



FEBRUARY 2018

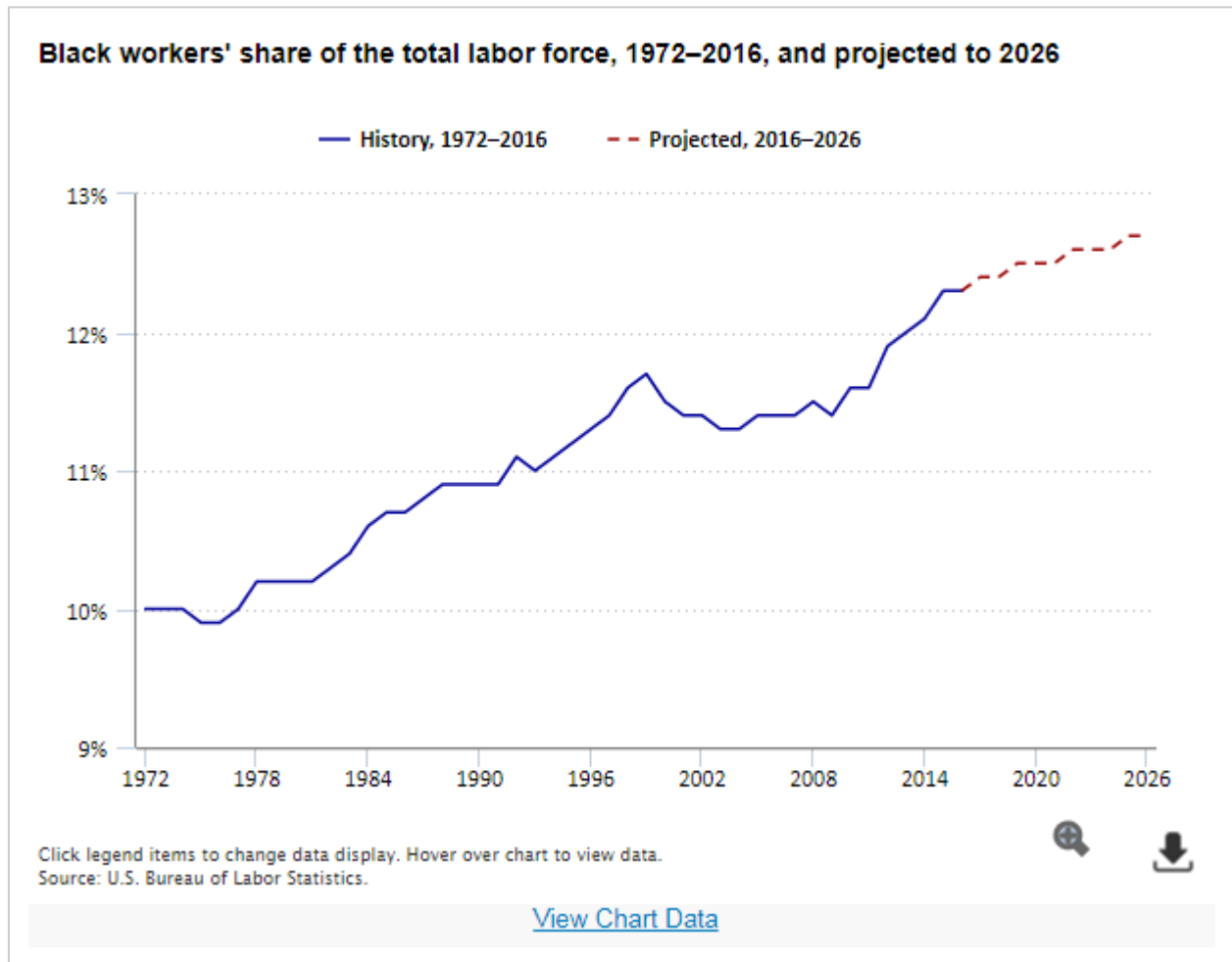
## **Blacks In The Labor Force**

**Mitra Toossi and Leslie Joyner**

Black History Month, also known as African American History Month, originally began as a week of observance in February 1926. To celebrate Black History Month 2018, this issue of *Spotlight on Statistics* presents some historical data and projections on Blacks or African Americans in the labor force.

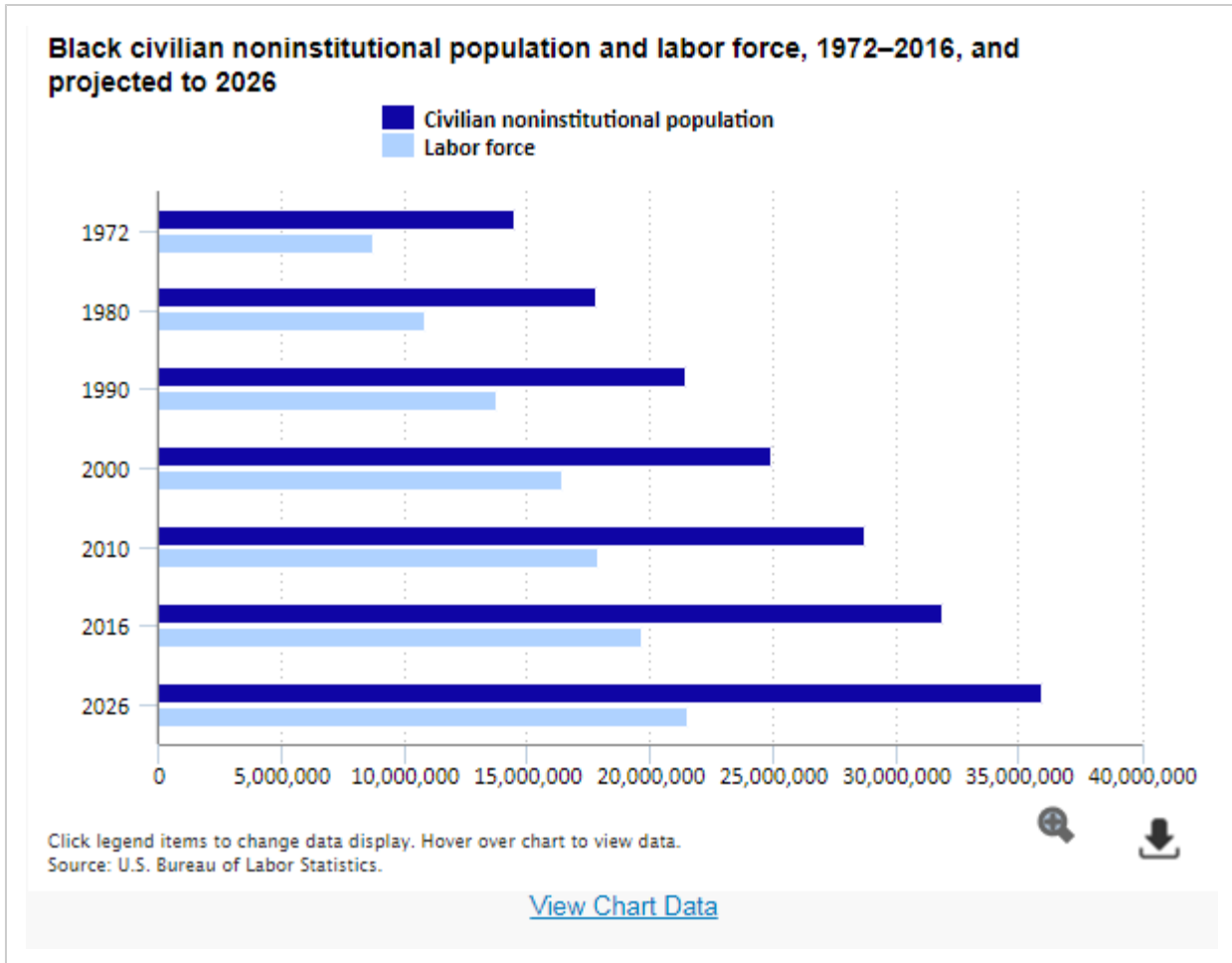
## The share of Blacks in the labor force is increasing

The share of Blacks in the total labor force has been on the rise since 1972, when data on Blacks were first collected. In that year, there were 8.7 million Blacks (about 10 percent) out of a total of 87 million people in the U.S. labor force. By 2016, Blacks made up 19.6 million (or 12 percent) from a total of 159.2 million people in the labor force. BLS projects the Black labor force will reach 21.6 million (12.7 percent) from a total of 169.7 by 2026.



