

# **GOALS FOR THE COMMON GOOD: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF EDUCATION**



A joint publication of the American Human Development Project and United Way.



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# INTRODUCTION

Those who advocate for greater investment in education often make the economic argument: more education leads to higher wages and is critical for financial stability and independence. They're right. Robust evidence supports the view that higher levels of educational attainment are linked to higher incomes, less unemployment, less poverty, and less reliance on public assistance.

**But education is about more than just better jobs and bigger paychecks,** important though they are in making families and individuals more financially stable. More education is also linked to better physical and mental health, longer lives, fewer crimes, less incarceration, more voting, greater tolerance, and brighter prospects for the next generation. More education is good for individuals who stay in school to earn their high school degree or who enter and graduate college, but it is also good for all of us, paying big dividends in the form of increased civic engagement, greater neighborhood safety, and a healthy, vibrant democracy.

This report is a companion piece to the online Common Good Forecaster™, a joint product of United Way and the American Human Development Project. It takes a closer look at the ten indicators featured on the Forecaster and makes the case for **why education matters** to each of these critical areas.

- **Life expectancy:** On average, the more education people have, the longer they live.
- **Low birthweight:** Infants born to less-educated mothers are more likely to have low birthweight, which is associated with developmental delays and infant death.
- **Murder:** A one-year increase in the average level of schooling in a community is associated with a 30 percent decrease in the murder rate.
- **Obesity:** Obesity has increased among all Americans, yet the more educated are less likely to be overweight or obese.
- **Income:** The median annual earnings of Americans 25 and over who did not complete high school are less than \$18,500, while those who completed high school typically earn early \$26,000. College graduates earn \$44,000 annually, and those with graduate or professional degrees typically earn \$57,500.
- **Poverty:** Education is the single most important factor in the determination of a person's poverty status: almost 24 percent of the adult population without a high school diploma is poor, compared to 11 percent of those who are high school graduates and only 3.6 percent of college graduates.
- **Unemployment:** The less education a person has, the more likely he or she is to be unemployed. A high school dropout is four times more likely to be unemployed than a college graduate.
- **Children's reading proficiency:** Among eighth graders whose parents have less than a high school education, 13 percent read proficiently (beyond a basic level), compared with 42 percent of their classmates whose parents have a college degree.
- **Voting:** In the 2004 presidential election, those with a college degree were 50 percent more likely to vote than high school graduates, and two and a half times more likely to vote than high school dropouts.
- **Incarceration:** Nearly three-quarters of state inmates did not complete high school; fewer than three percent completed college or more.

## WHERE TO FIND THE COMMON GOOD FORECASTER™?

[www.measureofamerica.org/forecaster](http://www.measureofamerica.org/forecaster)

[www.liveunited.org/forecaster](http://www.liveunited.org/forecaster)



United Way and the American Human Development Project (AHD) joined forces in 2008 to increase national momentum to improve our country's educational outcomes. We are falling behind our peer nations and leaving behind too many of our young people. Both United Way and the American Human Development Project recognize that education is a basic building block for a good life and share a concern about the troubling disparities among different groups in terms of high school graduation rates, which are a sentinel for the health and well-being of a community.

A high school diploma is the gateway to higher education, to entry-level jobs, and to military service, and, as such, is a critical step for any young person. Both organizations recognize the critical linkage between the educational attainment of community residents and their health, financial stability, children's academic performance, and community involvement. To that end, United Way has declared three 10-year goals that lie at the intersection of these important issues. One of these goals is to cut in half the number of students who drop out of high schools.



## HEALTH: survive & thrive

The value of education to individuals and to society goes far beyond increased income potential. Higher educational attainment is linked to a host of beneficial behaviors and good health outcomes, including greater life expectancy overall as well as a larger percentage of years spent in good health and with adequate mobility. Better educated people practice healthier behaviors, are more informed consumers of medical services, and are more likely to adhere to treatment regimes. More education is also associated with more robust mental health - greater personal happiness, more stable family relationships, more self-esteem and self-awareness, a greater sense of self-determination, and greater ability to adjust to change. Better educated people are also more effective in supporting healthy outcomes for their children.

### Life Expectancy

Life expectancy in the U.S. is 77.8 years at birth, with great variation by education, gender and ethnicity (see Table 1). **Those who acquire education beyond high school have an average life expectancy that is seven years longer than those whose education stops with high school** (Meara, Richards, and Cutler 2008); the lifespan gap between those two groups increased 30 percent from 1990 to 2000 (Singh and Siahpush 2006). People with more education tend to earn more, and thus have greater resources to pay for quality healthcare. In addition, **more educated people behave in ways that help maintain health** — applying critical thinking skills, adhering to treatment regimens and better managing chronic conditions, using newer and more effective drugs, and sharing more resilient outlook to cope with stress, avoid depression and hostility (Lleras-Muney 2005).

During the first half of the 20th century, life expectancy skyrocketed almost 21 years, and during the second half, it increased nearly 9 more years (Molla and Madans 2008). These gains mean more people face the degenerative and chronic diseases associated with advanced age. Instead of just trying to live longer, people now focus on how to expand the portion of life without disease, without impairment or functional limitation, without activity restriction or handicap, and in good or better health.

Education provides some protective advantage in living longer and in better health. For example, the latest modeling indicates that a 70-year old woman with at least 1 year of college education will spend 2.3 more years of her remaining life in good or better health and .8 fewer years in poor health than her agemate without a college education (Molla and Madans 2008). And education seems to predict longer life and longer healthy life better than race or ethnic background (Guralnik et al 1993). Perception of one's education is also important. Beyond actual life expectancies, more education seems to bring a different life outlook, such that a college-educated person expects to live 4.3 years longer than a 10th grade dropout (Mirowski and Ross 2000).

