

Washington: Number One In College Degrees

By Meghan McNally¹

“The Washington region has one of the most highly educated populations in the country.”

FINDINGS

This study of Census 2000 data shows that the Washington metropolitan area has a very highly educated population. The following is a summary of the major findings:

- **No major metropolitan area is better educated than the Washington area.** Compared to the 20 largest metropolitan areas, Washington ranks first in educational attainment—42 percent of the adult population has at least a bachelor’s degree and 19 percent has a master’s, professional, or Ph.D. degree.
- **The inner suburbs lead the way.** Within the region, the inner suburbs have the highest proportion of residents with at least a bachelor’s degree or a master’s, professional, or Ph.D. degree (48 and 22 percent respectively). The District is not far behind, as 39 percent have a bachelor’s degree and 21 percent a master’s, professional, or Ph.D. degree.
- **Educational attainment rates differ greatly by race and ethnicity.** Non-Hispanic whites and Asians are the most highly educated. However, compared to other metropolitan areas, blacks and Hispanics in the Washington region are highly educated.
- **High school completion rates are uneven within the region.** The inner suburbs have the highest rate, at 89 percent, followed by the outer suburbs and then the District. Forty-two percent of Hispanics lack a high school degree, compared to 19 percent of blacks, 15 percent of Asians, and 7 percent of whites.

The Washington, D.C. region rarely ranks first. When numbers are used to compare metropolitan areas, the capital region has neither the most people; nor the most square miles; nor the most businesses, banks, or theatres.

Given that, it’s reassuring to find in Census 2000 that, among the 20 largest metropolitan areas, the Washington region ranks at the very top in one of the more important indicators of all: educational attainment.

In 2000, no less than 42 percent

of the adult population of the national Capital area had at least a bachelor’s degree (up from 38 percent in 1990), and 19 percent of the population had graduate and professional degrees (up from 16 percent in 1990). In addition, the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) rated the Washington area’s workforce first out of the 50 largest metropolitan regions for its overall workforce education level in 2001.² Greater Washington, it turns out, possesses the best educated population in any major metropolitan area.



Further, research by economist Edward Glaeser and his colleagues has shown a strong relationship between high-skilled human capital and growth in metropolitan areas, a relationship that appears to be growing over time.³ Glaeser argues that educational attainment is a good indicator of job, population, and, most importantly, income growth as firms tend to gather and grow in particular regions to draw from local labor pools. In the Washington metro area, this means that the already highly educated population tends to attract other talented workers with high levels of education. This trend will continue to make the Washington region prosperous and attractive to new employers—and employees.

Washington’s educational preeminence is no surprise, since government, the area’s biggest business, requires an educated workforce. So do the activities that government attracts, such as legal, accounting and consulting services, technology and data processing. In an increasingly information intensive, technology-oriented economy, the Washington area is well-positioned to prosper.

At the same time, substantial unevenness undercuts the region’s intellectual strength. Although the Washington area ranks high in terms of higher educational attainment, the portion of the population

without a high school degree is a cause for concern. Although the regional figure of those without a high school degree (13 percent) remains below the national figure (20 percent), marked differences among jurisdictions and races/ethnicities fissure the region.

Within the region, the inner suburbs tend to have the highest educational attainment, followed by the District of Columbia and then the outer suburbs (see appendix). Racial and ethnic disparities are striking. Asians as a group have the highest educational attainment. Fifty-four percent of the area’s Asian

population has at least a bachelor’s degree, compared with 50 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 24 percent of blacks, and 21 percent of Hispanics. The figures for blacks and Hispanics trail the regional average, but exceed national averages for blacks and Hispanics: nationally, just 14 percent of blacks and 10 percent of Hispanics hold bachelor’s degrees.