## The Black civilian noninstitutional population and labor force are growing

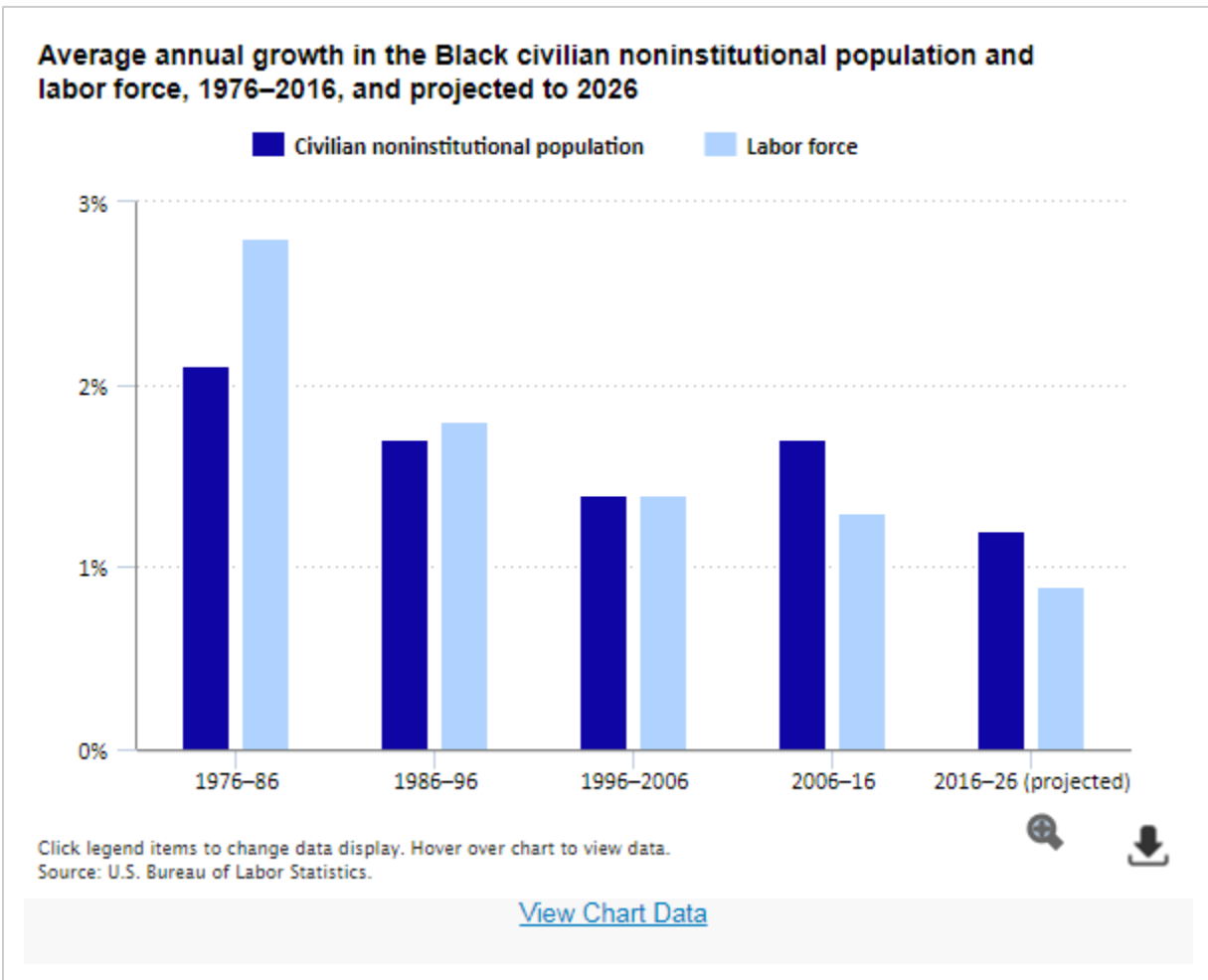
BLS labor force projections are based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s projections of the resident population, minus the institutional population and the Armed Forces. Since 1972, the Black civilian noninstitutional population (14.5 million) and the labor force (8.7 million) have increased to 31.9 and 19.6 million, respectively, in 2016. BLS expects the Black civilian noninstitutional population to expand to nearly 36 million and the labor force to increase to 21.6 million in 2026.



## Growth rate of the Black civilian noninstitutional population and labor force has slowed down

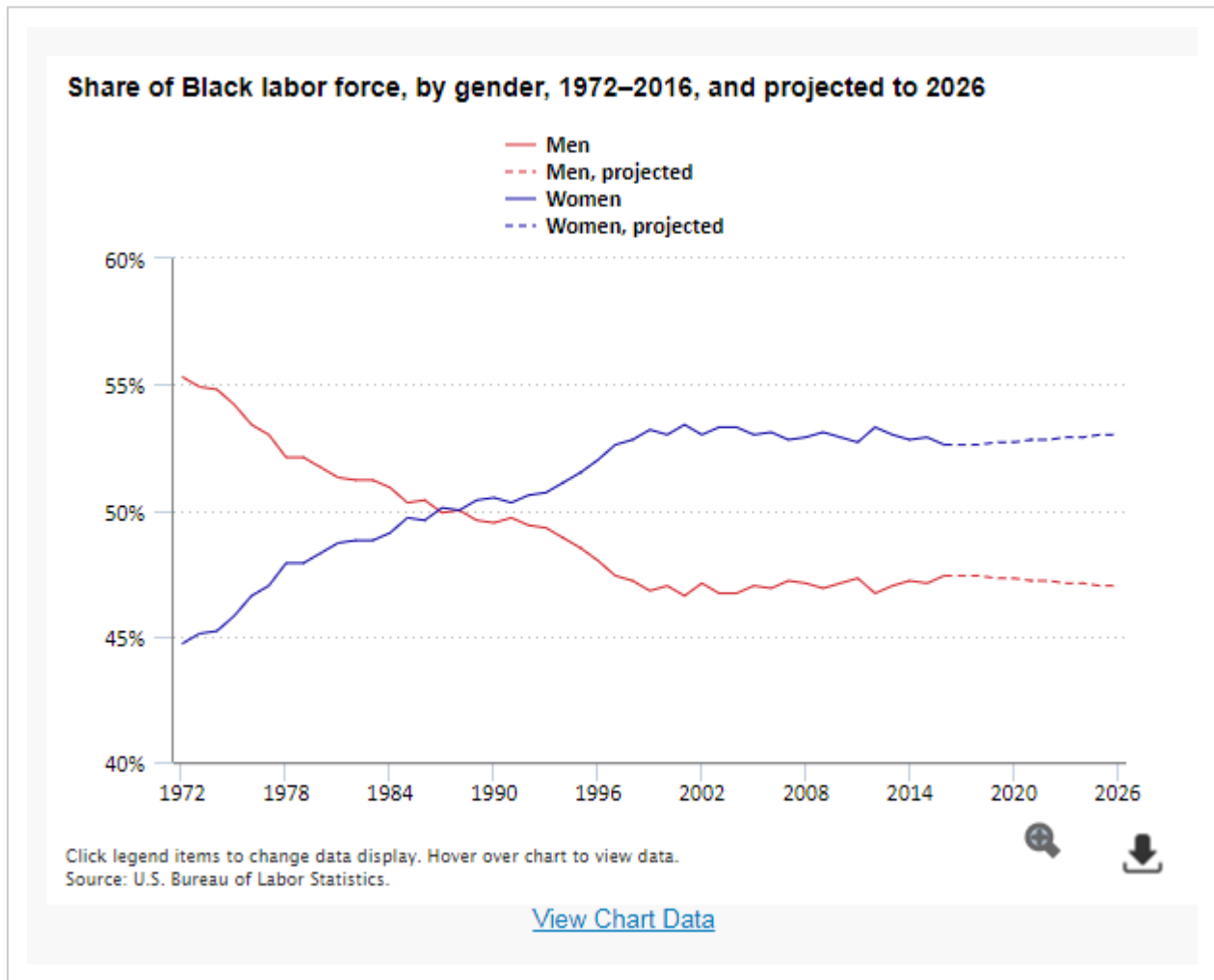
The growth rates of the Black civilian noninstitutional population and labor force were highest during the 1976–86 period, at 2.1 and 2.8 percent, respectively. The high rate of growth in the labor force coincides with Black baby boomers (persons born between 1946 and 1964) entering the labor force and the significant increase in labor force participation of Black women. However, by the following decade, 1986–96, the growth rate of the labor force declined to 1.8 percent. Over the 1976–96 period, the annual growth rate of the labor force was higher than the growth rate of the civilian noninstitutional population. In the 1996–2006 decade, growth rates of both the population and the labor force were the same, at 1.4 percent.

However, over the 2006–16 decade, the growth rate of the Black civilian noninstitutional population increased, while the growth rate of the labor force decreased. BLS projects the growth of the Black civilian noninstitutional population and labor force will decline even further in the 2016–26 decade, with the growth rate of the Black labor force projected to be slower than the growth rate of the Black population.



