

THE MEASURE OF AMERICA

AMERICAN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT 2008-2009

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AMERICAN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX: ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE

Access to Knowledge

Access to knowledge is critical to people's real freedom to decide what to do and who to be. It is a key determinant of long-term well-being.

Access to knowledge is a lifelong process that includes, but goes beyond, formal schooling. It also encompasses what happens at home during early childhood as well as experiences after school, in the summer, on the job, and through informal social networks that impart vital information.

Education and income have a high correlation. People with more education are able to command higher salaries. Globalization and technological change have made it extraordinarily difficult for poorly educated Americans to achieve the economic self-sufficiency, peace of mind, and self-respect enabled by a secure livelihood.

In addition to education's obvious positive impact on earnings, educational attainment is associated with many other benefits, as well. For the individual, they include better health, increased civic participation, greater ability to adjust to change, more stable relationships, and more social capital to pass on to one's children. Research also associates higher levels of education with a host of positive outcomes for society: educated citizens vote more frequently, volunteer more time, make more charitable contributions, are more tolerant, rely less on public assistance, and are less likely to commit a crime.

American Human Development Index and Access to Knowledge

The American HD Index uses *educational attainment* and *school enrollment* as measures of access to knowledge. Educational attainment is measured using three indicators. They include the percentage of the population twenty-five years and older who have earned: (1) a high school diploma or its equivalent (a GED); (2) a bachelor's degree; or (3) a graduate or professional degree. These data come from the American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Geographic Rankings

The region with the highest education ranking is the Northeast, followed by the West, the Midwest, and the South.

With a value of 7.94, Washington, DC, tops the education index, followed by Massachusetts and Connecticut, the two states with the highest overall HD Index. Maryland and New Jersey are also among the top-five states for education. Washington, DC's high-ranking index score reflects the highly-educated people drawn to work in the city, rather than the city's public education system, which has lower-than-average high school graduation rates.

The five bottom-ranked states in terms of education are, in order, Alaska, Tennessee, Nevada, Mississippi, and West Virginia.

State spending per pupil and the HD Education Index show a high correlation. What a state spends on each pupil explains about half the variation among states in the Education Index.

There is greater variation *within* states than among U.S. states. Even high-scoring states have low-scoring congressional districts.

The top-ranked congressional district in the nation on the Education Index is California's Thirtieth Congressional District (Beverly Hills, Santa Monica area). The other top-five districts are California's Fourteenth Congressional District (Palo Alto and Santa Cruz area), Virginia's Eighth Congressional District (Northern Virginia), New York's Fourteenth Congressional District (Manhattan's East Side), and California's Forty-Eighth Congressional District (Newport Beach area).

The bottom-ranked district in the nation is Texas' Twenty-Ninth Congressional District, located around South Houston. The remaining four bottom-ranked districts are California's Forty-Seventh Congressional District (Anaheim and Santa Ana areas), California's Thirty-Fourth Congressional District (Los Angeles area), California's Twentieth Congressional District (Fresno area), and Arizona's Fourth Congressional District (Phoenix area).

One important indicator – the percentage of the population twenty-five and over with a high school diploma or equivalent – reveals staggering disparities. In Colorado's Sixth Congressional District (Denver-Aurora Metropolitan Areas), fewer than 5 percent of adults lack a high school diploma. In contrast, in California's Twentieth District, nearly half (47.4 percent) of those twenty-five and over did not finish high school.

Rankings by gender and race/ethnicity

Overall, females slightly lead males in the education rankings. But while women edge out men when it comes to earning high school diplomas, a slightly smaller percentage of women than men has earned a college or graduate degree. This snapshot of today's adult population twenty-five years and older obscures a much-noted trend—that more women than men are now enrolling in and graduating from college. In the coming decades, barring a reversal of trends, the educational index for women will rise to reflect their large and growing share of higher-education degrees.

Asians rank the highest in education, followed by whites, African Americans, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and Latinos.

When race, ethnicity and gender are combined, Asian men are at the top of the education ladder, followed by Asian women, white women, and white men.

White, African American, Native American, and Latino women are all doing better in education than their male counterparts; Latino men have the lowest scores of any group by a significant margin.

By the end of fourth grade, African American and Latino children, and children of all races who are living in poverty, are two years behind their more affluent, predominantly white peers in reading and math. They have fallen three years behind by eighth grade, and four years behind by twelfth grade.

Report Conclusions on Education in the United States

Research shows that investment in intensive early childhood education pays high dividends in educational attainment and reduction of social problems, including crime, that correlate to high dropout rates.

For the roughly one in six adults without a high school diploma, there are few employment prospects save service-sector and retail jobs with poverty wages, often poor working conditions, and limited benefits.

For individuals, more education is linked to better health, a longer life, higher civic and political participation, greater ability to adjust to change, a more robust self-identity, stronger and more extensive social bonds, more stable relationships, and greater personal happiness.

Evidence suggests the following priorities:

- Invest in high-quality early childhood care and education. Establish a goal of universal access to two years of high-quality preschool; programs should meet families' needs for child care.
- Target teen mothers living in poverty with home-visit programs.
- Focus on the needs of at-risk children until age twenty-one, including those aging out of foster care and those who have been processed by the criminal justice system.

- Support families in their efforts to help children learn through conditional cash transfers and parenting programs.
- Create more “enveloping” school environments, with longer days, on-site health clinics, after-school activities, mentoring programs, etc.
- Equalize inputs in the public education system.
- Reform curriculum to teach twenty-first century skills and relevant content.
- Reduce perverse incentives created by standardized testing programs.
- Improve opportunities for the roughly seven-out-of-ten students who do not graduate from college.
- Expand efforts to make college affordable to middle-class families, but not at the expense of low-income families.
- Increase the real value of the Pell Grant to cover the majority of the cost of a public university education.

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