

The Transition from High School to  
College and the Labor Market Among the  
Nation's Recent High School Graduates:  
Findings for the High School Graduating  
Class of 2008 and Comparisons with the  
Experiences of High School Graduates from  
Earlier Years

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## **Introduction**

The Jobs for America's Graduates program was initially founded as a school-to-work transition program for a targeted subset of the nation's high school seniors who were identified by school staff and JAG job specialists as being at above average risk of joblessness upon graduation from high school. Among the major objectives of the initial and current Jobs for America's Graduates Senior Year program is that of facilitating the transition of high school graduates to the labor market and the post-secondary educational world in the first year following graduation from high school. A comprehensive array of services potentially can be provided by the professional staff associated with the Senior Year Program. These services are primarily targeted upon those high school seniors who were identified by JAG job specialists, school counselors, and other high school staff as most at-risk of being jobless and not enrolled in college upon graduating from high school. The program aims to bolster the ability of program participants to secure and retain employment in the first year following graduation from high school and to enroll in post-secondary education and training programs. These goals are to be achieved by providing participants with a diverse array of services, including employability skills, personal and career counseling, opportunities to participate in career association, community service, and work-based learning activities, job development and placement assistance, and personal follow-up support services for 12 months after graduation from high school.

Our national body of knowledge on the success of the nation's recent high school graduates in obtaining employment and/or gaining access to post-secondary educational opportunities in the early months following graduation is largely based on the findings of an annual supplement to the standard monthly CPS household survey questionnaire during the month of October. The Current Population Survey (CPS) is a monthly household survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics.<sup>1</sup> The CPS survey involves monthly interviews with a nationally representative sample of approximately 60,000 households across the nation. Labor force data are collected for all household members ages 16 and older. The findings of the monthly labor force surveys are used

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the basic design features of the monthly CPS labor force survey and the administration of the household survey, see: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment and Earnings, January 2007, "Appendix A," Washington, D.C., 2007.

by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to calculate the monthly size of the nation's civilian labor force, the employed and unemployed population, and the overall unemployment rate. It is one of the two core sources of data on national labor market developments in the monthly U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics' release on The Employment Situation.

In October of each year, the U.S. Census Bureau adds a supplementary set of questions to the standard monthly labor force questionnaire. The additional questions are used to collect information on the school enrollment status of all household members ages 3 and older at the time of the October survey. The questionnaire also attempts to identify all recent high school graduates and those youth who dropped out of high school/junior high school during the previous twelve-month period.<sup>2</sup> All recent high school graduates are tracked separately by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the findings are summarized in a special annual research report. On April 28, the BLS issued its findings on the college attendance and employment behavior of high school graduates from the Class of 2008.<sup>3</sup> The findings from these annual October CPS surveys also have been used in the past by the national JAG network to set job placement performance standards and positive outcome standards for the senior year program.

In this brief research paper, we will describe and assess key findings from the October 2008 CPS survey on the post-secondary schooling and labor market activities of national high school graduates from the Class of 2008, including their college attendance rates and their employment rates at the time of the October 2008 survey. Estimates of employment rates will be provided separately for those graduates who attended college in the fall immediately following their graduation from high school and those who did not enroll in college. Findings also will be presented for all graduates and for gender and selected race-ethnic groups. The results for the Class of 2008 also will be compared to those for graduating classes from earlier years, including the Classes of 2000 to 2007. Trends in college attendance rates and employment rates of high school graduates over these eight years will be identified and carefully assessed. Implications of these findings for the future design and administration of JAG senior year programs will be

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<sup>2</sup> The October 2008 CPS survey identified all individuals living in households or selected group quarters who graduated from high school sometime between October 2007 and October 2008. This group of graduates is referred to in this paper as the Class of 2008 since the vast majority of them did graduate in 2008. The CPS survey does not interview either members of the nation's armed forces serving in the 50 states or overseas or inmates of institutions such as jails, prisons, and nursing homes.

<sup>3</sup> See: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "College Enrollment and Work Activity of 2008 High School Graduates," Washington, D.C, April 28, 2009.

discussed at the end of the paper. A major finding of the October 2008 survey is the collapse in the employment rates of the nation's high school graduates in recent years, with graduates from the Class of 2008 working at a considerably lower rate than in 2000. The E/P rate for non-college enrolled youth was the lowest in the past 40 years.