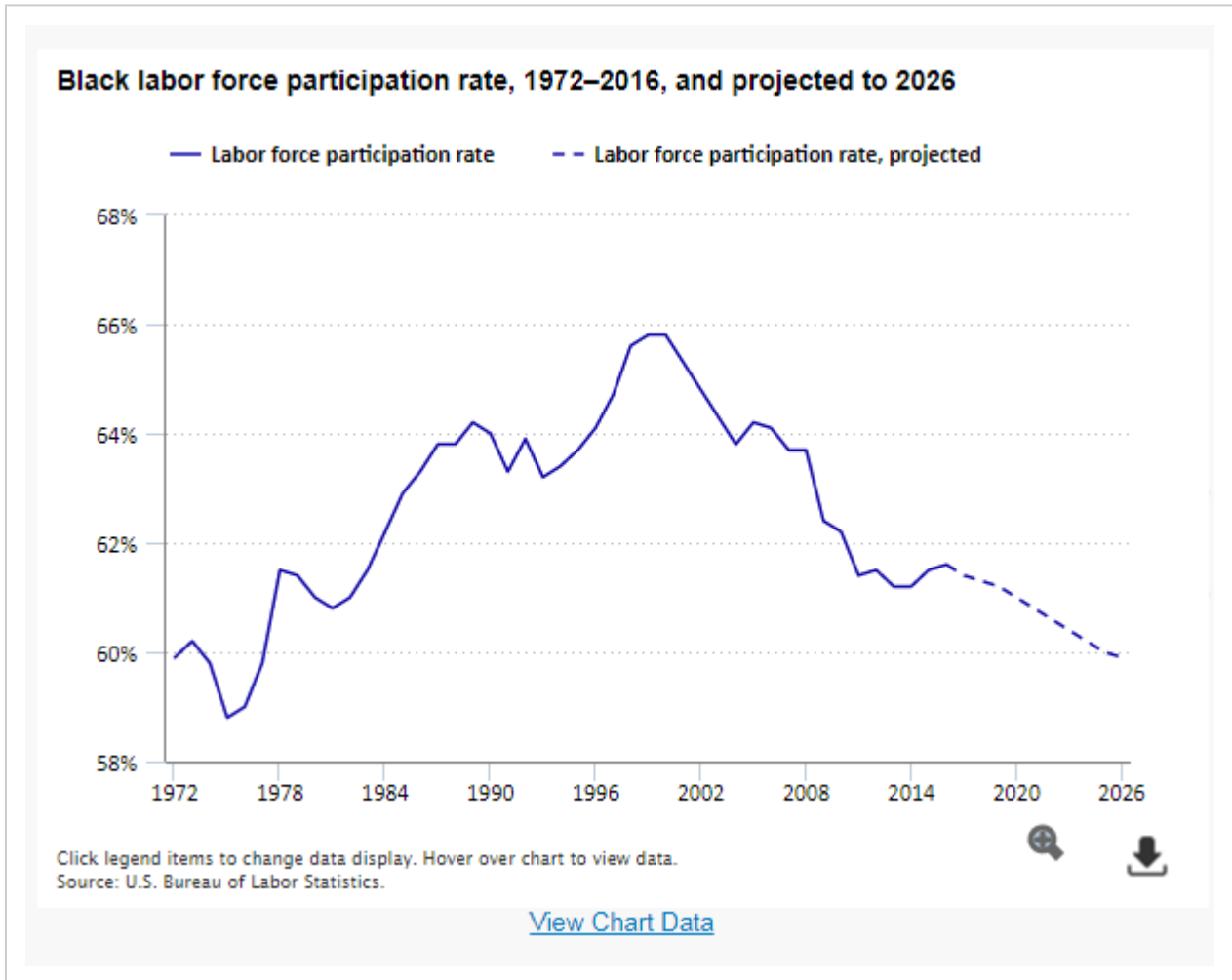
## Black women are projected to have a larger share of the Black labor force than Black men in 2026

In 1972, Black men made up 55.3 percent of the Black labor force, and Black women made up 44.7 percent. In the last four decades, the share of Black men in the labor force has declined, while the share of Black women has increased. In 1988, both men and women made up an equal share of the Black labor force. From 1989 to 2000, the share of Black women increased to 53 percent and the share of Black men declined to 47 percent. The rates for both women and men have stabilized since then. BLS projects these rates to be relatively flat in the 2016–26 decade.



## Black labor force participation rate has been declining since its peak in 2000

The labor force participation rate of Blacks has increased steadily from about 60 percent in the early 1970s, to its peak, 65.8 percent, in 2000. Since then it has declined steadily. The largest drop was in 2009, after the 2007–09 recession, to 62.4 percent, which was a decline of 1.3 percentage points relative to the 2008 rate. The decline has continued, registering at 61.6 percent in 2016. BLS projects the labor force participation rate of Blacks to decline even further in the 2016–26 decade.

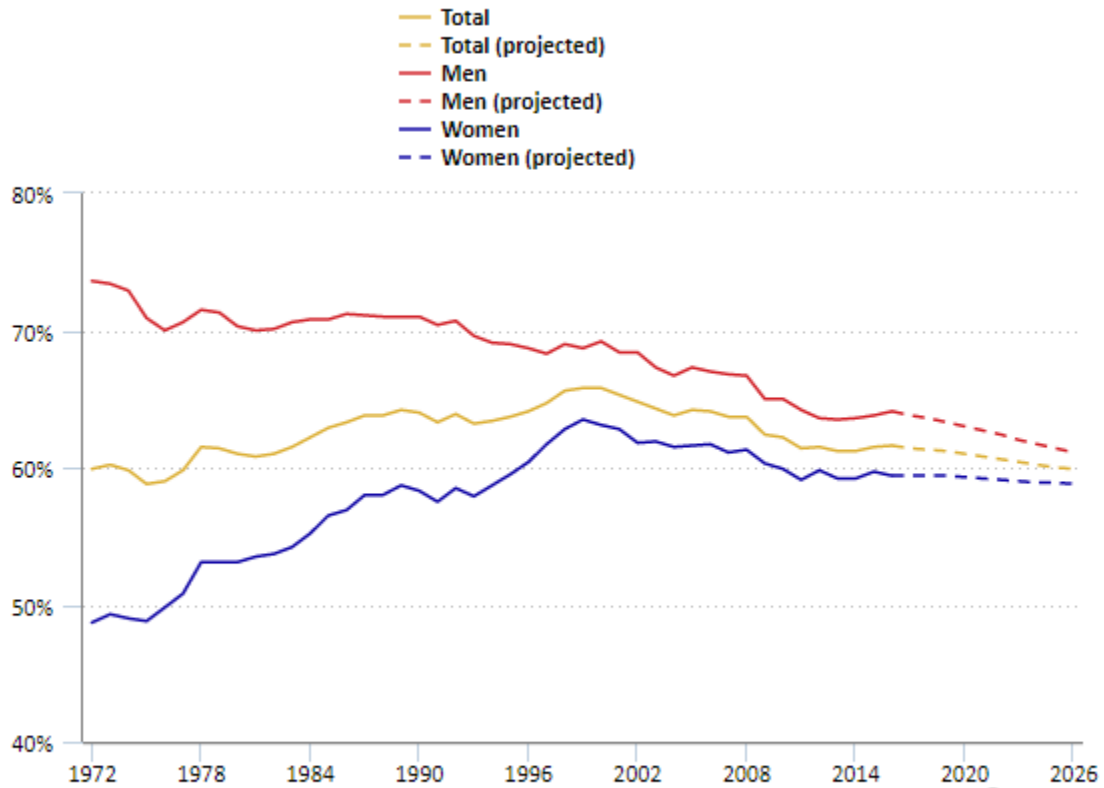


## **Labor force participation rate of both Black men and women is projected to decline**

The labor force participation rate of Black men was at its peak in 1972, at 73.6 percent. Since then, the rate for Black men has declined, specifically after the 2007–09 recession. BLS projects that the labor force participation rate of Black men is going to continue to decline and will register at 61.1 percent in 2026. By comparison, the labor force participation rate of Black women, which was at its lowest in 1972, at 48.7 percent, rose for nearly three decades, peaking at 63.9 percent in 1999. Since then, the labor force participation rate of Black women has been declining.

BLS projects that this decline will continue over the next decade, although the rate of decline is projected to be slower than that for Black men. The gender gap between the labor force participation rate of Black men and women was the largest in 1972, at nearly 25.0 percentage points. With each passing decade, the labor force participation rates of Black men and women have converged, with declines in the rates for men and increases in the rates for women. In 2016, the labor force participation rate of Black men stood at 64.1 percent, compared with 59.4 percent for women—a 4.7-percentage-point gap. BLS expects this gender gap to get smaller by 2.4 percentage points over the 2016–26 period.

