



POPULATION BRIEF

Trends in the Western U.S.

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The West Sees A Growing Gap In Education and Income

BY DON E. ALBRECHT

While college educated workers have always earned higher incomes than their less-educated counterparts, this educational income gap has increased substantially in recent years. Recent Census data indicate that households where the primary wage-earner has a college degree or more have total household incomes that are more than twice as high as households where the primary wage-earner has only a high school degree or less.

One of the primary reasons for the growing educational income gap is the change in the economic structure of this country. These changes are having an especially significant impact on rural areas. Historically, the primary source of employment in rural areas was the natural resource industry such as agriculture, forestry, and mining. Later, as our nation industrialized, manufacturing became the largest employer of rural Americans. A unique feature of manufacturing and the natural resource industries (the goods-producing industries) is that they provide many stable middle-income jobs, and many of these jobs are held by individuals who have a high school degree or less.

In recent years, however, millions of jobs in the goods-producing sector have been lost as they have either been replaced by technology or outsourced to foreign countries by multi-national corporations to take advantage of cheaper labor. Nationwide, the loss of jobs in the goods-producing industries has been offset by

a growing number of jobs in the service sector. Service sector employment compared to the goods-producing industries, tend to be much more economically diverse. There are many high-quality service jobs in fields such as health care, education, information, and finance. These jobs, however, generally require advanced education or training. In contrast, there has also been a significant increase in the number of low-paying service jobs in retail trade and personal, household, tourism, and entertainment services. Individuals holding these low-pay service jobs tend to earn substantially less than an equally educated person working in the goods-producing sector. Consequently, economic restructuring has resulted in steadily higher wages for college educated persons as the demand for skilled labor has increased, and lower wages for persons with less than a college education as middle-income jobs in the goods-producing industries have been replaced by low-pay service jobs. The consequence is increased inequality and a growing educational income gap.

Given the increased significance of educational attainment in the new economy, an examination of educational levels is therefore important. The data in Table 1 shows that 87.7 percent of adults (age 25 or older) living in the 13 western states in 2009 had completed high school, while 31 percent had at least a college degree. These numbers vary by state. In nine states, at least 90 percent of adults

had a high school degree, while in New Mexico and California only 84.8 percent of adults were high school graduates. Colorado had a higher proportion of college graduates than any other state in the region at 37.8 percent. In comparison, 23.8 percent of Nevada adults are college graduates.

Educational Attainment by Population Characteristics

Table 1. Educational Attainment for Persons 25+ in the Western United States, 2009

| State | Percent with High School Degree | Percent with College Degree |
|------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Alaska | 91.3 | 26.1 |
| Arizona | 88.1 | 28.1 |
| California | 84.8 | 32.0 |
| Colorado | 92.3 | 37.8 |
| Hawaii | 91.4 | 30.7 |
| Idaho | 90.7 | 24.2 |
| Montana | 92.3 | 26.9 |
| Nevada | 88.2 | 23.8 |
| New Mexico | 84.8 | 26.5 |
| Oregon | 91.7 | 29.9 |
| Utah | 93.4 | 30.3 |
| Washington | 92.4 | 31.8 |
| Wyoming | 92.9 | 24.5 |
| West Total | 87.7 | 31.0 |

Educational attainment levels are very different for various sectors of the population. Figure 1 shows there are substantial differences in educational attainment by whether individuals live in metropolitan or nonmetropolitan counties. While 32.9 percent of metro residents have at least a college degree, significantly fewer, 21.8 percent, of nonmetro residents are college educated. More than one-half of nonmetro adults have only a high school degree or less, this proportion is only 42.8 percent for metro residents.

Perhaps most significant gaps are differences in educational attainment by race/ethnicity. Thus, while 95 percent of White adults have completed high school, this proportion is only 63.7 percent for Hispanics and 77.8 percent for Native Americans (Figure 2). For college graduates, 45.7 percent of Asian and 35.9 percent of White adults have a college degree. In comparison, these proportions are 21.8 percent for Blacks, 11.6 percent for Hispanics, and 10.0 percent for Native Americans. Given the very rapid increase in minority (and especially Hispanic) populations, it is imperative that our communities find a way to better educate the minority residents of the West.

Finally, major differences in education by gender have emerged in recent years. As shown in Table 2, for persons who are 55 years of age or older, educational attainment levels for males surpass educational attainment levels for females.

