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Labor Market Activity Of Blacks In The United States

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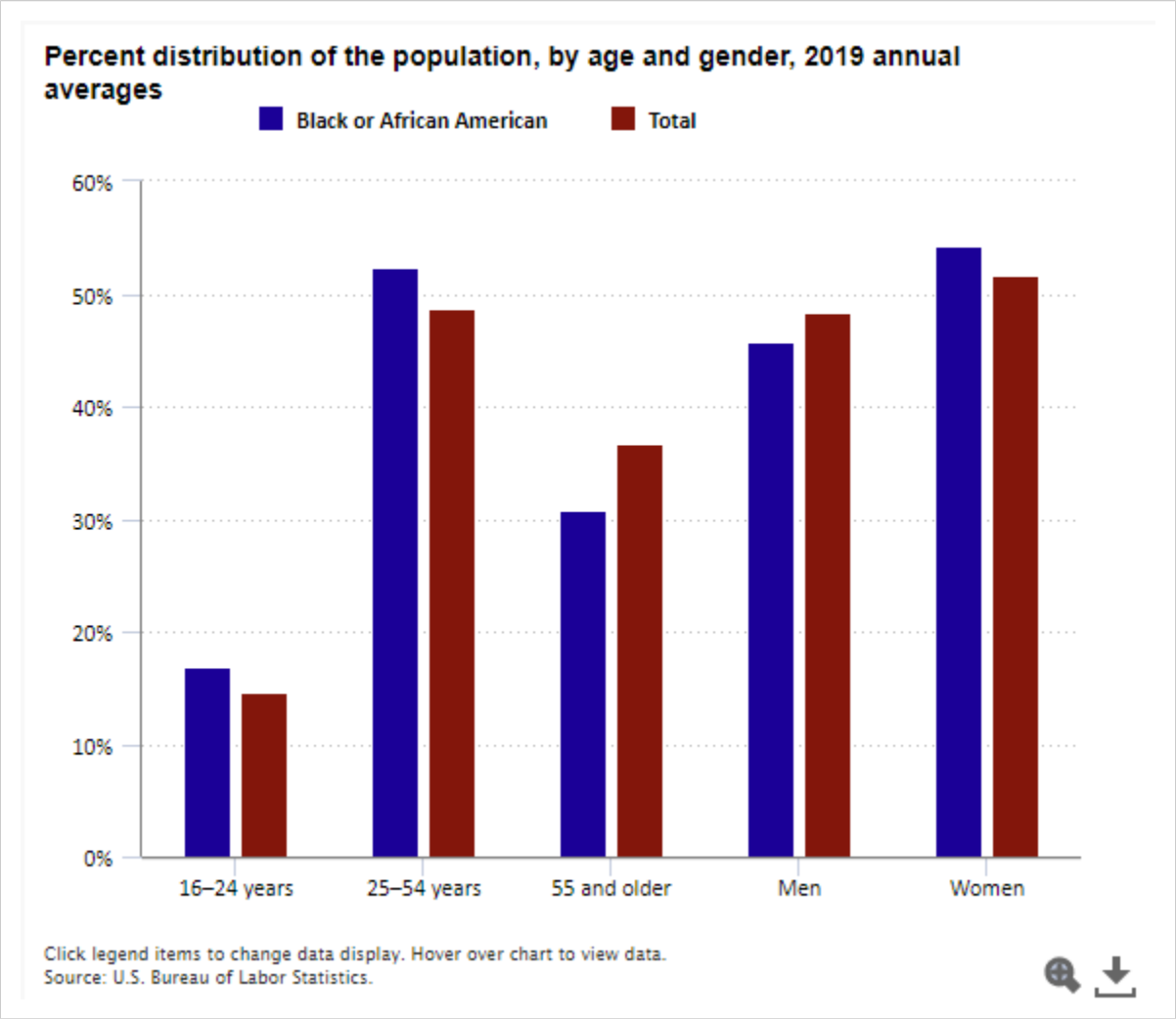
Observed during the month of February since 1976, Black History Month celebrates the contributions of African Americans throughout the history of the United States. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics collects and publishes statistics on how people spend their time, their labor force status, average number of jobs held, earnings, educational attainment, and other demographic characteristics by race and ethnicity. This Spotlight on Statistics explores those data for the Black or African American population and compares them to the nation as a whole.

