

The College Enrollment Behavior of Young Adult High School Dropouts, GED Holders, and High School Graduates with Regular Diplomas in the United States: 2000–2010

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Introduction

The labor market experiences and outcomes of America's young adults over the past few decades have become increasingly associated with their formal educational attainment.¹ The ability to obtain jobs, to work full-time, year round, to acquire skilled jobs, and to achieve adequate annual earnings has become more closely linked with the years of schooling completed by the nation's adults. Those adults without a regular high school diploma or GED certificate have fared the worst in the labor market over the past decade, but even those with a regular high school diploma or GED have lost a considerable amount of economic ground, particularly over the 2007 – 2010 time period.²

Efforts to keep teens in high school through graduation or to encourage dropouts to pursue a GED have been accompanied by calls for them to seek some additional post-secondary education and training including formal training from employers and apprenticeships, to boost their skills and their earnings capacity.³ Adult education agencies have been called upon to integrate their services with those of community colleges and workforce development agencies, and some community colleges have established GED programs on their campuses that enable some joint enrollment of high school dropouts in GED courses and regular community college classes.

This research report is primarily designed to track the college enrollment behavior of young adults (18-29, 25-29) who are high school dropouts, GED holders, and regular high school diploma holders. Their college enrollment behavior in selected years over the 2000-2010 decade will be tracked, both for young adults overall and in gender and race-ethnic groups. The

¹For a review of the widening gaps in labor market outcomes among young adults by educational level over the past few decades through 2009, see: i) Andrew Sum, Garth Mangum, et al., Confronting the Youth Demographic Challenge: The Labor Market Prospects of Out-of-School Youth, Sar Levitan Center for Social Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 2000. ii) Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Joseph McLaughlin, Sheila Palma, "No Country for Young Men: Deteriorating Labor Market Prospects for Low Skilled Men in the United States," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 635, May 2011, pp. 24-55.

² Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Mykhalo Trubskyy, and Sheila Palma, The Labor Force Behaviors, Labor Market Experiences, and Labor Market Outcomes of the Nation's Adults with No Post-Secondary Education, 2000-2010: Differences in Outcomes Between High School Dropouts, GED Holders, and High School Graduates, Report Prepared for U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Washington, D.C. 2012.

³ See: i) Kathryn Parker Boudett, Richard J. Murnane, and John B. Willet, "Second Chance Strategies for Women Who Drop Out of School," Monthly Labor Review, December 2000, pp. 19-31. ii) Harvard Graduate School of Education, Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century, Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 2011.

influence of the academic skills of these young adults on their college enrollment behavior will also be examined. The final section of the paper will track the college degree awards of 25-29 year old adults in 2009.

Sources of Data

The estimates of the college enrollment behaviors of young adults and their college degree reciprocity rates appearing in this paper are based on two primary sources of data. The first source is the October CPS surveys for calendar years 2000, 2001, 2009, and 2010. The October CPS survey questionnaire contains a supplement that collects information on the current school enrollment status of all respondents age 3 and older, including information on their educational attainment and the level of schooling currently being attended. Those adults who completed high school are asked whether they obtained a GED or a regular high school diploma.⁴ The second source of data is the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.⁵ Interviews from the 2009 NLS survey round were used to identify the school enrollment status of all respondents in the year prior to the survey and the grade of schooling being attended. Post-secondary degrees obtained by both regular high school graduates and GED holders also can be identified.

The College Enrollment Behavior of High School Dropouts with No GED Certificate

Admission into most colleges and universities across the country is dependent on the applicant possessing a high school diploma, a GED certificate, or its equivalent. In recent years, some post-secondary educational institutions, primarily community colleges, have allowed some high school dropouts to enroll in one or more courses provided that they are simultaneously enrolled in a GED program. Findings of the October CPS surveys for the past decade (2000-2010) and from recent interview rounds (2009) from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth consistently reveal only a negligible rate of college enrollment for high school dropouts with no GED. In 2000-2001, the college enrollment rate for all 18-29 year old dropouts across the U.S. was only 1.2 percent (Table 1). The college enrollment rate for the same age group in 2009-2010

⁴ In the regular monthly CPS survey, data on current school enrollment activities are only collected for those persons 16-24 years of age. Persons with a GED but enrolled in college cannot be separately identified on this survey.

⁵ The NLSY survey began in 1997 with a sample of approximately 9,000 youth ages 14-17. The sample contains an over-sampling of Black and Hispanic youth. Youth who obtained a GED and those with regular diplomas can be separately identified with the data.

was only 1.0%, and it was estimated at only .1% or 1-1000 for 25-29 year old dropouts in calendar year 2009 based on findings from the NLS survey.

