



About the data

The analyses contained in this report are based on newly released data from the 2009 American Community Survey (ACS): The data, released in 2010, are now available at both http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/acs_pums_2009_1yr.html or http://factfinder.census.gov/home/en/acs_pums_2009_1yr.html.

Unique Data Characteristics

- 1) For the first time in this survey the Census Bureau asked individuals who indicated that their degree was a bachelor's degree or higher, to supply their undergraduate major. Their responses were then coded and collapsed by the Census Bureau into 171 different degree majors.
- 2) Unlike other data sources focused on recent degree recipients, the Census data enable analysis across an individual's full life cycle.
- 3) The Census data also result in robust estimates due to the very large sample involved- 531,337 persons surveyed who are representative of 51,547,518 people having Bachelor's degrees (including those with graduate degrees), when weighted.

Population Restrictions

For our purposes, the majority of the analyses are based on persons aged 18-64, who are employed full-time, full-year, have positive annual earnings, and who have a Bachelor's degree. These estimates are based on 319,081 responses representing 31,296,319 full-time full-year workers with Bachelor's degrees (and higher).

Exceptions to the population restrictions

- 1) Some data represented in the report, namely metrics for labor force participation and unemployment, were calculated using the full universe of Bachelor's degree-holders.
- 2) For the majority of this report we focus solely on persons who have not completed a graduate degree. This is done to eliminate confounding factors in evaluating the value of a Bachelor's degree. However, the data about the likelihood of graduate attendance and the earnings boost from graduate school by major were calculated using all of those aged 18-64, working full-time, full-year with positive annual earnings that have completed a Bachelor's degree or better.

Why median?

The earnings data used are annual earnings and the core metrics to evaluate earnings are medians and variation defined by the earnings level at the 75th percentile (high) and the 25th percentile (low). We chose to use median earnings combined with variation at the 25th and 75th percentiles because they give a better sense of the earnings distribution independent of the effect of extreme earnings outliers. Average earnings were used to calculate the earnings boost afforded to people who have obtained a graduate degree.

This decision was made because the authors felt this metric better illustrated the gain realized by the ‘average’ Bachelor’s degree holder as they moved to obtaining a graduate degree.

Subgroups

The remainder of the analysis is based on evaluation of sub-groups of the entire population. In all cases, all earnings calculations were redone restricted to the appropriate subgroup analysis. In all cases, the sub-group restrictions are explained in text and are not repeated here.