

# Degree Attainment for Black Adults: National and State Trends

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## 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.