Table 1:
The College Enrollment Rates of Young Adult
High School Dropouts in the U.S., Selected Years, 2000 to 2010

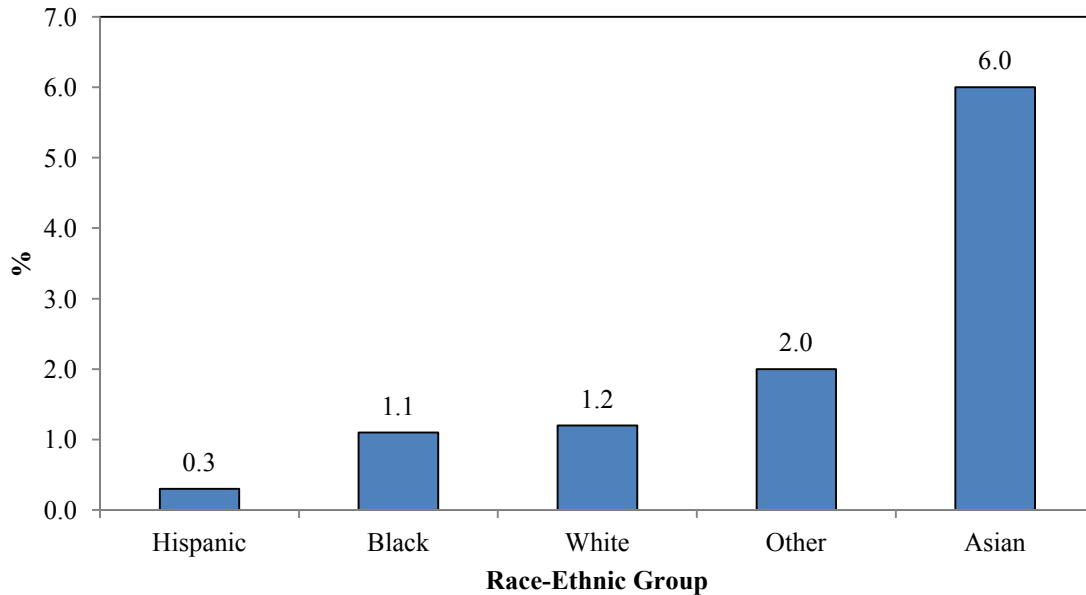
	(A)	(B)	(C)
Year/Age and Gender Group	Number of Dropouts	Number Enrolled in College	Enrollment Rate
2000 – 2001⁽¹⁾			
• All, 18 – 29 year olds	3,763,700	45,500	1.2%
• Men	2,018,200	20,400	1.0%
• Women	1,745,600	25,100	1.4%
2009 – 2010⁽²⁾			
• All, 18 – 29 year olds	3,547,000	33,700	1.0%
• Men	1,983,700	13,100	.7%
• Women	1,565,300	20,500	1.3%
2009⁽³⁾			
• All, 25 – 29 year olds	1,890,300	2,200	.1%
• Men	1,063,400	0	.0%
• Women	826,900	2,200	.3%

Sources: (1) October 2000 and October 2001 CPS, supplement on school enrollment; (2) October 2009 and 2010 CPS, supplement on school enrollment; (3) 2009 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.

In each of these three time periods, female high school dropouts were found to be slightly more likely to be enrolled in college than their male counterparts. For example, in October 2009-2010 1.3% of female dropouts were enrolled in college versus only .7% of men. The 2009 NLSY survey of 25-29 year olds did not find any male dropouts enrolled in college. College enrollment rates of all 18-29 year old dropouts in October 2009-October 2010 did vary across race-ethnic groups. They ranged from a low of only .3% for Hispanics to slightly over 1.0% for Blacks and Whites to a high of 6.0% for Asians. A very high share of Hispanic dropouts were foreign born, many never attended school in the U.S. and a high fraction have very weak English speaking and reading skills.⁶

⁶ For a review of the English speaking and literacy/numeracy skills of immigrants in the U.S., See: Andrew Sum, Irwin Kirsch, and Kentaro Yamamoto, A Human Capital Concern: The Literacy Skills of America's Immigrants, Center for Global Assessment, Educational Testing Service, Princeton 2004.