FINDINGS

Census 2000 provides a wealth of important new data, and that on educational attain-

Table 1: Educational Attainment in the 20 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 2000

	Percent with at least a Bachelor’s Degree	Percent with Master’s, Professional or Ph.D. Degree
Washington, DC—MD—VA—WV PMSA	41.8	18.8
Boston, MA—NH PMSA	39.5	16.9
Seattle—Bellevue—Everett, WA PMSA	35.9	11.7
Minneapolis—St. Paul, MN—WI MSA	33.3	10.1
Atlanta, GA MSA	32.1	10.4
Nassau—Suffolk, NY PMSA	31.3	13.7
Orange County, CA PMSA	30.8	10.4
Chicago, IL PMSA	30.1	11.1
Dallas, TX PMSA	30.0	9.5
San Diego, CA MSA	29.5	10.9
Baltimore, MD PMSA	29.2	11.9
New York, NY PMSA	29.2	12.6
Philadelphia, PA—NJ PMSA	27.8	10.5
Houston, TX PMSA	27.2	9.0
St. Louis, MO—IL MSA	25.3	9.2
Phoenix—Mesa, AZ MSA	25.1	8.5
Los Angeles—Long Beach, CA PMSA	24.9	8.8
United States	24.4	8.9
Detroit, MI PMSA	22.8	8.5
Tampa—St. Petersburg—Clearwater, FL MSA	21.7	7.3
Riverside—San Bernardino, CA PMSA	16.3	5.7

Source: Census 2000

ment and its geography is of particular interest to regions increasingly concerned with their competitive and economic status in the unfolding “knowledge economy.”

When it comes to the Washington area, Census 2000 supports at least four key observations about the region’s intellectual and educational attainment.

No Major Metropolitan Area is Better Educated than the Washington Area

The proportion of all residents in the Washington region who have received at

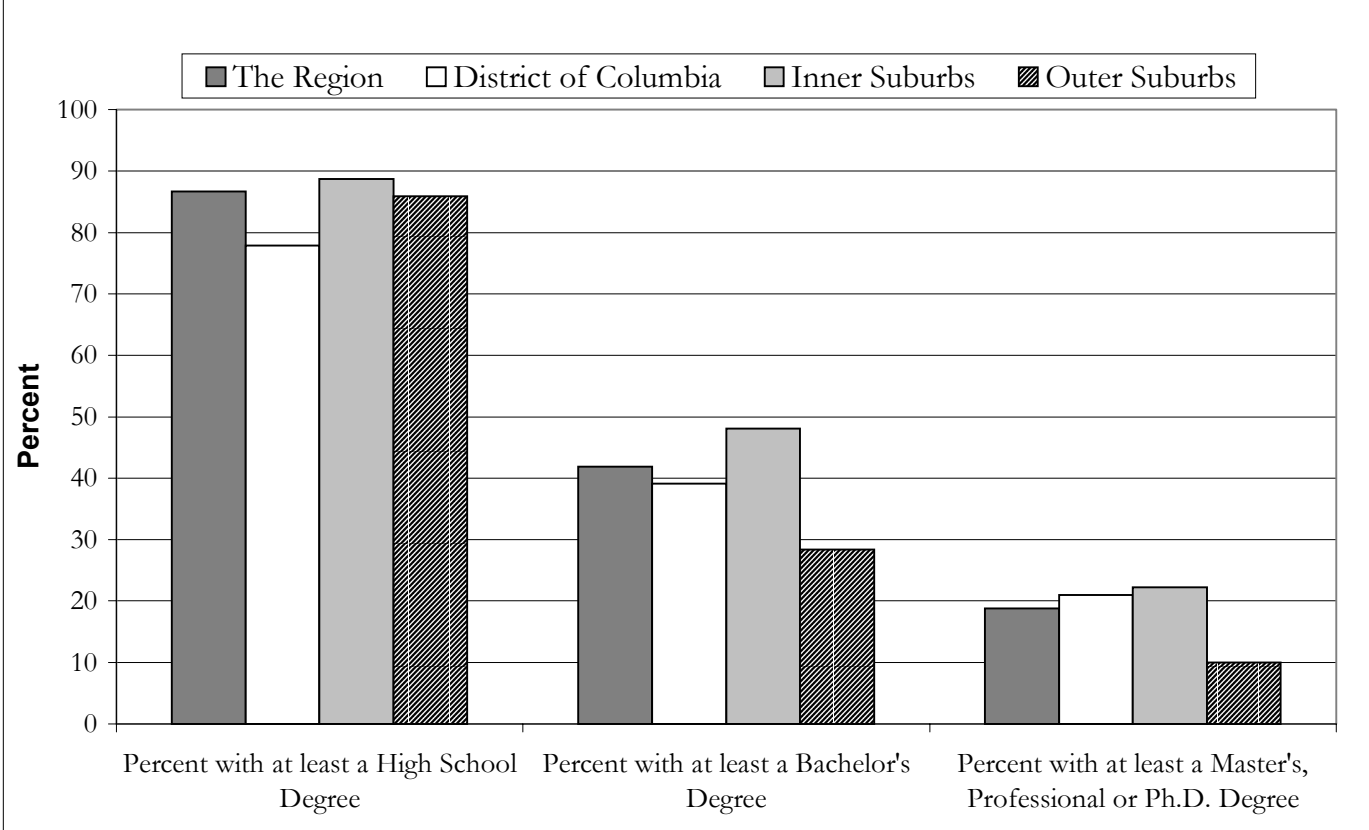
least a bachelor’s degree increased, from 30.8 percent to 41.8 percent, between 1980 and 2000 (see appendix). The share nationally of people with at least a bachelor’s degree increased from 16.2 percent to 24.4 percent over the same period. That growth in educational attainment now ensures Washington remains ahead of brainy Boston (39 percent) and high-tech Seattle (36 percent), and way ahead of older industrial areas, such as Baltimore (29 percent) and Detroit (23 percent).⁴ Nineteen percent of Washington area residents have master’s, professional or doctoral degrees, compared

