

Today's News

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Scholars Shed New Light in Debate Over High-School-Graduation Numbers

By [DAVID GLENN](#)

American high-school-graduation rates peaked around 1970 before entering a long period of stagnation and decline, according to a working paper released this week by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The decline in high-school graduation has been especially severe among male students, and it accounts for roughly half of the emerging gender gap in college attendance, according to the paper, which was written by James J. Heckman, a professor of economics at the University of Chicago, and Paul A. LaFontaine, a researcher at the American Bar Foundation's Center for Social Program Evaluation.

The paper adds a heavyweight voice—Mr. Heckman won the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science in 2000—and a new set of methodological tools to an already-heated scholarly debate about how best to count high-school graduates.

One camp, whose most prominent partisan is Jay P. Greene, a professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, has argued that the actual graduation rates, especially for minorities, are far worse than the widely cited figures from the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, or NCES, suggest. (In a 2002 [paper](#), Mr. Greene estimated that the graduation rate for public-school students in the class of 1998 was 71 percent.)

Another faction, whose proponents include Lawrence R. Mishel and Joydeep Roy of the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal think tank in Washington, maintains that the true graduation rate is close to the NCES estimates, and that minorities' graduation rates have slowly been converging with those of whites. (In a [book](#) published by the institute last year, *Rethinking High School Graduation Rates and Trends*, the researchers suggested that the most accurate recent overall estimate is 83 percent, for the class of 1992.)

Finding Middle Ground

Mr. Heckman and Mr. LaFontaine's new paper offers some succor to both sides of the debate. They estimate that the overall graduation rate is 77 percent, halfway between the two camps' figures. (In all three cases, the scholars are measuring official high-school diplomas, and do not include alternative certifications such as the GED.)

But the paper's grim tone is closer to that of Mr. Greene. "The decline in high-school graduation since 1970 has flattened college attendance and completion rates as well as the skill attainment of the U.S. work force," they write. "To increase the skill levels of the future work force, America needs to confront a large and growing dropout problem."

In their paper, Mr. Heckman and Mr. LaFontaine gather information from a wide variety of data sources, including surveys conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, official enrollment figures from state departments of education, and longitudinal research such as the NCES's High School and Beyond study.

Those data sources vary in their treatment of recent immigrants, prisoners, members of the military, and other groups.

Mr. Heckman and Mr. LaFontaine massaged the studies' findings to bring those variables into alignment. Once that is done, they write, the studies all tell essentially the same story: Graduation rates peaked around 40 years ago, and there has been no significant convergence between the rates for whites and the rates for minorities.

The authors note that there is tentative evidence that graduation rates have increased since the 2002 enactment of the No Child Left Behind law, which uses high-school graduation rates as a benchmark for states' performance. But it is too soon, they write, to say whether such increases reflect true improvements, or whether states have simply learned to manipulate the figures. And in any case, they say, there is no reason to believe that graduation rates have returned to the peak levels of the late 1960s.

Both Mr. Mishel and Mr. Greene offered praise for the paper on Thursday. "I think it's great to have someone of Heckman's standing weigh in on this," said Mr. Mishel in a telephone interview. "The authors are more pessimistic than we are, but we think that this is an important contribution."

Mr. Mishel praised the authors for highlighting the role of imprisonment. "The increased incarceration of black men is a big deal," he said. "Whether the increased incarceration is the result of bad schooling, or whether it's the result of changes in crime policy that lead to lower graduation rates, is yet to be untangled. You can't just blame schools. Is this something going on with schools, or is it something going on with criminal-justice policy?"

Mr. Greene, meanwhile, wrote in an e-mail message to *The Chronicle* that the paper was "very well done. ... I think they have convincingly demonstrated that officially reported rates from the Current Population Survey and the NCES, and defended by Mishel and Roy, are too high."

Mr. Heckman and Mr. LaFontaine's paper, "The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels," is available for \$5 from the [research bureau](#). A free version of the paper is available [here](#).

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