Chart 1:
Percent of 18-29 Year Old High School Dropouts with No GED Who Were Enrolled in College in October 2009 – October 2010 by Race-Ethnic Group



The College Enrollment Rates of Young Adult GED Holders in the U.S., 2000-2010

Young adults with GED certificates were considerably more likely to attend college than their dropout peers, and their college enrollment rates have been rising over time but remaining far short of those of young adults with regular high school diplomas. Over the October 2000-October 2001 period, slightly under 13 percent of GED holders ages 18-29 were enrolled in college (See Table 2). By October 2009-2010, this ratio had risen closer to 17 percent. As expected, the college enrollment rates of the older members of this age cohort of GED holders were lower than those of their younger counterparts. In 2009, only 9% of GED holders ages 25-29 were enrolled in college at any time in the prior 12 month period.

Table 2:
The College Enrollment Rates of Young Adult
GED Holders in the U.S., Selected Years, 2000 to 2010

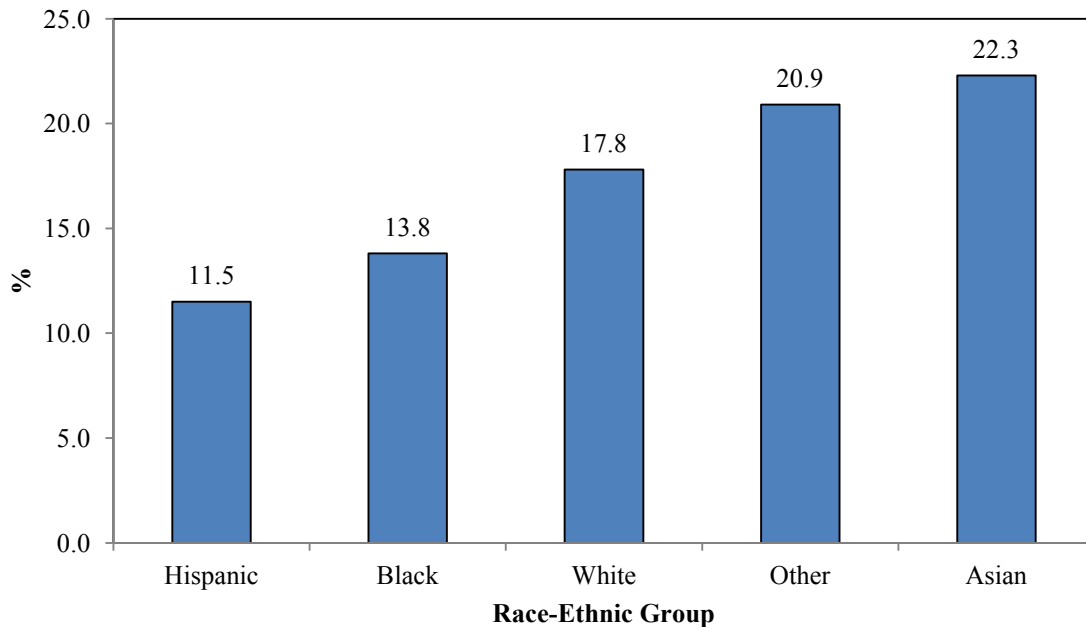
	(A)	(B)	(C)
Year/Age and Gender Group	Number of GED Holders	Enrolled in College	College Enrollment Rate
2000 – 2001⁽¹⁾			
• All, 18 – 29 year olds	2,357,300	296,8900	12.6
• Men	1,190,400	129,400	10.9
• Women	1,166,800	167,500	14.4
2009 – 2010⁽²⁾			
• All, 18 – 29 year olds	2,459,400	413,400	16.8
• Men	1,326,800	186,700	14.1
• Women	1,132,640	226,700	20.0
2009⁽³⁾			
• All, 25 – 29 year olds	2,016,500	178,000	8.9
• Men	1,158,100	62,300	5.4
• Women	858,400	115,700	13.4

Sources: (1) October 2000 and October 2001 CPS, supplement on school enrollment; (2) October 2009 and 2010 CPS, supplement on school enrollment; (3) 2009 National Longitudinal Survey.

Female GED holders were consistently more likely to enroll in college than their male counterparts in each time period. In 2009-2010, 20 percent of female GED holders ages 18-29 were enrolled in college versus only 14% of men though both gender groups had increased their college enrollment rates over the decade (See Table 2). The college enrollment rate of 25-29 year old GED holders in 2009 was 13.4 percent for women versus only 5.4% for men, a relative difference of 2.5 times. The college enrollment rates of 18-29 year old GED holders in October 2009-October 2010 also varied widely across race-ethnic groups, ranging from a low of 11.5% among Hispanics to 18% for White, non-Hispanics, nearly 21% for Black, non-Hispanics, and to a high of 22% for Asians.⁷

⁷ There were only a small number of Asian GED holders in this age group in 2009-2010. There were just 58,000 Asian GED holders versus 352,000 Blacks and 540,000 Hispanic GED holders.