The top three causes of death claim fewer lives every year, continuing their long-term downward trend — heart disease since 1980, cancer since 1993, and stroke since 1958 (Heron et al, 2009). In terms of extending life, practicing healthy behaviors (e.g. not being obese or a smoker, eating well and exercising) is critical (see Table 2) — so much so that the sharp spike in obesity threatens to erode century-long gains in life expectancy. Having good health care, adhering to physician recommendations, and being disability-free are linked to educational attainment and longevity. Some factors, such as crime, concentrated poverty and unemployment, and environmental hazards, are difficult for individuals to change. But in the end, as one scientist said, “we will all die; what determines how long and how well we live is how adeptly we reduce...disease and disability” (Rogers 1995).

**TABLE 1: WHITES LIVE LONGER THAN AFRICAN AMERICANS, WOMEN LIVE LONGER THAN MEN (years)**

	Gender Gap	Racial Gap
1970	7.8	6.7
1990	6.6	6.3
2005	2.6	4.6

Source: National Center for Health Statistics, 2009.

**TABLE 2: YEARS LOST DUE TO UNHEALTHY BEHAVIORS**

(life expectancy reduction in years compared to normal weight non-smoker, 40 years old)

	Male	Female
Normal weight, non-smoking	-	-
Overweight, non-smoking	3.1	3.3
Obese, non-smoking	6.7	7.2
Obese, smoking	13.7	13.3

Source: Peeters et al. 2003.

## Low Birthweight

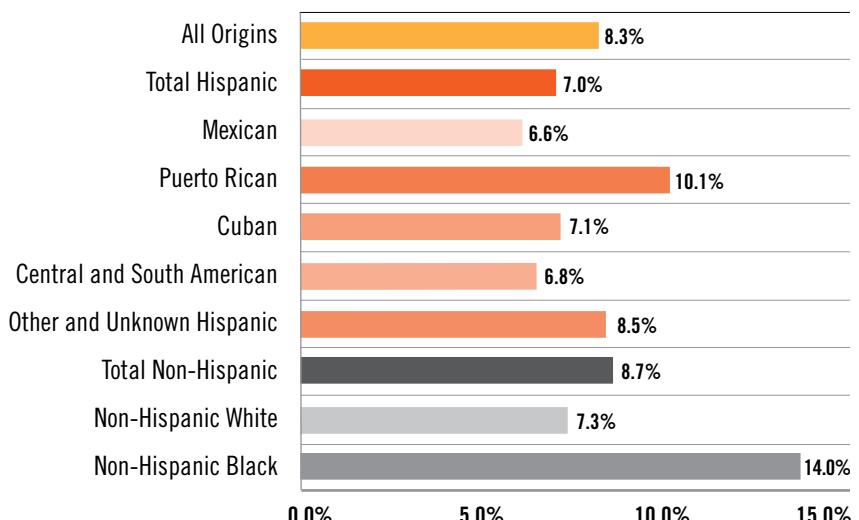
Birthweight is the strongest predictor of infant survival or mortality. For years, socioeconomic status (education, income, and occupational status) has been linked to birthweight and infant survival, and many other factors are, in turn, influenced by them. **Infants born to less educated women are more likely to die during their first year** (see Discussion Box), at least in part because the mothers have fewer resources to negotiate the health care system and pay for health care. They also tend to reside in more stressful environments, engage in more risky behavior such as smoking and drinking during pregnancy, and lack knowledge regarding appropriate health practices for themselves and their infants. Most experts agree that prenatal care and its efficacy affect outcomes beyond birth.

In the United States, race/ethnicity and poverty is a potent intersection of disadvantage, such that African American infants have low birthweights (and also die within the first year) at about twice the rate of white infants (see Figure 1). A conundrum, however, is that Latino infants have similarly low rates of low birthweight and infant mortality as white infants, despite socioeconomic disadvantage on par with that of African Americans. Some have suggested the healthy-eating habits of more recent immigrants help explain the gap, but much is still unexplained. Promising angles to understand the incidence of low birthweight have focused on the cumulative stresses of living in very poor, segregated, and often unsafe neighborhoods. One study showed that only 7 percent of whites lived in extreme poverty areas, whereas 39 percent of all poor African Americans and 32 percent of all poor Latinos did (Wilson 1987). The role of social support and family networks also plays a vital role, often varying by cultural group. For example, among births to African Americans who were poor in childhood, having a live-in grandmother reduced the risk of low birthweight by 56 percent (Hollander 2005).

**Cigarette smoking is an important risk for low birthweight and infant mortality.** Less educated mothers are more likely to have smoked prior to and during pregnancy and are more likely to smoke heavily. Alcohol use can also be damaging during pregnancy, and babies born to older women who are heavier drinkers are the most susceptible to fetal alcohol syndrome.

**The offspring of teenage mothers and mothers older than 35 are more likely to be premature and low birthweight.** The percentage of births that were preterm was 12.8 percent in 2006 and has been increasing steadily since 1981 when

**FIGURE 1:**  
**PERCENTAGE OF LOW BIRTHWEIGHT INFANTS BY RACE/ETHNICITY, 2006**



Source: National Center for Health Statistics.

it was 9.1 percent. For the most part, more education is related to lower rates of low birthweight; however, the rates start leveling out and even rising again for older mothers who delay childrearing, perhaps due to schooling, especially for those attaining graduate degrees. **Older mothers, who are more likely to use infertility therapies, are more likely to have children born in multiples, preterm, or low birthweight.** These children face poorer health and increased chance of infant death. In fact, 58 percent of all twins and 95 percent of triplets are born low birthweight (Martin et al, 2009).

