

Degree Attainment for Black Adults: National and State Trends

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Understanding the economic and social benefits of more college-educated residents, over 40 states during the past decade have set goals to increase their state’s share of adults with college credentials and degrees. In many of these states, achieving these “degree attainment” goals will be directly related to their state’s ability to increase the shares of Black and Latino adults in those states that have college credentials and degrees, particularly as population growth among communities of color continues to outpace the White population and older White workers retire and leave the workforce.¹ From 2000 to 2016, for example, the number of Latino adults increased 72 percent and the number of Black adults increased 25 percent, while the number of White adults remained essentially flat.

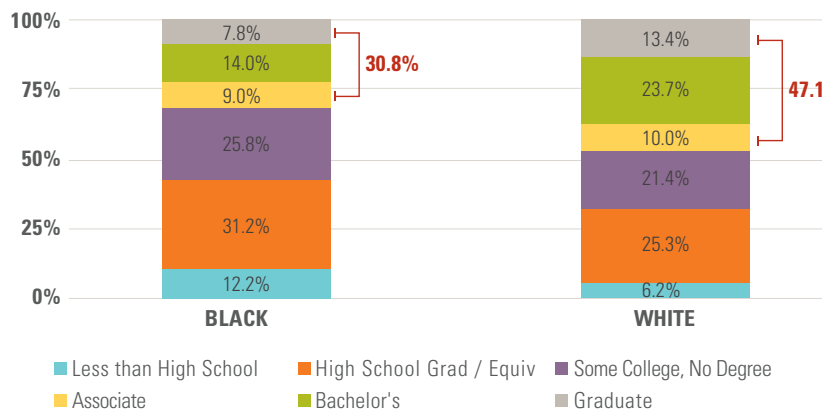
Nationally, there are significant differences in degree attainment among Black, Latino, and White adults, but degree attainment for these groups and the attainment gaps between them vary across states. In this brief, we explore the national trends and state-by-state differences in degree attainment for Black adults, ages 25 to 64 in 41 states.² We examine degree attainment for Latino adults in a companion brief.

National Degree Attainment Trends

Compared with 47.1 percent of White adults, just 30.8 percent of Black adults have earned some form of college degree (i.e., an associate degree or more). For perspective, current degree attainment levels of Black Americans are lower than the attainment levels of White adults in 1990 — over a quarter of a century ago.

Specifically, degree attainment among Black Americans trails the rate for White adults by 16.3 percentage points (see Figure 1), but a closer look at the data indicates that the differences in degree attainment are not uniform across all levels of attainment. The gaps are more prominent at the

FIGURE 1 DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR BLACK AND WHITE ADULTS, 2016



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey.

Why Is Degree Attainment Important?

As the American economy continues to become more knowledge-based, a college degree becomes more and more essential. By 2020, about 65 percent of American jobs will require some form of college, compared with just 28 percent in 1973.³ Generally, unemployment rates are lower for people with higher educational attainment, and wages are higher.⁴ Compared with high school graduates with no college degree, bachelor’s degree completers (with no graduate-level training) are nearly two times less likely to be unemployed and earn nearly \$25,000 more annually. Furthermore, bachelor’s degree completers — on average — earn nearly \$1 million dollars more over their lifetime than high school graduates that haven’t attended college.⁵

Given these personal economic benefits of completing college, degree attainment is often thought of as an individual benefit. However, these personal economic advantages result in larger social benefits, such as increased tax revenue and less reliance on public assistance or social “safety net” programs.⁶ In addition, increased levels of educational attainment are associated with less crime and incarceration, better health, more volunteerism, higher levels of voting and political engagement, and more charitable donations and philanthropic contributions.⁷



higher levels (i.e., bachelor's and graduate), which offer greater financial returns, job security, and employment options in the labor market.

The gap in attainment between Black and White adults at the associate degree level is rather small (i.e., only 1.0 percentage point). But at the graduate degree level, only 7.8 percent of Black adults have earned a degree compared with 13.4 percent of White adults — a gap of 5.6 percentage points. The discrepancy is largest at the bachelor's degree level, where the gap is nearly 10 percentage points. Just 14.0 percent of Black adults have attained a bachelor's degree compared with 23.7 percent of White adults.