Chart 2:
Percent of 18-29 Year Old GED Holders Who Were Enrolled in
College in October 2009 – October 2010 by Race-Ethnic Group



The College Enrollment Rates of Young Adults with Regular High School Diplomas

Young adults with regular high school diplomas are considerably more likely to be enrolled in college and to obtain college degrees than their peers with GED certificates and no regular diplomas. In October 2000-2001, approximately 31% of all high school graduates 18-29 years old were enrolled in college, including graduate schools. The college enrollment rate of this group of 18-29 year olds had increased to over 34% by 2009-2010, excluding those youth who had obtained some type of college degree but were no longer attending college at the time of the October 2009 or October 2010 CPS surveys. In 2009, approximately 16 of every 100 25-29 year olds with a regular high school diploma were enrolled in college. As was the case for high school dropouts and GED holders, women with regular diplomas in 2009-2010 were more likely to be enrolled in college than their male counterparts (36% vs. 32%).

Table 3:
The College Enrollment Rates of Young High School Graduates with
Regular Diplomas in the U.S., Selected Years, 2000 to 2010

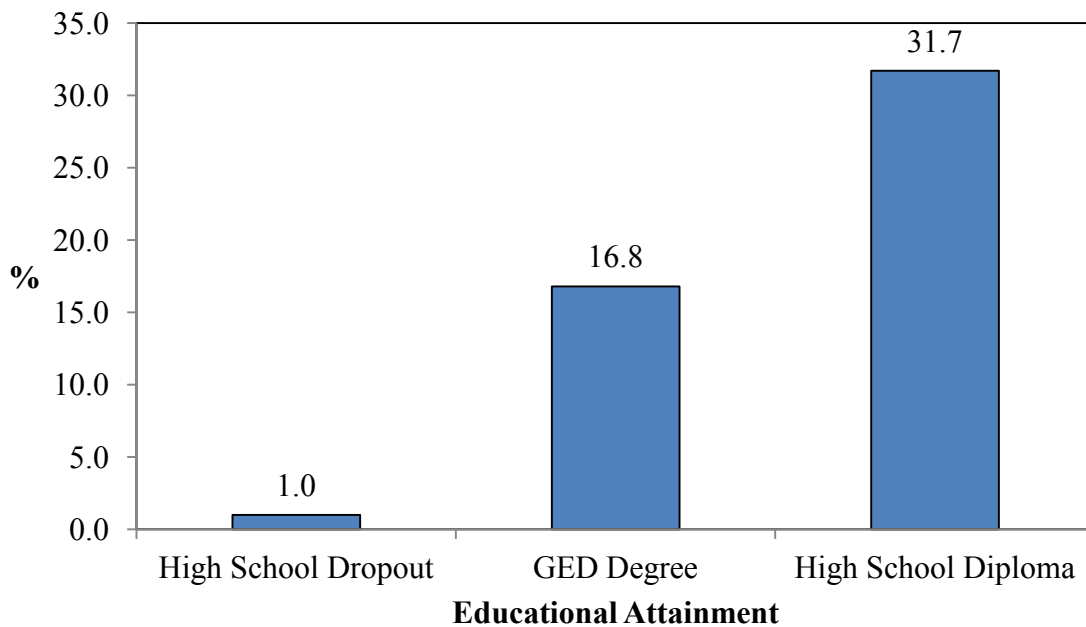
Year/Age and Gender Group	(A) Number of Youth With Regular High School Diploma	(B) Number Enrolled in College	(C) College Enrollment Rate (in %)
2000 – 2001⁽¹⁾			
• All, 18 – 29 year olds	35,014,600	11,238,600	30.9
• Men	16,831,800	5,130,300	29.2
• Women	18,183,000	6,108,300	32.4
2009 – 2010⁽²⁾			
• All, 18 – 29 year olds	41,407,400	14,566,900	34.4
• Men	20,322,300	6,763,000	32.4
• Women	21,085,200	8,002,000	36.4
2009⁽³⁾			
• All, 25 – 29 year olds	15,313,800	2,402,000	15.7
• Men	7,651,240	1,104,300	14.4
• Women	7,662,600	1,297,600	16.9

Sources: (1) October 2000 and October 2001 CPS, supplement on school enrollment; (2) October 2009 and 2010 CPS supplement on school enrollment; (3) 2009 National Longitudinal Survey, 1997.

