## Chapter 10. Education: Illiteracy and Educational Attainment

The census did not include a question on educational attainment (e.g., in the form of years of school completed, or diplomas and degrees) until 1940. Prior to that, the only questions on education from 1840 to 1930 were on the ability to read and/or write (in any language), and these questions were limited to the free population prior to 1870 . Based on the data collected, information on illiteracy can be presented in the form of the percent illiterate (i.e., the percent of persons who were not able to both read and write). Data for 1840 are not shown here because the form of data collection (tallies of the number of household members rather than data for each individual) raises issues of comparability and because the data are not available by sex. In addition, information collected on illiteracy in 1850 and 1860 is not totally comparable with data collected in subsequent censuses; however, data for 1850 and 1860 are included here with the assumption that all slaves were illiterate.

Data on educational attainment were collected in the census starting in 1940. From 1940 to 1980, the data were collected in the form of years of school completed. In 1990 and 2000, data on the highest level of school completed were collected in the form of diploma (e.g., high school) or degree (e.g., college), with highest grade completed for those without a high school diploma. Thus data on educational attainment for 1980 and 1990 are not totally comparable. The summary measures of educational attainment shown are the percentages with a high school diploma (or years of high school completed) and with a bachelor's degree (or 4 or more years of college completed). It is unfortunate that data on educational attainment were not collected in the census until 1940; however, the educational attainment of the population 25 years and over in previous censuses can be estimated based on 1940 data for the population 35+ in 1930, 45+ in 1920, and 55+ in 1910, although the estimates are subject to some error for various reasons, including the potential effects of immigration and mortality on population composition. The following estimates were developed by John K, Folger and Charles B. Nam (1967), Education of the American Population. Their estimates of the percentages with less than 5 years of school, 4 years of high school or more education, and 4 or more years of college, respectively, are as follows: for $1910--23.8,13.5$, and 2.7 ; $1920-22.0,16.4$, and 3.3; and $1930--17.5,19.1$, and 3.9. The corresponding percentages for 1940 , as shown in Figure 10-3, are 13.7, 24.5, and 4.6.

## Figures

10-1. Percent Illiterate by Sex and Age of the Population for the United States: 1850 to 1930
10-2. Percent Illiterate by Sex and Broad Age Group of the Population for the United States by Region: 1860, 1880, 1900, and 1930
10-3. Detailed Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex for the United States: 1940 to 2010
10-4. Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex and Age for the United States: 1940 to 2010
10-5. Detailed Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex for the United States by Region: 1940, 1970, 2000, and 2010

Figure 10-1.
Percent Illiterate by Sex and Age of the Population for the United States: 1850 to 1930
(Data for 1850 and 1860 assume 100 percent illiteracy for the slave population)



Female








15 to 19 or 15 to 20




Sources: Sources:U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census publications. See www.demographicchartbpook.com, References.
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Figure 10-1.
Percent Illiterate by Sex and Age of the Population for the United States: 1850 to 1930—Con.


Sources: Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census publications. See www.demographicchartbpook.com, References.
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Figure 10-2.
Percent Illiterate by Sex and Broad Age Group of the Population for the
United States by Region: 1860, 1880, 1900, and 1930
(Data for 1860 assume 100 percent illiteracy for the slave population)

## 20 OR 21 YEARS AND OVER

| $\square$ | United States |
| :---: | :--- |
| $\square$ | North |
| $\square$ | South |
| $\square$ | West |

```
            Total (both sexes)
1860 (20+)
```

Total (both sexes)


## Male



Female

1900 (21+)





10 YEARS AND OVER


Sources: Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial census publications. See www.demographicchartbpook.com, References.
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Figure 10-3.

## Detailed Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex for the United States: 1940 to 2010

## HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE EDUCATION

$\square$
$\square$
Percent with 4 years of high school or more education (1940-1980) or with at least a high school diploma (1990-2010)
Percent with 4 or more years of college (1940-1980) or with at least a bachelor's degree (1990-2010)


## PERCENT DISTRIBUTION BY HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

| 1940 to 1980 | 1990 and 2010 |  |
| ---: | :--- | :--- |
| Less than 5 years | $\square$ | Less than 5 years |
| 5 to 8 years | $\square$ | 5 to 8 years |
| 9 to 11 years | $\square$ | 9 to 12 years, no diploma |
| 12 years | $\square$ | High school diploma |
| College, 1 to 3 years | $\square$ | Some college, no degree; or associate degree |
| College, 4 years | $\square$ | Bachelor's degree |
| College, 5 or more years | $\square$ | Graduate degree |
| College, 4 or more years | $\square$ | Bachelor's degree or higher |



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Figure 10-4.

## Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex and Age for the United States: 1940 to 2010

$\square$ Percent with 4 years of high school or more education (1940-1980) or with at least a high school education (1990-2010)
Percent with 4 or more years of college (1940-1980) or with at least a bachelor's degree (1990-2010)


## Male



| 22.9 | 59.8 |
| :---: | :---: |
| 25.7 | 82.7 |
| 27.7 | 58.2 |

Female


| 22.6 | 62.9 | 85.5 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 29.4 | 56.5 | 85.9 |
| 35.0 |  | 54.1 |



## 45 to 64 years




| 1990 | 19.1 | 54.2 | 73.3 | 23.7 | 49.7 | 73.4 | 14.9 | 58.4 | 73.3 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 2000 | 26.4 | 56.8 | 83.2 | 29.3 | 53.7 | 82.9 | 23.7 | 59.7 | 83.4 |
| 2010 | 28.6 | 59.1 | 87.7 | 29.3 | 57.5 | 86.8 | 27.9 | 60.7 | 88.6 |

65 years and over

| 1940 | 10.5 | 13.1 |  |
| :--- | :--- | :--- | :--- |
| 1950 | 14.1 | 17.7 |  |
| 1960 | 15.4 | 19.1 |  |
| 1970 | 15.4 | 21.6 | 27.1 |
| 1980 | 8.3 | 30.6 |  |
|  | 38.8 |  |  |



Not shown: 2.6, 3.6, 3.7, and 5.5


Not shown: 3.3, 4.3, and 4.3


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Figure 10-5.
Detailed Educational Attainment of the Population 25 Years and Over by Sex for the United States by Region: 1940, 1970, 2000, and 2010

## HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE EDUCATION



Percent with 4 years of high school or more education (1940-1980) or with at least a high school diploma (1990-2010)
Percent with 4 or more years of college (1940-1980) or with at least a bachelor's degree (1990-2010)


Not shown: 4.6, 4.6, 4.0, and 6.2

Male

|  | 17.2 | 22.7 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
|  | 17.2 | 22.9 |
|  | 14.0 | 18.5 |
| 6.9 | 24.8 |  |


61.9

| 26.1 | 54.0 | 80.1 |
| :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 26.7 | 55.7 | 82.4 |
| 24.1 | 53.1 | 77.2 |
| 28.2 | 52.2 | 80.3 |



Not shown: 5.5, 5.7, and 4.4

Female


| 22.8 | 57.8 |
| :---: | :---: |
| 80.7 |  |
| 23.5 | 59.2 |
| 22.8 |  |
| 21.1 | 57.1 | | 88.2 |
| :---: |
| 24.4 |



Not shown: 3.8, 3.5, 3.6, and 5.4

PERCENT DISTRIBUTION BY HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT (BOTH SEXES)


Not shown for 2000:2.2, 1.5, and 2.4. Not shown for 2010:2.2, 1.6 and 2.3.
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