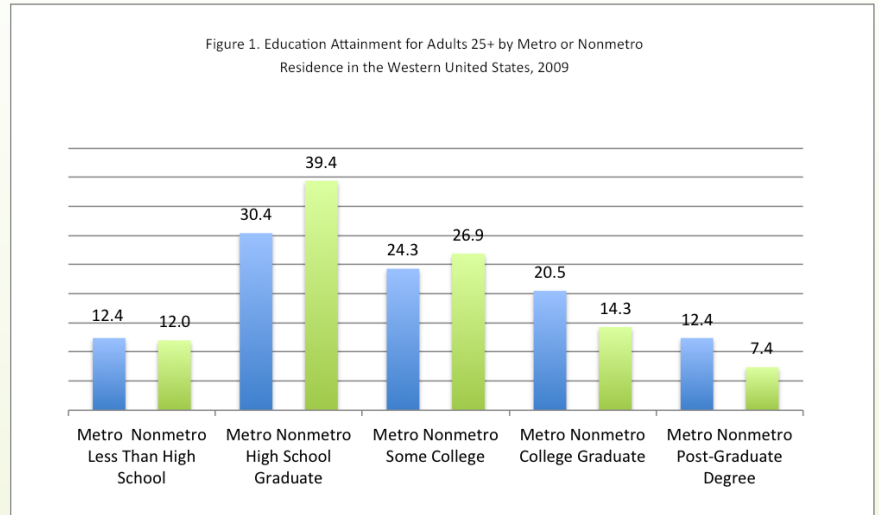
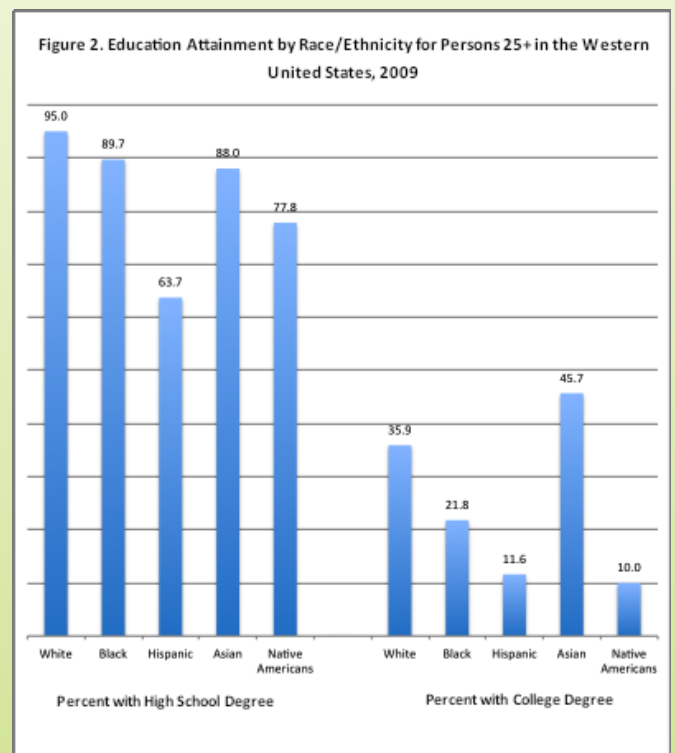


Table 2. Educational Attainment by Age and Gender in the Western U.S., 2009

| Age and Gender | Less than High School | High School Graduate | Some College | College Graduate | Post-Graduate Degree |
|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|------------------|----------------------|
| 18-24 | | | | | |
| Male | 16.1 | 47.9 | 29.6 | 6.0 | 0.4 |
| Female | 11.4 | 41.6 | 36.1 | 10.2 | 0.7 |
| 25-30 | | | | | |
| Male | 12.6 | 34.6 | 25.6 | 21.3 | 5.9 |
| Female | 9.5 | 28.2 | 27.0 | 26.3 | 9.0 |
| 31-34 | | | | | |
| Male | 13.1 | 31.3 | 23.7 | 21.5 | 10.4 |
| Female | 11.5 | 26.1 | 25.4 | 24.1 | 12.9 |
| 35-44 | | | | | |
| Male | 13.7 | 30.6 | 23.4 | 20.1 | 12.2 |
| Female | 11.9 | 27.7 | 25.5 | 22.6 | 12.3 |
| 45-54 | | | | | |
| Male | 11.6 | 32.6 | 24.7 | 18.9 | 12.2 |
| Female | 10.5 | 31.2 | 27.9 | 19.7 | 10.7 |
| 55-64 | | | | | |
| Male | 9.0 | 27.2 | 27.2 | 20.5 | 16.1 |
| Female | 10.0 | 32.0 | 26.7 | 18.6 | 12.7 |
| 65 or More | | | | | |
| Male | 14.8 | 32.0 | 20.7 | 17.1 | 15.4 |
| Female | 17.2 | 42.6 | 20.8 | 12.2 | 7.2 |