Findings in Tables 1 to 3 can be combined to allow comparisons to be made of the college enrollment rates of young adults with varying levels of schooling. Estimates of college enrollment rates for our three groups of young adults in October 2009 and October 2010 are displayed in Chart 3. The average college enrollment rate over these two months was only 1.0% for high school dropouts, nearly 17% for GED holders, and 32% for those young adults (18-29) with a regular high school diploma. Obtaining a GED clearly increased college enrollment among GED holders relative to high school dropouts, but they still fell far short of the college enrollment rates of regular high school graduates in those two years.⁸

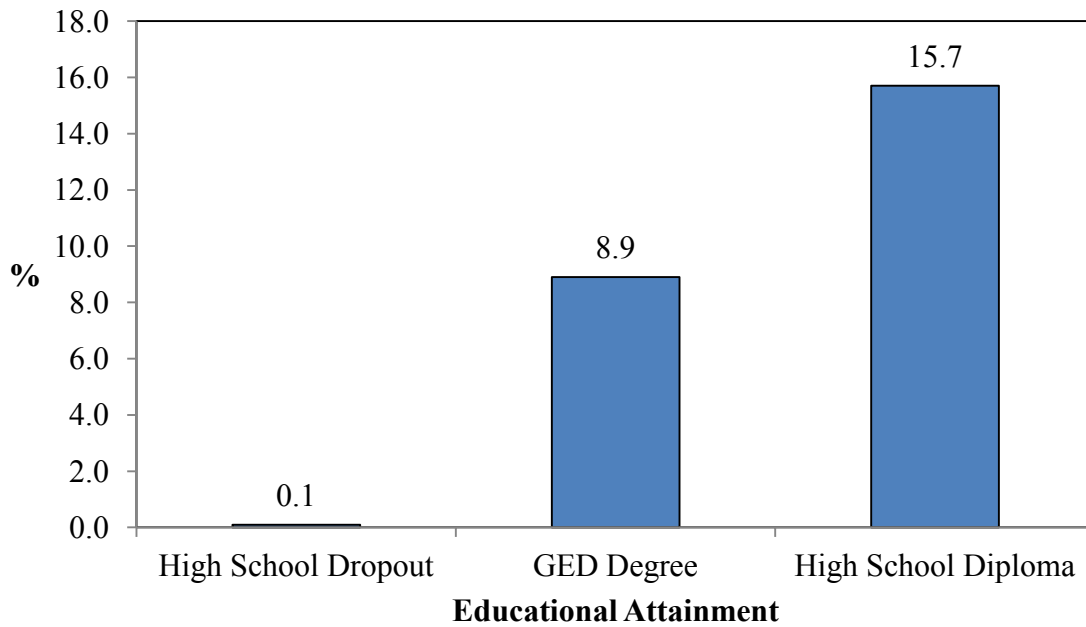
⁸ These results closely mimic those found for young GED and regular diploma holders in the U.S. in 1991. By age 26, only 14% of male GED holders had completed at least one year of college versus 48% of males with regular high school diplomas. Among young women, the ratios were 19% for GED holders and nearly 50% for regular diploma holders. See: Richard J. Murnane, John Willet, and Kathryn Boudett, “Does a GED Lead to More Training, Post-Secondary Education, and Military Service for School Dropouts?” Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 51, No. 1 October 1997, pp. 100-116

Chart 3:
Percent of 18-29 Year Old High School Dropouts, GED Holders, and Regular High School Diploma Holders Who Were Enrolled in College in October 2009-October 2010



Very similar findings prevail when we limit our analysis to 25-29 year olds in 2009. The NLS97 survey found that well under one percent of high school dropouts were enrolled in college in 2009 versus 9% of GED holders and 16% of those with a regular high school diploma (Chart 4). Similar patterns prevailed for both men and women and for members of each major race-ethnic group. Only 5.4% of 25-29 year old male GED holders were enrolled in college in 2009 versus nearly 15% of male high school graduates (Table 4). Among women, 13% of GED holders were enrolled in college versus 17% of those with a regular high school diploma. In each race-ethnic group, those with a regular high school diploma were more likely to be enrolled in college than their peers with only a GED certificate. Approximately one of every six Black, Hispanic, and white GED holders were enrolled in college in 2009 versus only 6 to 9 percent of GED holders in these same race-ethnic groups.

Chart 4:
Percent of 25-29 Year Old High School Dropouts, GED Holders, and Regular High School Diploma Holders Who Were Enrolled in College in 2009



Source: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997, survey round 2009.

