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Postsecondary Participation Rates by Sex and Race/Ethnicity: 1974–2003

The educational progress of women and minority groups has long been an important policy concern. Research indicates that both women and minorities have made significant gains in postsecondary educational enrollment and attainment over the past 20 years (Freeman 2004; Llagas 2003; National Center for Education Statistics 2000; Koretz 1990). But there has been some debate about the size of the gender gap in postsecondary enrollment (which now favors females) relative to the size of racial/ethnic gaps (King 2000; Mortensen 1999). To address this debate, this Issue Brief uses nearly 30 years of data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) School Enrollment Supplement (October 1974 to October 2003) to examine participation in postsecondary education among women and men and among different racial/ethnic groups.¹

Enrollment rates are often calculated as the percentage of young adults who are currently in postsecondary education. As Koretz (1990) notes, these enrollment rates typically underestimate a group's educational progress by counting college graduates who are no longer enrolled as if they had never entered college. To better reflect educational progress, this analysis counts individuals who are enrolled in postsecondary education or who have completed at least 2 years of postsecondary education.² In addition, the enrollment/completion rates presented here are based on the *total* age cohort rather than on high school graduates; the latter understates racial/ethnic differences in educational progress, because the lower high school completion rates of minorities (Snyder and Hoffman 2003) are factored out. Thus, the data presented here include differences in the rates at which young adults complete high school, enter postsecondary education, and persist in postsecondary education. To avoid confusion with traditional enrollment rates, these data are referred to as *participation* rates.

Specifically, this Issue Brief examines the rates at which young, traditionally college-age individuals (all adults ages 18 to 24)

enroll in or complete postsecondary education. This age cohort accounts for 63 percent of undergraduate enrollment (Snyder and Hoffman 2003, table 175) and is the age group most likely to attain a postsecondary degree after enrolling (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002, p. 57).

Participation Rates by Sex and Race/Ethnicity

Figure 1 shows that in 1974, young men participated in postsecondary education at a higher rate than young women (38 vs. 33 percent). Since 1974, both young men and young women have increased their rate of participation. However, the participation rate of young women outpaced that of young men, so that by 2003 participation patterns had reversed: 51 percent of young women had entered and/or completed postsecondary education, compared to 41 percent of young men.

In 1974, young Whites participated in postsecondary education at a higher rate than both young Blacks and young Hispanics (38 vs. 26 and 22 percent, respectively). From 1974 to 2003, participation rates for all three groups increased; however, the increase in the participation of Whites outpaced that of Blacks and of Hispanics. Thus, in 2003 Whites continued to have higher participation rates than both Blacks and Hispanics. In addition, the White-Hispanic gap increased from 16 percentage points in 1974 to 26 percentage points in 2003. Although it appears that there was a 3 percentage point increase (from 12 to 15 percent) in the participation gap between Whites and Blacks, this increase was not statistically significant.