Thus, 32.5 percent of males 65 and older have a college degree compared to only 19.4 of females in this same age group. In this age group, females were much more likely to have only a high school degree or less. For persons aged 35 to 54, educational attainment levels by gender are very similar. However, for persons between the ages of 18 and 34, female educational attainment levels are significantly greater than educational attainment levels for males. Many young people between 18 and 24 have not had time to complete significant amounts of school; women, however, have done much better than their male counterparts. While 64 percent of males have only a high school degree or less, this proportion is only 53 percent for females. Additionally, 10.9 percent of females have a college degree compared to only 6.4 percent of males. Female advantages are also apparent for persons from 25 to 30 and 31 to 34 years of age. These trends are troubling in a world where the value of an education is increasing, and employment declines are especially prominent in the goods-producing industries that have historically provided numerous relatively well-paying jobs for men without a college education. With declines in these types of jobs, employment opportunities are limited for poorly educated males. Thus, it is critical that schools, especially in rural areas, make a concerted effort to help boys and men understand

the new economy and the subsequent significance of obtaining a high-quality education.

Educational Attainment by County


As educational attainment levels vary widely by whether the county is metro or nonmetro and the proportion of minority residents, differences in educational attainment levels are very different from one county to another. Tables 3 - 5 provide an overview on the extremes of educational attainment by county in the western region. On the one hand, in almost one-third (141) of the counties in the West, over 90 percent of the adults 25 years of age or older have at least completed high school. On the other hand, Table 3 provides a list of ten counties where less than 70 percent of adults have a high school degree and these counties are all characterized by large minority populations. Tables 4 and 5 explore the percent of adults with at least a college degree. Nearly one-half or more of adults in the counties listed in Table 4 have a college degree, led by Los Alamos, New Mexico at 63.4 percent. The counties in Table 4 are generally university communities, high-income suburban communities, or high-amenity nonmetropolitan communities. At the other extreme, Table 5 lists ten counties where only 10 percent or less of adult residents have earned a college degree. 

Table 3. Top 10 Counties in the Western United States on Lowest Percent of Persons 25+ with High School Degree, 2009

| County | Percent of High School Degree |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Imperial, California | 63.4 |
| Aleutians East, Alaska | 65.1 |
| Adams, Washington | 66.7 |
| Merced, California | 67.0 |
| Luna, New Mexico | 67.1 |
| Tulare, California | 67.2 |
| Colusa, California | 68.0 |
| Franklin, Washington | 68.1 |
| Madera, California | 68.3 |
| McKinley, New Mexico | 68.7 |

Table 4. Top 10 Counties in the Western United States on Highest Percent of Persons 25+ with a College Degree, 2009

| County | Percent with College Degree |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Los Alamos, New Mexico | 63.4 |
| Pitkin, Colorado | 59.1 |
| Boulder, Colorado | 56.6 |
| Marin, California | 53.9 |
| Douglas, Colorado | 53.5 |
| San Francisco, California | 51.1 |
| Teton, Wyoming | 49.5 |
| Summit, Colorado | 48.9 |
| Albany, Wyoming | 48.8 |
| Summit, Utah | 48.2 |

Table 5. Top 10 Counties in the Western United States on Lowest Percent of Persons 25+ with a College Degree, 2009

| County | Percent with College Degree |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Clark, Idaho | 7.6 |
| Guadalupe, New Mexico | 8.3 |
| Mineral, Nevada | 8.5 |
| Aleutians West, Alaska | 8.5 |
| Nye, Nevada | 8.9 |
| Apache, Arizona | 9.7 |
| La Paz, Arizona | 9.9 |
| Lander, Nevada | 10.2 |
| Gem, Idaho | 10.3 |
| Cibola, New Mexico | 10.4 |

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About the Briefs

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The Population Briefs are available in PDF format on the WRDC website (wrdc.usu.edu).

Data

Data for this series is obtained from the U.S. Census of Population for 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010.

About the WRDC

The Western Rural Development Center (WRDC) is one of four regional centers competitively funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Institute of Food and Agriculture to strengthen the capacity of local citizens to guide the future of their rural communities. Each of the four Centers link the research and extension capacity of regional land-grant universities with local decision-makers to enhance rural prosperity, create thriving communities, and support a sustainable and competitive agricultural system.

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