Table 4:
Percent of 25-29 Year Old GED Holders and Regular High School Diploma Holders Who Were Enrolled in College in 2009 by Gender and Race Ethnic-Group

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Demographic Group	GED	High School Diploma	H.S. Diploma - GED
Gender			
• Men	5.4	14.6	+ 9.2
• Women	13.6	17.1	+ 3.5
Race-Ethnic Group			
• Black	6.3	16.7	+ 10.4
• Hispanic	9.4	16.2	+ 6.8
• White, not Hispanic	9.1	15.2	+ 6.1

Years of College Attended by 18-29 Year Olds in 2009-2010 by High School Degree Status

The October CPS surveys also collect information from those enrolled in school on the year of school currently being attended, i.e. college freshman, sophomore, or graduate student. Findings from the October 2009 and October 2010 CPS surveys on the year of college being attended by 18-29 year old high school dropouts, GED holders, and regular high school graduates are displayed in Table 5 below. The estimates represent two year averages.

Table 5:
Years of College Attended by College Enrolled Students 18-29 Years Old
in October 2009 – 2010 by Type of High School Degree (in %)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
High School Degree Status	First Year College	Second Year College	Third or Higher Year of College	Graduate School
• High School Dropout	86	10	4	0
• GED Holder	54	26	16	4
• High School Diploma Holder	28	25	33	14

Among those high school dropouts attending college, the vast majority (86%) were enrolled in their freshman year of college. Another 10 percent reported that they were in their second year of college, and 4 percent were in their third year. Among GED holders, a slight majority (54%) were enrolled in their first year of college, another 26 percent were in their second year, and 16 percent in their junior or senior year of college. Four percent of the GED holders attending college reported that they were in graduate school. These young adults with a regular high school diploma were further along in their post-secondary schooling. Only 28 percent were enrolled in their first year of college and another 25 percent were in their second year of college.⁹ One third of this group of high school diploma holders were in their junior or senior year of college and 14 percent were in graduate school.

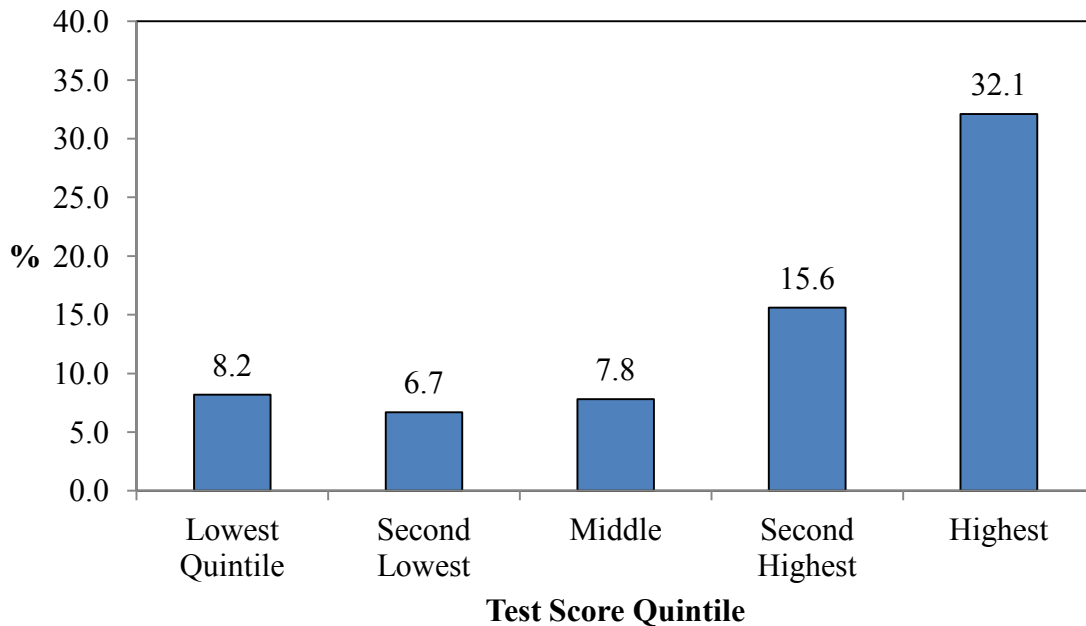
⁹ This college could have been a community college or a four year college/university.

Links Between the Academic Proficiencies of Young Adults and Their College Enrollment Behavior

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth administered the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) to participating youth in 1998. Their scores on this test of academic aptitude/mechanical/coding skills were converted into percentile ranks.¹⁰ The median percentile rank for all GED holders was only the 26th percentile. For those with a regular high school diploma, the median score was the 51st percentile. Forty percent of GED holders fell in the bottom quintile of the test score distribution, and only 4 percent made it to the top quintile versus 21 percent of regular high school graduates.

