

U.S. at 300 Million and the Education Goals of the Great Society*

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Introduction

When the U.S. hit the 200 million mark in 1967, Lyndon B. Johnson was president, and major changes that would shape the lives of Americans in the last half of the 20th century had already begun. Johnson's "War on Poverty" and vision of a "Great Society" produced far-reaching legislative changes between 1964 and 1969, including bills that created Head Start and other pre-school programs, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), Medicaid, and the Social Security amendment creating the Medicare program. Also, during this period, the leading edge of the Baby Boom generation (born 1946-1964) entered the labor market, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed, and the Hart-Celler Act eliminated the national origins quota system, paving the way for increased immigration from non-European countries.

Now forty years after the first baby boomers entered the labor force and Johnson urged Congress to implement the widest range of social policies since the New Deal, the U.S. approaches the 300 million mark. Again, major policy changes and demographic trends are poised to transform the course of American life in the 21st century. Earlier this year marked the tenth anniversary of the 1996 welfare reform that refocused the major poverty program targeting children and the fourth anniversary of the No Child Left

* *Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the Population Reference Bureau.*

Behind Act of 2001, the most recent reauthorization of ESEA signed into law in January 2002. Also, the Medicare administration implemented a new prescription drug program, Part D. Finally, the first baby boomers turned sixty this year, and they will become eligible for full social security retirement benefits at age 66, in 2012.

Baby Boom

The Baby Boom generation has been a defining phenomenon of the past forty years and will be a major factor in the aging of the U.S. population over the next twenty years. The size of the Baby Boom cohort has had implications for government institutions and private markets at each stage of these individuals' lives. Since the Baby Boom cohort reached working age and began entering the labor force, they have represented over 40 percent of the labor force. Their prospective retirement will have a profound impact on social security as the cohorts following the Baby Boom generation are not as large and as women's labor force participation rates are likely to grow more slowly than in the past. The result is that growth in the cost of social security benefits as boomers retire will outpace growth in both total labor income and growth in social security revenues.

The "Great Society" and Education

As the last of the Baby Boomers' entered schools, legislative changes increased access to education in the 1960s, enrollment in elementary and secondary schools swelled, peaking at 51.3 million in 1971 and then declining until the children of Baby Boomers began to enter school themselves around 1984. The grandchildren of Baby Boomers, a growing minority population with higher fertility rates, and immigration continue to spur rising school enrollment.

President Johnson had a grand vision for American life in which poverty and racial injustice would be eradicated, every child would have access to education, the urban landscape would be rebuilt to accommodate the growing population in cities, and the natural beauty of the countryside would be preserved. In 2004, on the fortieth anniversary of the Johnson's "war on poverty" speech, pundits judged the success of America's war on poverty, noting that after declining dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, poverty rates have fluctuated in a narrow range (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Recently, economists have noted that the poverty rate seems decoupled from the economy, failing to decline significantly during the most current economic recovery.

Much less attention has been paid to the effects of the ESEA, education legislation that increased the resources available to poor school districts. Yet the widespread increase in access to education and educational attainment is one of the hallmarks of change throughout the U.S. between the 200 millionth and 300 millionth benchmarks. Since 1970, states lagging behind in educational attainment have seen steady increases in the high school graduation rate among the population age 25 and older (Table 1). Over a similar period nursery school enrollment rose from 6 percent to 60 percent and enrollment of five-year olds in school became nearly universal at 92 percent.

Unfortunately, the racial and ethnic gap in education achievement still persists with a significantly smaller proportion of Hispanic and African American children achieving proficiency in reading, mathematics (Figures 3-6).

