

January 31, 2023

STRONGER NATION

Ten Findings on U.S. Educational Attainment Trends

1. The nation's educational attainment rate after high school in 2021 was 53.7 percent. This figure means 53.7 percent of working-age adults—those 25 to 64 years old—had earned college degrees or other credentials beyond a high school diploma that could lead to further education and better pay or jobs.
2. The nation's attainment rate is the sum of the degree attainment rate (45.7 percent) and the attainment rate of high-value, short-term credentials (8 percent). Short-term credentials include college-level certificates (4.3 percent) and industry-recognized certifications (3.7 percent).
3. The increase from 51.9 percent in 2019 to 53.7 percent in 2021, the most recent year for which data are available, is the most significant two-year gain since Lumina Foundation began compiling this report in 2009.
4. Over the past two years, every state—as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico—experienced gains in degree attainment—that is, people with associate degrees or higher. States with the highest degree attainment increases from 2019 to 2021 include Arizona, Maine, New Mexico, Vermont, and West Virginia. The District of Columbia also had similar gains.
5. States with the most significant increases in attainment rates—that is people with associate degrees or high-quality short-term credentials—among adults 25 to 64 years old include Indiana, Idaho, Mississippi, South Dakota, Utah, and Vermont. States with the highest attainment rates for adults 25 to 64 include Massachusetts (62.1 percent), Utah (61.1 percent), Colorado (60.5 percent), and Minnesota (60.2 percent). The District of Columbia's rate is the highest, at 72.4 percent.
6. The nation's attainment rate after high school among adults 25 to 34 years old, foreshadowing future trends, is 55.9 percent—representing a 2-point increase over two years. States with the highest overall attainment rates among younger adults include Massachusetts (68.7 percent), New Jersey (64.5 percent), Minnesota (63.3%), and New York (62.8 percent). The District of Columbia's rate is the highest, at 80.7 percent.
7. Attainment after high school has been steadily increasing nationally. The share of working-age Americans with credentials of value beyond a high school diploma has grown every year since Lumina began tracking progress. In 2008, degree attainment was 37.9 percent, and today it is 53.7 percent. These increases are a result of growth and better measurement.
8. State-level attainment rates after high school are increasing. With the addition of certifications, 39 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico now have higher attainment rates for working-age adults than 50 percent. All states are above 40 percent. (In 2008, no state had a degree-attainment rate of 50 percent or greater, and 32 states had rates of under 40 percent.)
9. Educational attainment among adults 25 to 64 is increasing across all races and ethnicities. In 2021, the nation experienced the most significant increase by almost 2 ½ percentage points among Hispanics and Latinos. Meanwhile, Black Americans experienced a nearly 2-point increase. Nonetheless, significant disparities continue to exist. The national degree attainment rate is 45.7 percent. But the percentage of Black adults with college degrees is 34.2 percent. Among Hispanic and Latino adults, the percentage with degrees is 27.8 percent. And among Native Americans, the rate of degree holders is 25.4 percent.
10. Data for A Stronger Nation come from two sources. We use the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) for degree attainment. The ACS does not include attainment values for short-term credentials (high-value certificates and certifications). Labor market experts derive these data at Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.