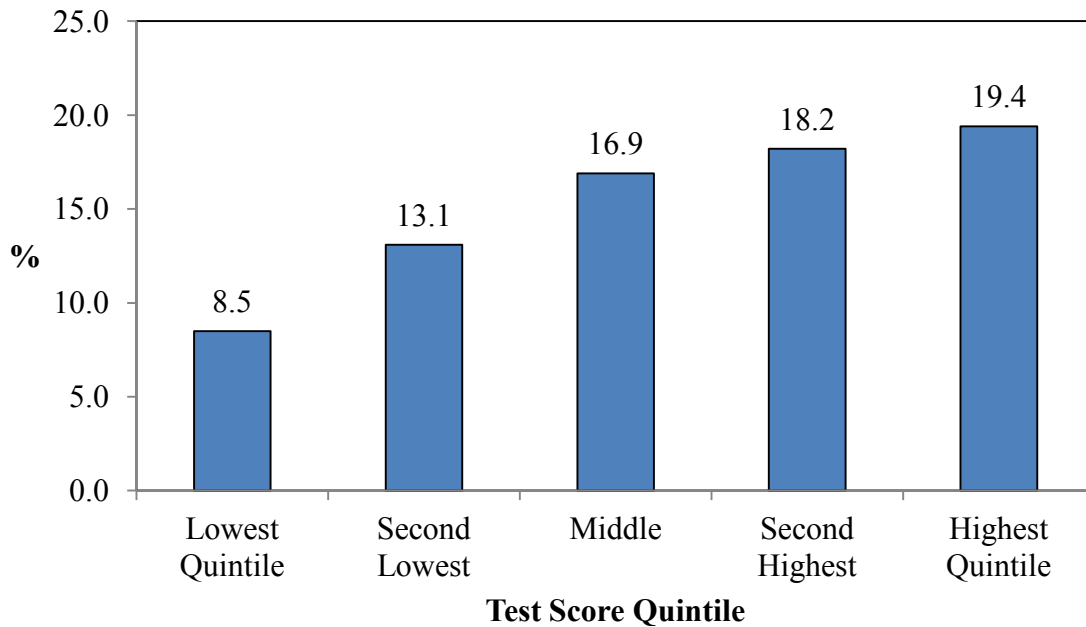
The ASVAB test scores for individual GED holders and regular high school graduates were assigned to the appropriate quintile of the test score distribution for all youth regardless of their level of schooling. For GED holders and diploma holders in each quintile of the distribution, we estimated the share that was enrolled in college in 2009. Findings are displayed in Chart 5 and Chart 6.

Chart 5:
Percent of 25-29 Year Old GED Holders Enrolled in College in 2009
by Position in the ASVAB Test Score Distribution



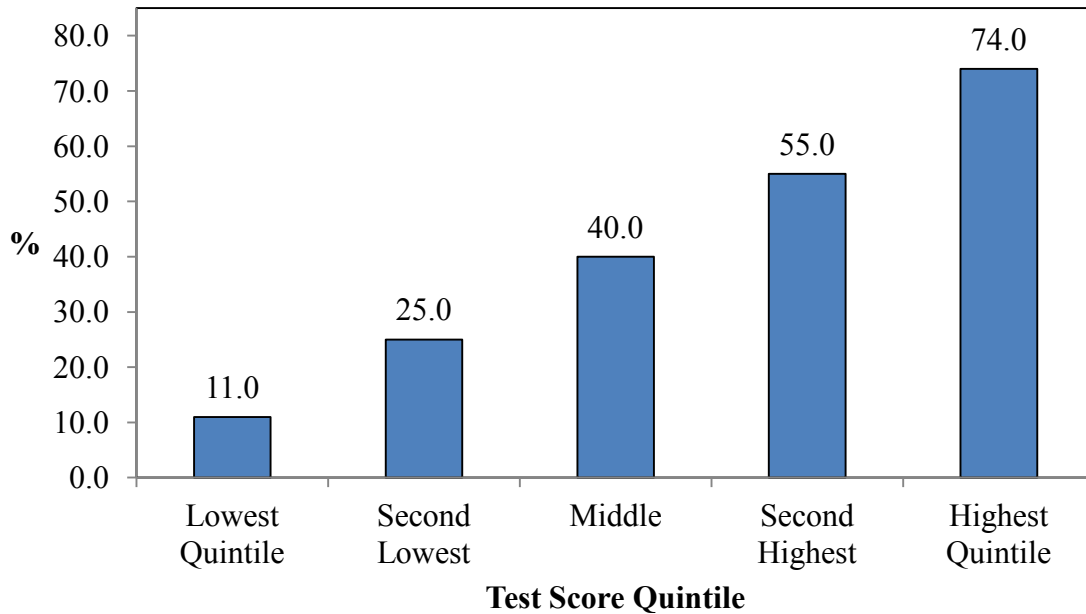
¹⁰ The test scores of individuals were adjusted by the survey administrators by age before converting them into their percentile ranks.