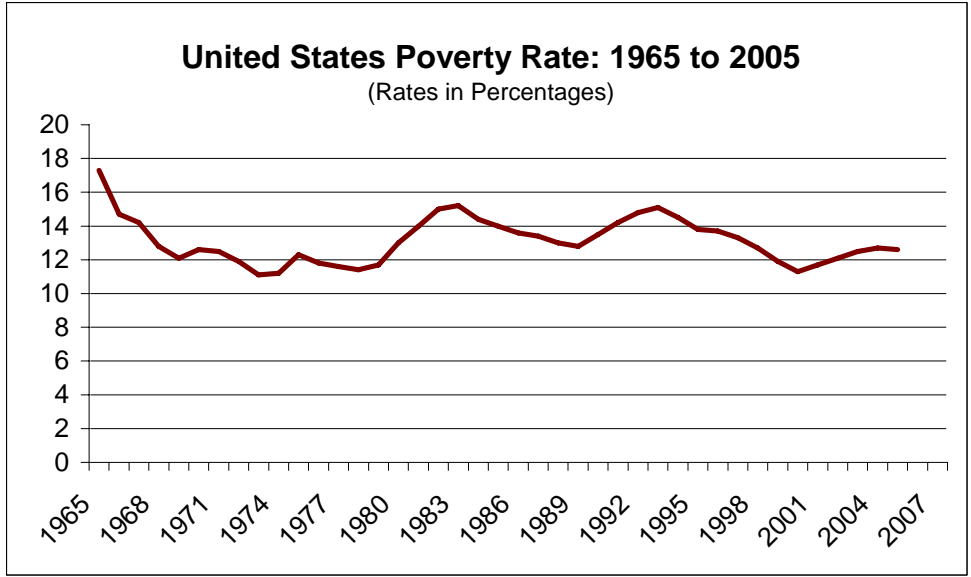


Figure 1

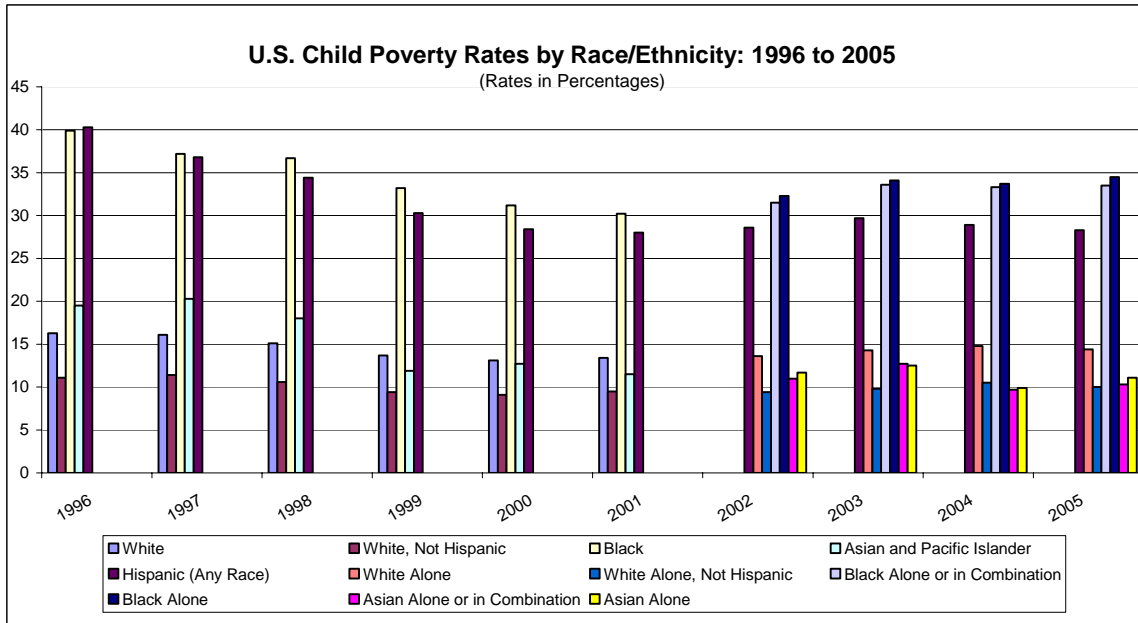


Figure 2

Table 1. Percent of the Total Population 25 Years and Over with a High School Diploma or Higher by Sex, for the United States, Regions, and States: 1940 to 2000