### Black labor force participation rates for total (both sexes), men, and women, 1972–2016, and projected to 2026



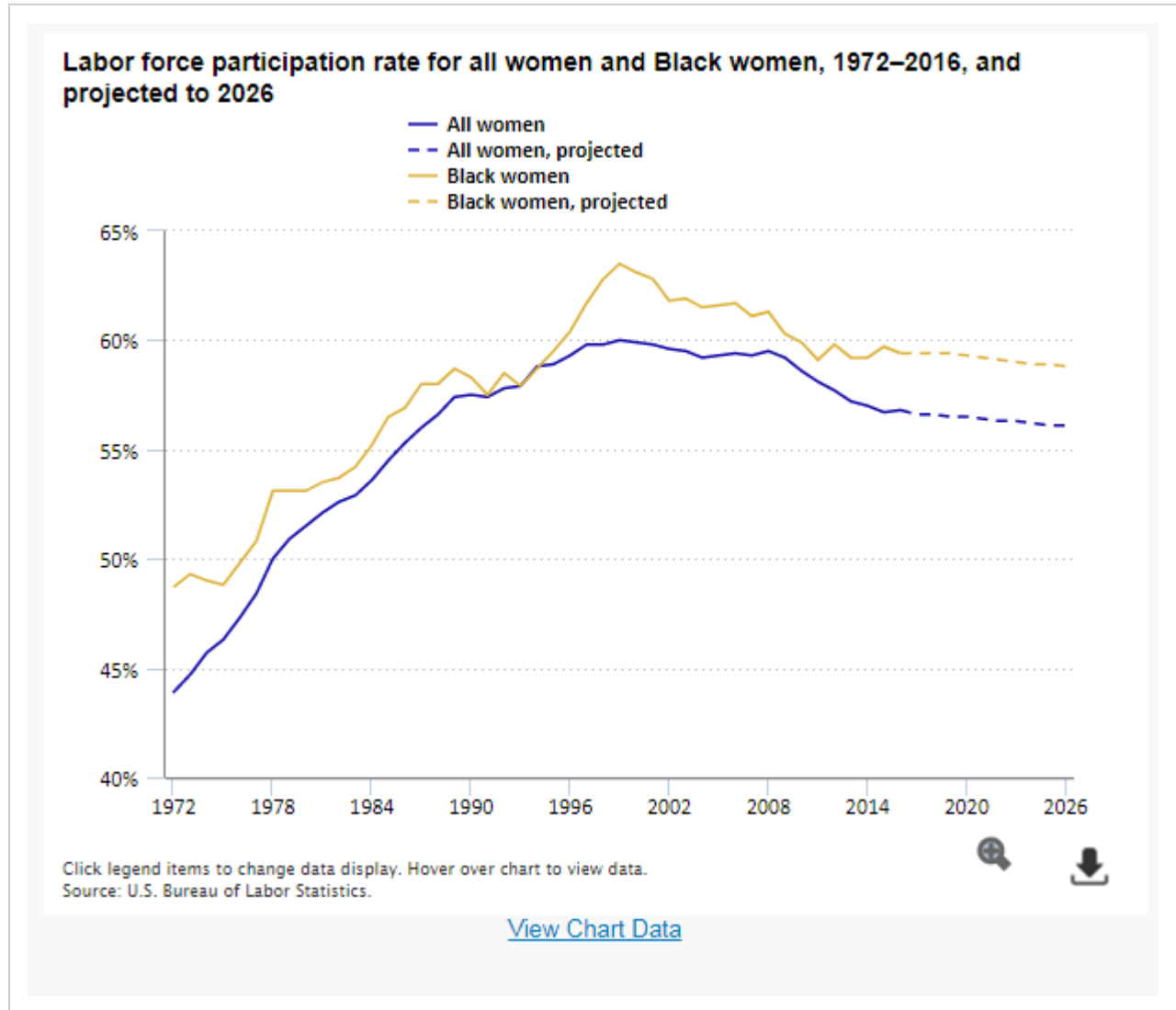
Click legend items to change data display. Hover over chart to view data.  
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

[View Chart Data](#)



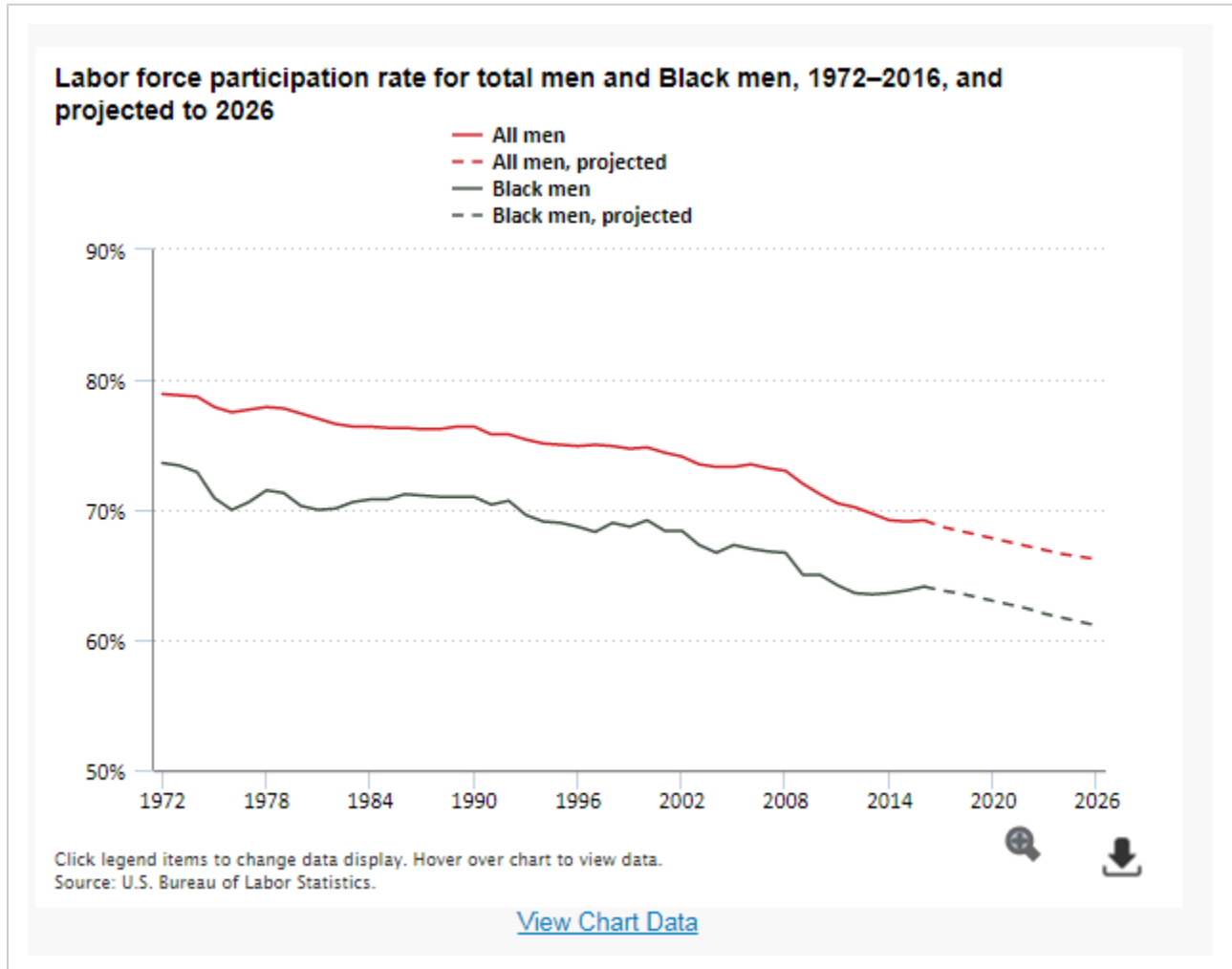
## Labor force participation rate of Black women was generally higher than that of all women

Historically, the labor force participation rate of Black women has been consistently higher than the rate for all women, with the exception of 1994. At its high point in 1999, the labor force participation rate of Black women was 63.5 percent, while the rate for all women was 60.0 percent. BLS projects that both rates will decline in the 2016–26 decade. However, the rate for Black women is expected to decline less than the rate for all women.



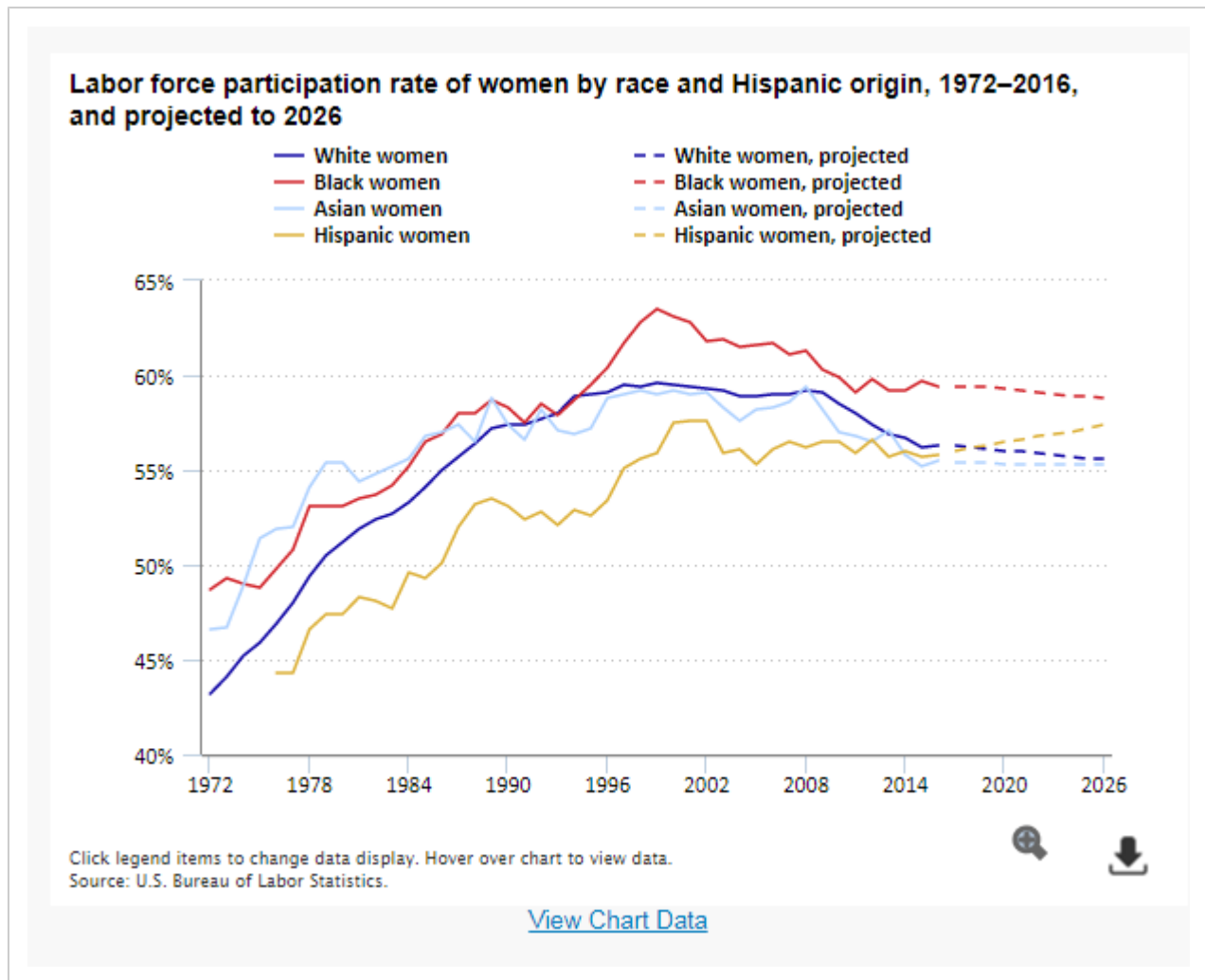
## Labor force participation rates of Black men have been consistently lower than the rate for all men

The labor force participation rates for all men and Black men have been declining in the past four decades. Historically, the labor force participation rate of Black men has been consistently lower than the rate for all men. BLS expects these rates to decline even further in the next decade. The labor force, including the Black labor force, is getting much older and has considerably lower participation rates.