Chart 6:
Percent of 25-28 Year Old High School Diploma Holders Who Were Enrolled in College in 2009 by Position in the ASVAB Test Score Distribution



Among GED holders, there was very little difference in college enrollment rates among those in the bottom three quintiles of the ASVAB test score distribution. The college enrollment rates were in the 6 to 8 percent range for all three groups. However, those GED holders with ASVAB scores in the top two quintiles of the test distribution were substantially more likely to enroll in college. Approximately 1 of 6 GED holders in the second highest quintile were enrolled in college as were 32% of those in the highest quintile of the test score distribution. Among high school graduates with regular diplomas, the share of 25-28 year olds enrolled in college rose steadily with their position in the ASVAB test score distribution. These college enrollment rates increased from a low of 8 percent for those in the bottom quintile to just under 17% for those in the middle quintile to a high of 19% for those in the top quintile. Those youth in the top quintile were also considerably more likely to have obtained a college degree by the time of the 2009 NLS survey than their less academically proficient peers. Nearly three-fourths of high school graduates in the top quintile of ASVAB scores had obtained some type of college degree versus only 11% of those in the bottom quintile and 40% of those in the middle quintile.

Chart 7:
Percent of 25-28 Year Old High School Graduates Who Had Obtained
a College Degree by 2009 by ASVAB Test Score Quintile



College Degree Attainment Rates of Young Adult GED Holders and High School Graduates

The findings of the October CPS surveys also can be used to identify the college degree attainment status of young adults (18-29 years old) with GED certificates and regular high school diplomas in recent years (see Table 6). For the October 2009-October 2010 period, only slightly more than 7 percent of GED holders reported that they held some type of college degree, with half of them holding an Associate’s degree. Among those young adults with a regular high school diploma, close to one-third (31.5%) held a college degree with nearly three-fourths of them possessing a bachelor’s or higher degree. Young adults with a regular high school diploma were four times as likely as GED holders in the same age group to have secured a college degree.

Table 6:
Percent of 18-29 Year Old GED Holders and High School Diploma Holders with a College Degree by Type of Degree, 2009-2010

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)
High School Degree Status	All Degrees	Associate	Bachelor	Master's or Higher
• GED Holders	7.5	3.8	3.2	0.5
• Regular High School Diploma	31.5	8.4	19.0	4.1

The findings of the 2009 survey round of the National Longitudinal survey also were analyzed to identify the college degree attainment status of the nation's 25-29 year olds (see Table 7). Among GED holders, slightly under 4 percent reported holding some type of college degree versus close to 44 percent of regular high school graduates, a relative difference of 11 to 1 between the two groups. There were very large gaps in college degree attainment rates between GED holders and regular high school graduates in each gender and race-ethnic group. Among women, close to 50 percent of those with a regular high school diploma had obtained a college degree versus less than 6 percent of their peers with a GED. Among young Black, non-Hispanics, nearly 30 percent of those with a regular high school diploma obtained a college degree versus only 1 to 2 percent of GED holders, a relative different of close to 20-1.

Table 7:
Percent of 25-29 Year Old GED Holders and High School Graduates with a College Degree by Gender and Race-Ethnic Groups, 2009

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Group	GED Holders	High School Diploma	H.S. Diploma - GED
• All	3.7	43.7	+ 40.0
• Men	2.5	38.6	+ 36.1
• Women	5.7	48.8	+ 43.1
• Black	1.6	29.4	+ 27.8
• Hispanic	5.4	27.7	+ 22.3
• White	4.2	48.2	+ 44.0
• Asian	14.3	68.3	+ 54.0

Clearly, as has been the case for earlier age cohorts, the nation's young adults with GED credentials are finding it difficult to secure post-secondary educational degrees. While higher

fractions of them have been found to be enrolling in college over the past decade, their overall degree attainment rate remains quite low. Past research for the early 1990s has shown that women with a GED credential obtained significantly higher annual earnings for each year of college completed and each year of off-site and on-site job training.¹¹ A future paper based on the NLSY data will attempt to estimate the impacts of higher schooling and increased formal training on the annual earnings of GED holders in recent years.

¹¹ See: Kathryn Boudett, Richard J. Murnane and John B. Willet, "Second Chance Strategies for Women Who Drop Out of School," Monthly Labor Review, December 2000, pp. 19-31.