Geographic area	1970	1980	1990	2000
United States	52.3	66.5	75.2	80.4
State				
Alabama	41.3	56.5	66.9	75.3
Alaska	66.7	82.5	86.6	88.3
Arizona	58.1	72.4	78.7	81.0
Arkansas	39.9	55.5	66.3	75.3
California	62.6	73.5	76.2	76.8
Colorado	63.9	78.6	84.4	86.9
Connecticut	56.0	70.3	79.2	84.0
Delaware	54.6	68.6	77.5	82.6
District of Columbia	55.2	67.1	73.1	77.8
Florida	52.6	66.7	74.4	79.9
Georgia	40.6	56.4	70.9	78.6
Hawaii	61.9	73.8	80.1	84.6
Idaho	59.5	73.7	79.7	84.7
Illinois	52.6	66.5	76.2	81.4
Indiana	52.9	66.4	75.6	82.1
Iowa	59.0	71.5	80.1	86.1
Kansas	59.9	73.3	81.3	86.0
Kentucky	38.5	53.1	64.6	74.1
Louisiana	42.2	57.7	68.3	74.8
Maine	54.7	68.7	78.8	85.4
Maryland	52.3	67.4	78.4	83.8
Massachusetts	58.5	72.2	80.0	84.8
Michigan	52.8	68.0	76.8	83.4
Minnesota	57.6	73.1	82.4	88.0
Mississippi	41.0	54.8	64.3	72.9
Missouri	48.8	63.5	73.9	81.3
Montana	59.2	74.4	81.0	87.2
Nebraska	59.3	73.4	81.8	86.6
Nevada	65.2	75.5	78.8	80.7
New Hampshire	57.6	72.3	82.2	87.4
New Jersey	52.5	67.4	76.7	82.1
New Mexico	55.2	68.9	75.1	78.9
New York	52.7	66.3	74.8	79.1
North Carolina	38.5	54.8	70.0	78.1
North Dakota	50.3	66.4	76.7	83.9
Ohio	53.2	67.0	75.7	83.0
Oklahoma	51.6	66.0	74.6	80.6
Oregon	60.0	75.6	81.5	85.1
Pennsylvania	50.2	64.7	74.7	81.9
Rhode Island	46.4	61.1	72.0	78.0

Table 1. Continued

South Carolina	37.8	53.7	68.3	76.3
South Dakota	53.3	67.9	77.1	84.6
Tennessee	41.8	56.2	67.1	75.9
Texas	47.4	62.6	72.1	75.7
Utah	67.3	80.0	85.1	87.7
Vermont	57.1	71.0	80.8	86.4
Virginia	47.8	62.4	75.2	81.5
Washington	63.5	77.6	83.8	87.1
West Virginia	41.6	56.0	66.0	75.2
Wisconsin	54.5	69.6	78.6	85.1
Wyoming	62.9	77.9	83.0	87.9

[1950 to 2000 data based on a sample. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, and definitions, see <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/doc/sf3.pdf>] Footnotes: The data cells for Alaska and Hawaii are filled with an "--" in 1940 and 1950 because they were not states at that time. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census of Population, 1940 to 2000.