### Discussion Box: Low Birthweight and Infant Mortality

- About three out of four of the deaths within the first month of life, and about 60 percent of the deaths in the first year, occur among low and very low birthweight infants. Very low birthweight babies are increasingly likely to survive in the U.S., albeit with elevated risk of disabilities or developmental delays.
- In 2006, 83 per 1,000 births were low and very low birthweight babies, the highest in four decades, compared to slightly below 7 per 1,000 who die in their first year, the lowpoint of a century-long decline.

## Violent Crime: Murder

The United States belongs to a community of affluent, democratic nations with high levels of social and economic development. Yet in the area of violent crime, we stand out from our peers. Approximately 17,000 Americans died in 2006 from homicide, the fifteenth leading cause of death overall, and the sixth and seventh leading cause among African Americans and Latinos, respectively. Premature death from homicides in the United States is more than five times higher than the average of nations in Western Europe, the Nordic countries, Australia, Canada, and Japan. In fact, if the U.S. murder rate were the same as Japan's, the number of murders recorded in 2003 would have been more on the order of 1,500 rather than 15,000.

This high rate of violent crime is related to neighborhood and school factors, family and personal circumstances, and the highest civilian-owned gun rate in the world (Small Arms Survey 2007). With high school dropouts over eight times as likely to be in jail or prison (from all crimes) than those who complete high school (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morrison 2006), there is clearly a role that a quality education, particularly through high school, can play in decreasing crime and violence in our society.

**Rigorous studies show a strong link between more education and reduced rates of violent crime (Lochner 2004). A one-year increase in the average level of schooling in a community is associated with almost a 30 percent decrease in the murder and assault rates (Lochner 2007), results which are particularly reliable through high school.** Of course, one important reason is that more school generally brings higher wages and expanded job opportunities and thus less incentive to engage in criminal activities. However, wages and jobs are not the end of the

story. Classrooms help instill values that oppose criminality and socialize students to become better citizens. In many cases, schooling may also teach patience, reduce tolerance for risk-taking, and provide a supervised environment that tempers negative interaction among young people. And finally, youth who leave school early risk being influenced by a more negative set of peers, while those who stay are more likely to build a constructive social network and set off on a path toward productive work experiences.

The physical and emotional scars to families due to violent crime run deep; and the price of reduced productivity and decreasing property values in American communities is steep. Compared to incarceration, educational outlays are a far cheaper and more productive investment. Public costs for one year in prison are \$24,000, while public outlays to educate a K-12 student are \$9,000, on average. While additional funding for education does not automatically guarantee decreased crime, the numbers point to the tremendous potential to expand young people's choices and opportunities while simultaneously building greater security in our communities.

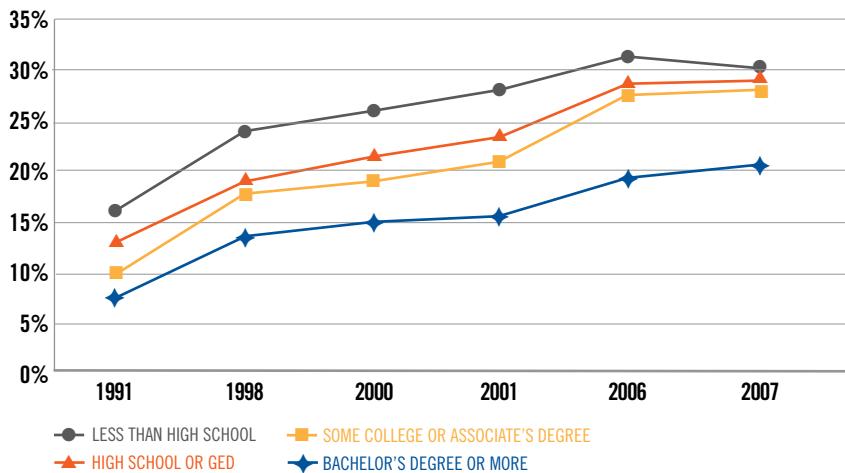
## Obesity

In developed nations like the United States, education affects the likelihood of being overweight or obese. **In general, the higher the income, education, or social status level, the lower the likelihood of being overweight or obese** (see Figure 2). Americans are becoming heavier; people of the same age and education now have much higher body mass index levels than their counterparts of even ten years ago. Severe obesity is more common among children in less educated families, which are more likely to endure poverty. Although obesity rates have been increasing across the board, minority populations are disproportionately affected, especially minority women.

Excessive weight has detrimental health effects for both males and females of all ages. Overweight adults in particular are at increased risk for Type II diabetes, coronary heart disease, elevated blood pressure, stroke, respiratory problems, gallbladder disease, osteoarthritis, sleep apnea, some types of cancer, and premature death. Beyond direct physical effects, excess weight can have social and economic ramifications. Overweight adults encounter lowered productivity and higher health care outlays. Being obese is associated with an annual cost of \$395 more per person more for inpatient and outpatient care, compared to \$230 for smokers and \$150 for drinkers (Sturm 2002). Some data suggest that excessive weight has powerful effects on a woman's self-image and ability to engage in school, reducing the likelihood some women will enter college (Crosnoe 2007), but not so for men. Being obese has also been shown to limit promotion for women (Sobal 1991).

**FIGURE 2:**  
**OBESITY INCREASING AT EVERY EDUCATION LEVEL, 1991-2007**

(% of adults 18 and older)



Source: CDC, Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 1991-2007.

## FINANCIAL STABILITY: work & dignity



Current theories behind the expanding waistlines of all developed nations, and the U.S. in particular, are numerous. Individual and environmental factors are both important and include:

- advances in technology that reduce energy expended at work or at play;
- greater sedentary time, such as time watching TV or using a computer;
- the convenience and ubiquity of high-calorie processed foods;
- lack of fruit and vegetable markets;
- large portion sizes both at home and in restaurants;
- neighborhood crime forcing parents to keep children indoors;
- and less frequent exercise and lack of access to exercise facilities (NIH 2004).