### **The Estimated Number of New High School Graduates, Class of 2008**

The findings of the sample results from the October CPS survey on the number of new high school graduates are used by the U.S. Census Bureau to derive an estimate of the total number of new high school graduates across the country each year. The estimate for the Class of 2008 includes all graduates of public and private high schools between October 2007 and the time of the October 2008 CPS survey.<sup>4</sup> These graduates are categorized as graduates from the Class of 2008 in this report. The estimated number of high school graduates from the Class of 2008 was 3.151 million (Table 1). The annual number of high school graduates in the previous year was the highest in the past decade and exceeded the number of graduates from the Classes of 1999 and 2000 by an average of 325,000. This represents a very sizable increase in the number of new high school graduates partly reflecting growth in the high school population and an improvement in the high school graduation rate.

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<sup>4</sup> The CPS survey is administered during the calendar week containing the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the month. The reference week for the survey is the preceding calendar week; i.e., the week containing the 12<sup>th</sup> day of the month.

Table 1:  
Trends in the Number of New High School Graduates in the U.S. by  
Year, Classes of 1999 to 2008  
(in 1000s)

Graduating Class	Number of New Graduates
1999	2,897
2000	2,756
2001	2,545
2002	2,796
2003	2,677
2004	2,752
2005	2,675
2006	2,495
2007	2,955
2008	3,151
Absolute Change, 1999-2000 to 2008	-325
Percent Change, 1999-2000 to 2008	+11%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, October CPS surveys, published research releases.

## **The College Enrollment Behavior of Class of 2008 Graduates and Recent Trends in College Enrollment Behavior of the Nation’s Newest High School Graduates**

The October 2008 CPS supplement collected information on the college enrollment status of all high school graduates from the Class of 2008 as of October of that year. All persons attending a two or four-year college or university in a degree-granting program are classified as college students.<sup>5</sup> Estimates of the October 2008 college enrollment rates for Class of 2008 high school graduates are displayed in Table 2, with separate breakouts of the data for men, women, Asians, Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites. The overall college enrollment rate for graduates from the class of 2008 was 68.6%. This college enrollment rate was 2.8 percentage points above that of the Class of 2006 and tied the Class of 2005 for the all-time high of 68.6%. The college enrollment rate for female Class of 2008 graduates was 71.5%, which was approximately 6 percentage points higher than that of men (65.8%). College enrollment rates for graduates from the Class of 2008 varied quite considerably across the four major race-ethnic groups. College

<sup>5</sup> Persons enrolled in vocational/technical programs or one-year business schools not leading to a formal degree are not considered to be college students by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in its analysis of the October CPS data.

enrollment rates ranged from lows of 55 % among Blacks and 69% among Hispanics to a high of 88% among Asians.

Table 2:  
Percent of New High School Graduates Enrolled in College in October of the Year of Graduation, Total and by Gender and Race-Ethnic Group, 2000 to 2008

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)
Year	All	Men	Women	Black	Hispanic	White	Asian
2000	63.3	59.8	66.2	56.2	53.0	64.0	--
2001	61.7	59.7	63.6	54.8	51.4	63.0	--
2002	65.2	63.1	68.4	58.6	53.4	66.7	--
2003	63.9	61.2	66.5	58.2	58.6	65.0	84.1
2004	66.6	61.4	71.6	61.0	61.8	68.4	76.0
2005	68.6	66.4	70.3	56.7	54.1	69.3	87.5
2006	65.8	65.5	66.0	55.0	58.4	66.6	82.4
2007	67.2	66.1	68.3	55.2	63.9	68.7	90.9
2008	68.6	65.8	71.5	54.9	63.7	70.8	87.5

According to the October CPS survey findings, there has been a consistent but variable gender gap in college enrollment rates in favor of women (Table 3). The college enrollment rate gap, however, is only the tip of the iceberg in gender gaps in formal educational attainment in the U.S. Women are more likely than men to graduate from high school, to attend some type of college upon graduation, to attend four-year colleges when they do graduate from high school, and to persist in college more strongly than their male counterparts. As a consequence of all of these behaviors, there are very large gender gaps in formal degree attainment. Nationally, in 2007, 158 women obtained Associate degrees for every 100 obtained by men, and they obtained 136 bachelor degrees for every 100 such degrees obtained by men. These gender gaps in degree attainment have been rising over time not declining, and they are projected by the National Center for Education Statistics to increase further in magnitude through 2015. The gender gaps in college degree attainment are particularly large among both Blacks and Hispanics. During 2007, for example, Black women earned 217 Associate degrees for every 100 Associate degrees obtained by Black men, and they earned nearly 200 Bachelor degrees for every 100 obtained by Black men. Among Hispanics, women obtained 163 Bachelor degrees for every 100 held by Latino men (Table 4).