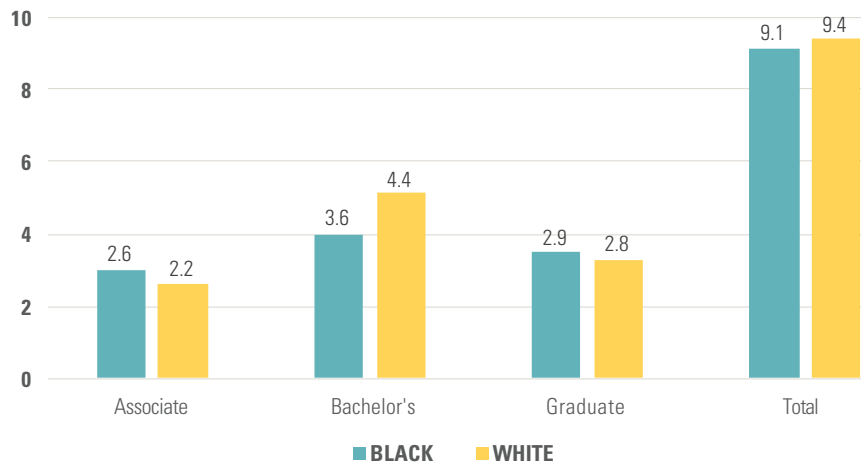
There have been gains in degree attainment over time for Black adults, but these gains have not been enough to close a persistent gap in Black and White attainment. Since 2000, Black and White degree attainment has increased by a little more than 9 percentage points (see Figure 2). For Black adults in 2000, associate degree attainment was 6.4 percent, and bachelor's degree attainment was 10.4 percent. The White associate and bachelor's degree attainment rates in 2000 were 7.8 percent and 19.3 percent, respectively. Gains in associate degree attainment are slightly higher for Black adults, but bachelor's degree attainment gains are higher for White adults. With respect to graduate level attainment, the rate was slightly less than 5 percent for Black adults in 2000, compared with 10.6 percent for Whites. For both Blacks and Whites, gains at the graduate degree level are nearly identical.

When you look at attainment by age, the overall gap doesn't appear to be narrowing. Attainment for young Black adults, ages 25 to 34, is over 20 percentage points lower than that for their White peers, 30.2 percent and 51.0 percent, respectively (see Figure 3). This difference is the largest gap between Black and White adults in any age category. In addition, degree attainment of young Black adults, ages 25 to 34, is not much higher than the rate for older Black Americans, ages 55 to 64. Stated differently, there appears to be very little improvement from one generation to the next. This is not the case for young White adults, whose degree attainment rates are approximately 10 percentage points higher than older White adults.

State Attainment Trends

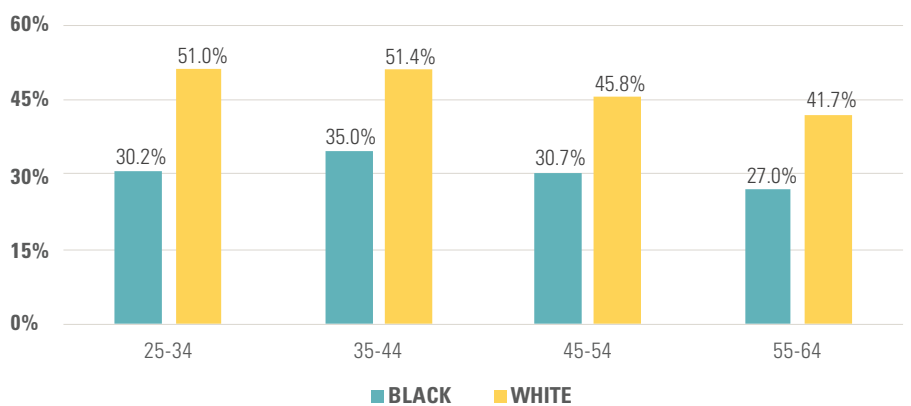
In this section, we examine state-level data on the following: 1) Black degree attainment, 2) Black attainment change since 2000, and 3) attainment gaps between Black and White adults. Narratives describing the data are below, but state ranks, grades, and ratings for each of the three indicators can be found on Table 1 on page 3. We also include a map showing how states compare on Black degree attainment and attainment gaps on page 4.

FIGURE 2 PERCENTAGE POINT GAINS IN DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR BLACK AND WHITE ADULTS SINCE 2000



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey and the 2000 Decennial Census.

FIGURE 3 DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR BLACK AND WHITE ADULTS BY AGE, 2016



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2016 American Community Survey.



