

Sarah Crissey and Nicole Stoops
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The Gender Gap in Educational Attainment: Variation by Race, Ethnicity and Nativity in the United States

Researchers studying gender and education note that the gender gap in educational attainment has been shrinking in recent decades. In fact, according to the Current Population Survey, women surpassed men in the proportion with high school diplomas in 2002 and this trend has continued. In 2003, 85.0 percent of women 25 years and over had a high school diploma or more compared with 84.1 percent of men. While the gender gap in attainment has closed at the high school level, women still fall behind men in the proportion with a bachelor's degree or higher. In 2003, 28.9 percent of men 25 years and over had a bachelor's degree or higher compared with 25.7 percent of women. However, this is likely also to close, as women now comprise a larger proportion of college graduates (Kannankutty, 2005; DiPrete and Buchmann, 2006).

Despite the overall trend, it is less known whether this pattern is consistent across the population. Prior research suggests that the gender gap between African-American women and men is larger than that of Whites, as African-American women are more likely than their male counterparts to complete high school and college. The gender gap for Hispanics is also slightly larger than for Whites (Freeman, 2004). However, these comparisons between race/ethnicity ignore the heterogeneity of the US population, particularly regarding nativity. Recent data from the American Community Survey documents the rising number of immigrants and their diversity of educational experiences. Research has only begun to explore the variation in the educational

resources of these groups, particularly regarding the gender differences within race/ethnic groups between native and foreign-born populations (Gamoran, 2001).

This proposed research explores three fundamental questions: Does the gender gap in educational attainment exist for varying segments of the US population by race/ethnicity and nativity? If so, where does this gap exist? Which group has the largest gap? To answer these questions, we compare educational attainment by sex at both the secondary and post-secondary levels among the native and foreign-born populations of four key race/Hispanic origin groups: non-Hispanic Whites, Blacks, Asians, and Hispanics. Using the 2005 American Community Survey (ACS), we evaluate these differences by graphing the percent of males and females in each subgroup with a high school diploma or higher and the percent with a bachelor's degree or higher across 5-year age groups.

The American Community Survey is a powerful new data source from the US Census Bureau that provides detailed social, housing, economic, and demographic data on an annual basis. The 2005 ACS contains data from approximately 3 million housing units in 3,141 counties in the U.S. and provides data for all geographic areas with populations of 65,000 or more. The ACS is the most current source of demographic data available on this scale.

Previous research documents the considerable differences in educational attainment by race/ethnicity and nativity, and we expect that these differences will be apparent in our research as well. However, we also expect to find variation in the gender differences across these subgroups. Consistent with prior research, we expect that native born women from all race/ethnic groups are more likely than their male counterparts to

have completed either high school or college, and that this is particularly true for Black and Hispanic women.

For the foreign born population, we expect that the pattern will be less consistent due to the heterogeneity of this population. This population includes highly skilled and highly educated workers, particularly those from Asia, who tend to be more likely to have the highest levels of educational attainment (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). However, the foreign born population also includes a large segment of people who have very little education, such as those from developing countries in Latin America. We therefore expect to find differences in overall educational attainment for the foreign born population, with higher levels for Asian immigrants and lower levels for the Hispanic population.

However, we also expect that the gender gap within these groups will be different. For instance, gender gaps in educational attainment may mirror the countries of origin (Licuanan, 2004). It is also possible that characteristic of US society are likely to influence the gender gap. For example, if the science and technology industry that attracts highly educated Asian immigrants is more likely to employ men, it would not be surprising to see higher attainment among foreign born Asian men compared to their female counterparts. Overall, we expect less gender parity in educational attainment among the foreign born, particularly for groups with higher education, such as Asians.

With the increase of immigration in the United States, researchers and policy makers continue to need information about the characteristics of the foreign born population. By addressing the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity, and nativity, this research helps illuminate the diverse educational experiences of multiple segments of the population.

References

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