Table 3:  
Differences in the College Enrollment Rates of Men and Women in the  
U.S., High School Graduating Classes of 2000 to 2008 (in %)

	(A)	(B)	(C)
Graduating Class	Men	Women	Women – Men
2000	59.8	66.2	+6.4
2001	59.7	63.6	+3.9
2002	63.1	68.4	+5.3
2003	61.2	66.5	+5.3
2004	61.4	71.6	+10.2
2005	66.4	70.3	+3.9
2006	65.5	66.0	+0.5
2008	65.8	71.5	+5.7

Table 4:  
Number of Women Per 100 Men that Earned a College Degree by  
Type of Degree and Race-Ethnic Group, U.S., 2007

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)
Level of Degree	All	Asian or Pacific Islander	Black	Hispanic	White, not Hispanic
Associate's	158	146	217	171	150
Bachelor's	136	124	197	163	131
Master's	149	118	252	190	163
PhD Degree	95	109	185	139	114

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Education Statistics.

These large and rising gender gaps in college degree attainment are creating a number of substantive economic and social problems. Men with limited formal schooling are being left far behind in the labor market, and many are unable to achieve the annual earnings and incomes needed to support families and their children. These factors have contributed in an important way to the high levels of out-of-wedlock childbearing among women under 30 years old. In 2007 in the U.S., one-half of all births to women under 30 were out-of-wedlock, and this ratio was over 70 percent for Black women. Marriage rates among men with no post-secondary schooling have fallen sharply over the past 20 years. A key question for the national JAG network is whether it can prove itself capable of playing some substantive role in improving both high school

graduation rates and post-secondary enrollment and persistence rates for men, especially those from low income White, Black, and Hispanic backgrounds.

The October CPS survey also collects information from college students on the type of post-secondary educational institution that they were attending (a two-year college versus a four-year college/university) and whether they were enrolled on a full-time or part-time basis.<sup>6</sup> In October 2008, slightly under 60 percent of the college students from the high school graduating Class of 2008 were enrolled in four-year colleges and universities, and the remaining 40 percent were attending two-year colleges. No demographic breakouts of the college enrollment data by type of institution attended were provided by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics in its published report. CLMS analyses of the college enrollment data for Class of 2003 graduates revealed that women were more likely than men to be attending four year colleges and universities (68% vs. 64%) and that Asians and Whites were enrolled in four-year educational institutions at higher rates than their Black and Hispanic counterparts.

The vast majority of the college students from the Class of 2008 reported that they were attending college on a full-time basis in October 2008. Slightly over 93% of the college attendees were enrolled on a full-time basis. These full-time enrollment ratios have been fairly stable over the past few years.

Table 5:  
Key Characteristics of the College Enrollment Behavior of Class of 2008 Graduates  
(in %)

	(A)
Type of College Attended	All
Two Year	40.3
Four Year	59.7
Full-time	93.1
Part-time	6.9

Source: October 2008, CPS supplement, BLS News release, April 28, 2009.

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<sup>6</sup> Full-time enrollment is defined as twelve or more hours of class work during a typical week.

## The October 2008 Employment Rates of Class of 2008 Graduates

The October CPS survey also collected standard information on the labor force activities of each of the graduates of the Class of 2008. The estimated employment rates (E/P ratios) for all Class of 2008 graduates and by their college enrollment status are displayed in Table 6.<sup>7</sup> Only slightly more than 41% of the graduates from the Class of 2008 were employed in some capacity (part-time or full-time) at the time of the October 2008 CPS survey (Table 6). Those high school graduates not attending college were employed at a higher rate than their peers enrolled in college (56% vs. 35%) although the gap between the employment rates of these two groups had declined somewhat since the late 1990's.