## Labor force participation rate of Black women generally higher than that of all other women

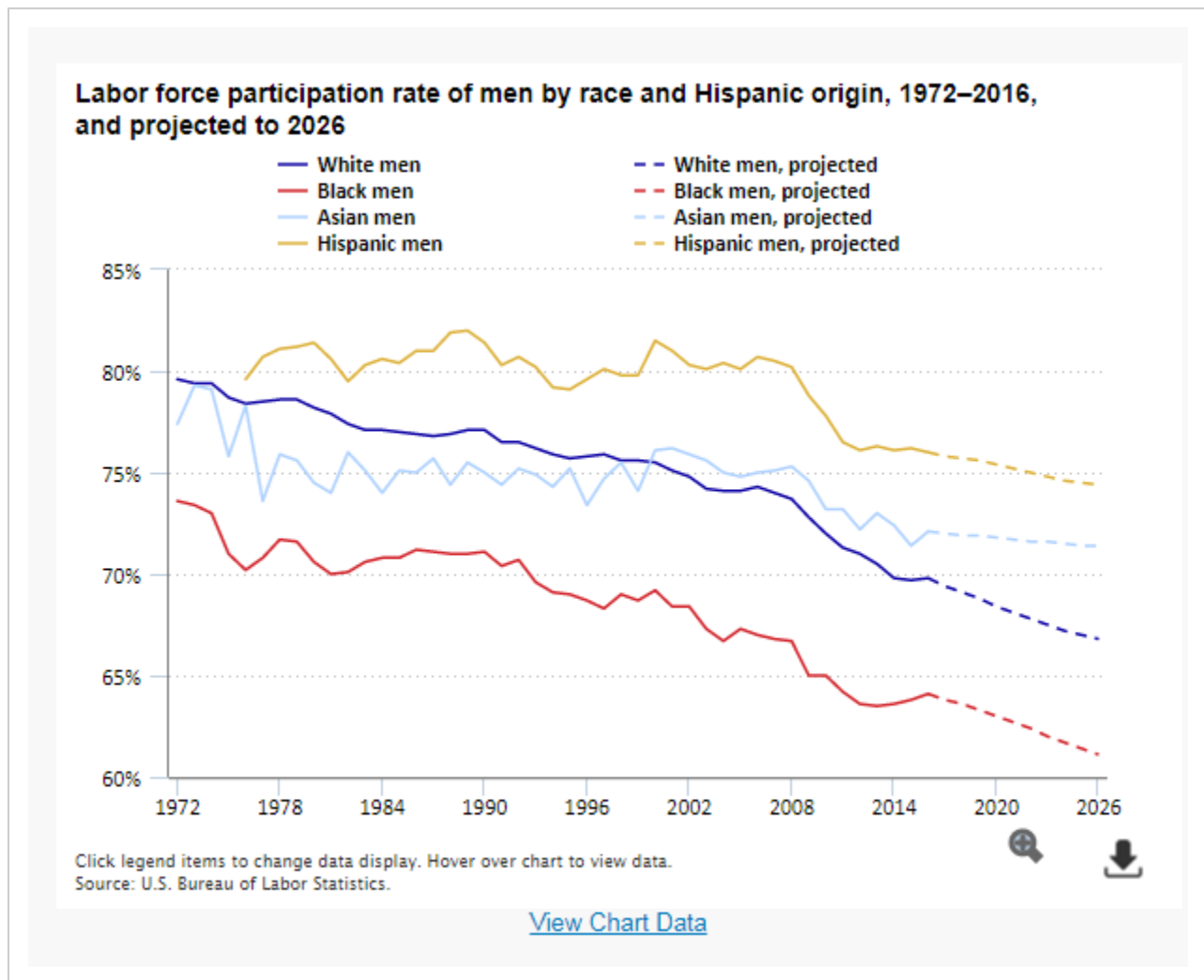
After peaking in 1999 at 63.5 percent, the labor force participation rate of Black women declined following the 2001 and the 2007–09 recessions, and then fell to 59.4 percent in 2016. BLS projects that the participation rate of Black women will decrease slightly to 58.8 percent by 2026. However, Black women will continue to have the highest labor force participation rates among women. Although the labor force participation rate of Hispanic women has generally been the lowest compared with the rates of other women, BLS projects that the rate for Hispanic women will increase to rates higher than those of other women, except for Black women. The labor force participation rate of White women also peaked in 1999 and has been on a declining trend since then. BLS projects that their rates will decline further in the next decade. The labor force participation rate of Asian women has also been declining since 2000 and is projected to do so in the future.



## Labor force participation rates of Black men have been lower than all other men

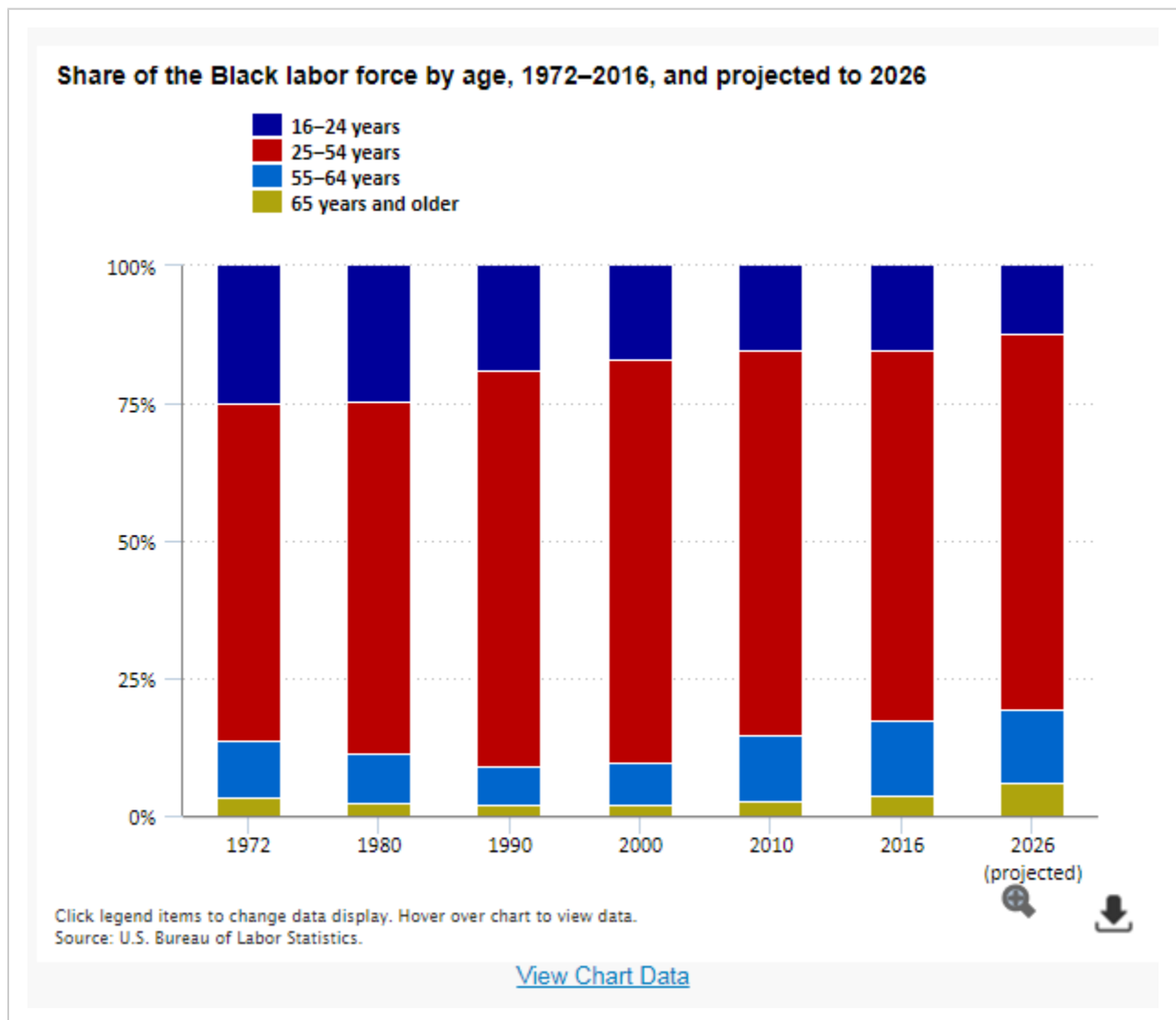
The labor force participation rates of men in most race and ethnic groups have declined steadily in the past several decades. Historically, however, the labor force participation rate of Black men has been the lowest among all race and ethnic groups. From its high point of 73.6 percent in 1972, the labor force participation rate of Black men has declined steadily. After the 2007–09 recession, the rate fell to new lows, and BLS projects this trend to continue. The participation rates of White men in the labor force also has declined. One of the main reasons for the decrease in labor force participation rates for all race and ethnic groups is the aging of the labor force into older groups that have lower labor force participation rates.