Many of these factors are especially prevalent in racial minority and poor neighborhoods, helping to explain their disproportionately high obesity rates. One study showed that moving families away from neighborhoods where only energy-dense, inexpensive but tasty foods are available can lower obesity rates (HUD 2003).

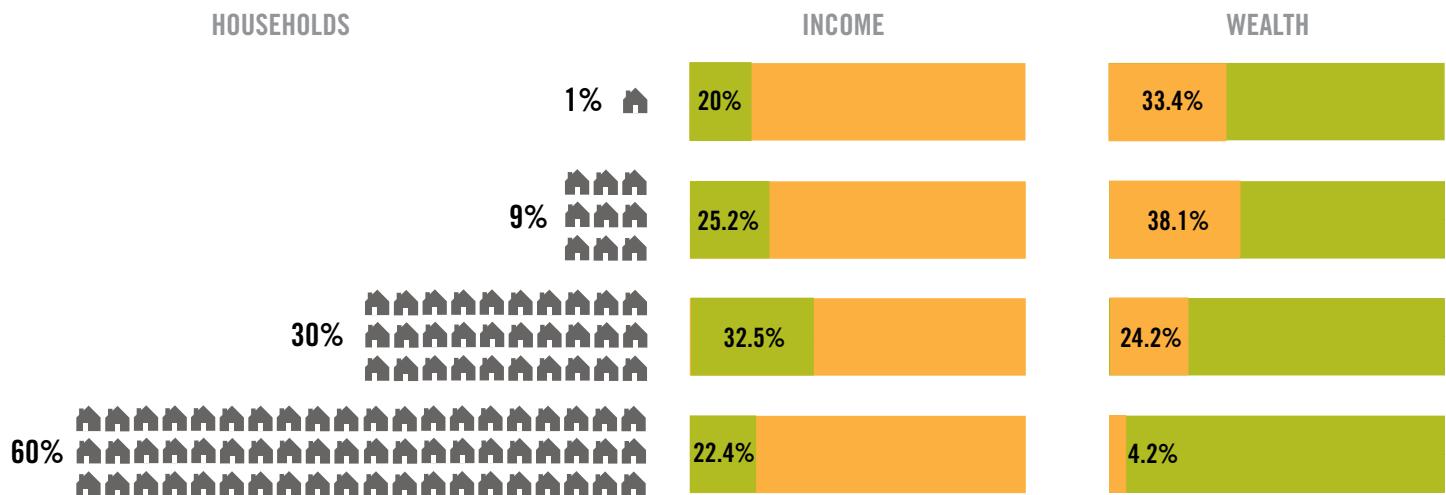
### Median Earnings

Money may not be everything — but a decent income is necessary for a life that guarantees more choices, freedom, and opportunity in the United States today. And getting **more education is the surest route to a higher income**. The median personal earnings (income generated by labor) of Americans over 25 who did not complete high school are less than \$18,500. Those who complete high school earn about 40 percent more, nearly \$26,000. College graduates earn \$44,000 annually, and those with graduate or professional degrees earn \$57,500 to \$99,300 respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). College graduates can expect to earn, on average, nearly a million dollars more over their lifetimes than high school graduates (Cheeseman 2002).

Over the last thirty years, the inflation-adjusted earnings of less educated workers have stagnated or fallen, while technological change and globalization have increased the demand for and wages of those with more education. Another reason for the earnings decline among less educated Americans is a general drop in blue-collar manufacturing jobs, which once afforded workers with high school degrees or less a middle-class lifestyle. African American men without high school degrees have been particularly hard-hit, a significant problem given that one in five African American men over 25 did not complete high school.

Figure 3 illustrates these disparities today in both wealth and income by household. The top 1 percent of households reap 20 percent of total income, the top 10 percent just about 45 percent of income, and the bottom 60 percent of households less than one-quarter of income. The right bar shows household wealth among these same catego-

**FIGURE 3:**  
**DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME AND WEALTH BY HOUSEHOLD GROUPS, 2003-2004**



Source: Wolff, "Changes in Household Wealth in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.S." in *The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009*.

ries, indicating even greater disparities. The top 1 percent of households possesses 33.4 percent — one-third — of America's wealth, and the bottom 60 percent of households only 4.2 percent of all wealth held by U.S. households.

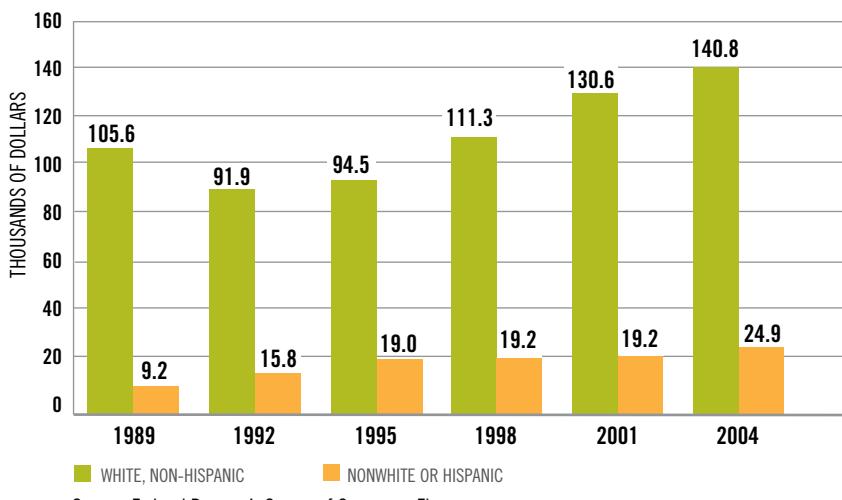
The more education people have, the more lifetime earnings they can expect. Whites can expect to earn approximately half a million dollars more than African Americans over a course of a lifetime, in addition to the other non-monetary benefits gained through higher average levels of education. Asian Americans earn more and have more education than any other racial or ethnic group, and Latinos make the least. More than 40 percent of Latinos over 25 did not complete high school (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

Since 1982, more women than men have earned a bachelor's degree. Women also have higher levels of high school completion. This change has lead to a gradual closing in the earnings gap for younger men and women, with a ratio of .81 for ages 25-29 versus .60 for ages 60-64. Despite having less education, American males still earn 50 percent more than females, on average.

