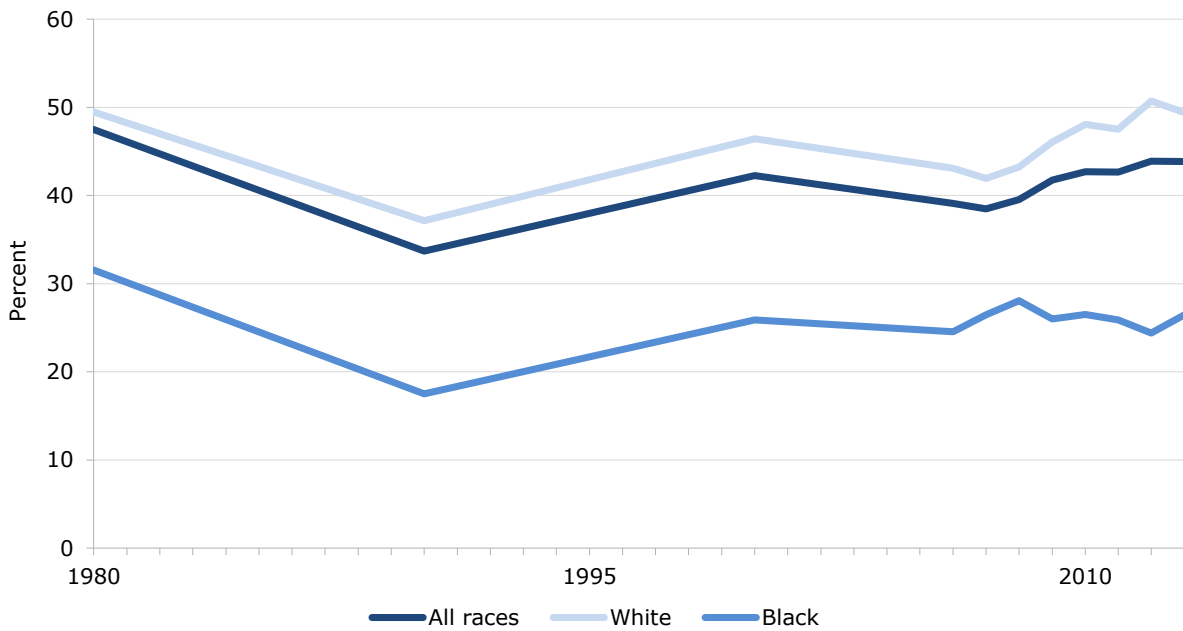
Although the data only allow for a strict cohort analysis using birth years 1987 and 1988, we can obtain an approximate estimate of the “persistence rate” by using the entry rate for 19-year-olds and completion rate for 25-year-olds in the same year.<sup>7</sup> **Figure 7** displays this estimated persistence rate for all races, blacks, and whites, from 1980 to 2013. By this alternative measure, in 1980, about one-third (31.6 percent) of blacks who entered college at age 19 completed a degree by age 25. In the same year, using the same method, about half (49.5 percent) of whites who entered college finished by age 25.

<sup>7</sup> The cohort method and alternative method described here only overlap for two years of data, 2006 and 2007. Using the cohort method, the persistence rates for blacks in 2006 and 2007 were 26.3 percent and 28.4 percent, respectively. Using the alternative method, the persistence rates for 2006 and 2007 were 24.5 percent and 26.5 percent, respectively.



During the next 25 years, the persistence rates of blacks and whites decreased, while the black-white gap increased slightly to 18.5 percentage points by 2006. From 2006, however, the persistence rate of whites started to increase steadily, while the corresponding rate for blacks stagnated, leaving large gaps between blacks and whites. In 2013, the approximate persistence rate for blacks was 26.5 percent, down 5.1 percentage points from the 31.6 percent rate in 1980, and 22.9 percentage points below their white counterparts.

**FIGURE 7**  
Approximate College Persistence Rate, 1980–2013



Source: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey (ACS) 2006–2013. Entry rates were estimated using data on 19-year-olds in each year. Completion rates were estimated using data on 25-year-olds in each year. Persistence rates are calculated by dividing the completion rate by the entry rate. Immigrants are excluded from the sample.

Young blacks have experienced significant gains in college entry since 1980. Today, blacks are about 30 percentage points more likely to enter college than they were in 1980. Black men in particular, have seen about a 34 percentage point increase in entry rates. But, much work remains with respect to college completion and persistence. Black men and women still lag almost 20 percentage points behind their white counterparts when it comes to college completion rates. Furthermore, the persistence rate for blacks has stagnated in recent years, while the persistence rate for whites has increased, leaving a significant gap between blacks and whites (about 23 percentage points).<sup>8</sup> This disparity in college completion is likely to lead to inequality in employment, wages, and a host of other outcomes. Future reports will examine these issues, but the next report in this series will focus on the issue of employment.

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8 There are a number of possible explanations as to why blacks are less likely to complete college. Some explanations include the high percentage of blacks attending for-profit institutions, the increasing cost of tuition at such institutions (and others), and high student loan burdens. For more see: Smith, Peter and Leslie Parrish. 2014. "Do Students of Color Profit from For-Profit College?: Poor Outcomes and High Debt Hamper Attendees' Futures." Washington, DC: Center for Responsible Lending. <http://www.responsiblelending.org/student-loans/research-policy/CRL-For-Profit-Univ-FINAL.pdf>, Rawlston-Wilson, Valerie, Susie Saavedra, and Shree Chauhan. 2014. "From Access to Completion: A Seamless Path to College Graduation for African-American Students." Washington, DC: National Urban League. <http://nulwb.iamempowered.com/sites/nulwb.iamempowered.com/files/RADD%20--%20EMBARGOED%20REPORT.pdf>, Cottom, Tressie, McMillan. "Insider's View of For-Profit Colleges, Race, Class and Education Justice." The Huffington Post. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tressie-mcmillan-cottom/for-profit-colleges-kaplan-university\\_b\\_1205464.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tressie-mcmillan-cottom/for-profit-colleges-kaplan-university_b_1205464.html), and Darity, William and Tressie McMillan Cottom. "Profit U: The Rise of For-Profit Higher Education." Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association (forthcoming).