

Religiosity

Headline

Following modest increases from the early 1990s through 2002, the percentage of tenth and twelfth grade students reporting that religion plays a very important role in their lives declined slightly between 2002 and 2003. ([See Figure 1](#))

Importance

Religious adolescents are more likely to avoid risky behaviors and to engage in positive activities.¹ Adolescents who see themselves as religious are less likely to take risks or enjoy danger, engage in violent behaviors, or to get in trouble with the police.² These adolescents are also less likely to skip school and to be suspended, expelled, or sent to detention.³ Religious teens are more likely to volunteer in their communities, participate in student government, and play sports or exercise regularly.⁴ These teens also have lower rates of drug abuse.⁵ In addition, religious teens tend to hold more conservative attitudes toward sex and have lower levels of sexual experience,⁶ though some research indicates that religious adolescents who have sex are less likely to use contraception.⁷

Trends

Since the early 1990s, the percentage of students reporting that religion plays a very important part in their lives has fluctuated, but overall there has been a modest increase. Between 2002 and 2003, however, the percentage of students who reported that religion played a very important role in their lives decreased from 35 percent to 33 percent among tenth graders and from 33 percent to 31 percent among twelfth graders. ([See Figure 1](#)) While the importance of religion did not significantly change among eighth graders between 2002 and 2003, in the last decade the percentage of eighth graders reporting that religion plays a very important role in their lives has increased from 24 percent in 1991 to 34 percent in 2003.

Differences by Race

Black students are much more likely than white students to report that religion plays a very important role in their lives. For example, among twelfth graders in 2003, 56 percent of black students reported that religion played a very important role in their lives, compared with 26 percent of white students. ([See Figure 2](#))

Differences by Gender

Female students are somewhat more likely than male students to report that religion plays a very important role in their lives. In 2003, eighth grade female rates were five percentage points higher than their male peers, tenth grade females were seven

percentage points higher than their male peers, and twelfth grade females were nine percentage points higher than their male peers. ([See Figure 3](#))

Differences by College Plans

Students who plan to complete four years of college are more likely than students who do not plan to attend or finish college to report that religion plays a very important role in their lives. Among eighth graders in 2003, there was a 16-percentage point difference between the groups, among tenth graders, a 11-percentage point difference, and among students in the twelfth grade, a 9-percentage point difference. ([See Table 1](#))

State and Local Estimates

None available

International Estimates

None available

National Goals

There are no specific national goals in this area, but recent federal faith-based initiatives recognize the importance of religious organizations in youths' lives.

More information is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/government/fbci>

Definition

Students were asked, "How important is religion in your life?" This indicator reflects those who responded "very important."

Data Source

Child Trends original analysis of the Monitoring the Future Survey, 1976 to 2003.

Raw Data Source

Bachman, Jerald G., Lloyd D. Johnston, and Patrick M. O'Malley. *Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth* (8th, 10th, and 12th-Grade Surveys), 1976-2003 [Computer files]. Conducted by University of Michigan, Survey Research Center. ICPSR ed. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producer and distributor].

ICPSR: <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu>

Monitoring the Future: <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/>

Approximate Date of Next Update

November 2005

¹ Bridges, Lisa J., and Kristin Anderson Moore. (September 2002). "Religious Involvement and Children's Well-Being: What Research Tells Us (And What It Doesn't)," Child Trends Research Brief. Washington D.C., Child Trends.

<http://www.childtrends.org/Files/ReligiosityRB.pdf>

² Smith, Christian and Robert Faris. (2002). *Religion and American Adolescent Delinquency, Risk Behaviors and Constructive Social Activities*. National Study of Youth and Religion. Chapel Hill, NC.

<http://www.youthandreligion.org/publications/docs/RiskReport1.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ National Center on Addition and Substance Abuse at Columbia University. (2001). *So Help Me God: Substance Abuse, Religion, and Spirituality*, pp 8-12.