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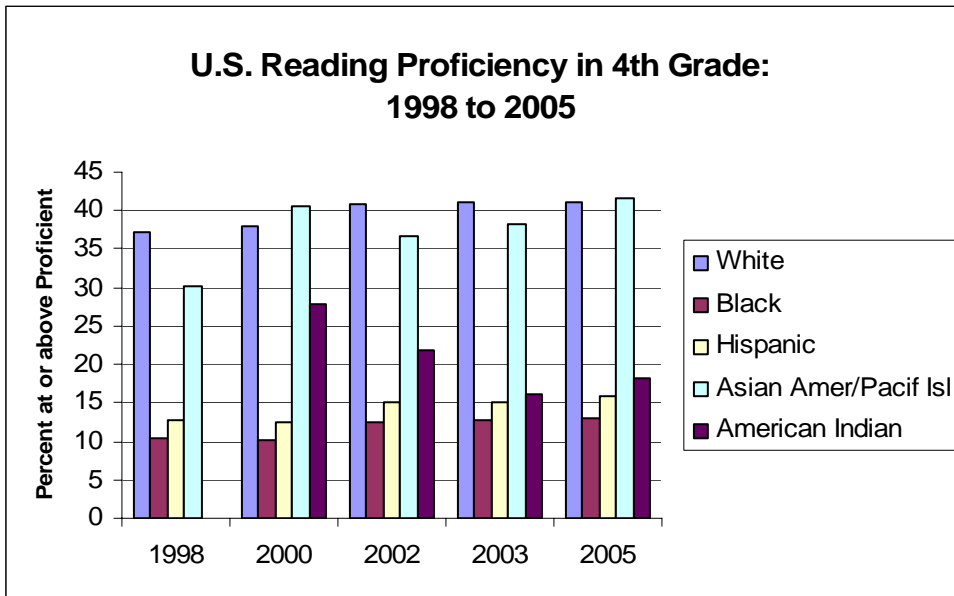