Table 6:  
October Employment Rates of New High School Graduates, All and  
By College Enrollment Status, Classes of 1999, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2008  
(in %)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)	(G)
Enrollment Status	1999	2000	2003	2004	2005	2006	2008	Percentage Point Change (1999-2000 to 2008)
All	53.0	53.5	44.4	46.6	49.3	46.0	41.6	-11.7
Enrolled in College	43.3	44.0	36.9	38.8	43.4	40.2	35.0	-8.6
Not enrolled in college	69.4	69.7	57.8	62.1	62.4	57.2	56.0	-13.6

Source: October CPS survey supplement, tabulations by authors.

The 41.6 percent employment rate for Class of 2008 graduates was 7.7 percentage points below that of the Class of 2005 and 4.4 percentage points below that of the Class of 2006. The employment rate of high school graduates from the Class of 2008 remained nearly 12 percentage points or 22% below the peak employment rates of recent high school graduates at the height of the labor market boom of the 1990s (Table 6). Both youth enrolled in college and those not enrolled were considerably less likely to be employed in October 2008 than in October 1999-2000. Among those not enrolled in college, the employment rate of graduates from the Class of

<sup>7</sup> The employment rate represents the ratio of the number of employed graduates (E) to the number of high school graduates from the Class of 2008 in the civilian non-institutional population (P). The civilian non-institutional population excludes members of the nation's armed forces, the homeless, and those residing as inmates in institutions (juvenile correctional institutions, jails, prisons, long stay hospitals).

2008 was nearly 14 percentage points below the average employment rate of their peers from the Classes of 1999 and 2000. Only 56 percent of non-enrolled graduates from the Class of 2008 were working versus nearly 70% of their peers from the Classes of 1999 and 2000. This 56 percent employment rate of young high school graduates not enrolled in college is the lowest in the 32 year period for which such employment findings are available.<sup>8</sup>

Employment rates among college students from the Class of 2008 were substantially higher for female than for male graduates. In October 2008, nearly 40% of female college students were working versus only 30% of male college students, a 9 percentage point gap. The E/P rate for male college students was one-third below its value in 2000. Across race-ethnic groups, the employment rates of these young college students ranged from a low of 27% among Blacks to a high of 37% among Whites. Among each race-ethnic group, first-year college students were much less likely to be working in October 2008 than they were in 2000.

Table 7:  
Employment Rates of College Enrolled High School Graduates by Gender and Race/Ethnic Group, Classes of 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2008 (in %)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)	(H)
Group	1999	2000	1999- 2000 Avg.	2003	2005	2006	2008	Percentage Point Change (2000 to 2008)
Men	44.2	47.1	45.7	36.8	43.4	34.9	30.3	-16.8
Women	42.5	41.8	42.2	37.0	43.3	45.4	39.6	-2.2
Black	27.9	34.2	31.1	21.7	33.9	28.7	27.0	-7.2
Hispanic	32.5	59.2	45.8	32.5	43.1	40.0	34.7	-24.5
White	46.5	46.5	46.5	38.4	45.2	42.5	37.2	-9.3

Among non-enrolled high school graduates from the Class of 2008, a key target group for JAG Senior year programs, only 56% were employed at the time of the October 2008 CPS survey, approximately 6 percentage points below that of their employment rate in October 2004-2005. The employment rate for non-enrolled graduates in October 2008 was nearly 17 percentage points or more than one-third below its value in October 2000. This is the lowest such

<sup>8</sup> Near the depth of the recession of 1981-82, slightly over 60% of the nation's newest high school graduates in October 1982 were able to obtain some type of employment.