For Asian men, the labor force participation rate has increased over the past four decades. In 2000, their rate passed the rate for White men, but it has declined since the 2007–09 recession. From its high point at the end of the 1980s, the labor force participation rate of Hispanic men had not declined as much as it did for Black and White men. BLS projects that the rate for Hispanic men will decline less than the rate for White men.



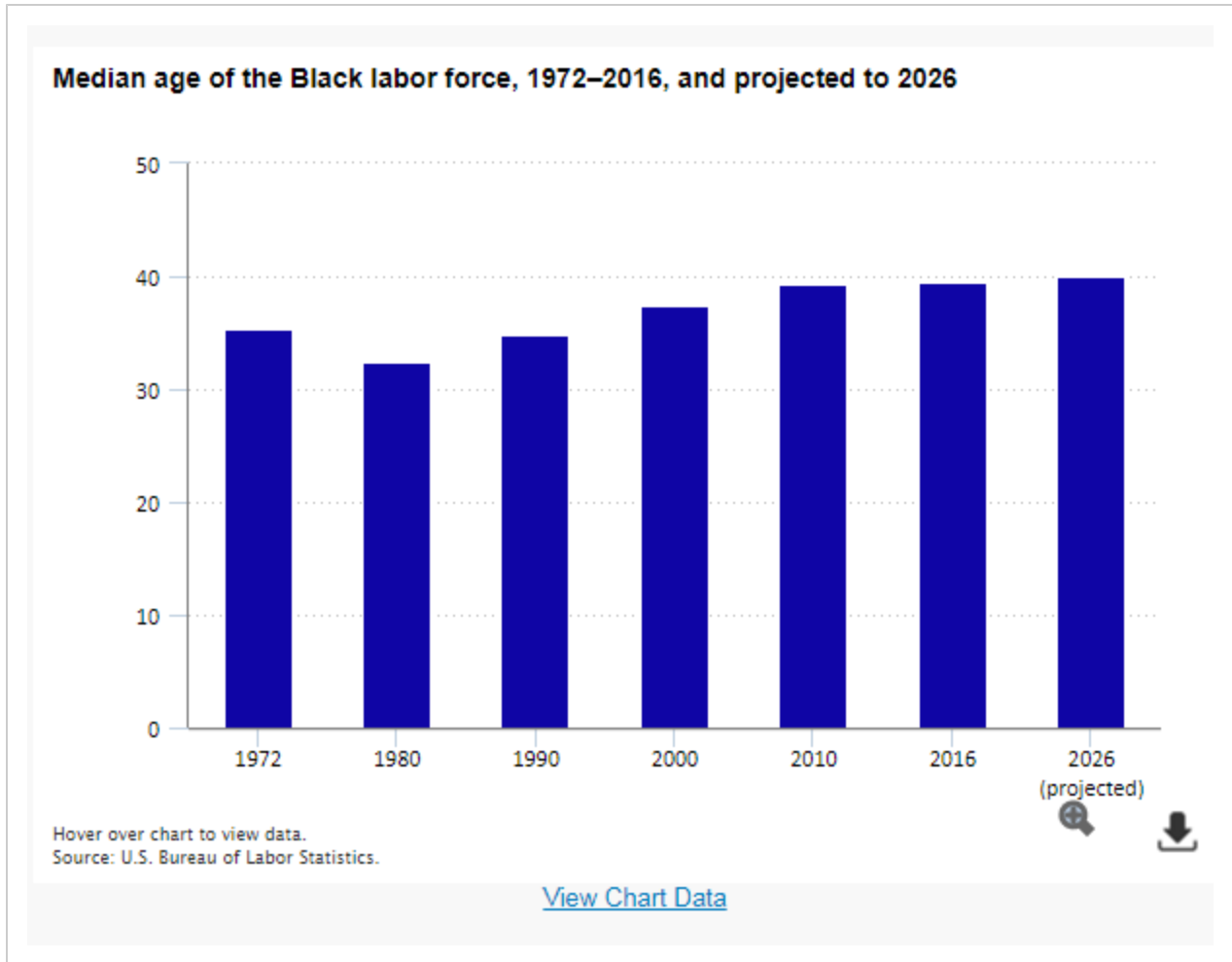
## Share of Black youth in labor force has been declining while that of older groups, increasing

The aging of the Black population has an impact on the growth of its labor force. The share of Black youth (16 to 24 year olds) in the labor force has been declining for the past four decades and is projected to continue to do so over the 2016–26 period. The share of those in the peak working years (ages 25 to 54) in the Black labor force increased until 2000 and has been declining since then. BLS projects that the share of this age group will slightly increase over the next decade. With the aging of the Black labor force, the share of those 55 years and older has grown substantially; this share is expected to continue growing over the next decade. This increase will continue until the bulk of the baby boomers retire and exit the labor force.



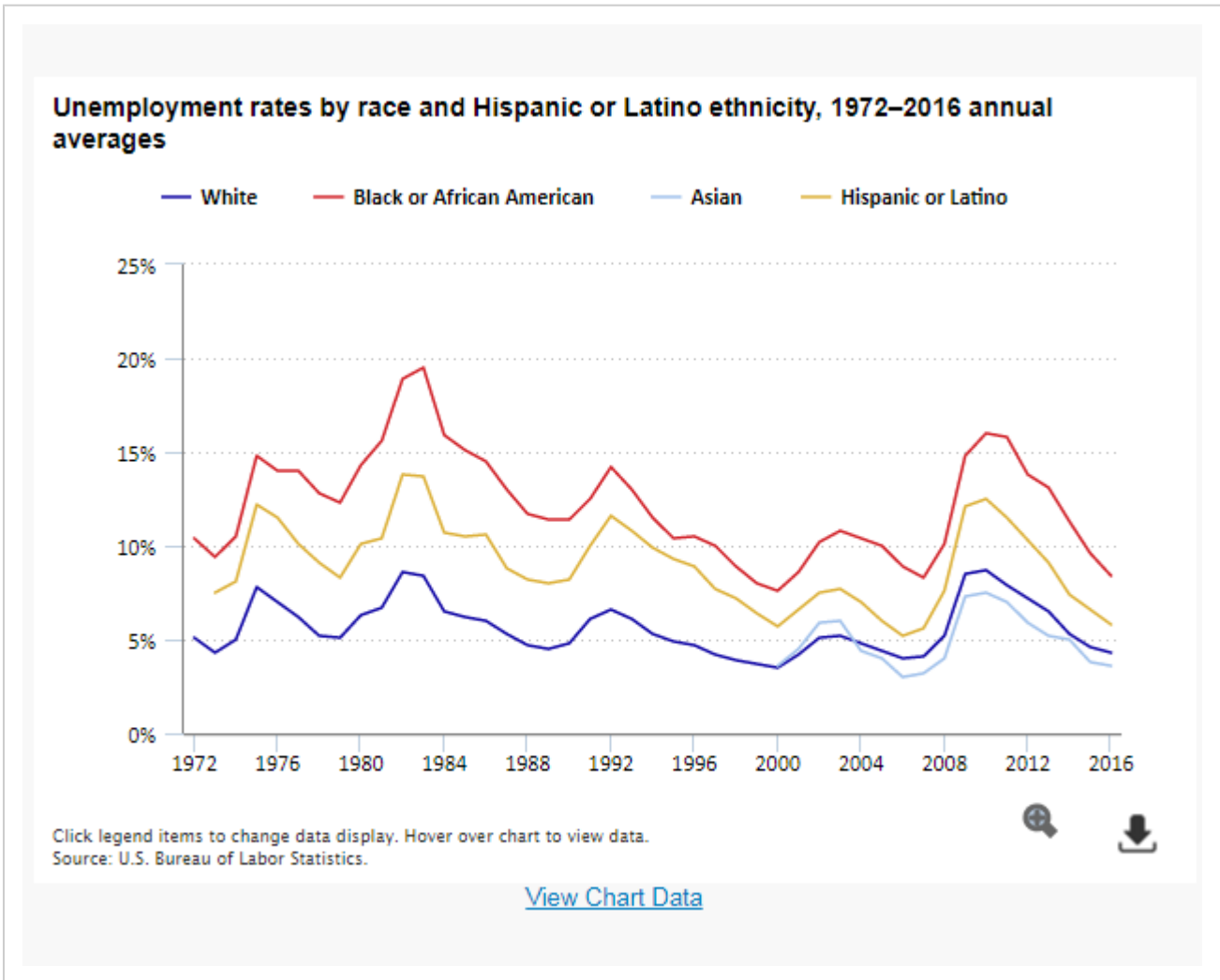
## Median age of the Black labor force has been increasing

The median age, an index that summarizes age distributions, is another way to measure the aging of the population and the labor force. The median age indicates that Blacks in the labor force have aged in the past four decades, and BLS projects this trend to continue during the 2016–26 period. The projected slowdown of the Black labor force is mainly the result of the aging Black population. By 2026, Black baby boomers will be between the ages of 62 and 80, with very low labor force participation rates.