## Poverty

More than 38 million Americans — 13 percent of the population — live below the official poverty line, about \$20,000 per year for a family of four. **Education is the single most important factor in the determination of a person's poverty status:** 24 percent of the adult population without a high school diploma is poor, compared to 11 percent of those who are high school graduates, and 3.6 percent of those who have a four-year college degree. In other words, an adult without a high school education is two times more likely to live in poverty than one with a high school diploma, and seven times more likely than a college graduate (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

**FIGURE 4:**  
**MEDIAN NET WORTH, BY RACE**



Source: Federal Reserve's Survey of Consumer Finance.  
From *The Measure of America: American Human Development Report 2008-2009*.

The official poverty line is determined by income. But poverty is more than a lack of income or a shortage of material goods, though they are certainly important and visible components of poverty. **Poverty also implies a lack of dignity, control, and freedom to make choices about how to live.** A more comprehensive definition of being poor means that one does not have the "basket of necessities," both material goods and a more amorphous combination of the education, health, social relationships, and skills that are required to participate fully in the economic, political, and social life of the country.

Poverty and low levels of education are mutually reinforcing. The nearly one-in-five American children living in poverty face greater barriers to high school completion and are significantly less likely to enter and to graduate from college than middle-class children. Deep and persistent poverty in the preschool years is associated with lower rates of high school completion. In 2006, young people age 16 to 19 from poor families were about three times more likely to be out of school and not working than were their non-poor counterparts (NCES 2007).

The U.S. is alone among affluent nations in funding public education chiefly through local property taxes. The combination of local funding for schools and the existence of concentrated poverty and concentrated affluence, often coinciding with racial and ethnic concentration, results in huge inequities in public education. In general, **schools serving students with the greatest needs have the fewest resources.** Schools in high-poverty neighborhoods tend to have less qualified and experienced teachers; fewer special education aides, school psychologists, and library staff; worse physical conditions in the schools; a more bare-bones curriculum, often with little physical education, art or music; and lower levels of student achievement (Burd-Sharps et al. 2008).

Racial disparities in poverty are stark, with the median level of assets for whites almost six times that of nonwhites (see Figure 4).

The last half century has seen a large increase in single motherhood, particularly among women with less education. Being born to a single mother is the strongest predictor of child poverty.

## Unemployment

The less education a person has, the more likely he or she is to be unemployed. In 2007, 10 percent of working-age adults 25 and older without a high school diploma were unemployed, compared to 6.4 percent of those who had completed high school and 2.7 percent of those who had at least a bachelor's degree. **A high school dropout is four times more likely to be unemployed than a college graduate** (U.S. Census Bureau 2007).

# EDUCATION: kid's achievement



The recent economic downturn shows that although even high levels of education cannot inoculate workers from job loss, more education does decrease the likelihood of unemployment. Labor Department figures show that over the course of 2008, the unemployment rate for college graduates increased less than one percentage point, while the unemployment rate for those without high school degrees grew three times as much, from 7.6 percent to 10.5 percent.

Young people who have dropped out of high school have a difficult time entering the job market. Only about half of 2005-2006 dropouts were in the labor force in October 2006, and of those, about a quarter were not actually employed but rather were looking for work. **In 2006, 4.5 million young people ages 18-24 were not in school, not working, and had not graduated from high school** (NCES 2007). These disconnected youth are cut off from the mainstream of school and work inhabited by their peers, making for a potentially rocky and inauspicious transition to adulthood.

African American men face particularly formidable obstacles to labor force participation. Research shows that they are the group most likely to become disconnected from school and work. More than one third of young black men today drop out of high school, with rates higher still among those living in central cities. Even entry-level jobs increasingly require not only a high school degree, but additional workplace skills, and the racial gaps in academic achievement remain large. A criminal record has significant and lasting effects on a person's ability to get a job — incarceration rates are high among young black men such that one in eight are behind bars on any given day. African American men are more likely to live in central cities, far from more suburban areas where better-paying jobs have increasingly located, and less likely to have access to informal networks that provide information about and contacts to such jobs. Continuing employer discrimination against young black men is well documented (Holzer 2007).

Research shows that **labor force participation is important for reasons that go well beyond earning a paycheck**; employment matters for social inclusion, physical health, and psychological well-being. Losing a job undermines mental health, as it represents not just a loss of income, but also a loss of identity, status, structure, and social support.

Parents lead their children down dramatically different pathways based partly on their own circumstances and partly on choices they make. Teaching children the value of learning and reading to open up new worlds is a critical parental role that can help to counter some of the forces pulling children away from a healthy developmental trajectory.

