

DEGREES OF EDUCATION: A SHIELD & A PATH

How has educational attainment shaped economic wellbeing and life expectancy in the United States between 2000 and 2020?



ABSTRACT

For many people today, a college degree seems to be worth a lot less each year. As college tuitions continuously rise and new industries like automation rise and take over, people often question whether higher education continues to be a worthwhile investment. However, despite the rising cost of a college education and the glittery headlines of self-made entrepreneurs, lies an astonishing truth: in the United States, education remains one of the most powerful predictors of both wealth and health. Our group's research investigates how educational attainment has shaped economic outcomes and life expectancy in the United States between 2000 and 2020. By using data sourced and compiled from a variety of sources, including the U.S Census Bureau, U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), along with other major health studies publications, we discovered that educational attainment not only correlates with higher economic outcomes for an individual but is also a determinant of life expectancy itself.

METHOD

Our research used a mixed-sources quantitative approach. We compiled data from major federal datasets, including the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, focusing on indicators from 2000–2020. We analyzed trends in educational attainment, income, poverty levels, unemployment rates, and life expectancy. Census tables such as PCT145 and H13 were used to determine economic outcomes by education level, while life expectancy patterns were drawn from Lancet Public Health (Sylte, Dillon O., et al.). These datasets were compared across time to identify national patterns and widening gaps between education groups.

SOURCES

- U.S. Census Bureau
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics
- CDC National Center for Health Statistics
- Mortality Disparities in American Communities (MDAC)
- The Lancet Public Health
- Population Studies
- Public Health Reports
- Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences

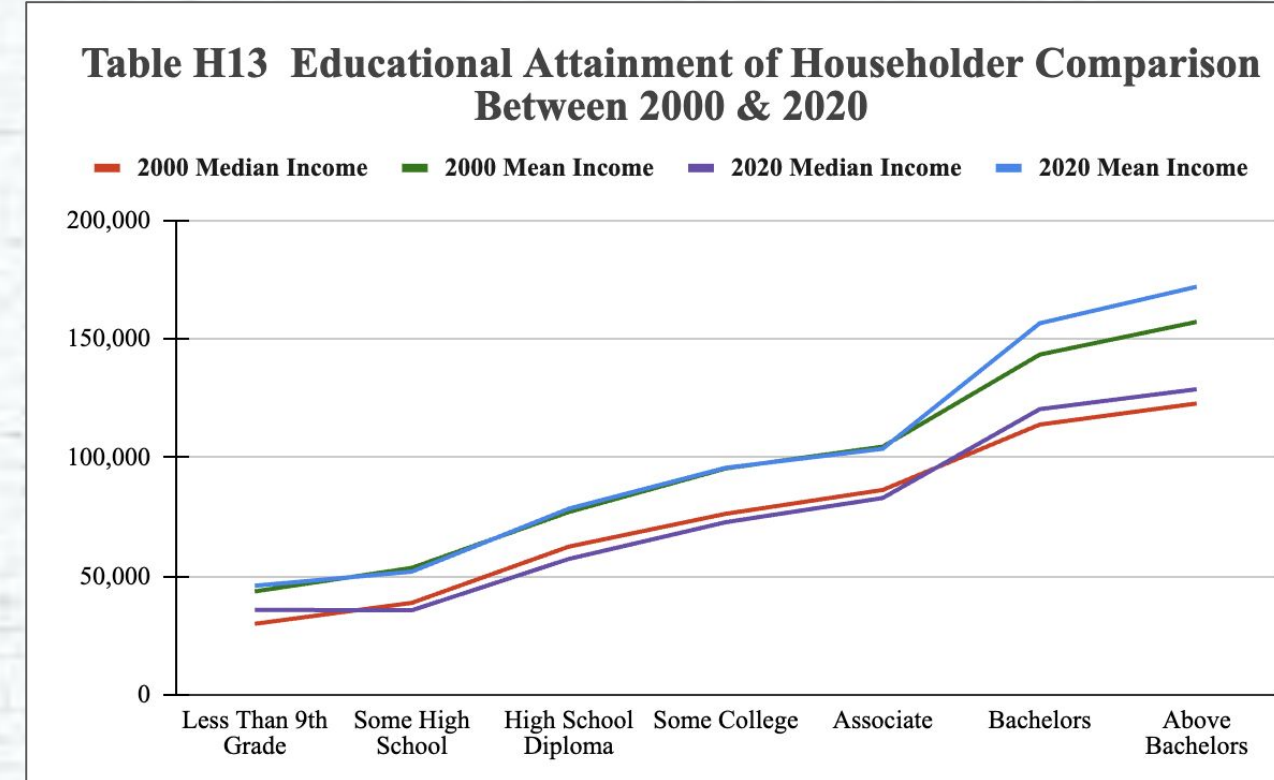
By: **Janel Wang, Matthew Venditti & Philopateer Demyan (CUNY, Macaulay CSI)**