<http://www.casacolumbia.org/pdshopprov/files/91513.pdf>

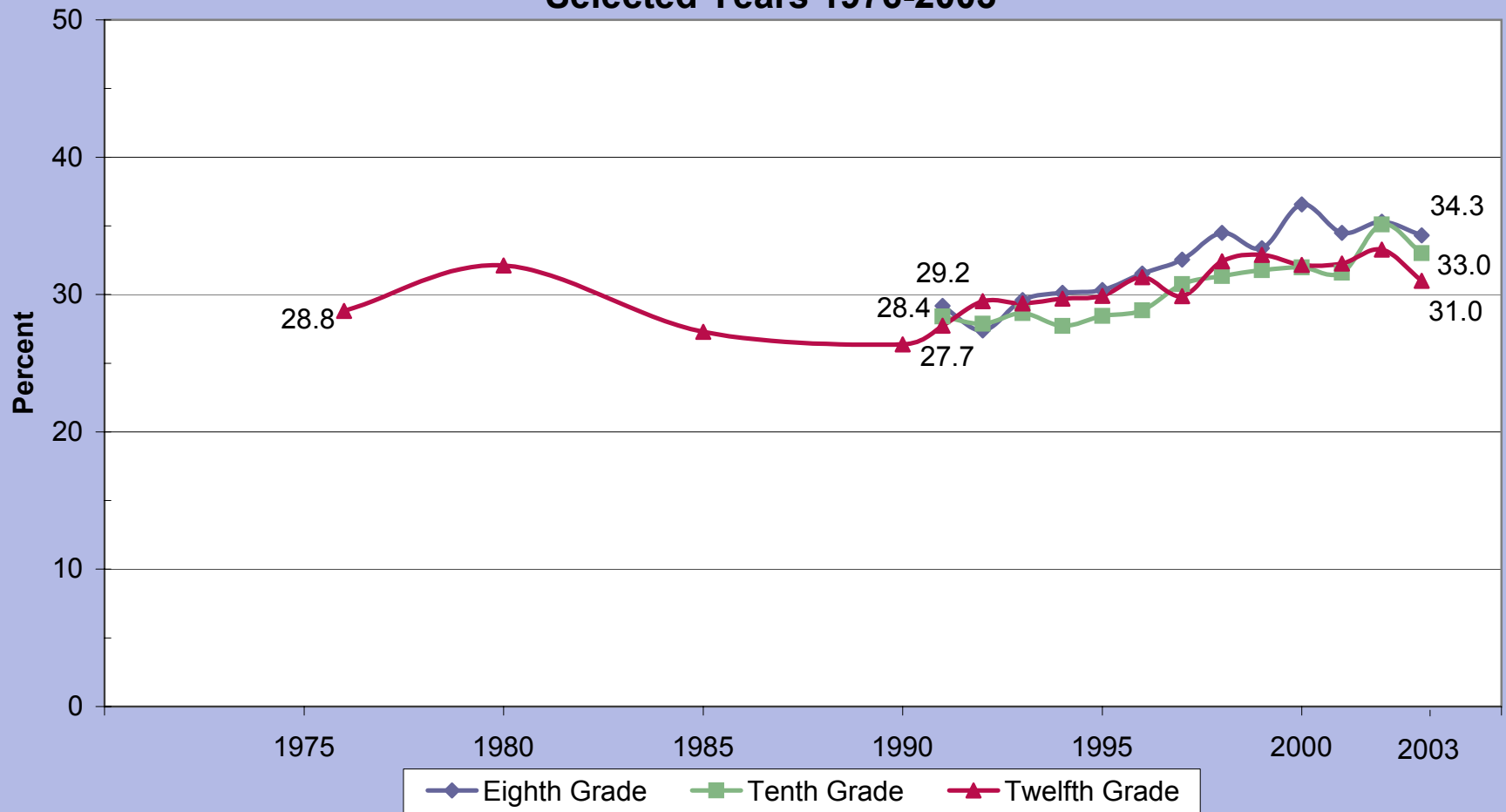
⁶ Bridges, Lisa J., and Kristin Anderson Moore. (September 2002).