## Children's Reading Proficiency

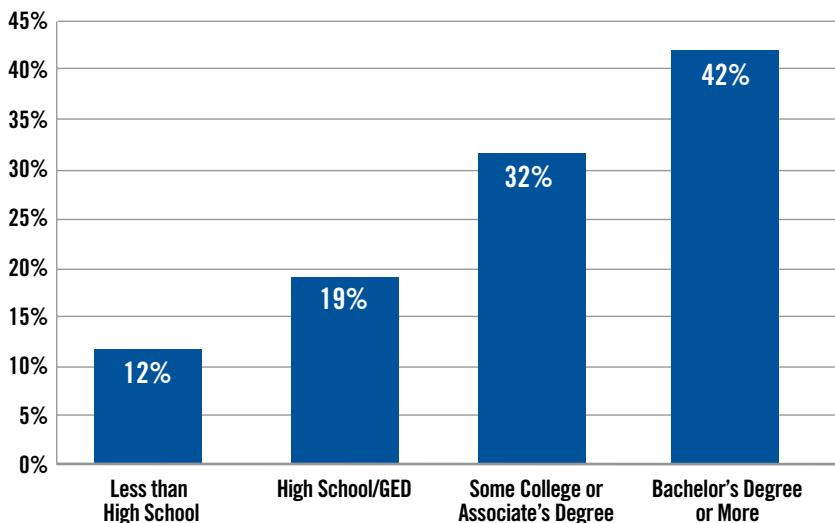
Reading is an essential gateway for children on the path to success in school and later in the workplace. It is the mechanism through which many other vital life skills are acquired and improved. **Graduating from high school can be predicted reasonably well by the level of reading skills at the end of grade 3** (Slavin et al 1994). Children learn to read through many influences, among which are their parents, families, friends, neighborhoods, social networks, day care arrangements, and schools.

Reading to children even before they can hold a book on their own is one of the smartest choices parents and caregivers can make. Speaking to an 8-month old infant improves her vocabulary at age three (Hart and Risley 1995). Still, in 2005, more than one-third of pre-k 3 to 5-year-olds were not read to more than three times a week by their parents — in particular, those parents who had not graduated from high school, 37 percent, and those who did not speak English, 35 percent (ECPP Survey 2005). In families where at least one parent had more than a high school degree, five percent of children were never read to, compared to 10 percent of children from households with at least one high school graduate parent and 16 percent for those households where no adult was a high school graduate.

**While lower socioeconomic status, an amalgam of annual income level, job status, and education, is one of the biggest factors influencing child success in school and later life, this does not prevent enthusiastic parents from any background from helping their kids excel** (see Table 3). In one study, 15-year-old students whose parents were at the lowest socioeconomic level but read regularly and felt good about it, were better readers than those from well-off families who were less engaged in reading (OECD, 2002).

Higher levels of parental education are linked to higher reading scores in middle school. One study tracking children over time from ages 6 to 14 found that the difference on a basic reading skills test between children of parents with less than a high school education and those with a high school education was 7.7 percentile points in 4th grade and opened up to 9.4 points by the eighth grade (Boardman et al 2002). Facing struggles on many fronts, children of parents with less than a high school education find themselves falling further behind with every year.

**FIGURE 5:**  
**PERCENTAGE OF 8TH GRADERS “PROFICIENT” IN READING BY PARENT’S HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVEL, 2007**



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Note: A group of students did not report parental education, of whom 13% were proficient.

Reading well and often is associated with a fuller life. Readers are more likely to go to museums and attend cultural events, engage in civic life from reading newspapers to volunteering, and engage in active life from exercise and sports to other outdoor activities (see Figure 5). In short, it may be true that readers have more fun in addition to being healthier and more successful.

*Note: Proficient eighth-grade readers show an “overall understanding of the text, including inferential as well as literal information..., extend ideas by making clear inferences..., drawing conclusions, and... making connections to their own experiences...” National Association of Education Progress.*

**TABLE 3: INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS TO A READING CITIZENRY, ADULTS**

	Prose Literacy Skills Level		
	Proficient	Basic	Below Basic
Percentage who said their reading skills limited their job opportunities a lot	4%	38%	70%
Percentage who voted in the 2000 presidential election	84%	62%	53%
Percentage who volunteered	57%	31%	18%
Percentage who got no information about current events, public affairs, and the government from various media sources:			
Newspapers	7%	12%	29%
Internet	16%	53%	77%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2007.

Note: Although the literacy levels share common names with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) levels, they do not correspond to the NAEP levels. Find out more: [http://nces.ed.gov/n�al/perf\\_levels.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/n�al/perf_levels.asp).

# COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT: civic participation



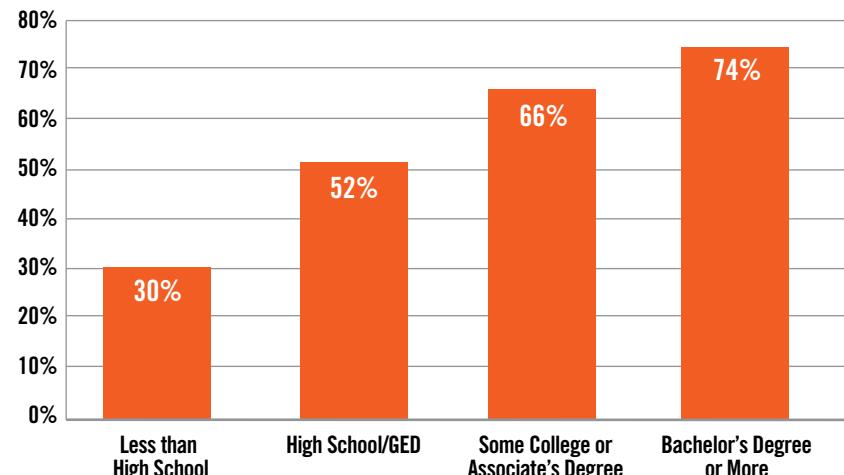
## Voting

The 2008 Presidential election broke all records on voter turnout, proving that when the electorate is excited, they do go to the polls. What other more durable factors influence voter turnout? There is a robust relationship between an educated electorate and the quality of our democracy. Studies over time have shown that more education in the U.S., and in many other countries, is associated with increased civic participation. And this increased civic participation, in turn, strengthens community cohesion, improves the efficiency of our society, and builds a stable democracy.