Blacks tend to be younger than the overall population

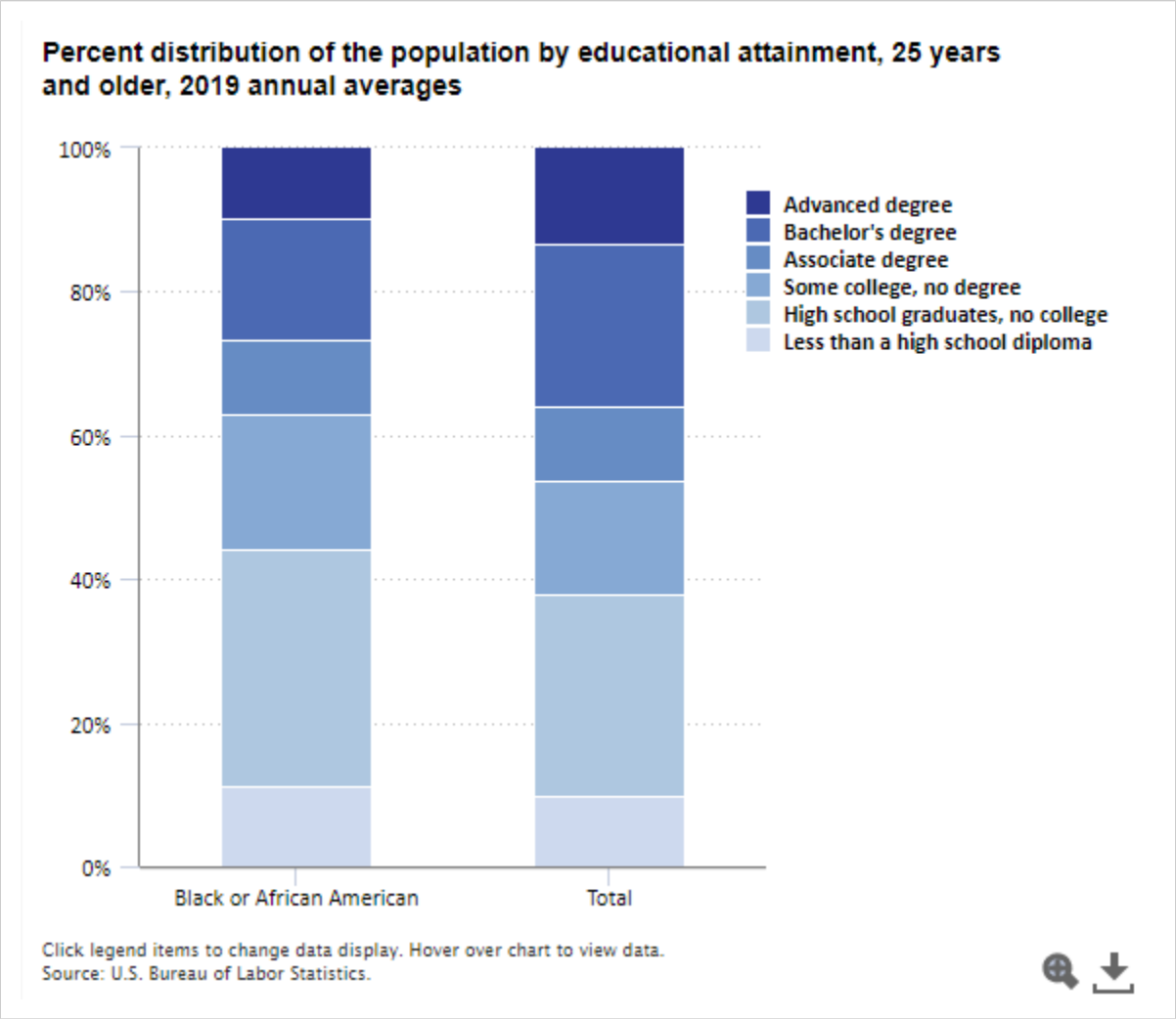
The Black or African American population tends to be younger in comparison to the overall population age 16 and older. (Population refers to the civilian noninstitutional population age 16 and older.) In 2019, about 69 percent of the Black population was age 16 to 54. By comparison, about 63 percent of the overall population was in the same age range.

The Black population is also slightly less likely to be made up of men than the overall population. In 2019, Black men made up about 46 percent of the Black population; men made up about 48 percent of the overall population.



Over a quarter of the Black population has a bachelor's degree or higher

In 2019, about 27 percent of the Black population age 25 and older had attained a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 36 percent of the overall population. Although educational attainment among Blacks has increased over time, 44 percent of the Black population age 25 and older had a high school diploma or less in 2019, compared with 38 percent of the overall population.