Participation Rates by Sex and Race/Ethnicity Combinations

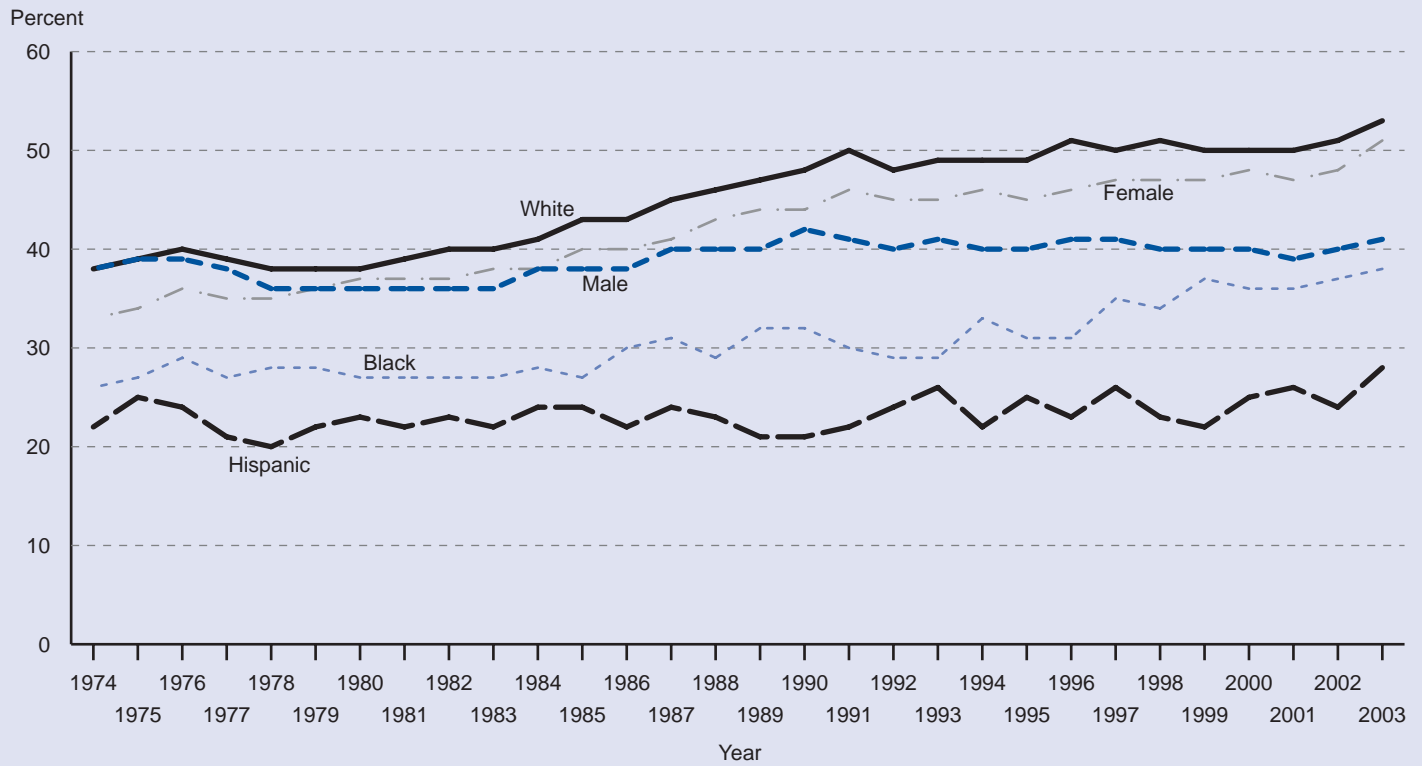
The data in figure 1 suggest that young men and young minorities are increasingly underrepresented in postsecondary education. But is this a problem common among all young men and all young minorities? In other words, do these overall trends mask differences by racial/ethnic group within the sexes, or by sex within racial/ethnic groups, that can help provide a more complete picture of postsecondary participation trends and patterns?

To address these issues, figure 2 shows the 18- to 24-year-old participation rate trends for each sex and racial/ethnic group combination (White females, White males, etc.). As the figure shows, with one exception, all six groups increased their participation rates from 1974 to 2003. The exception is Hispanic men, whose participation rate declined over this period.

¹ The racial/ethnic groups compared are non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, and Hispanics. For the remainder of this Issue Brief, the former two groups will be referred to as Whites and Blacks, respectively.

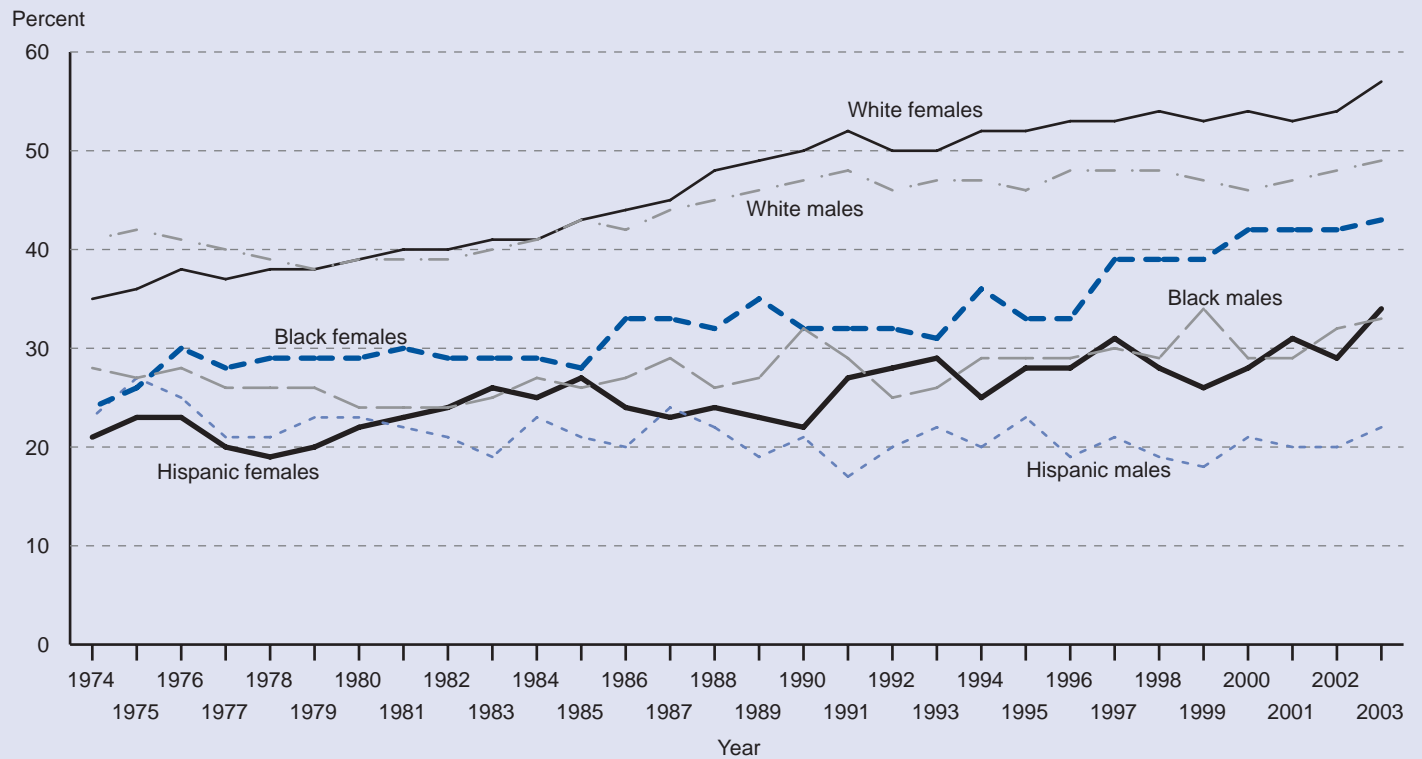
² Ideally, the analysis would have used those enrolled in postsecondary education or who have a postsecondary credential. This type of analysis is possible from 1992 to 2003, when CPS respondents were asked what degree they had earned; those with an associate's degree or higher were included in this analysis. Prior to 1992, however, respondents were asked how many years of education they had completed; for those years, responses of 2 or more years of college were included in this analysis.