with 17 percent in the Boston metropolitan region, 13 percent in the New York City region, 9 percent in Los Angeles-Long Beach, and 6 percent in Riverside-San Bernardino (see Table 1).

The Inner Suburbs Lead the Way

Within the region, the inner suburbs have the highest level of educational attainment: 48 percent of the total adult population possesses a bachelor’s degree or more.⁵ In the District, 39 percent of the population has at least a bachelor’s degree, followed by

Figure 1: Educational Attainment Within the Washington Metropolitan Area, 2000



Source: Census 2000

Table 2: Proportion of Residents with a High School Degree and a Bachelors Degree in the Washington Metropolitan Area, 2000

	Non-Hispanic White		Black		Hispanic		Asian	
	High School Degree	Bachelor's Degree	High School Degree	Bachelor's Degree	High School Degree	Bachelor's Degree	High School Degree	Bachelor's Degree
District of Columbia	97.5	80.6	70.4	17.5	47.8	24.8	81.9	58.2
Inner Suburbs	95.2	59.8	86.7	28.5	57.8	20.8	85.7	54.7
Outer Suburbs	87.7	29.9	80.6	18.4	65.2	19.0	84.2	44.5
The Region	92.6	50.3	81.3	24.1	57.7	21.0	85.4	53.9

Source: Census 2000

28 percent of the population in the outer suburbs (see Figure 1). The inner suburbs also have the highest rate of post-graduate degrees: twenty-two percent of the adult population has a master's, professional, or doctoral degree in the inner suburbs, followed by 21 percent of District residents and 10 percent of those living in the outer suburbs.

Looking at high school degrees, the inner suburbs also have the highest proportion of residents who have completed at least high school, at 89 percent, followed by the outer suburbs, at 86 percent. The District's rate of high school completion lags somewhat: seventy-nine percent of adult residents have completed at least high school, meaning that more than 20 percent of adults lack a high school degree.

Educational Attainment Rates Differ Greatly by Race/Ethnicity

In general, Asians and non-Hispanic whites enjoy the highest levels of educational

attainment (see Table 2). Fifty-four percent of Asians have at least a bachelor's degree, followed by 50 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 24 percent of blacks, and 21 percent of Hispanics in 2000. The racial and ethnic differences continue with post-graduate degrees. Twenty-five percent of Asians in the region hold a master's, professional, or doctoral degree, as do 23 percent of non-Hispanic whites, and nine percent of blacks and Hispanics.