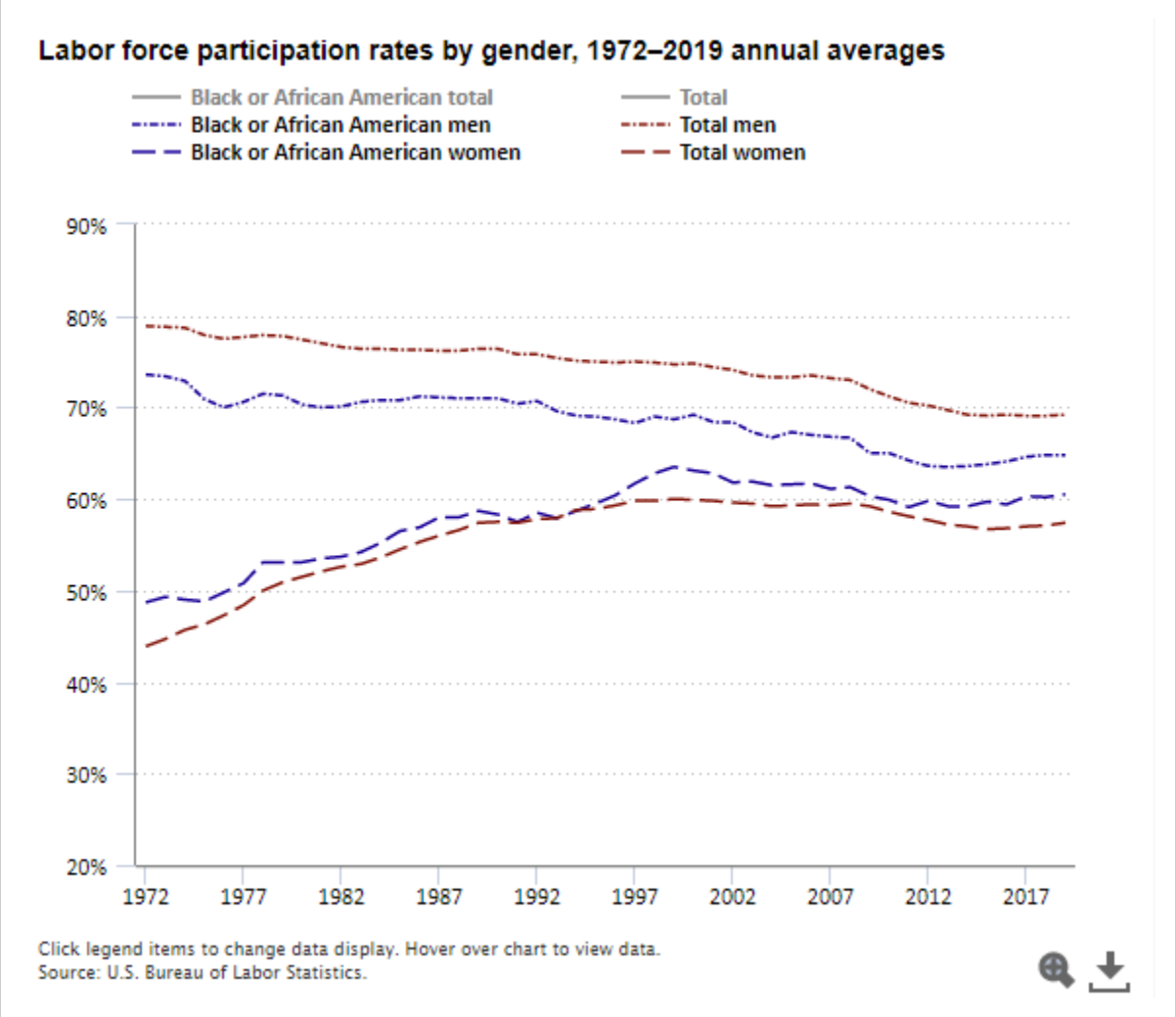


Labor force participation rate of Black men lower than the rate for all men

Historically, the labor force participation rate (the proportion of people working or looking for work as a percentage of the civilian noninstitutional population) for Black men has been lower than the rate for all men. In 2019, the rate for Black men was 64.8 percent, which was 4.4 percentage points lower than the rate of 69.2 percent for men overall.