Educational Attainment 2020									
	Total	None	Primary - Middle School	Some High School	High school	Some College	Associate's degree	Bachelor's degree	Above Bachelor's
Population 25+	223,058	725	7,169	12,314	61,597	33,986	23,566	52,164	31,537
Percentage		0.33%	3.21%	5.52%	27.61%	15.24%	10.56%	23.39%	14.14%

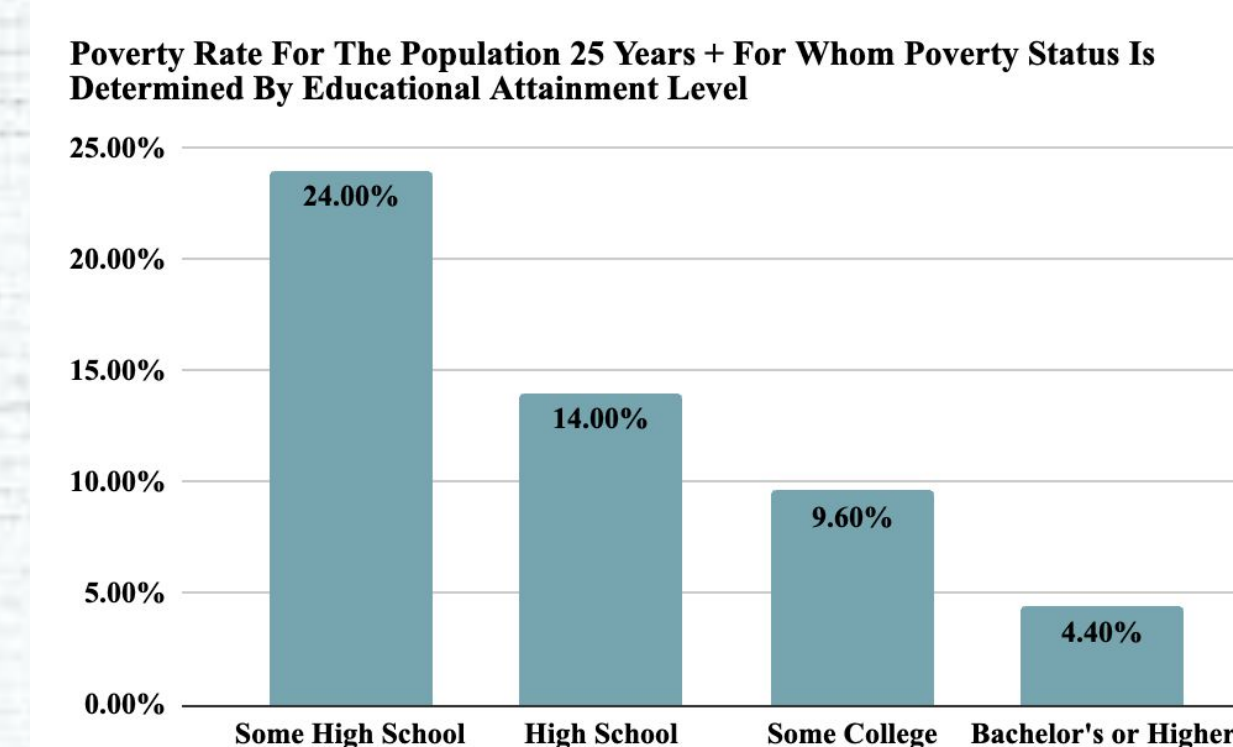
Educational Attainment in the United States: 2020 - Table 1