Although blacks and Hispanics have lower levels of educational attainment than the regional averages, when looking across metropolitan areas, blacks and Hispanics in the Washington region maintain comparatively high levels of education. Among the top 20 metropolitan areas, only the Orange County, CA region has a higher percentage of blacks with at least a bachelor's degree (27 percent), although Boston, Seattle, Atlanta, and Nassau-Suffolk are all close (between 21 and 22 percent). In other

large metropolitan areas, the percentages are lower; for example, in Chicago the figure is 16 percent, and in Philadelphia and Detroit, 13 percent.

Among Hispanics, the Washington area ranks third, behind Baltimore and St. Louis, MO, in the percentage of Hispanics with a bachelor's degree and post-graduate degrees. However, educational attainment among Hispanics in the region—and among all the subregions, including the District, inner and outer suburbs—has actually decreased over the past 20 years. Over the same time period, the region has become home to a growing immigrant population, with an increasing share of new foreign-born entrants coming from Latin America, particularly El Salvador and other Central American countries.⁶ The low levels of educational attainment of so many of these Hispanic adult immigrants reflect educational standards in their home countries and explain to a large extent the declining educational levels among Hispanics in the

Washington region over time.

Racial and ethnic disparity at the subregional level is also notable. The District is a particularly strong study in contrasts. It has a very well-educated white population: eighty-one percent of non-Hispanic whites possess at least a bachelor's degree, and almost 50 percent have a post-graduate degree. Less than three percent lack a high school degree. Among blacks and Hispanics, the story is less encouraging. Eighteen percent of blacks have at least a bachelor's degree, as do 25 percent of Hispanics, but large portions of these populations lack high school degrees: nearly one-third of the black population and more than half of the Hispanic population in the District does not have a high school degree. The majority of the Asian population in the District has at least a bachelor's degree (almost 60 percent), but there is also a sizeable minority (18 percent) without a high school degree.

Disparity by race and ethnicity in educational attainment is less in the inner suburbs, although still present. Twenty-nine percent of the black population in the inner suburbs holds at least a bachelor's degree (above both the District figure of 18 percent and the regional average for blacks of 24 percent), compared to 60

percent of the white population.

High School Completion Rates are Uneven within the Region

The Washington region also ranks highly—although not at the very top—in the proportion of its population that has completed high school. Almost 87 percent of the adult population in the region has completed high school, placing the Washington region fourth among the top 20 metro areas, behind Minneapolis-St. Paul (91 percent), Seattle (90 percent) and Boston (87 percent).

But there are marked differences among jurisdictions and races/ethnicities. Overall, levels of high school completion are highest in the inner suburbs (89 percent), followed by the outer suburbs (86 percent). High school completion is slightly lower in the District at 78 percent. The outer suburbs, meanwhile, have seen the biggest increases in the proportion of its population with high school degrees. Growth in the outer suburbs is fueled by the movement outward of educated households from the core of the region and its more central suburbs.

Among different races and ethnicities, the Hispanic population has by far the highest proportion without a high school degree, at 42 percent. This is related, as noted above, to the

relatively large number of recent Hispanic immigrants who come to the region with low levels of educational attainment from their country of origin. Nineteen percent of blacks lack a high school degree, compared to 15 percent of Asians and seven percent of whites.

Conclusion

The Washington region, with a highly-educated population, is well-positioned to prosper in the knowledge-based economy of the twenty-first century. The region will continue to grow as its well educated population—and the amenities it supports—attract other well-educated people and employers to the area. A well-educated workforce is likely to be employed in high-wage, high-skill jobs. Moreover, employers with needs for skilled, educated employees are likely to locate here to take advantage of the highly skilled workforce living in the region.

At the same time, the racial, ethnic and jurisdictional disparities in educational levels indicate that this prosperity is spread unevenly throughout the region. Reducing the disparity is critical on two counts: first, to ensure the region's continuing competitiveness, and second, to prevent a subset of the population from being locked into low-wage jobs due to low skill levels.

Footnotes

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² “The Metropolitan New Economy Index.” Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute, 2001. See <http://www.neweconomyindex.org/metro/index.html>. This reflects a weighted measure of local advanced degrees, bachelor’s degrees and other college work.