Figure 1. Postsecondary participation rates for adults ages 18–24, by sex and race/ethnicity: 1974–2003



NOTE: Participation includes those enrolled in postsecondary education and those who have completed (1) at least 2 years of postsecondary education (1974–1991 data), or (2) an associate's or higher degree (1992–2003 data). White and Black groups exclude those of Hispanic origin.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 1974–2003.

Figure 2. Postsecondary participation rates for adults ages 18–24, by combinations of sex and race/ethnicity: 1974–2003



NOTE: Participation includes those enrolled in postsecondary education and those who have completed (1) at least 2 years of postsecondary education (1974–1991 data), or (2) an associate's or higher degree (1992–2003 data). White and Black groups exclude those of Hispanic origin.
 SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 1974–2003.

More to the point, these data show how the sexes compare within each racial/ethnic group, and how the racial/ethnic groups compare within each sex. Looking first at the sexes, figure 2 shows that for each racial/ethnic group, young women's increase in participation outpaced that of young men, so that as of 2003, there was a gender gap (of 8–12 percentage points) favoring females for each racial/ethnic group.³ Comparing these gender gaps across racial/ethnic groups shows that the 2003 gender gap for Whites was not measurably different in size from the gender gap for Blacks or for Hispanics.

Looking at the racial/ethnic groups separately for young men and young women, the participation rates of both male and female Whites increased at a faster pace than those of their Black and Hispanic same-sex peers. In 2003 (as in 1974), racial/ethnic participation gaps favored Whites over Blacks and Whites over Hispanics for both sexes. The racial/ethnic gaps for males were not measurably different in size from the racial/ethnic gaps for females.

The findings above suggest that the overall 2003 male-female gap accurately describes the gaps for each racial/ethnic group, and vice versa. Thus, it is relevant (for both sexes and all racial/ethnic groups) that the 2003 racial/ethnic gap of 15 points between Whites and Blacks and the 26-point gap between Whites and Hispanics are both larger than the 2003 gender gap of 10 percentage points. From this statistical perspective, racial/ethnic gaps are larger than the gender gap.

Summary

How do participation trends compare across these sex and racial/ethnic groups? All but one of the groups examined here increased their rate of postsecondary participation from 1974 to 2003. The one exception was young Hispanic males, whose participation rate declined while the rates of others increased. Moreover, participation gaps favoring females over males and Whites over Hispanics increased during this period.

As of 2003, the postsecondary participation gap between young men and young women was 10 percentage points, a

gap that cuts across all three major racial/ethnic groups. However, this gender gap is smaller than the gap between Whites and Blacks and between Whites and Hispanics. As noted above, these gaps reflect the effects of sex and racial/ethnic differences in high school completion, postsecondary attendance, and postsecondary persistence, which may in some cases have cumulative effects (cf. Hudson 2003).

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³ In 1974, White males had a higher participation rate than White females; no differences were detected in the participation rates of males versus females in each of the minority groups.

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