Educational Attainment 2000				
United States	Enrolled in School			Population 25 +
	Preschool	Elementary & High School	College or Graduate School	With Bachelor's Degree or Higher
	9,115,073.00	50,034,592.00	17,483,262.00	24.40%

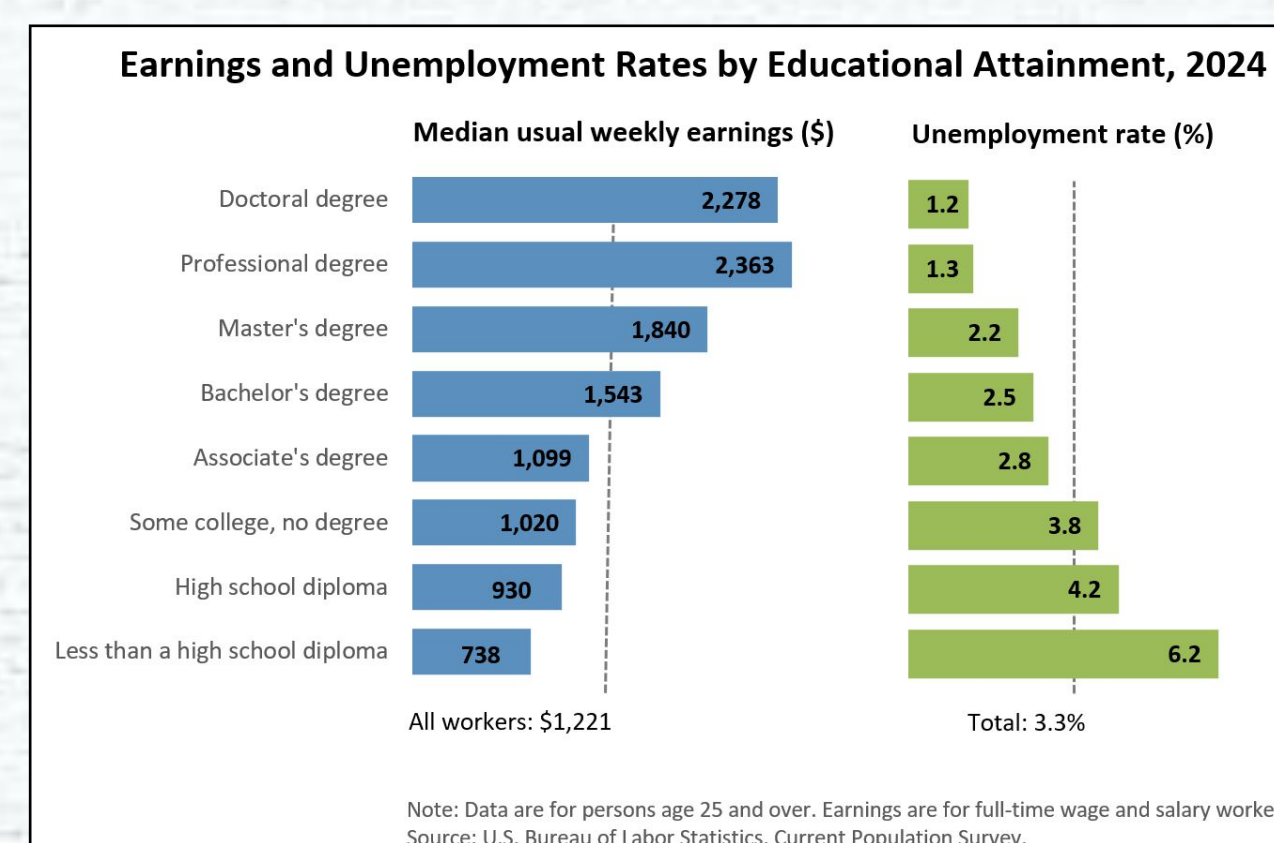
United States Summary: 2000 Report Number: PHC-2