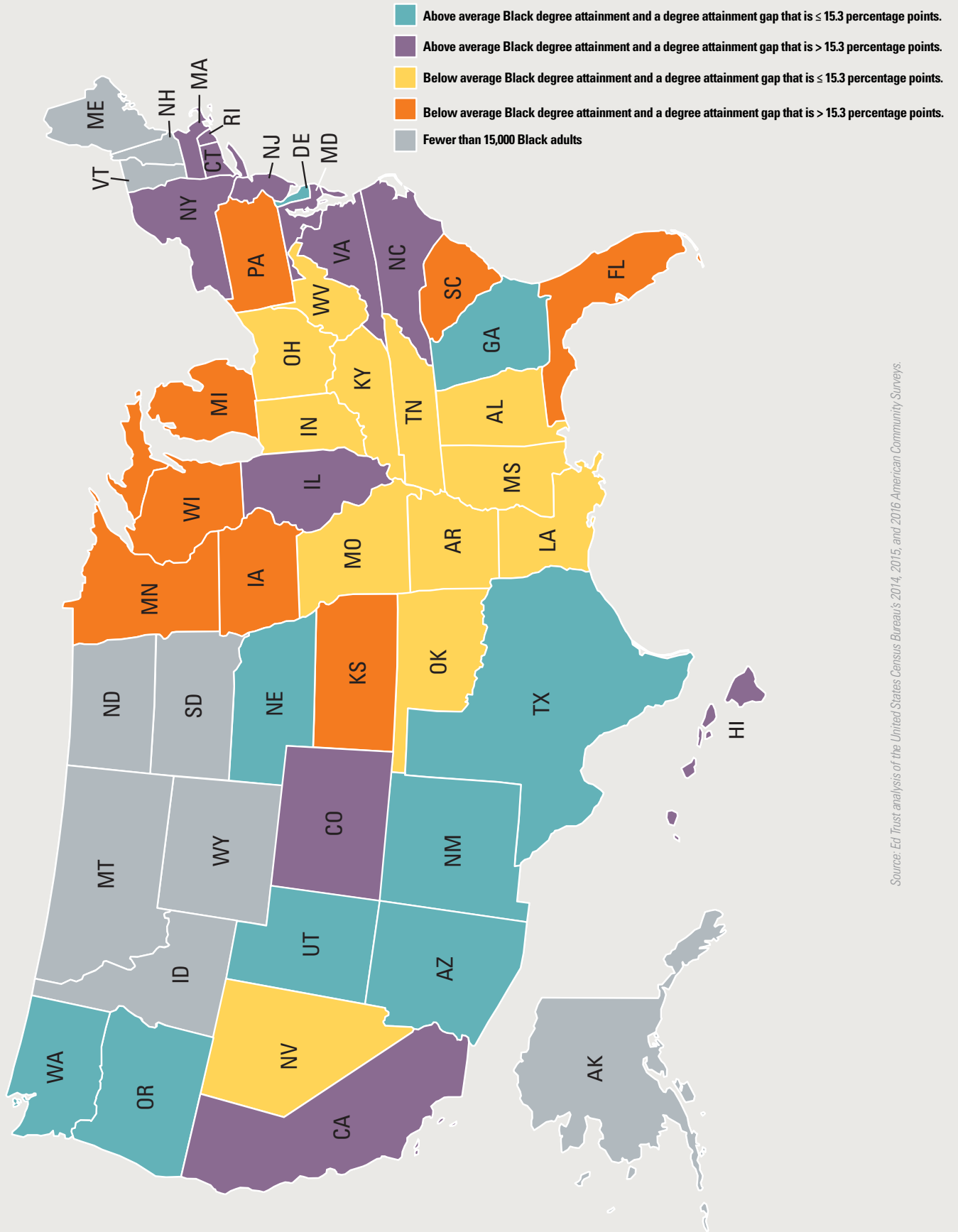
Table 1: Black Degree Attainment Indicators by State

