

Young Black America Part One: High School Completion Rates are at their Highest Ever

By Cherrie Bucknor*

By most measures, the educational attainment of blacks is currently at the highest it has ever been. After decades of stagnation, high school completion rates for blacks have increased rapidly since 2000. This issue brief will focus on the high school status completion rates of blacks ages 20 to 24 since 1975. Future reports will focus on other issues facing young blacks, including college graduation rates, unemployment rates, wages, and poverty rates.

The figures below analyze Census Bureau data to determine high school completion rates¹ using a methodology similar to that of Heckman and LaFontaine (2010) and Murnane (2013).² Previous research has shown that including recent immigrants can bias completion rates, since it is unlikely that they spent their high school years in U.S. schools.³ Depending on which country they were born in, recent immigrants can either be noticeably more or noticeably less likely to have completed high school than those who have been in the United States longer or those who were born in the United States. The data that follow exclude immigrants that have been in the United States for less than 10 years.

Completion rates for all races were stagnant for the last three decades of the twentieth century, but have significantly increased since 2000. **Figure 1** displays high school completion rates for all races,

- 1 The terms completion rate and graduation rate used here and elsewhere are often used interchangeably as measures of high school graduation. Traditionally, 'graduation rate' only refers to those with high school diplomas, while 'status completion rate' refers to those who completed high school with either a high school diploma or GED. The data in this report refer to the status completion rate, which measures the percentage of blacks within a specific age range who completed high school with a high school diploma or GED.
- 2 Heckman, James J. and Paul A. LaFontaine. 2010. "The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels." Review of Economics and Statistics, Vol. 92, No. 2, pp.244-262, and Murnane, Richard J. 2013. "U.S. High School Graduation Rates: Patterns and Explanations." Journal of Economic Literature, Vol. 51, No. 2, pp. 370.
- 3 See Murnane (2013), and Mishel, Lawrence and Joydeep Roy. 2006. Rethinking High School Graduation Rates and Trends. Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute.



Center for Economic and Policy Research
1611 Connecticut Ave. NW
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20009

tel: 202-293-5380
fax: 202-588-1356
www.cepr.net

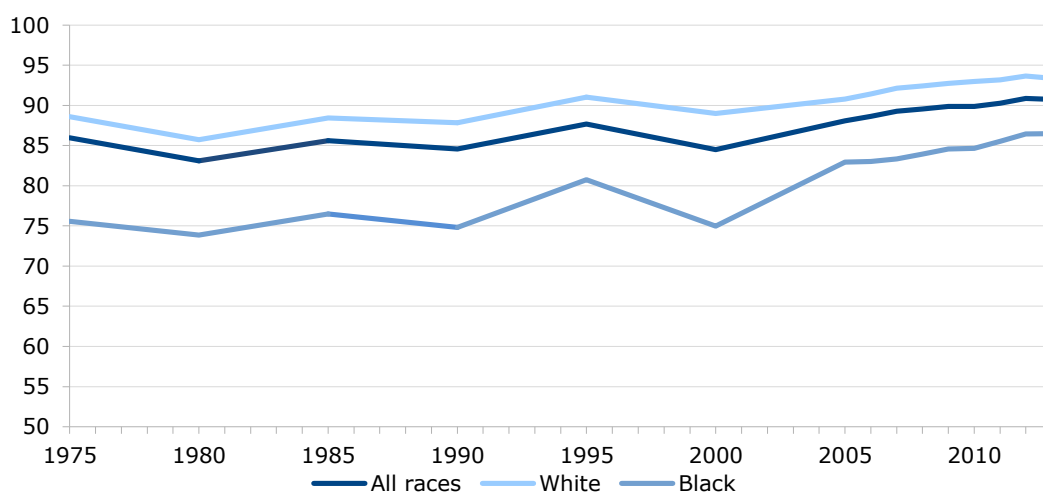
blacks, and whites from 1975 to 2013. In 1975, the completion rate for blacks ages 20-24 was 75.6 percent. This rate remained virtually unchanged throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. There was a spike in 1995 to 80.8 percent, but by 2000 the rate was back down to 75.0 percent. So, for the last three decades of the twentieth century, young blacks experienced almost no improvement in their high school completion rates.⁴