One important means of community involvement is voting. While it is always variable from person to person and place to place, the data are clear: **the more educated vote more, and voting increases steadily with additional years of education up through a bachelor's degree.** One rigorous study over the second half of the 20th century (see Milligan et al 2003) found that, on average, while just over half of high school dropouts in the U.S. reported having voted, the rate for high school graduates jumped to 67 percent, for those with some college to nearly three-quarters, and 84 percent for college graduates (Figure 6 shows voting rates by education for the 2004 presidential elections). Education is also central to other important forms of civic participation. For example, while nearly half of people with bachelor's degrees volunteer many hours in their communities, just over one-fifth of those with a high school diploma are volunteering (Baum and Payea 2004). Such skewed participation in our democratic process means we lose the voice of some who need public policy solutions and forms of support for the challenges they face.

Why are better-educated people more likely to exercise their civic responsibility? Voting requires not only going to the polls, but also learning about the issues and the candidates. Schooling instills greater acceptance of free speech and democratic values, more understanding of the issues on which we vote, and increased confidence in our ability to select able leaders. More educated citizens are, on average, more likely to pay attention to public affairs, to discuss politics and to work on community issues (Milligan et al, 2006). Equipping all people with the tools to contribute to our democratic decision-making processes helps to ensure we unleash the potential talents of and respond to the different needs in our diverse society.

**FIGURE 6:**  
**VOTING RATES BY EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF POPULATION 18 AND OVER.**  
(2004 presidential elections)

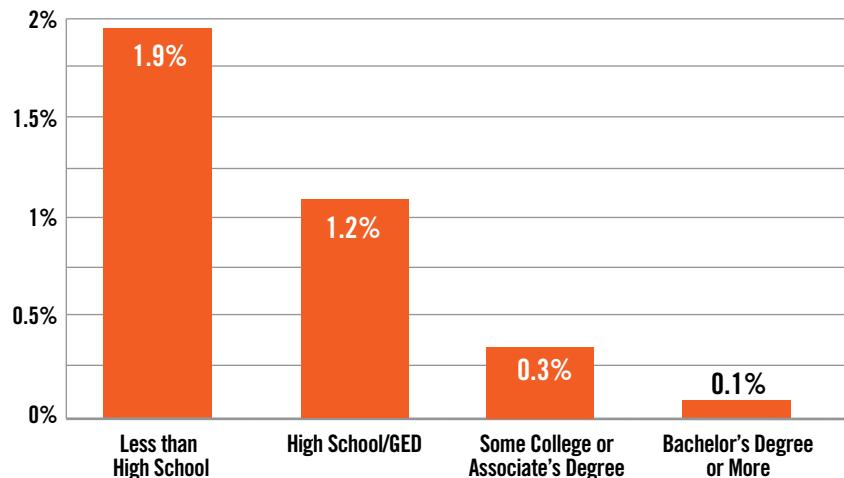


Source: U.S. Census Bureau and authors' calculations.  
<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting.html>

## Incarceration

While prisons are one important prong of any state or community's public safety strategy, U.S. incarceration rates are higher than those of any country in the world, including China and Russia. About 2,000 people with criminal records are released from prison in America every day, according to the Department of Justice, and two-thirds of them will eventually end up back behind bars. Our current system has failed to prepare the majority of prisoners for a stable, law-abiding life on the outside. A startling statistic underscores the importance of making high school and college more attractive than crime: **While about 16 percent of American youth, on average, do not complete high school each year, nearly 75 percent of state inmates had not done so at the time of**

**FIGURE 7:**  
**INCARCERATION RATES BY EDUCATION LEVEL**



Source: Baum and Payea (2004).

**imprisonment. And fewer than 3 percent had completed college.** (See Figure 7 below for incarceration rates by education level.)

What is the link between education and the likelihood of imprisonment? Lack of education and skills is closely associated with fewer work opportunities and lower wages, which in turn can translate into fewer disincentives for committing a crime. Schooling can help to instill values that reject criminal behavior and teach tolerance and good citizenship while providing a supervised environment. Particularly for young men in high school, staying in school often means their peers are more likely to be in school as well.

Research shows that:

- High school graduation reduces the probability of incarceration in men ages 22-28 by 3-4 percent for white males and 8-9 percent for African American males (Lochner and Moretti 2004).
- Of males who graduated from high school and went on to attend some college, only 5 percent of African American males and 1 percent of white males were incarcerated in 2000 (Raphael 2004).
- A 5 percent increase in the male high school graduation rate would lead to incarceration-related savings of about \$5 billion dollars each year (Alliance for Excellent Education 2006).

The incarceration rate has exploded since the early 1980s, and young African American males have borne the brunt of tougher crime-fighting measures. **If current incarceration rates continue, nearly one out of every three African American males will spend some portion of their lives in state or federal prison.** (Heckman et al 2007). In low-income minority communities, criminal justice system involvement is so pervasive as to be a normative life experience. In fact, the “Million Dollar Block” project has found, using official criminal justice data, that we are spending more than a million dollars each year to incarcerate residents of *single city blocks*. The principal government institution in these communities is the criminal justice system, crowding public revenue for all the other critical investments needed for those communities to thrive. Reducing the dropout rate and investing in a quality education for all children is money well spent.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

To cut in half the number of high school dropouts in the next 10 years, we have to start long before school does. We know high school dropouts are more than 12 years in the making. They usually start school behind, and research shows that most never catch up. Tackling high school dropout rates means reversing these grim statistics:

- 46 percent of children start school without the literacy, social, emotional and intellectual capacity they need to succeed (Zill and West 2001)
- 67 percent of fourth-graders cannot read proficiently (NAEP 2007)
- 25 percent of high school students fail to graduate on time (Planty et al 2008)
- 15 percent of young adults are neither working nor attending school (United Way of America 2007)

That's why the entire education continuum — from birth through 21 — must be in our sightline if we are to move the needle on high school graduation.