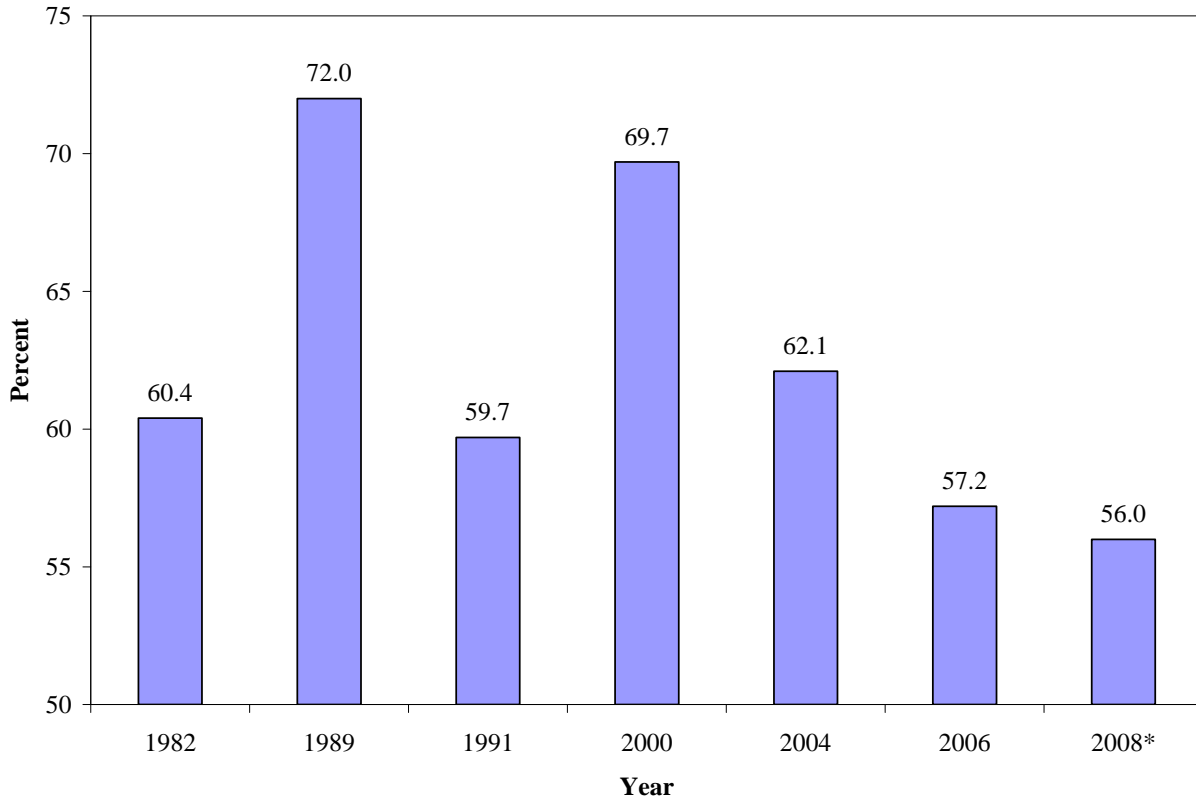
employment rate for non-enrolled graduates since 1965, the beginning of the data series. The employment rate gaps were extremely high among both men and women and among White and Hispanic graduates. The October E/P rates of Whites and Hispanics were 14 and 18 percentage points, respectively, below those prevailing in October 2000. Among members of these three race-ethnic groups, the October 2008 E/P ratios ranged from a low of 44% among Blacks to 61% among Whites.

Table 8:  
October Employment Rates of Non-College Enrolled, New High School Graduates,  
All and by Gender and Race/Ethnic Group, Classes of 1999, 2000, 2003 to 2006, and 2008  
(in %)

	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)	(H)	(I)
Group	1999	2000	1999- 2000 Avg.	2003	2004	2005	2006	2008	Percentage Point Change (2000 to 2008)
All	69.4	69.7	69.6	57.8	62.1	62.4	57.2	56.0	-13.7
Men	73.9	69.8	71.8	58.6	68.9	68.2	57.5	56.1	-13.7
Women	64.4	69.6	67.0	56.9	53.5	56.5	57.0	55.9	-13.7
Black	59.5	46.0	52.8	27.5	49.8	50.7	34.7	43.8	-2.2
Hispanic	59.3	68.8	64.1	57.7	57.3	56.9	60.4	50.5	-18.3
White	72.2	75.1	73.7	66.9	65.2	65.9	62.4	61.1	-13.8

Source: October CPS Supplements, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, tabulations by authors.

**Chart 1:**  
**October Employment Rates of Non-Enrolled New High School Graduates,**  
**Selected Classes from 1982 to 2008**  
**(in %)**



Note: This employment rate for Class of 2008 graduates was the lowest recorded in the 44 years for which such data are available.

The extraordinarily low employment rates of recent high school graduates not enrolled in college should be viewed as deeply troublesome by the nation's and state's policymakers. The absence of substantive employment opportunities for these young adults today will reduce the wages and employability of these youth in future years and will reduce the likelihood that they will receive future training from their employers. The costs of joblessness today reverberate throughout their future with adverse consequences for them, their communities, and the nation.