<http://www.childtrends.org/Files/ReligiosityRB.pdf>

⁷ Thornton, Arland and Marlena Studard. "Adolescent Religiosity and Contraceptive Use," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 49 (February 1987): 117-128.

Figure 1

Religiosity: Percentage of Students in Grades 8, 10, and 12 Who Report that Religion Plays a Very Important Role in Their Lives, Selected Years 1976-2003

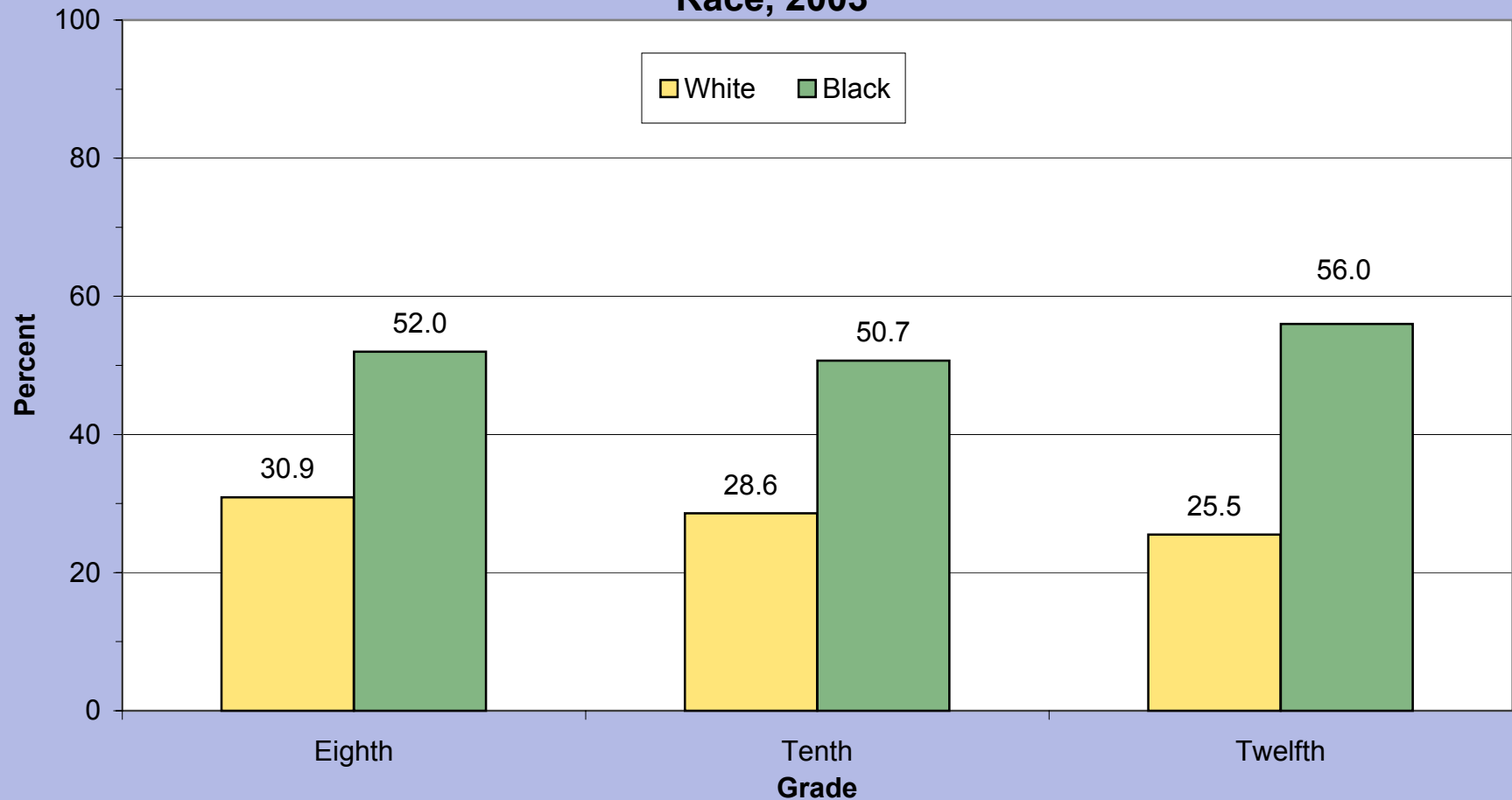


Note: Data from 1997-2001 exclude students living in California

Source: Original analysis by Child Trends of Monitoring the Future data, Selected Years 1976-2003