## HOW WE CAN ACHIEVE OUR EDUCATION GOALS

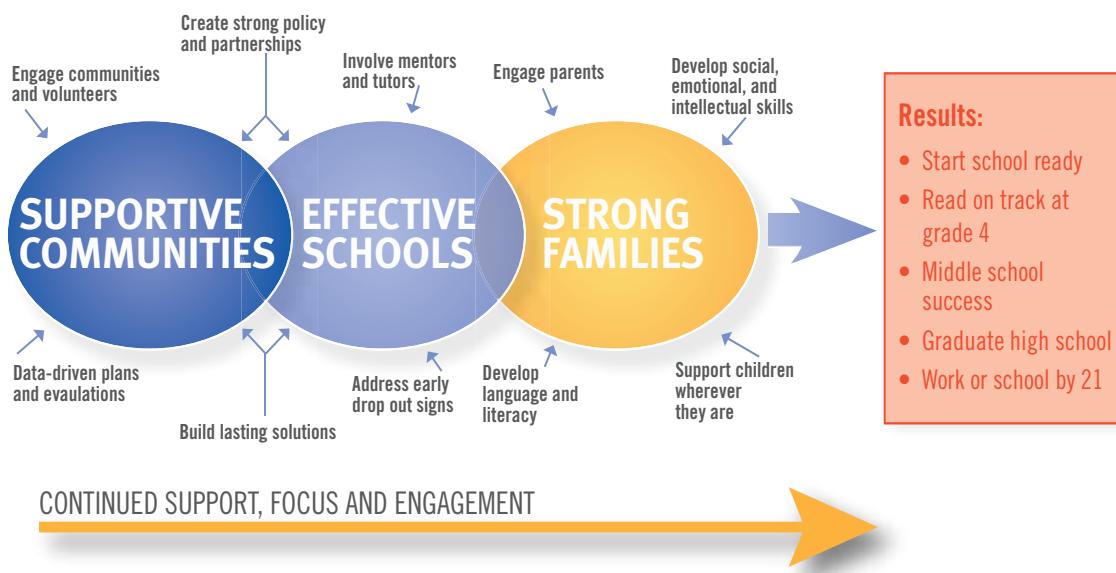
How can we move the needle on education? This theory of change is built on a view that focusing on outcomes and goals should define and lead the work. This means drawing on the strength of existing partnerships, relationships, and good ideas already underway. Sustained investment and action do not happen in a vacuum. Supportive communi-

ties, effective schools, and strong families must be in place, along with strategies rooted in research, such as:

- Honing in on language and literacy skill-building, starting at birth
- Engaging volunteers, including mentors and tutors, especially in the early years
- Pursuing new strategies to bring parents and families in as full partners in improving education opportunities for their children
- Being alert to early warning signs (e.g. chronic absenteeism in early grades), with action plans in place
- Building strong public-private partnerships that help galvanize multiple sectors behind reform
- Focusing community leaders from all sectors around research-based and proven strategies
- Insisting on data-driven plans and evaluation and taking full advantage of new data systems that track individual students from kindergarten through high school and beyond
- Shaping legislative policies, programs and budgets at local, state and national levels.

Visit [United Way's Web site](#) for an overview of United Way's Education Action Plan, ideas for how you can get involved to improve education, and research, and strategies for how to tackle community education challenges.

## HOW WE CAN ACHIEVE OUR EDUCATION GOALS



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal and state funding streams have a large effect on our daily lives and partially define the focus of efforts to improve education. It is important that the right legislation be passed to maximize the chances we can deliver on goals for young people today and for healthy, financially stable, and vibrant communities in the future.

The following policy recommendations are our best bets to ensure quality education for children and youth along the continuum of education:

- Policies to provide access to quality learning beginning at birth, including (but not limited to):
  - Expand Early Head Start, Head Start, and Pre-K programs
  - Incentivize and/or establish programs for infant and toddler home visitation
  - Support Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care to ensure quality and consistency
- Policies to increase parental and community involvement in education, including (but not limited to):
  - Support Community Schools as centers of community activity to better leverage existing community resources and partnerships
  - Provide incentives for the development of coalitions and partnerships among local educational agencies, nonprofits, the business community, and families
  - Implement the community-based, integrated student services model to address both academic and non-academic barriers to learning
- Policies to increase middle and high school retention and reenrollment, including (but not limited to):
  - Modernize K-12 education to teach twenty-first century skills and content
  - Develop supplemental supports for youth in disadvantaged populations
  - Address disparities in educational quality
  - Increase opportunity for academic re-entry and high school completion
- Policies to ensure quality and support of out-of-school-time programs:
  - Support 21st Century Learning Centers and Supplemental Educational Services
  - Support quality mentoring programs
  - Increase training for and investment in the after-school workforce
  - Expand the definition of out-of-school-time to recognize the importance of nights, weekends, and summers
- Policies to maintain and increase investment in early childhood, elementary, and secondary education
- Policies to adopt a uniform, broad-based accountability framework and necessary longitudinal data systems from birth through post secondary education

Visit [United Way's Web site](#) for an overview of United Way's stance on education policies. Then take action by calling your elected officials to express support for the policies mentioned above.

(<http://capwiz.com/unitedway/issues/bills/>)

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