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Census Data Show Rise in College Degrees, but Also in Racial Gaps in Education

By Alex Richards

The share of Americans with a college education has been increasing steadily for generations, but it doesn't look like the rising tide that lifts all boats. If anything, the country has become increasingly stratified over time.

Back in 1940, less than 5 percent of Americans 25 and older had bachelor's degrees. Now, according to data released by the Census Bureau in December, nearly 28 percent do. For the first time since 2000, it is possible to get a comprehensive view of those numbers for every county. *The Chronicle* examined this recent release—a sample of information collected from residents of the United States between 2005 and 2009, as part of the American Community Survey—alongside decennial census data released since 1940 to see how those numbers have changed.

For example, in Maury County, Tenn., the proportion of residents with bachelor's degrees has not kept pace with that rate in the rest of the country, rising from 2 percent to 16 percent since 1940, a figure that also puts it behind the rest of Tennessee. La Plata County, Colo., had a similar attainment rate in 1940—4 percent. But by 1990, the population had doubled, and the rate was 28 percent. The most recent numbers put the share at 42 percent. An interactive map at <http://chronicle.com/census> lets readers explore these data.

One thing that jumps out of the data is the large educational gap experienced by blacks and Hispanics. That can be difficult to examine fairly over time because of changes in how the census has handled race and ethnicity, but a clear contrast exists with college degrees in the population as a whole.

For instance, the census estimates that in 2009, 28 percent of Americans 25 and older had at least four-year degrees. But the rate for black Americans was just 17 percent, and for Hispanic Americans only 13 percent.

The situation varies substantially depending on where one looks. When race and ethnicity are factors, no two counties tell the same story. Consider two examples, Miami-Dade County, in Florida, and Milwaukee County, in Wisconsin. Powerful economic and demographic forces have transformed those counties in recent decades. In one, the gap between Hispanics and the rest of the population is smaller than nearly anywhere else, bucking a national trend. The other exemplifies a growing chasm, where a backdrop of poverty and economic strife has left the black population behind.

In Miami-Dade, the share of Hispanic college graduates may lag by a few percentage points—an estimated 23 percent versus 26 percent over all, according to sampling done by the census between 2005 and 2009—but that's a much smaller gap than in Los Angeles, Phoenix (Maricopa County) or Houston (Harris County), where the Hispanic college-degree rate doesn't even crack 10 percent.

In Miami, the composition of the Hispanic population may account for some of the difference in degree attainment.

Recent census estimates show that nearly two-thirds of Hispanics in the United States identified themselves as originating from Mexico. Concentrations are particularly high in border states like California, Arizona, and Texas, where educational attainment among Hispanics is lower than the national average.

William Frey, a demographer with the Brookings Institution, said that its unusual immigrant mix makes Miami stand out compared with other American cities with growing Hispanic populations. "Miami is an immigrant hub, but it has a much higher mix of Hispanics," he said.

Cuba remains the dominant source in that mix, even though Cubans comprise a waning share. About half of all Cubans in the United States live in Miami-Dade County, and they make up more than half of the county's Hispanic population. A review of census data from 2000 shows Cubans there as relatively prosperous, with fewer residents below the poverty level than in other Hispanic groups.

The influx of Cubans began in earnest during the 1960s, after Fidel Castro came to power. John Logan, a professor of sociology at Brown University, noted that this first wave of immigrants was widely regarded as a highly educated entrepreneurial class.

The character of those immigrants changed in subsequent waves, Mr. Logan said, later coming from the lower end of Cuban society, thus lowering the average level of education.

A growing contingent of Miami's Hispanic population comes from South America, especially Colombia. Mr. Logan characterized those immigrants as having very different backgrounds from people from Mexico.

"They have higher rates of literacy and high-school completion, and that shows up in the immigration stream," he said.

In a previous study, Mr. Logan analyzed the average years of education for different Hispanic groups. The census data from 1998 and 2000 essentially showed a gap of two grade levels between residents who came from South America and those from Central America—12.6 and 10.3 years, respectively.

The largest components of Miami's Hispanics in 2009—Cubans, Colombians, and Nicaraguans—had, on average, completed 12 or more years of school.

Milwaukee's Education Gap

Almost the converse of the Hispanic trend in Miami is the achievement gap between Milwaukee County's black population and its population as a whole. The gap in degree attainment is much larger—15 percentage points. It's a place where opportunity for blacks seems to have largely evaporated since its manufacturing heyday.

Sammis B. White, a professor of urban planning at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, said the area had been devastated by the loss of tens of thousands of jobs, beginning with recessions in the 1970s and 1980s, and displacing black workers hired for manufacturing jobs in the 1960s. Many of them had been recruited from the South and had limited educational backgrounds.

"They made good livings, but those livings could not continue," Mr. White said.

These unionized jobs, involved in creating durable goods, manufacturing heavy equipment, and fabricating metals, typically provided wages that could support a family, said Marc Levine, a professor of history, economic development, and urban studies at Milwaukee.

There's some sense, too, that the collapse was disproportionate. Mr. Levine pointed out that a higher share of blacks than whites worked in those trades, and so they bore the brunt of the fallout as those jobs disappeared.

Now that the path to prosperity relies on a strong educational background, a flourishing working class in Milwaukee has given way to a city of sharp economic divides. That's partly evident in the widening degree attainment gap for black Milwaukeeans.

In 1980, 7 percent of blacks age 25 and older in Milwaukee County were college graduates, compared with about 8 percent nationally and about 17 percent for whites in the county. Nearly 30 years later, the estimated share of college graduates in the black population had risen only to 12 percent, well below the national average and about 20 percentage points below that of whites.

In some ways, Mr. Levine said, the differences that show through the share of people with college degrees are a function of racial disparities that exist across the board.

There is no one particular cause. Milwaukee suffers not only from high levels of poverty but also from high concentrations of poverty in inner-city neighborhoods, which Mr. Levine said have continued to increase. The poverty rate within the city limits stood at an estimated 27 percent in 2009. Much of the job growth has also been in the suburban and exurban fringe, where exceedingly few of Milwaukee's blacks live.

"I think the backdrop to all this is that socioeconomic conditions have created an environment which makes it fairly difficult for African-American males, and African-Americans in general, to go on to college," Mr. Levine said.