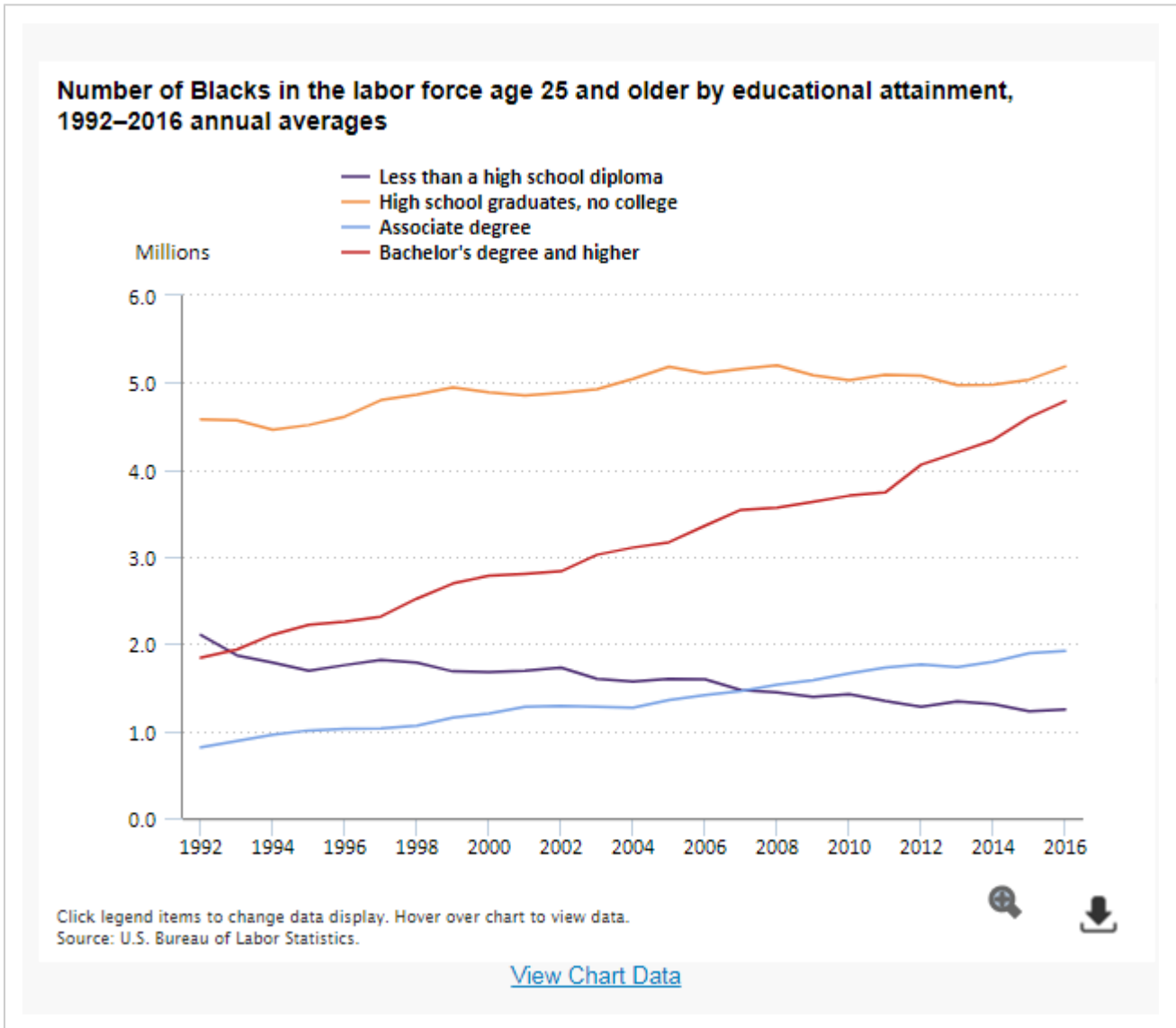
## Black unemployment rates are higher than those for all workers

The unemployment rate represents the number of people who are unemployed as a percentage of the civilian labor force. Historically, the unemployment rate of Blacks has been higher than those of other race and ethnic groups. Unemployment rates for all race and ethnic groups generally increase during recessionary periods. In the middle of the 2007–09 recession, the Black unemployment rate was 10.1 percent, compared with 5.2 percent for the White unemployment rate. The Black unemployment rate peaked at 16.0 percent in 2010 and declined to 8.4 percent in 2016.



## Educational attainment of the Black labor force, 25 and older, is increasing

The educational attainment of the Black labor force has increased over the past two decades. While the number of Blacks with less than a high school diploma has decreased, the number of high school graduates, with no college, has increased. The number of Blacks attaining an associate degree also has increased. However, the largest increase in educational attainment has been in the number of Blacks attaining a Bachelor’s degree or higher.