The gap between completion rates for blacks and whites was 13.0 percentage points in 1975 and rose slightly to 14.0 percentage points in 2000. Fortunately, the first decade of the twenty-first century showed significant improvement for blacks. By 2005, the high school completion rate for blacks had increased 8 percentage points to 83.0 percent, and the black-white gap decreased to 7.8 percentage points. By 2010, the completion rate for blacks (84.7 percent) was 9.7 percentage points higher than it had been in 2000. In 2013, the black completion rate rose to its highest ever, 86.5 percent, and the black-white gap fell to 6.9 percentage points. Overall, the black high school completion rate rose 11.5 percentage points from 2000 to 2013.

FIGURE 1

High School Status Completion Rate, 1975-2013

(percent)



Source and Notes: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey 2005-2013. For 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005-2010, data refer to 20 to 24 year-olds in the relevant year. To estimate data for 1975, 1985, and 1995, we use 25 to 29 year-olds in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census PUMS, who would have been 20 to 24 years old in 1975, 1985, and 1995. Recent immigrants who have been in the United States for less than 10 years are excluded from the sample.

4 One feature of the methodology used here and in Murnane (2013) is that it introduces a sawtooth pattern in the data from 1975-2000. This is because we use 25 to 29 year-olds to estimate completion rates of 20 to 24 year-olds five years earlier. This trend follows Murnane (2013), however, my inclusion of GED recipients mildly exaggerates this effect.

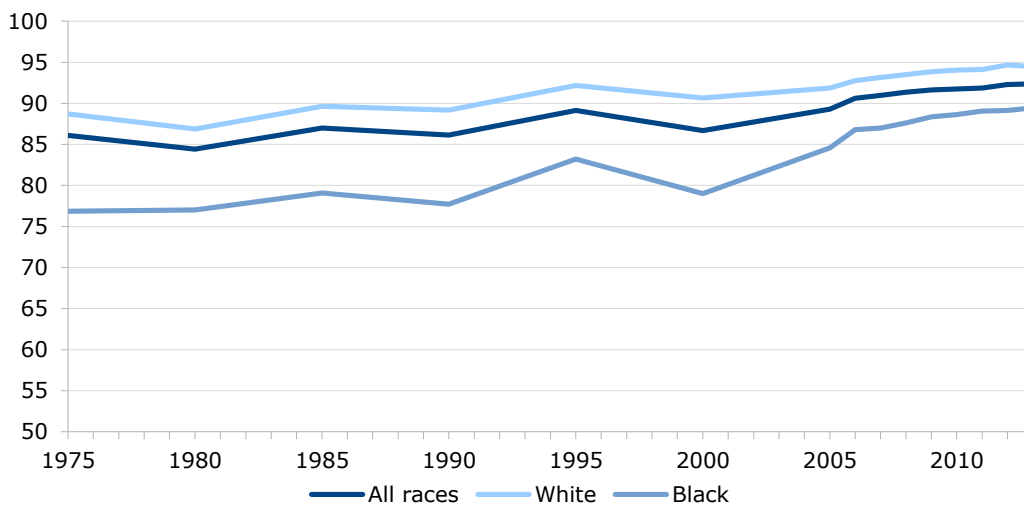
Throughout the entire period, women of all races had higher completion rates than men. **Figures 2 and 3** show completion rates for the same period, by gender. The difference between black men and black women was larger than for whites and those of the overall population. In 1975, the high school completion rate for black women was 76.9 percent and the rate for black men was 74.1 percent. This gap has averaged around 6 percentage points over the entire period. The rate for black women, like that of blacks overall remained flat during the last three decades of the twentieth century. Starting in 2000, the rate increased steadily and in 2013, it was 89.4 percent, only 5.1 percentage points lower than the rate for white females.

The completion rate for black males followed the same trajectory, but 3 to 8 percentage points lower. Although black males experienced noticeable gains in completion rates during this century (an increase of 18.1 percent since 2000), their gains were not enough to offset the gains of other groups, leaving noticeable gaps in completion rates between black males and other groups. In 2013, the completion rate for black males (83.5 percent) was 5.9 percentage points lower than black females and 8.8 percentage points lower than white males.