State	Percentage of Adults that are Black	Degree Attainment Rate			Change in Degree Attainment			Degree Attainment Gap			
		Black Attainment	Black Attainment Rank	Grade for Black Attainment	Black Attainment Change Since 2000 (percentage points)	Black Attainment Change Since 2000 Rank	Grade for Change in Black Attainment	Black-White Gap (percentage points)	Black-White Gap Rank	Rating for Black-White Gap*	Gap Change Since 2000 (percentage points)
Alabama	26.7%	26.0%	32	D-	7.1	23	C-	11.6	11	below average	0.9
Arizona	4.4%	34.9%	6	A-	6.4	28	D+	10.9	6	below average	0.2
Arkansas	15.7%	22.3%	40	F	6.6	26	C-	10.4	5	below average	1.3
California	5.7%	34.3%	8	B+	7.0	24	C-	19.1	33	above average	0.6
Colorado	3.9%	37.1%	3	A	5.9	32	D	19.1	34	above average	2.4
Connecticut	10.0%	31.5%	17	C+	10.4	4	A	23.5	41	above average	-1.9
Delaware	21.3%	30.4%	20	C	9.3	9	B+	14.0	16	average	-3.4
Florida	15.6%	28.8%	25	C-	9.0	11	B	15.5	22	average	-1.2
Georgia	31.1%	32.3%	13	B-	9.8	7	A-	11.5	9	below average	-2.2
Hawaii	2.2%	39.2%	2	A+	5.9	33	D	16.7	27	average	2.1
Illinois	13.7%	30.7%	18	C+	7.9	18	C+	19.7	35	above average	1.9
Indiana	9.1%	26.9%	27	D	8.4	14	B-	11.2	8	below average	0.8
Iowa	3.1%	28.8%	24	C-	7.5	20	C	16.3	24	average	4.0
Kansas	5.8%	29.2%	22	C-	5.0	36	F	17.2	28	average	3.6
Kentucky	8.0%	25.3%	34	D-	8.3	15	B-	9.0	2	below average	1.4
Louisiana	31.0%	20.7%	41	F	6.0	31	D	14.8	19	average	1.4
Maryland	29.6%	36.9%	4	A	10.1	5	A-	16.7	26	average	-1.1
Massachusetts	6.6%	34.4%	7	B+	4.6	38	F	23.0	39	above average	5.0
Michigan	13.5%	25.9%	33	D-	5.5	35	D-	15.7	23	average	2.4
Minnesota	5.5%	29.1%	23	C-	3.3	40	F	23.3	40	above average	8.6
Mississippi	37.4%	24.3%	37	F	8.1	17	C+	12.6	13	average	-0.6
Missouri	11.4%	26.1%	31	D-	6.3	29	D+	14.2	18	average	2.6
Nebraska	4.4%	34.2%	9	B+	12.6	1	A+	14.2	17	average	-2.3
Nevada	8.3%	24.8%	36	F	6.0	30	D	13.2	14	average	2.3
New Jersey	12.8%	32.1%	15	B-	8.5	13	B-	21.9	37	above average	1.6
New Mexico	2.0%	40.3%	1	A+	10.1	6	A-	10.1	4	below average	-3.9
New York	14.4%	34.1%	10	B+	8.7	12	B-	21.3	36	above average	1.3
North Carolina	21.5%	30.5%	19	C+	10.5	3	A	16.3	25	average	0.6
Ohio	11.8%	26.5%	30	D	6.9	25	C-	13.8	15	average	2.2
Oklahoma	7.3%	26.6%	29	D	4.8	37	F	11.1	7	below average	3.0
Oregon	1.8%	32.9%	11	B	7.8	19	C+	11.6	10	below average	0.6
Pennsylvania	10.5%	26.8%	28	D	7.4	21	C	17.6	30	average	2.8
Rhode Island	5.5%	30.3%	21	C	4.2	39	F	17.5	29	average	3.5
South Carolina	27.1%	25.2%	35	D-	9.0	10	B	18.4	31	average	0.1
Tennessee	16.7%	27.7%	26	D+	8.2	16	C+	9.4	3	below average	0.8
Texas	12.2%	32.2%	14	B-	9.5	8	B+	15.2	21	average	-1.7
Utah	1.1%	31.7%	16	C+	1.5	41	F	14.9	20	average	7.0
Virginia	19.0%	32.8%	12	B	11.3	2	A+	18.6	32	average	-1.9
Washington	3.7%	35.9%	5	A	5.8	34	D	11.9	12	below average	1.6
West Virginia	3.8%	24.0%	38	F	7.3	22	C	5.0	1	below average	-0.1
Wisconsin	5.9%	23.5%	39	F	6.5	27	D+	22.3	38	above average	4.0

*"Below average" means the attainment gap is smaller than the gap in most states. "Above average" means the attainment gap is larger than the gap in most states. See "About the Data" for more details.

Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2014, 2015, and 2016 American Community Surveys.

BLACK EDUCATION ATTAINMENT AND BLACK-WHITE ATTAINMENT GAP BY STATE



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2014, 2015, and 2016 American Community Surveys.

2016 Black Degree Attainment

When you examine differences in degree attainment for Black adults by state, most of the 41 states in our analysis have rates that fall within roughly 5 percentage points of the national average, which is approximately 30 percentage points (see Figure 4). But there are several states that stand out at both the high and low end of the distribution. On the high end, Arizona, Washington, Maryland, Colorado, Hawaii, and New Mexico all have degree attainment rates that are very close to or exceed 35 percent. Hawaii and New Mexico have rates that hover around 40 percent. Within this group, Maryland, a Mid-Atlantic state, is the outlier. While the others are Pacific and Mountain states and have Black population shares under 5 percent, nearly 30 percent of adults in Maryland are Black. If we look at the top 10 states, New York — with a degree attainment rate of 34.1 percent and a Black adult population of 14.4 percent — is the only other state (besides Maryland) where the Black adult population exceeds 7 percent. Absent from the top 10 are any Southern states, which have the highest shares of Black adults. Virginia and Georgia at 12th and 13th, respectively, were the highest ranked Southern states.

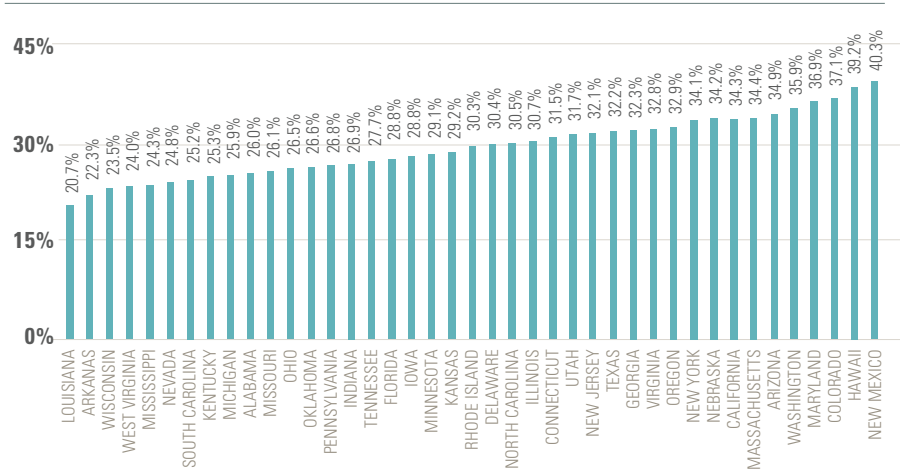
On the lower end of the attainment distribution for Black adults are Nevada, Mississippi, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Arkansas, and Louisiana. These states have degree attainment rates that are below 25 percent. Louisiana, at 20.7 percent, has the lowest degree attainment rates for Black adults.

These states with low attainment rates for Black adults tend to have higher percentages of Black adults than the high(er) attainment states highlighted above. Over 30 percent of adults in Louisiana and Mississippi are Black, and nearly 16 percent of adults in Arkansas are Black. It is also noteworthy that 7 out of the 10 states with the lowest Black attainment rates are in the South, where Black adults make up larger shares of the state's 25 to 64 year old population. The three non-Southern states are Nevada, Wisconsin, and Michigan. While Nevada and Michigan have relatively low or moderate levels of attainment for all adults, attainment in Wisconsin is relatively high.

Attainment Change Since 2000

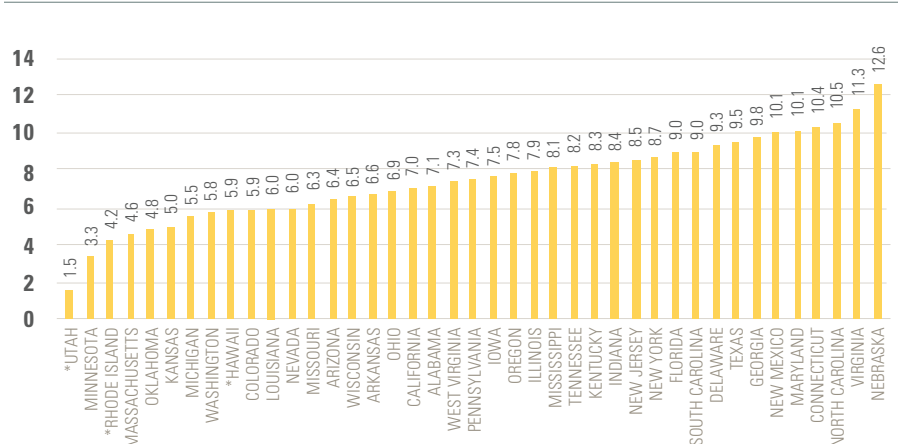
Since 2000, all of the states we examined have seen some increase in degree attainment for Black adults (see Figure 5). On average, larger states with higher percentages of Black adults experienced average or above average change, while many smaller states