Black women have typically had higher labor force participation rates than all women, though the difference is not as great. In 2019, the rate for Black women was 60.5 percent, while the rate for women overall was 57.4 percent.

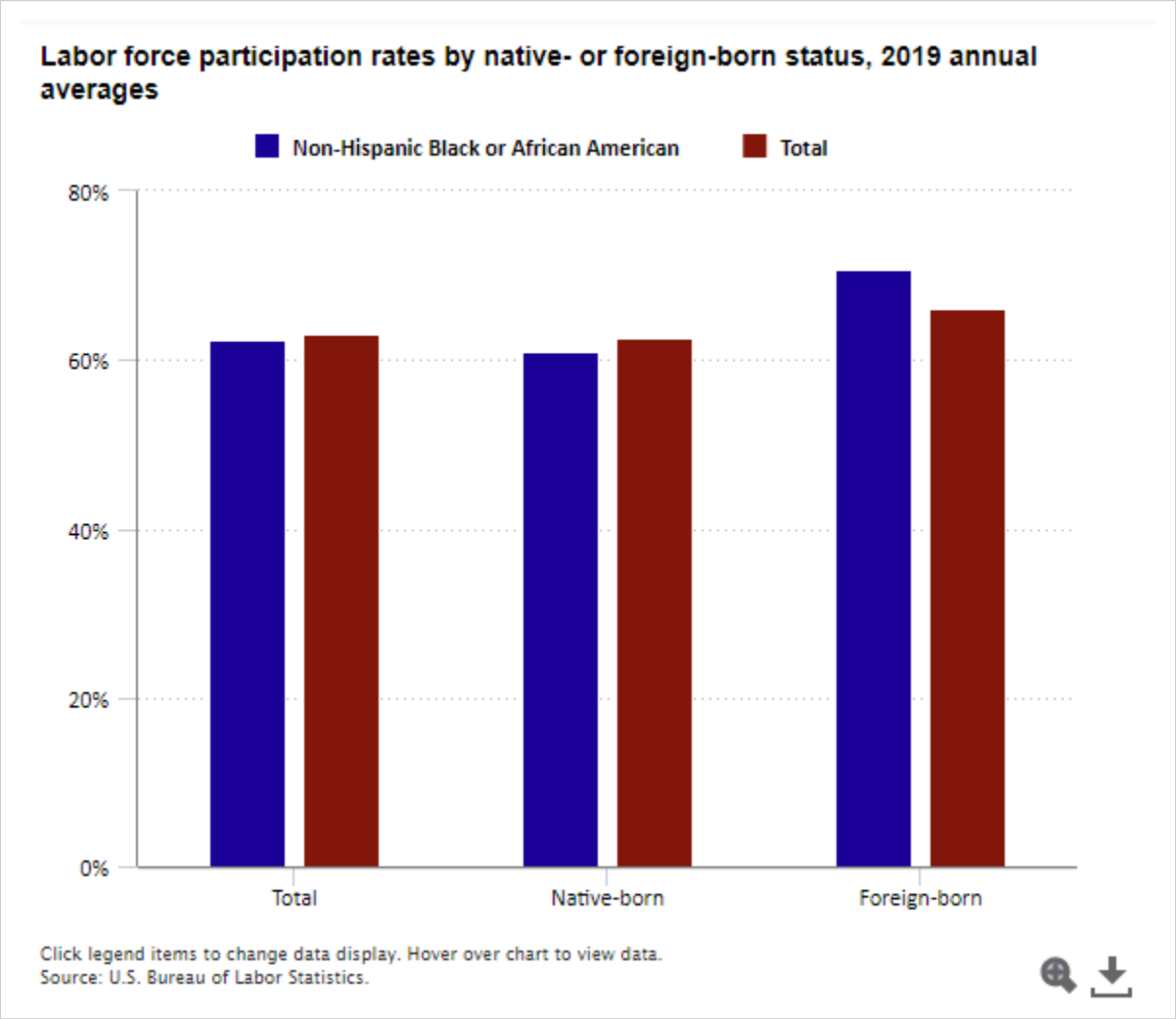
The labor force participation rate for all men has generally been on a downward trend since 1972. In contrast, the participation rate for all women increased dramatically from the 1970s through the 1980s, before slowing in the 1990s. After reaching a peak in 1999, labor force participation among women began a gradual decline, before leveling off in recent years.