FIGURE 2

High School Status Completion Rate of Females, 1975-2013

(percent)

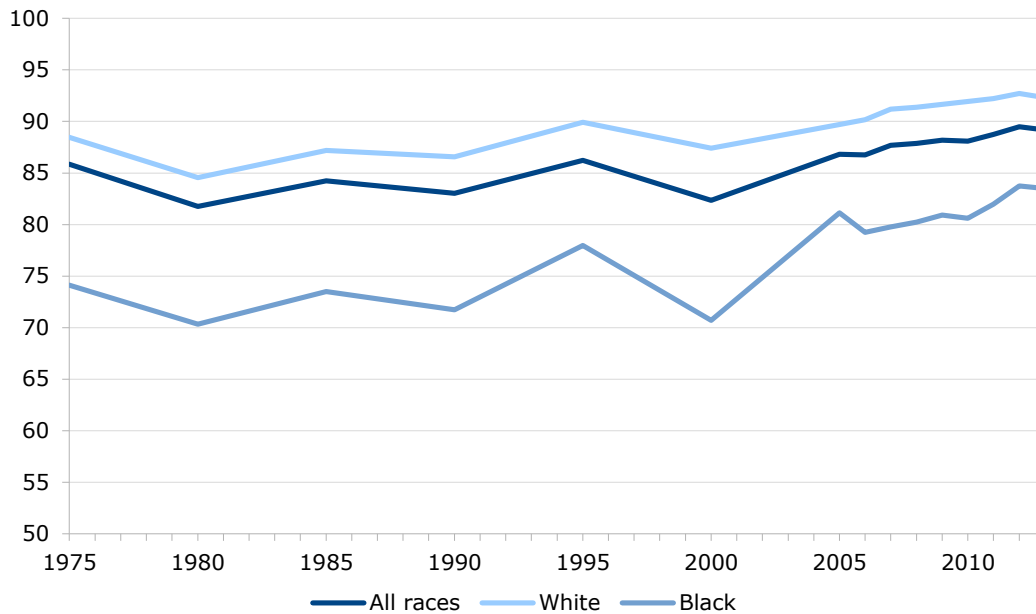


Source and Notes: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey 2005-2013. For 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005-2010, data refer to 20 to 24 year-olds in the relevant year. To estimate data for 1975, 1985, and 1995, we use 25 to 29 year-olds in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census PUMS, who would have been 20-24 years old in 1975, 1985, and 1995. Recent immigrants who have been in the United States for less than 10 years are excluded from the sample.

FIGURE 3

High School Status Completion Rate of Males, 1975-2013

(percent)



Source and Notes: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey 2005-2013. For 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005-2010, data refer to 20 to 24 year-olds in the relevant year. To estimate data for 1975, 1985, and 1995, we use 25 to 29 year-olds in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census PUMS, who would have been 20 to 24 years old in 1975, 1985, and 1995. Recent immigrants who have been in the United States for less than 10 years are excluded from the sample.

Another recent development is that regional differences in completion rates have narrowed substantially since 2005. **Figure 4** displays completion rates for blacks by region from 1975 to 2013. Blacks from western states have traditionally had higher completion rates than blacks living in other regions. In 1975, the status completion rate for blacks in the West was 85.6 percent. The next highest was for blacks in the Northeast (76.0 percent), followed by the Midwest (75.7 percent) and the South (73.5 percent).

