

Black Americans from well-educated families continue to face educational barriers, finds study

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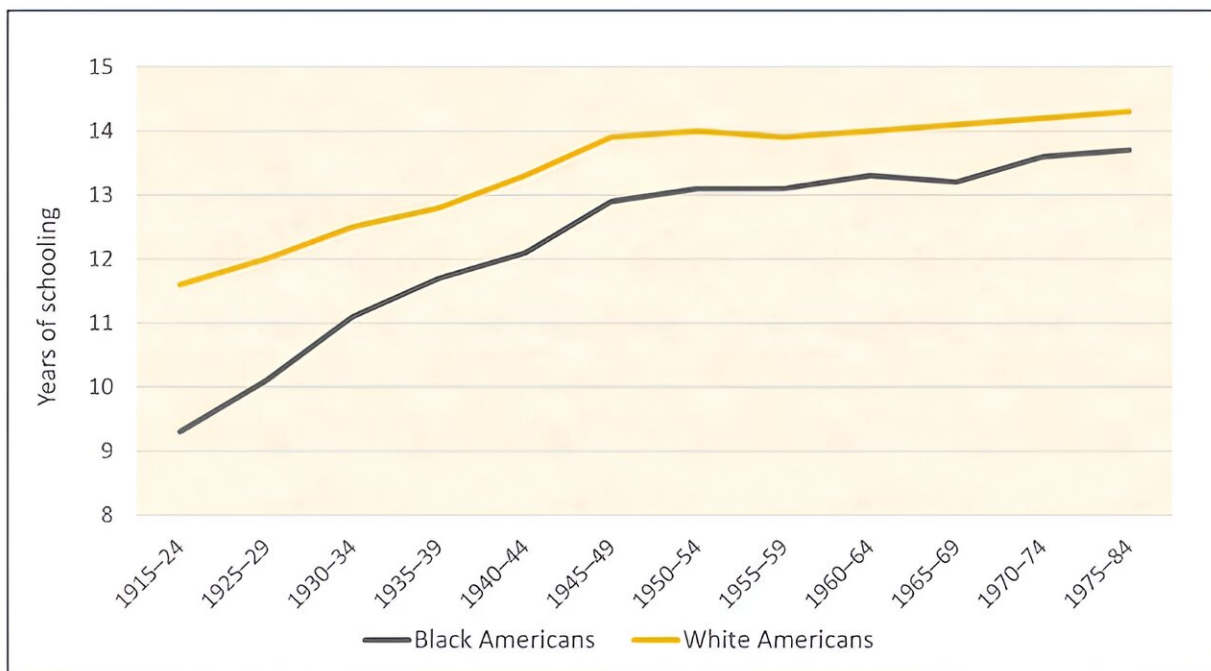


Figure 1: Average length of education for Americans (by year of birth). Americans born around 1980 have significantly more education than previous generations. At the same time, the overall racial education gap has narrowed over the past 70 years. Estimates in Figures 1 and 2 are based on the 1972–2016 U.S. General Social Survey. Credit: *American Journal of Sociology* (2023). DOI: 10.1086/724884

While racial disparities in education have narrowed in the U.S., African American individuals from well-educated backgrounds still find it especially difficult to attain the same high level of education as their parents. A new study points to entrenched racial inequalities in parts of American society.

At a first glance, it's a story of success. Over the past three to four generations, both the white and black populations in the U.S. have become much better educated. At the same time, the gap in educational attainment between the two groups has narrowed significantly.

Nonetheless, a recent comprehensive study conducted by Kristian Karlson from the University of Copenhagen offers a more nuanced and less optimistic perspective on this progress through extensive analysis of educational data from 72,000 American parents and children.

On the one hand, the study confirms that [racial gaps](#) in educational attainment have generally narrowed (Figure 1). Furthermore, it highlights a significant advancement: African American children from less educated [family](#) backgrounds are now just as likely as their white counterparts to transcend barriers to [upward mobility](#) and attain a level of [education](#) that surpasses that of their parents (Figure 2).

On the other hand, children from well-educated families with African American background remain significantly disadvantaged compared to their white peers. On average, they receive less schooling and have a harder time keeping up with their parents' educational attainment (Figure 2).