Figure 2

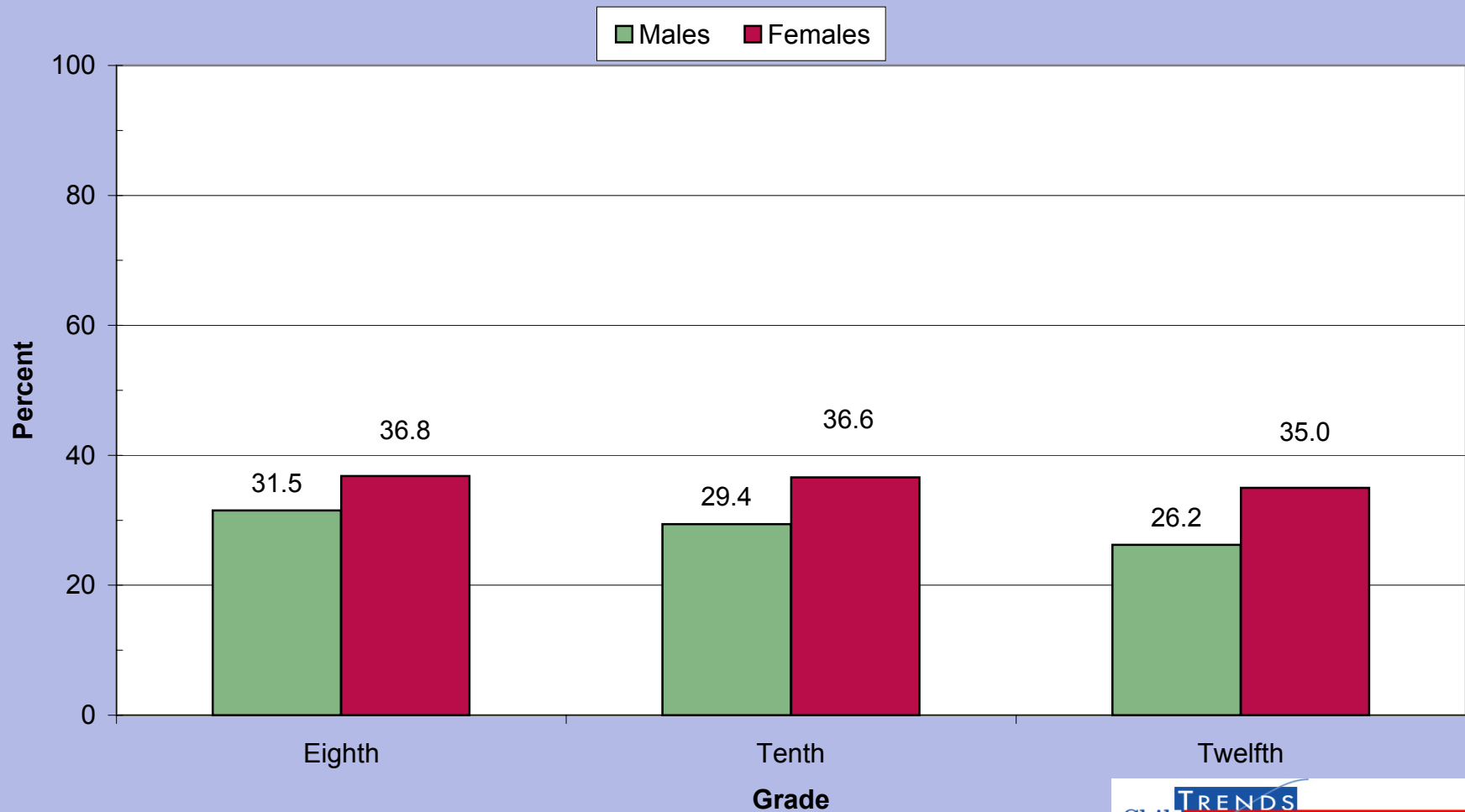
Religiosity: Percentage of Students in Grades 8, 10, and 12 Who Report that Religion Plays a Very Important Role in Their Lives, by Race, 2003