Foreign-born Blacks more likely to participate in the labor force

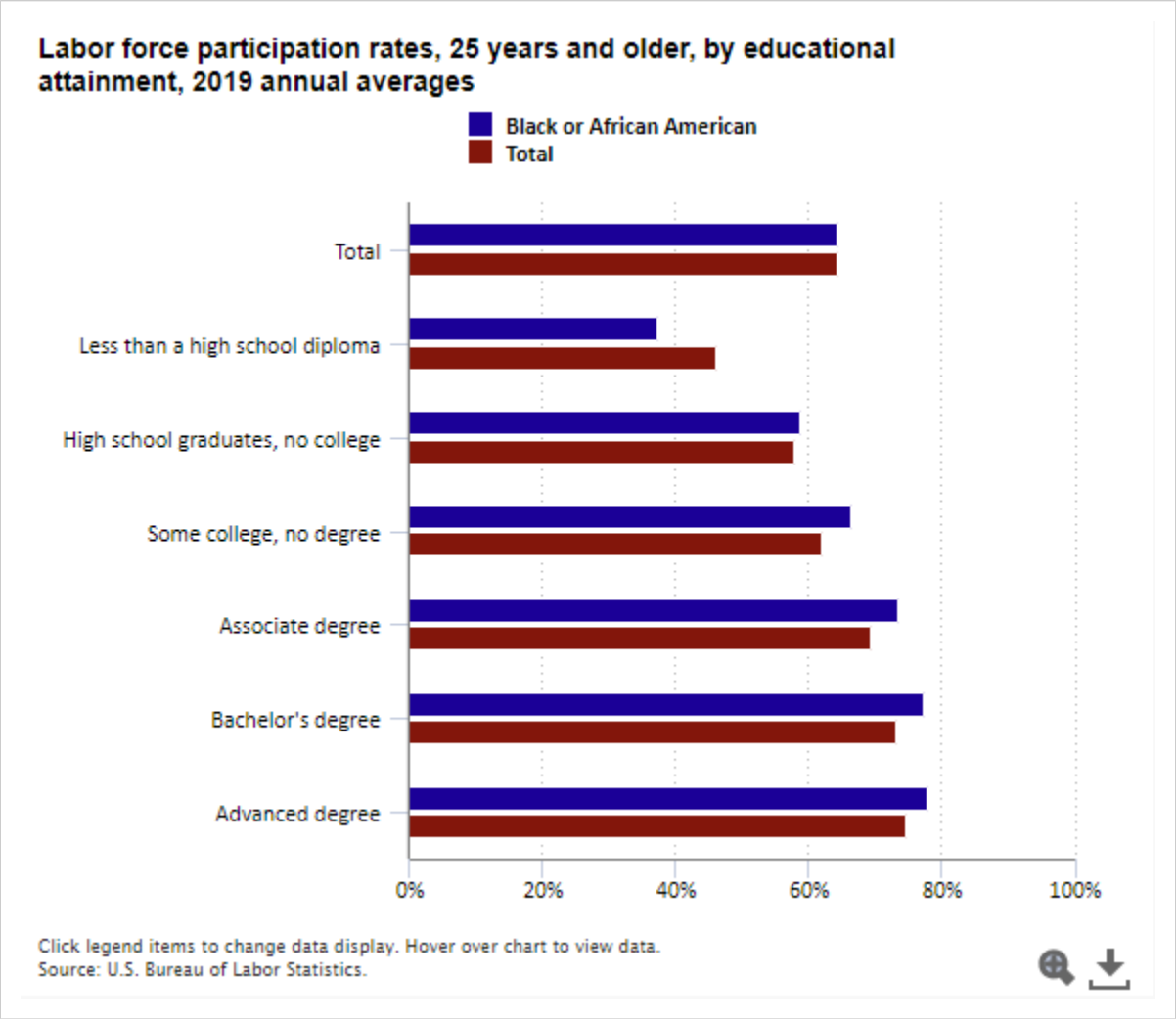
In 2019, foreign-born non-Hispanic Blacks were more likely to participate in the labor force than were the foreign born overall (70.8 percent versus 66.0 percent). By contrast, native-born Blacks were about as likely as the native born overall to participate in the labor force (61.1 percent and 62.5 percent, respectively).

The foreign born are people who reside in the United States but who were not U.S. citizens at birth. Specifically, they were born outside the United States (or one of its outlying areas such as Puerto Rico or Guam), and neither parent was a U.S. citizen. The foreign born include legally admitted immigrants, refugees, temporary residents such as students and temporary workers, and undocumented immigrants. The native born are people born in the United States or one of its outlying areas such as Puerto Rico or Guam or, if born abroad, had at least one parent who was a U.S. citizen.