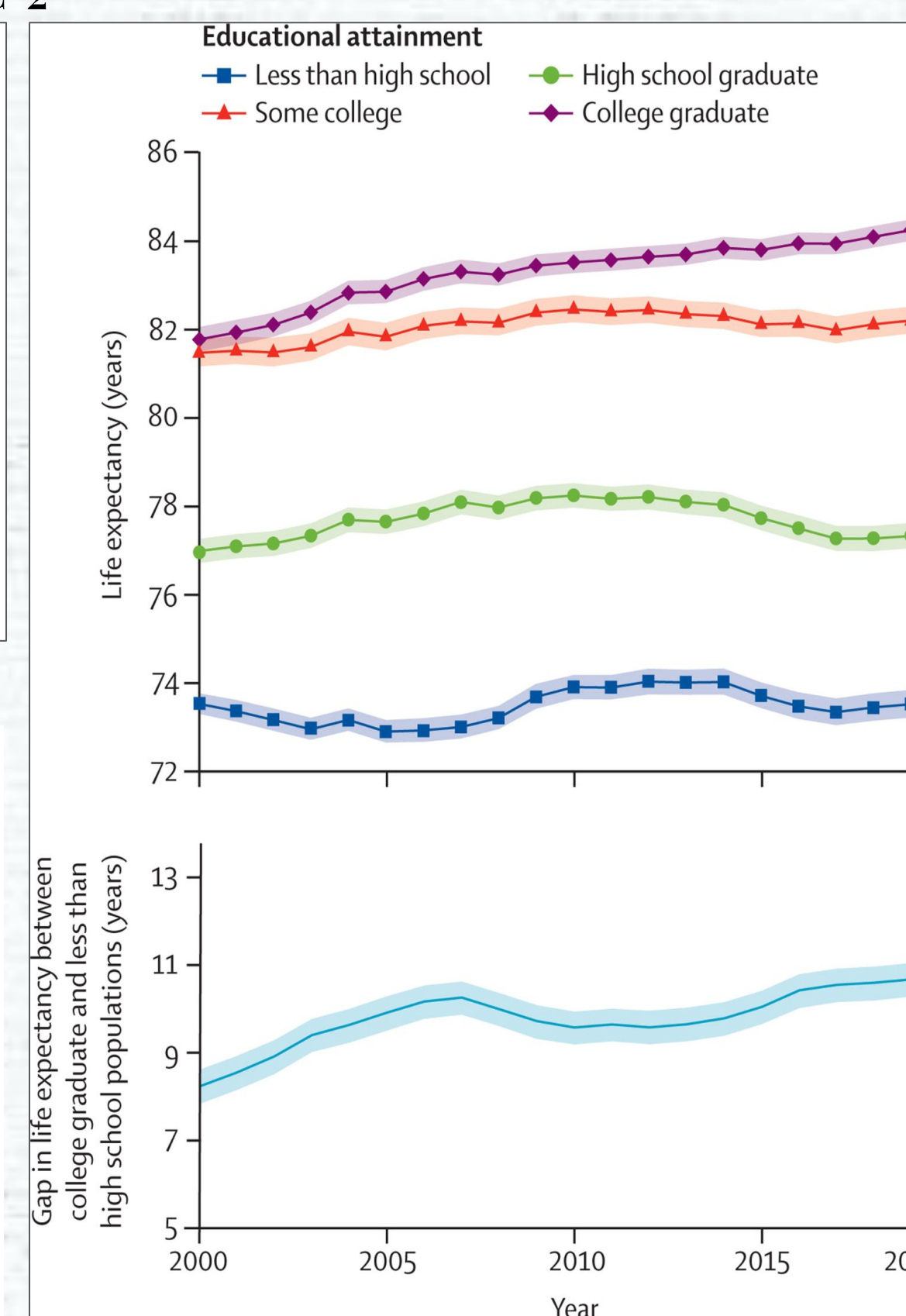
Values Extracted From Census Data Table H13