FIGURE 4 DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR BLACK ADULTS BY STATE



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2014, 2015, and 2016 American Community Surveys.

FIGURE 5 PERCENTAGE POINT GAINS IN DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR BLACK ADULTS SINCE 2000 BY STATE



*Change in degree attainment rate not statistically significant from zero based on an independent sample t-test at the 95 percent level of significance

Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2014, 2015, and 2016 American Community Surveys and the 2000 Decennial Census.

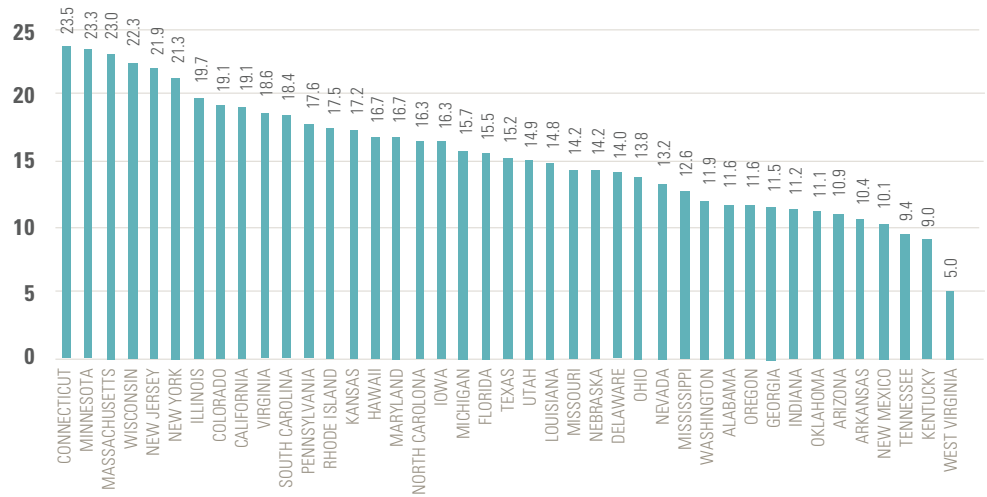


with lower percentages of Black adults exhibited very little change in attainment. Virginia and Nebraska stand out as states that have improved the most. Virginia has increased Black attainment by 11.3 percentage points, while Nebraska has seen the most improvement with a 12.6 percentage point gain. New Mexico, Maryland, Connecticut, and North Carolina have also seen above average change with gains that are close to or exceed 10 percentage points.

There are also several states that have experienced very little change in attainment over the past decade and a half. Utah, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, and Kansas

all saw gains that were 5 percentage points or less. Utah saw the least amount of change with only a 1.5 percentage point gain, but it is important to note that Utah has the lowest percentage of Black adults of any state included in our analysis. Michigan, with only a 5.5 percentage point gain since 2000, is the only state in the bottom 10 on change that has a Black population that accounted for at least 10 percent of the state's adults. Louisiana, where slightly more than 3 out of 10 adults are Black, is right outside the bottom 10 with just a 6.0 percentage point gain in degree attainment for Blacks.

FIGURE 6 PERCENTAGE POINT GAP IN BLACK AND WHITE DEGREE ATTAINMENT FOR ADULTS BY STATE



Source: Ed Trust analysis of the United States Census Bureau's 2014, 2015, and 2016 American Community Surveys.

Attainment Gaps Between Black and White Adults

In every state in our sample, there is a gap between the degree attainment rates for Black and White adults, and in half of the states that gap exceeds 15 percentage points (see Figure 6). West Virginia has the smallest attainment gap in the country — 5.0 percentage points. However, their gap is mostly a function of the state's low attainment for White adults, as Black attainment is only 24.0 percent — 38th lowest among the 41 states in our analysis. Kentucky and Tennessee are the only other states with gaps below 10 percentage points. But, just like West Virginia, the small gaps in these states are primarily driven by lower than average attainment rates for White adults. Out of the 10 states with the smallest gaps, only New Mexico, Arizona, Georgia, and Oregon have Black attainment rates that exceed the national average.