³ See Edward Glaeser, “The New Economics of Urban and Regional Growth.” In Gordon Clark, Meric Gertler and Maryann Feldman (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Edward Glaeser, Jose Scheinkman and Andrei Schliefer, “Economic Growth in a Cross-section of Cities.” *Journal of Monetary Economics* 36 (1), 1995.

⁴ However, the San Francisco PMSA ranks 29th in size and 43.6 percent of its population has at least a bachelor’s degree and 16.3 percent have a master’s degree or higher.

⁵ Please see the Appendix for a definition of subregional breakdowns.

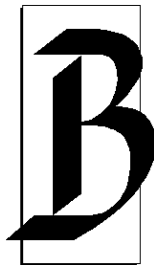
⁶ See Audrey Singer, “At Home in the Nation’s Capital: Immigrant Trends in Metropolitan Washington” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2003).

Appendix: Educational Attainment by Jurisdiction, Washington Metropolitan Area, 1980 to 2000

	Percent with at least a High School Degree			Percent with at least a Bachelor's Degree			Percent with at least a Master's, Professional, or Ph.D. Degree*	
	1980	1990	2000	1980	1990	2000	1990	2000
District of Columbia	67.2	73.1	77.8	27.5	33.3	39.1	17.2	21.0
Inner Suburbs	84.6	88.5	88.8	36.1	43.3	48.1	18.5	22.2
Alexandria city, VA	83.1	86.9	86.8	41.0	48.5	54.3	19.3	24.8
Arlington County, VA	86.7	87.5	87.8	42.5	52.3	60.2	24.0	30.6
Fairfax city, VA	85.7	87.5	88.6	33.5	41.3	45.7	15.2	20.8
Fairfax County, VA	88.6	91.4	90.7	41.8	49.0	54.8	20.3	24.4
Falls Church city, VA	86.2	91.4	95.9	45.0	52.8	63.7	25.6	33.8
Montgomery County, MD	87.4	90.6	90.3	42.9	49.9	54.6	23.2	27.5
Prince George's County, MD	77.5	83.2	84.9	21.1	25.5	27.2	9.3	10.2
Outer Suburbs	66.7	80.0	85.9	16.8	21.8	28.4	7.3	9.9
Berkeley County, WV	56.0	68.4	77.6	10.6	11.9	15.1	4.1	6.0
Calvert County, MD	64.6	79.3	86.9	11.8	17.6	22.5	6.1	8.3
Charles County, MD	69.0	81.0	85.8	12.4	16.2	20.0	5.4	6.8
Clarke County, VA	57.3	75.0	82.1	15.7	18.6	23.9	5.0	7.7
Culpeper County, VA	50.1	66.7	73.7	11.4	14.9	15.7	5.1	5.8
Fauquier County, VA	60.3	78.9	84.5	15.5	21.5	27.1	6.6	8.8
Frederick County, VA	63.5	80.4	87.1	16.9	22.0	30.0	8.3	11.1
Fredericksburg city, VA	59.5	73.8	80.2	22.2	26.1	30.5	8.0	12.6
Jefferson County, WV	56.7	68.2	79.0	16.3	16.2	21.6	6.1	8.7
King George County, VA	63.2	73.1	80.4	19.2	20.4	23.6	6.2	8.1
Loudoun County, VA	75.4	86.6	92.5	23.5	32.7	47.2	10.2	15.2
Manassas city, VA	79.2	84.2	81.3	23.6	25.8	28.1	7.1	10.3
Manassas Park city, VA	59.7	70.4	76.4	5.4	7.9	20.3	1.7	5.9
Prince William County, VA	81.9	87.8	88.8	22.9	27.6	31.5	9.3	11.2
Spotsylvania County, VA	58.2	76.6	83.8	12.9	19.0	22.8	5.8	6.8
Stafford County, VA	65.3	80.9	88.6	15.1	21.6	29.6	6.6	10.8
Warren County, VA	54.2	64.6	75.5	9.4	11.8	15.0	4.0	4.7
TOTAL	77.8	84.3	86.7	30.8	37.0	41.8	15.8	18.8

*Data on advanced degrees is not available for 1980.

Source: Census 2000



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