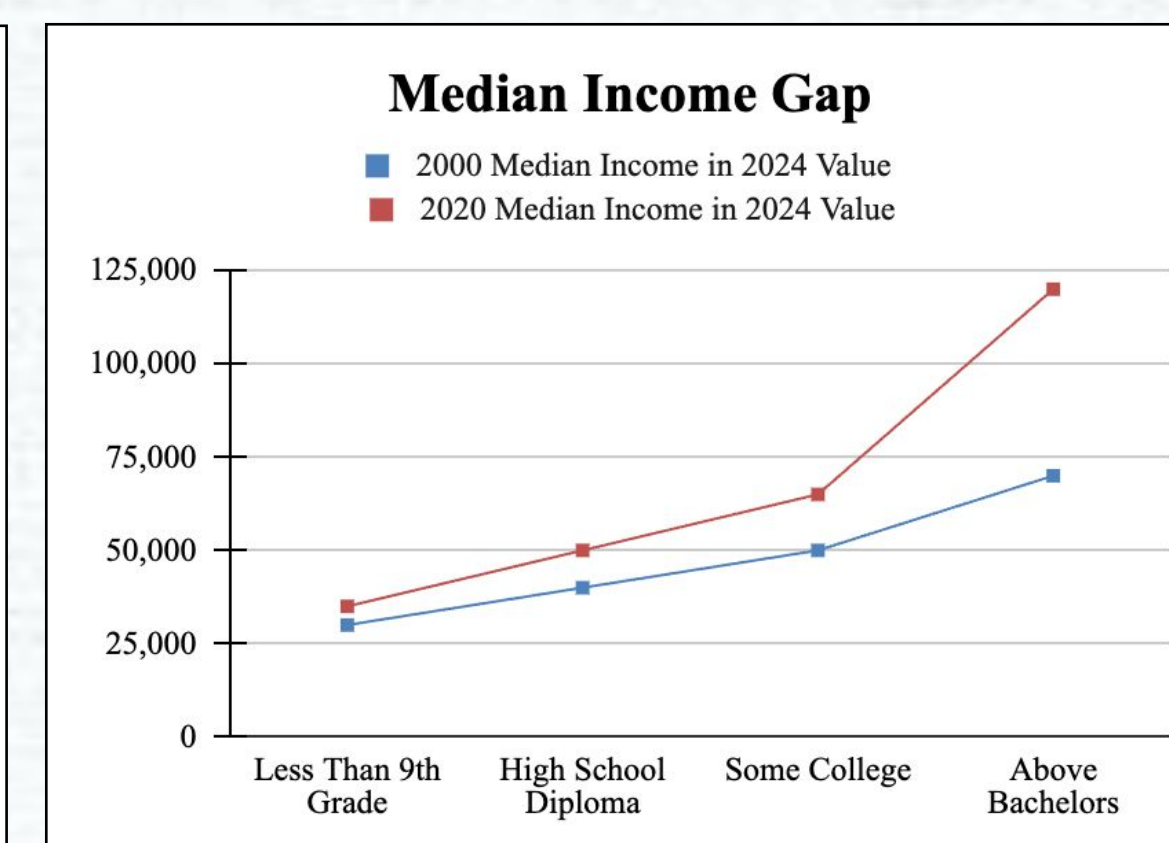
Census Table PCT145



US Bureau of Labor Statistics



Credit: Lancet Public Health (Sylte, Dillon O, et al.)



US Census Bureau Table H13

DISCUSSION

Our findings show that education functions as both a health advantage and an economic stabilizer. The life expectancy gap between the most and least educated Americans expanded from 8 years in 2000 to nearly 11 years in 2019, demonstrating a growing inequality. Economic disparities also widened, with the income gap between low- and high-education groups nearly doubling over the two decades. These patterns suggest that education does not just correlate with improved outcomes — it actively shapes long-term wellbeing by influencing behavior, access to healthcare, job stability, and financial security. Wider socioeconomic forces, including stagnant minimum wages, rising tuition costs, the 2008 recession, and the 2020 pandemic, intensified these divides.

CONCLUSION

Educational attainment has become one of the strongest predictors of both economic mobility and health in the United States. Higher education acts as a shield, protecting individuals from poverty, unemployment, and poor health, and a path, opening long-term opportunities for stability and longevity. Between 2000 and 2020, rising educational attainment improved national outcomes overall, but also widened gaps between groups. Addressing these disparities requires policies that expand access to higher education and support lower-educated populations, ensuring equity in both health and economic wellbeing.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our deepest acknowledgement and gratitude to Professor Charles Liu for his continuous guidance throughout this project. We also offer special thanks to Professor Mark White for his consultation on specific ideas. We thank the U.S. Census Bureau, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the CDC, and the researchers whose publicly available datasets and studies

RESULTS

Higher educational attainment leads to **increased life expectancy**, **lower poverty rates**, **higher income**, and **reduced unemployment rate** across the United States between 2000 and 2020. These trends show that education consistently strengthens both economic stability and long-term health outcomes across all demographic groups.