On the other end of the spectrum, Connecticut, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, New Jersey, and New York all have extreme inequality in degree attainment between Black and White adults. Having such large gaps in these states is especially problematic because these states account for about 14 percent of all Black adults. The three states with the largest gaps are Connecticut, Minnesota, and Massachusetts. These states have attainment differences that approach or exceed 23 percentage points. Eight out of the 10 states with the largest gaps have degree attainment rates for Black adults that surpass the national average. Wisconsin and Minnesota are the only two states with large gaps where Black residents have attainment rates below the national average for Black adults.

Conclusion

As states continue to pursue their goals to increase the share of adults that have some form of postsecondary credential, it is imperative that states enact policies, interventions, and incentives that will enable more Black students to successfully navigate the traditional educational pathway to degree completion and help Black adults — who may have dropped out of college or never enrolled — find a pathway to completing a college credential or degree. The data in this brief show that Black attainment rates in many states are far too low and significantly trail rates for White adults.



We know that racial gaps in attainment are the result of various factors, such as historical — and current — economic, social, and educational barriers that systemically disadvantage and stifle the progress of Black people in this country. The wealth gap and inequities in the criminal justice system are clear examples that influence educational attainment. Additionally, we know that our education system, on average, sends Black students to schools with less funding and resources,⁸ fewer experienced teachers,⁹ less rigorous curricular options,¹⁰ and fewer school counselors.¹¹ These systemic barriers can only be addressed through interventions and policies that prioritize eliminating racial disparities. An emphasis on income is important but insufficient for racial justice, as recent research has found that differences in parental marriage rates, education, and wealth explained “very little of the Black-White gap” in social mobility.¹²

About the Data

In this brief, we use data from the United States Census Bureau to examine degree attainment at the state and national level. Degree attainment is defined as the percentage of adults between the ages of 25 and 64 that have some form of postsecondary degree (i.e., an associate, bachelor’s, or graduate degree). For the national degree attainment estimates, we used the United States Census Bureau’s 2016 American Community Survey. These data include adults in all states, the District of Columbia (Washington D.C.), Puerto Rico, and overseas military installations.

The degree attainment estimates for states were calculated using three-year averages of data from the United States Census Bureau’s American Community Surveys from 2014, 2015, and 2016. We used a three-year average to mitigate the influence of sampling error and single-year anomalies for states with small populations. To further address the influence of sampling error, we excluded states from the analysis that had an average estimated population of Black adults below 15,000 in 2014-2016. Attainment data for 41 states were included. Alaska, Idaho, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming were excluded.

We did not eliminate states from the analysis that had an estimated Black population that was below 15,000 in 2000 for two reasons. First, the 2000 data were only included in one indicator — the change in attainment since 2000. Second, the 2000 Decennial Census is more robust than the annual ACS surveys, limiting the effect of sampling error and providing more precise data.

Grades were assigned to each state based on how well each state compared with the other states on the degree attainment rate and the change in degree attainment. We standardized the distribution of scores for each category by transforming each data point into a z-score (subtracting the mean and dividing by the standard deviation across states). Grades were assigned based on the z-score’s position on the normal curve. The cutoff scores for the grades were: F grades had z-scores below -1.036; D grades had z-scores above -1.036 but below -0.385; C grades had z-scores between -0.385 and 0.385; B grades had z-scores above 0.385 but below 1.036; and A grades had z-scores above 1.036. Pluses and minuses were added for further delineation by splitting each grade band into three equal portions based on the area under the normal curve.

We also rated the degree attainment gap between Black and White adults. The gap was rated as either “above average,” “average,” or “below average.” An “above average” rating means that the state’s degree attainment gap was 0.75 standard deviation above the average gap across all states. A “below average” rating means that the state’s degree attainment gap was 0.75 standard deviation below the average gap across all states.



Endnotes

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ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust is a nonprofit organization that promotes closing opportunity gaps by expanding excellence and equity in education for students of color and those from low-income families from pre-kindergarten through college. Through research and advocacy, the organization builds and engages diverse communities that care about education equity, increases political and public will to act on equity issues, and increases college access and completion for historically underserved students.

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