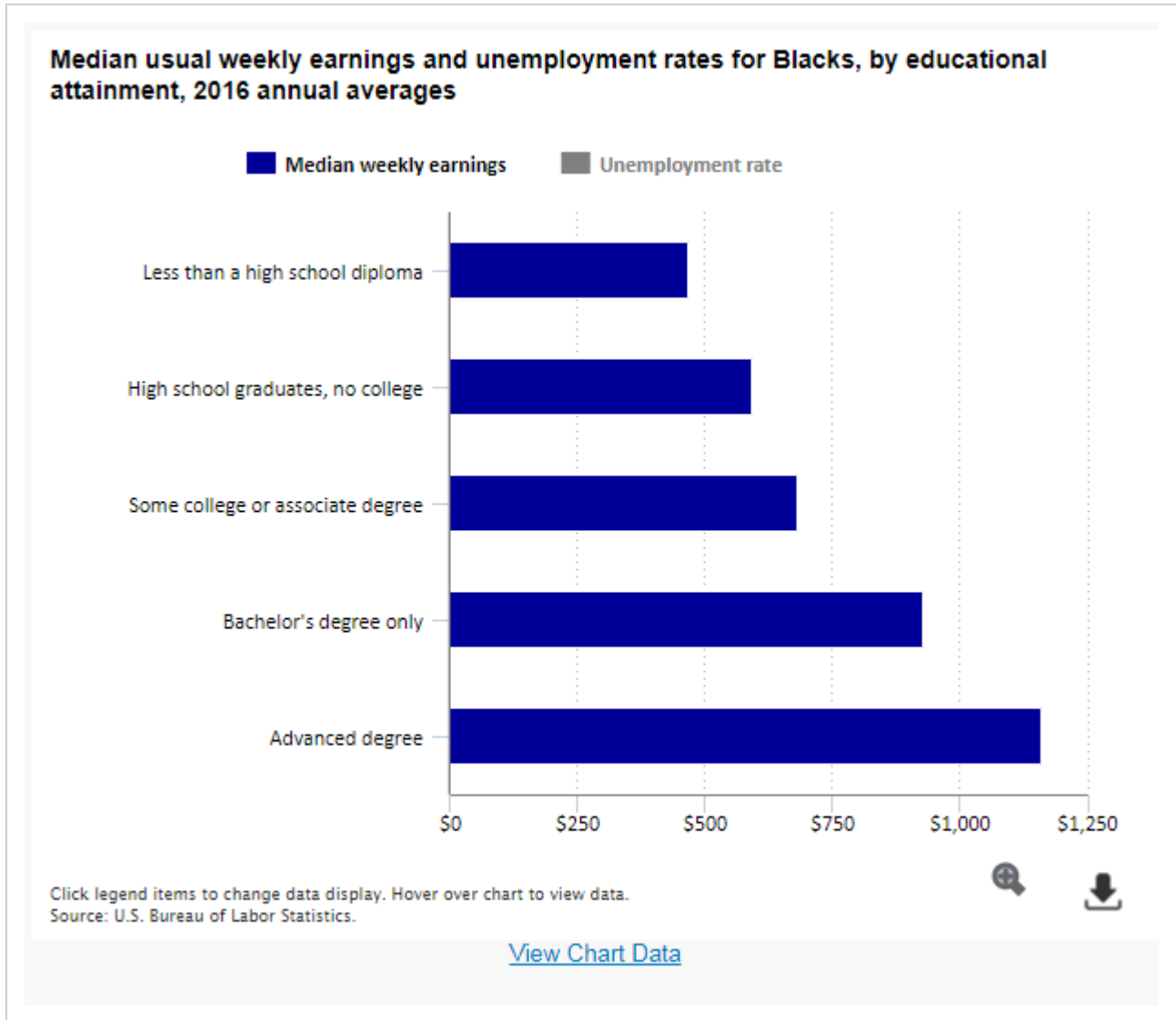






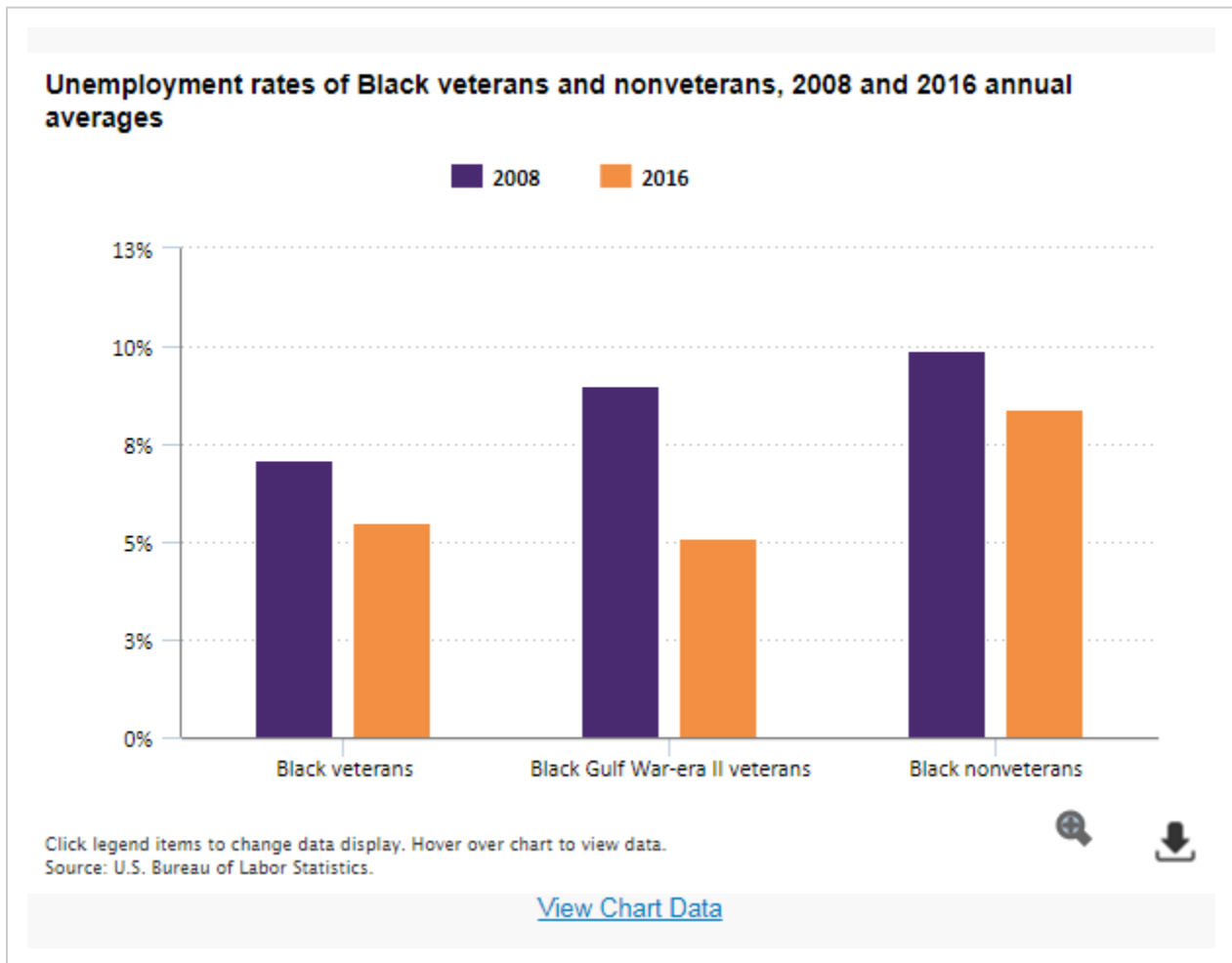
## Blacks with more education have better prospects for earnings and employment

People with more education generally have higher earnings and lower rates of unemployment than those with less education. For example, among Black workers, those with an advanced degree had the highest median weekly earnings (\$1,162) and lowest unemployment rate (3.3 percent) in 2016. Median earnings for Black workers with only a high school diploma were \$592 per week, and the unemployment rate for these workers was 8.6 percent.



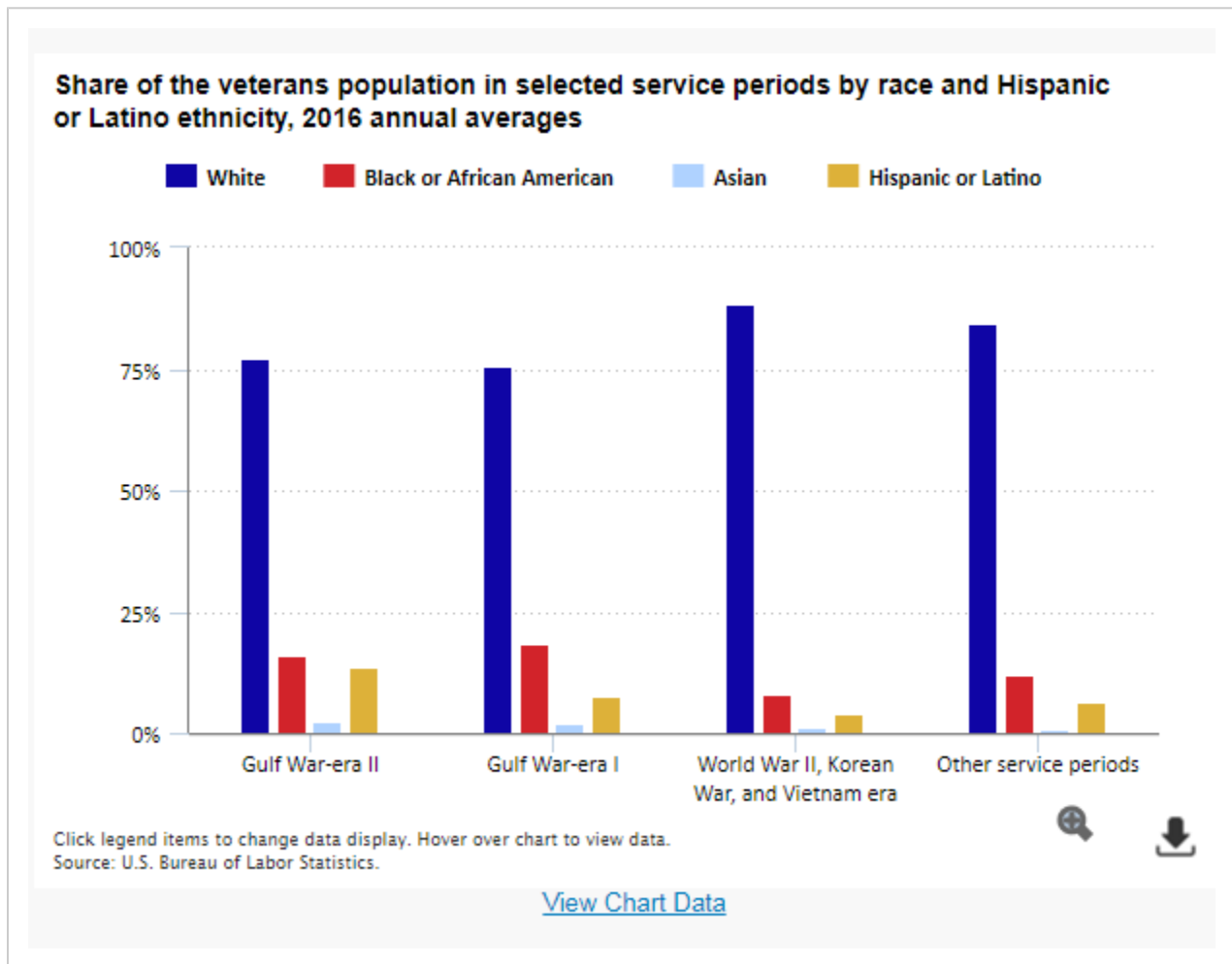
## Unemployment rates for Black veterans lower than those for Black nonveterans over the past decade

In 2016, nearly 21 million people, or about 9 percent of the civilian noninstitutional population age 18 and older, were veterans. Veterans are defined as men and women who have previously served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces and who were civilians at the time these data were collected. Veterans are more likely to be men than nonveterans and also tend to be older. About 10 percent of all veterans were women. The unemployment rate for Black veterans has consistently been lower than that of Black nonveterans over the last decade. The unemployment rate of Black veterans who served on active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces at any time since September 2001—a group referred to as Gulf War-era II veterans—was 5.1 percent in 2016, compared with 9.0 percent in 2008.



## Nearly 1 in 6 Gulf War-era II veterans is Black

Veterans age 18 and older who previously served on active duty made up about 9 percent of the civilian noninstitutional population in 2016, with 2 in 5 having served during the World War II era (December 1941 to December 1946), the Korean War era (July 1950 to January 1955), and the Vietnam War era (August 1964 to April 1975). The Gulf War-era I and Gulf War-era II veteran populations were more racially and ethnically diverse than the combined World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam-era veteran population in 2016. About 1 in 6 Blacks served during the Gulf War-era I period (August 1990 to August 2001), and nearly 1 in 5 Blacks served during the Gulf War-era II period (September 2001 to present).



## More information

Mitra Toossi is an economist in the Office of Employment and Unemployment Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Email: [toosi.mitra@bls.gov](mailto:toosi.mitra@bls.gov). Leslie Joyner is a supervisory economist in the Office of Publications and Special Studies, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Email: [joyner.leslie@bls.gov](mailto:joyner.leslie@bls.gov).

The historical demographic data on labor force participation rates are from the [Current Population Survey](#). This is a monthly survey of about 60,000 households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The survey provides statistics on the demographic and labor force characteristics of the civilian noninstitutional population age 16 years and older. The projected labor force and labor force participation rates for 2016–26 are based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s projections of the resident population. To learn more, see our page about [labor force projections](#).