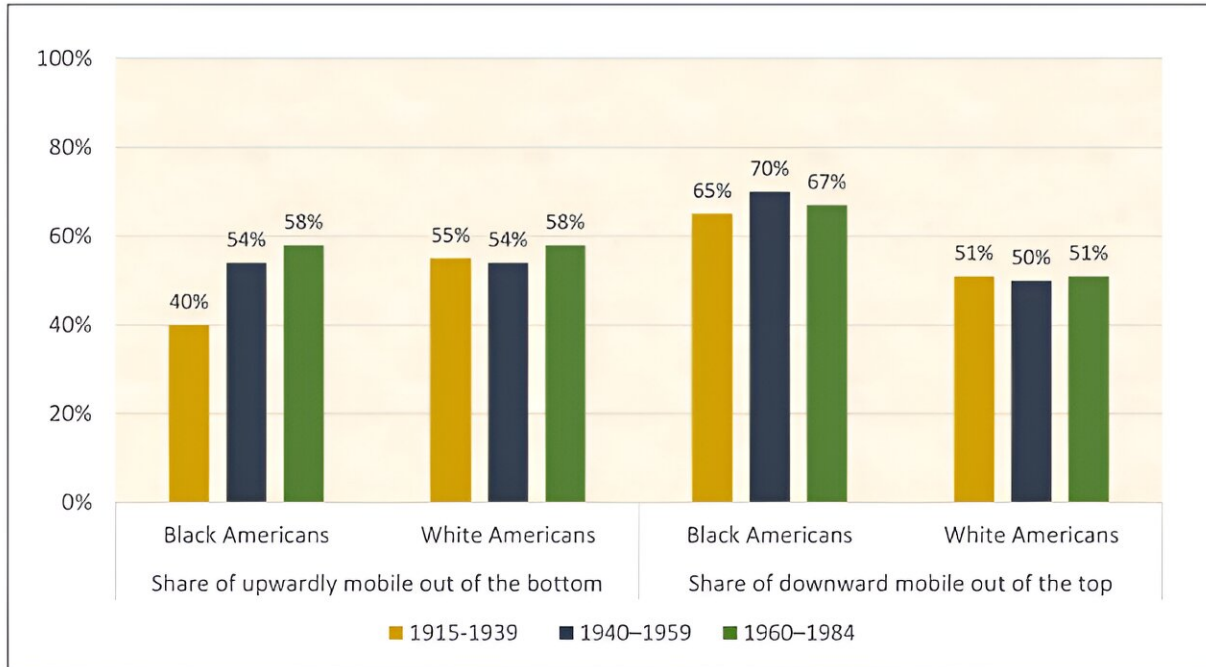


Figure 2: Proportions of black and white Americans experiencing upward and downward educational mobility (by year of birth). The figure shows the proportion of three generations experiencing upward mobility from the bottom of the education distribution or downward mobility from the top. While the black-white gap in upward mobility has disappeared, there is no change among the most educated at the top. Bottom and top are defined as the 25% with the least and most education in each birth cohort. Credit: *American Journal of Sociology* (2023). DOI: 10.1086/724884

"Seeing the diminished role of racial background in the educational prospects of children from less educated families marks a significant stride toward equality," remarks Associate Professor Kristian Karlson of the Department of Sociology.

"Nevertheless, it's concerning that, on a broader scale, the African American community appears to encounter additional obstacles in sustaining their educational achievements at the highest levels."

He also points out that the racial education gap at the top of the education ladder has remained largely unchanged over the past 70 years.

"The study therefore shows that racial background still matters in education. Black Americans from well-educated families seem to encounter an invisible barrier. This contradicts a dominant theory in the field, which argues that racial inequality will increasingly give way to class-based inequality. My findings suggest that this theory needs to be revised."

Strong inequality at the top of the education distribution

Since visiting Yale University in 2012, Kristian Karlson has been working on the study, "Black-White Trends in Intergenerational Educational Mobility: A Positional Analysis," which was recently [published](#) in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Karlson used data from the American General Social Survey, 1972–2016, to analyze educational mobility by race and gender throughout the 20th century.

The study includes a total of about 72,000 American parents and children and is methodologically innovative because it examines mobility by determining both children and parents' relative educational position among their peers in terms of educational attainment. This enables comparisons across generations, ensuring that the overall rise in [educational attainment](#) doesn't skew the findings.

In the article, Karlson demonstrates that around half of [white children](#) from the most educated quartile of families successfully maintain their status in the upper 25% of educational achievement. By contrast, this level of educational continuity is achieved by only a third of African American children.

"This gap of 17–18 percentage points is very significant. Especially when you consider that both the shares and the gap have not changed significantly over the 70 years covered by the study," says Karlson.

The study also shows that black men in particular are lagging behind, while women are doing somewhat better. However, both black men and women still fare worse than their white peers. Overall, black Americans from well-educated families have a much harder time maintaining their [social position](#) across generations.

A reflection of economic and social conditions

What are the mechanisms that perpetuate [racial disparities](#) among children of well-educated families?

Incorporating additional data, the study highlights that family structure and income are pivotal. Black Americans, on average, see smaller financial gains from education compared to whites. Additionally, children in well-educated black families typically have more siblings and face higher rates of parental divorce.

These factors can potentially hinder children's educational prospects, as limited financial and social resources may need to be distributed among more siblings or might not be sufficient for attaining higher education.

"Simply put: Resources are stretched thinner, placing black families at a disadvantage in providing their [children](#) with extensive and costly educational support," explains Kristian Karlson.

"However, that's only a part of the story. Racial disparities in the U.S. are deeply rooted in longstanding and historical injustices, encompassing issues like segregation and discrimination. Above all, the study underscores the importance of meaningful progress within the U.S.

education system, advocating for the enhancement of equal opportunities across racial and social backgrounds."

More information: Kristian Bernt Karlson, Black-White Trends in Intergenerational Educational Mobility: A Positional Analysis, *American Journal of Sociology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1086/724884](https://doi.org/10.1086/724884)

Provided by University of Copenhagen

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