Source: Original analysis by Child Trends of Monitoring the Future data, 2003

Figure 3

Religiosity: Percentage of Students in Grades 8, 10, and 12 Who Report that Religion Plays a Very Important Role in Their Lives, by Gender, 2003



Source: Original analysis by Child Trends of Monitoring the Future data, 2003

Table 1

Religiosity: Percentage of 8th, 10th, and 12th Grade Students in the United States Who Report that Religion Plays a Very Important Role in their Lives, Selected Years 1976-2003

	1976	1980	1985	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997 ¹	1998 ¹	1999 ¹	2000 ¹	2001 ¹	2002	2003
Eighth Grade	-	-	-	-	29.2	27.4	29.6	30.1	30.3	31.5	32.5	34.5	33.4	36.6	34.5	35.3	34.3
Gender																	
Male	-	-	-	-	27.0	26.1	27.3	28.5	28.4	29.3	30.3	32.9	30.7	32.7	31.1	32.2	31.5
Female	-	-	-	-	31.3	28.5	31.6	31.8	31.8	33.6	34.8	36.3	35.8	40.1	37.6	38.2	36.8
Race																	
White	-	-	-	-	26.4	23.0	26.1	26.2	25.9	26.9	28.5	30.0	29.5	32.5	31.5	30.6	30.9
Black	-	-	-	-	46.9	45.7	42.3	46.3	45.6	47.1	48.3	52.5	51.9	52.6	48.8	52.0	52.0
Parental Education²																	
Less than high school	-	-	-	-	30.1	28.3	30.6	29.7	27.0	32.8	29.7	28.4	31.2	31.9	33.0	33.1	33.2
Completed high school	-	-	-	-	28.1	26.4	27.0	28.1	28.1	28.7	27.9	32.2	31.6	31.7	30.8	32.1	31.6
Some college	-	-	-	-	29.2	27.4	30.1	29.8	29.1	30.6	30.4	35.0	32.9	36.1	33.7	37.9	34.2
Completed college	-	-	-	-	29.5	28.9	31.4	32.1	33.4	32.2	37.4	38.1	36.4	41.8	37.3	37.0	36.7
Graduate school	-	-	-	-	30.6	26.4	31.4	31.0	33.0	35.0	37.5	36.3	34.1	41.0	39.9	37.1	35.6
College Plans																	
None or under 4 years	-	-	-	-	22.1	21.9	23.3	22.4	20.7	24.0	21.2	22.8	22.6	22.6	22.8	25.0	20.3
Complete four years	-	-	-	-	30.3	28.1	30.4	31.1	31.4	32.6	33.8	35.9	34.8	38.3	36.0	36.3	35.8
	1976	1980	1985	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997 ¹	1998 ¹	1999 ¹	2000 ¹	2001 ¹	2002	2003
Tenth Grade	-	-	-	-	28.4	27.9	28.7	27.7	28.4	28.9	30.8	31.4	31.8	32.0	31.6	35.1	33.0
Gender																	
Male	-	-	-	-	26.0	26.1	26.2	24.0	25.8	26.3	28.1	28.7	28.4	28.7	27.4	31.6	29.4
Female	-	-	-	-	30.7	29.4	31.1	31.4	31.2	31.3	33.2	33.6	34.8	34.8	35.6	38.5	36.6
Race																	
White	-	-	-	-	23.4	23.7	25.7	24.2	24.6	25.4	27.1	25.5	26.9	28.4	28.4	30.9	28.6
Black	-	-	-	-	51.2	49.5	49.8	47.3	48.5	47.1	47.8	53.6	54.8	52.1	49.0	54.7	50.7
Parental Education²																	
Less than high school	-	-	-	-	28.6	28.0	29.3	29.0	32.1	31.4	32.1	32.9	31.9	31.8	28.9	28.6	27.4
Completed high school	-	-	-	-	28.4	26.9	27.4	26.6	26.0	26.2	28.3	28.5	30.6	28.5	30.5	31.9	30.8