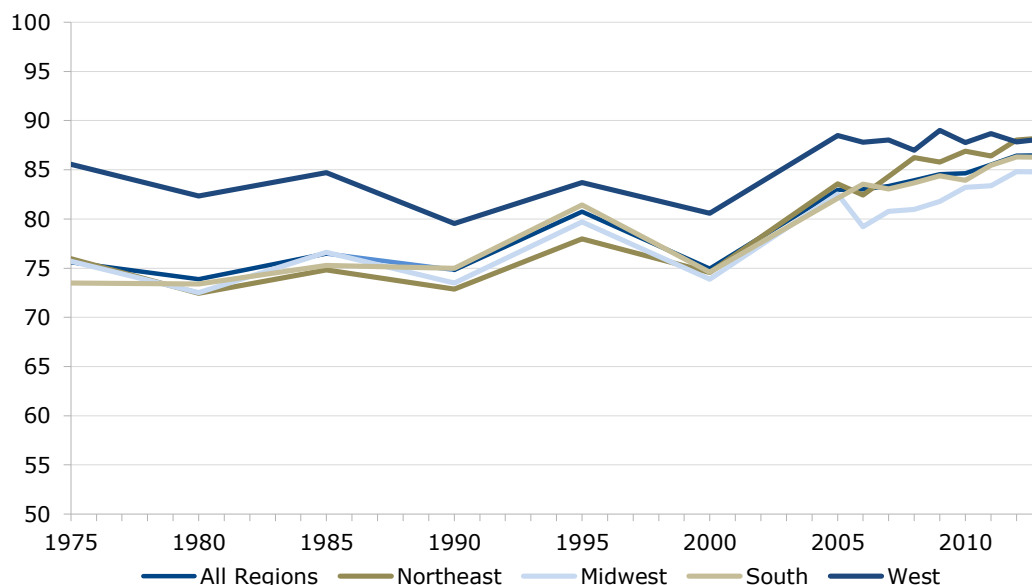
Throughout most of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, blacks in the West maintained an advantage over blacks in other regions, but this gap began to shrink significantly after the middle of the last decade. In 2005, blacks in the West had a completion rate (88.5 percent) that was 4.9 percentage points higher than the next highest region – the Northeast (83.6 percent). However, in the following years, the status completion rates for blacks in the West remained flat, while the rates for other regions continued to grow steadily (with the exception of the Midwest, which dipped in 2006, but grew steadily thereafter).

In 2012, the Northeast surpassed the West, becoming the region with the highest status completion rate (88.0 percent). In 2013, all 4 regions were within 3.4 percentage points of each other. Blacks in the Northeast had a completion rate of 88.2 percent, followed by blacks in the West (88.1 percent), the South (86.3 percent), and the Midwest (84.8 percent).

FIGURE 4

High School Status Completion Rate of Blacks, By Region, 1979–2013

(percent)



Source and Notes: Author's analysis of Census PUMS 1980, 1990, 2000, and American Community Survey 2005-2013. For 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2005-2010, data refer to 20 to 24 year-olds in the relevant year. To estimate data for 1975, 1985, and 1995, we use 25 to 29 year-olds in the 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census PUMS, who would have been 20 to 24 years old in 1975, 1985, and 1995. Recent immigrants who have been in the United States for less than 10 years are excluded from the sample.

The data here show notable increases in completion rates for blacks from 2000 on, using Census PUMS and ACS data. This increase is broadly consistent with other measures of high school graduation rates, including the averaged freshman graduation rate (AFGR) from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and the OECD secondary school completion rates for the United States.⁵ However, for various reasons, these measures do not show the decrease in the black-white gap that is apparent in the status completion rate. Murnane (2013) provides a compelling explanation for why this is the case, and suggests that measures based on the Common Core of Data (CCD) are

5 Both the AFGR and the OECD secondary school completion rate for the United States are based on the Common Core of Data (CCD). For more, see http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_coi.asp, and <http://www.oecd.org/edu/Education-at-a-Glance-2014.pdf>.

biased and do not accurately capture high school graduation rates.⁶

All in all, young blacks have experienced significant gains in high school completion rates during the past 13 years. Black females in particular, have seen a rapid rise and have substantially narrowed the gap relative to white females. Given the importance of educational attainment in determining future wages, higher completion rates should, in theory, translate to higher wages. A future report will examine this issue, but first, part two in this series will focus on the college graduation rates of young blacks in America.

⁶ See Murnane (2013) for a detailed explanation. One reason for this downward bias is that measures using the CCD focus on four-year graduation rates, and blacks are much more likely than whites to graduate outside of the typical four-year period.