Figure 3

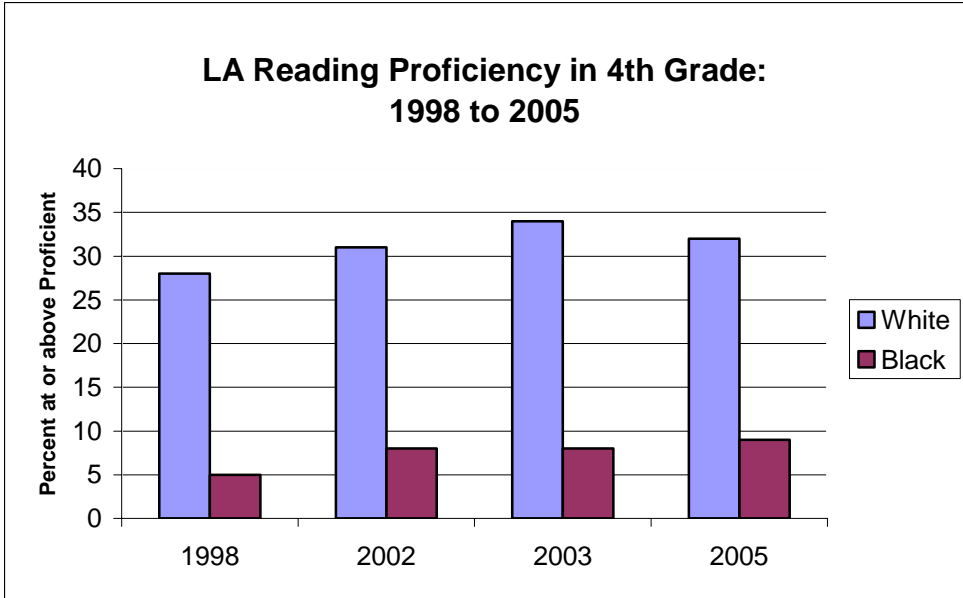


Figure 4

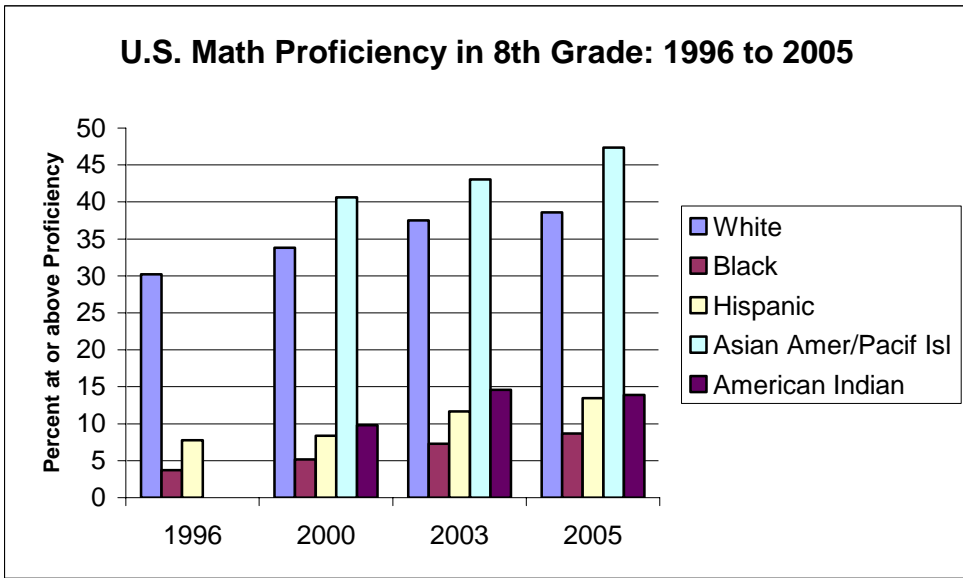


Figure 5

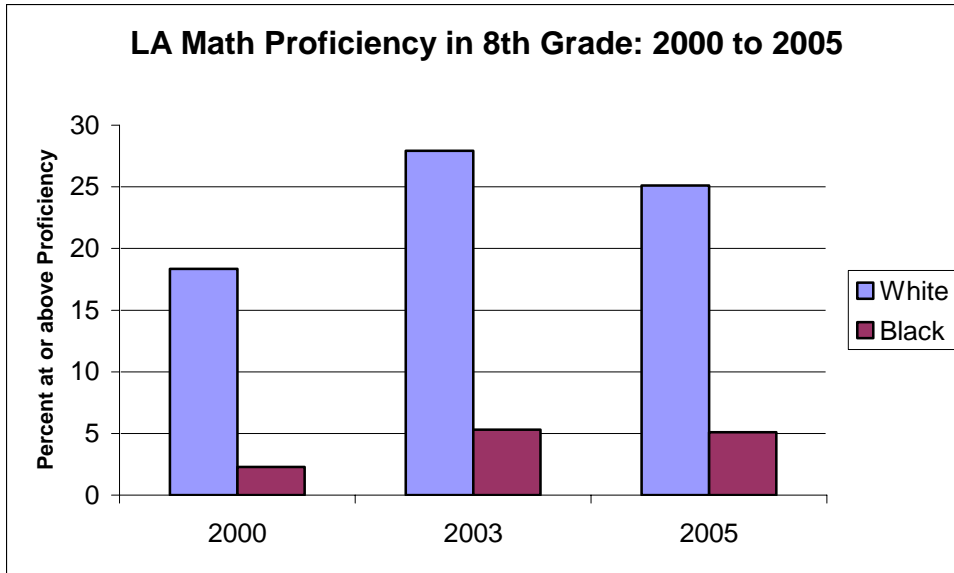


Figure 6

Web Resources for more information:

Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1589660>

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act

http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news_events/features/2005/08/esea0819.html

School Enrollment

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/school.html>

www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p20-554.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics, *The Impact of the Baby Boom Echo on School Enrollment*. Issue Brief, September 1997. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs98/98039.pdf>

Overall poverty rates and Child poverty rates

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2003pubs/p60-222.pdf>

NAEP test scores reading

http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nrc/reading_math_2005/s0011.asp?subtab_id=Tab_2&tab_id=tab1&printver=

http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/nrc/reading_math_2005/s0015.asp?printver=