Some college	-	-	-	-	27.0	27.6	29.6	26.0	27.2	29.8	30.7	33.5	31.4	31.7	30.5	34.5	34.0
Completed college	-	-	-	-	29.3	30.0	28.4	29.1	29.4	29.8	31.7	31.8	33.1	34.9	33.5	37.7	36.1
Graduate school	-	-	-	-	29.0	26.6	28.7	29.7	30.9	29.2	32.1	30.3	32.9	31.4	34.2	40.4	31.4
College Plans																	
None or under 4 years	-	-	-	-	23.9	22.4	22.4	21.3	21.0	20.5	19.5	21.8	21.7	22.7	20.5	22.7	23.8
Complete four years	-	-	-	-	29.5	29.0	30.0	29.0	29.7	30.2	32.7	32.9	33.3	33.5	33.3	36.9	34.3
	1976	1980	1985	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997 ¹	1998 ¹	1999 ¹	2000 ¹	2001 ¹	2002	2003
Twelfth Grade	28.8	32.1	27.3	26.4	27.7	29.5	29.4	29.7	29.9	31.3	29.9	32.4	32.9	32.2	32.3	33.3	31.0
Gender																	
Male	23.6	27.0	23.4	23.0	24.1	25.9	25.5	27.0	26.8	27.5	25.6	28.3	29.8	28.7	28.3	29.3	26.2
Female	34.1	37.0	31.0	29.8	31.4	33.0	32.7	32.0	32.7	34.8	33.8	36.2	35.6	35.2	36.3	36.7	35.0
Race																	
White	25.8	29.3	23.4	22.2	24.0	24.8	23.8	25.8	25.8	26.8	24.5	26.8	28.8	25.6	26.7	30.0	25.5
Black	50.9	49.6	52.5	53.5	50.3	51.4	51.4	49.3	51.9	55.0	55.7	57.3	55.4	58.1	57.0	51.4	56.0
Parental Education²																	
Less than high school	33.6	37.3	32.2	31.7	30.9	31.6	35.2	32.0	33.1	34.7	31.0	36.3	35.7	35.9	32.0	33.7	30.3
Completed high school	26.9	31.6	25.6	26.4	26.9	27.8	28.7	27.8	30.0	30.6	28.7	30.0	31.3	29.2	27.2	32.6	29.5
Some college	28.3	30.9	27.4	25.3	26.9	29.6	28.6	30.0	28.6	32.1	30.0	32.1	33.2	32.0	31.3	30.7	31.3
Completed college	29.0	30.5	26.4	24.9	28.5	30.2	29.4	30.4	30.8	32.5	31.5	34.6	34.4	34.4	34.4	36.4	31.9
Graduate school	24.9	29.3	26.6	25.8	27.2	30.5	26.9	29.6	27.7	26.2	28.0	31.8	30.3	32.1	39.2	34.4	31.5
College Plans																	
None or under 4 years	25.3	29.7	23.5	23.4	23.8	23.6	24.7	25.6	24.7	25.1	24.3	27.9	28.1	24.1	24.8	26.0	23.6
Complete four years	32.0	33.8	29.3	27.4	29.4	31.3	30.9	31.0	31.4	32.7	31.1	33.5	33.9	34.1	34.0	34.7	32.9

¹ Note: Data exclude students living in California

² Parental education is calculated by the Institute of Social Research as the average of the mother's and father's education. Child Trends has relabeled these results to reflect the education level of the most educated parent. In those circumstances where the gap between mothers' and fathers' education is more than one level, this results in an underestimate of the most educated parent's education level.

Note: These estimates may differ slightly from published estimates due to small differences between the publicly available sample weights and those used by Monitoring the Future staff.