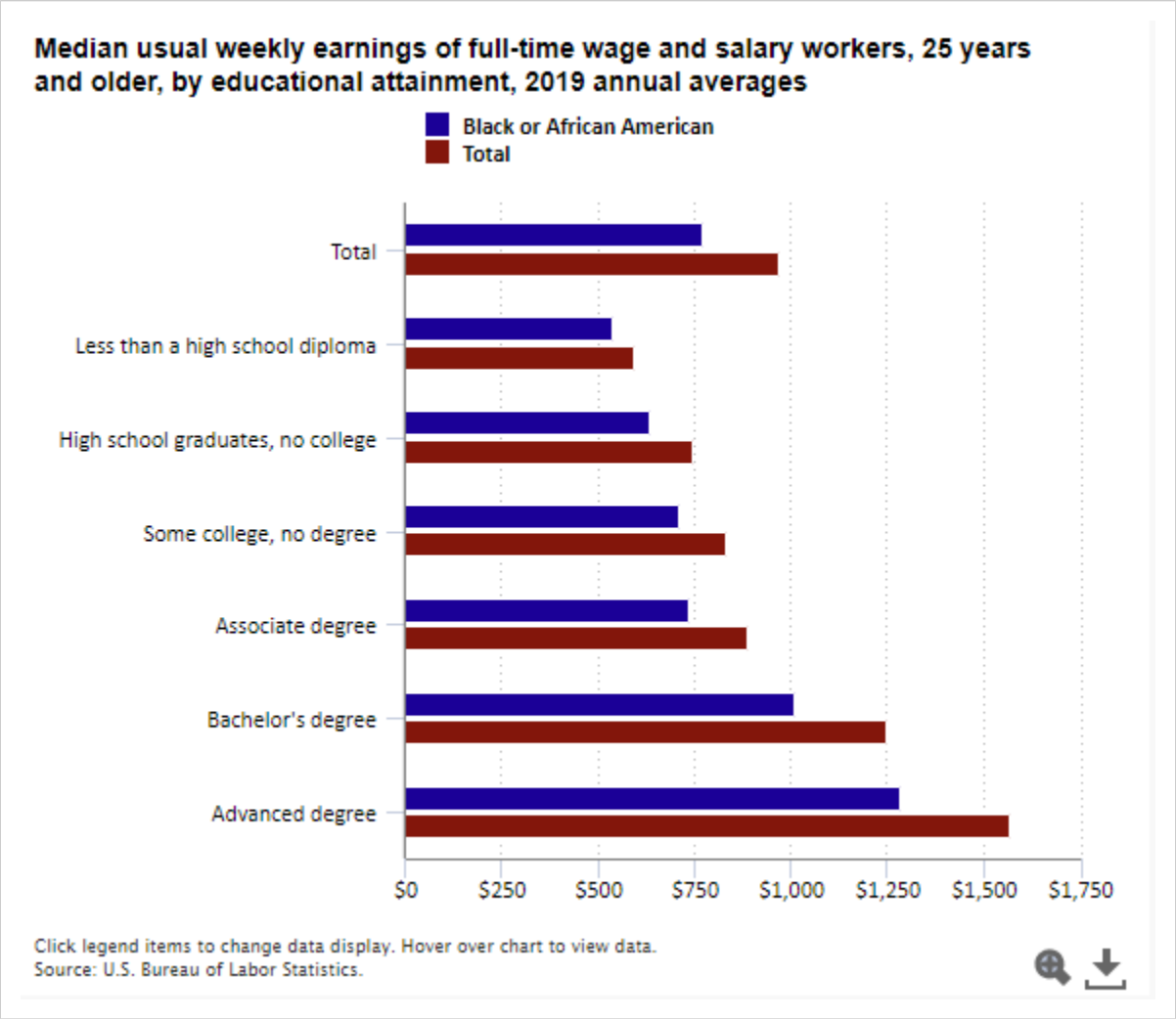
Labor force participation increases with educational attainment

Greater educational attainment is generally associated with a higher likelihood of labor force participation. In 2019, 77.9 percent of Blacks with an advanced degree (master's, professional, or doctoral degree) and 77.4 percent of Blacks with a bachelor's degree participated in the labor force, compared with 58.9 percent of Blacks with a high school diploma and 37.3 percent of Blacks with less than a high school diploma.



Earnings increase with educational attainment

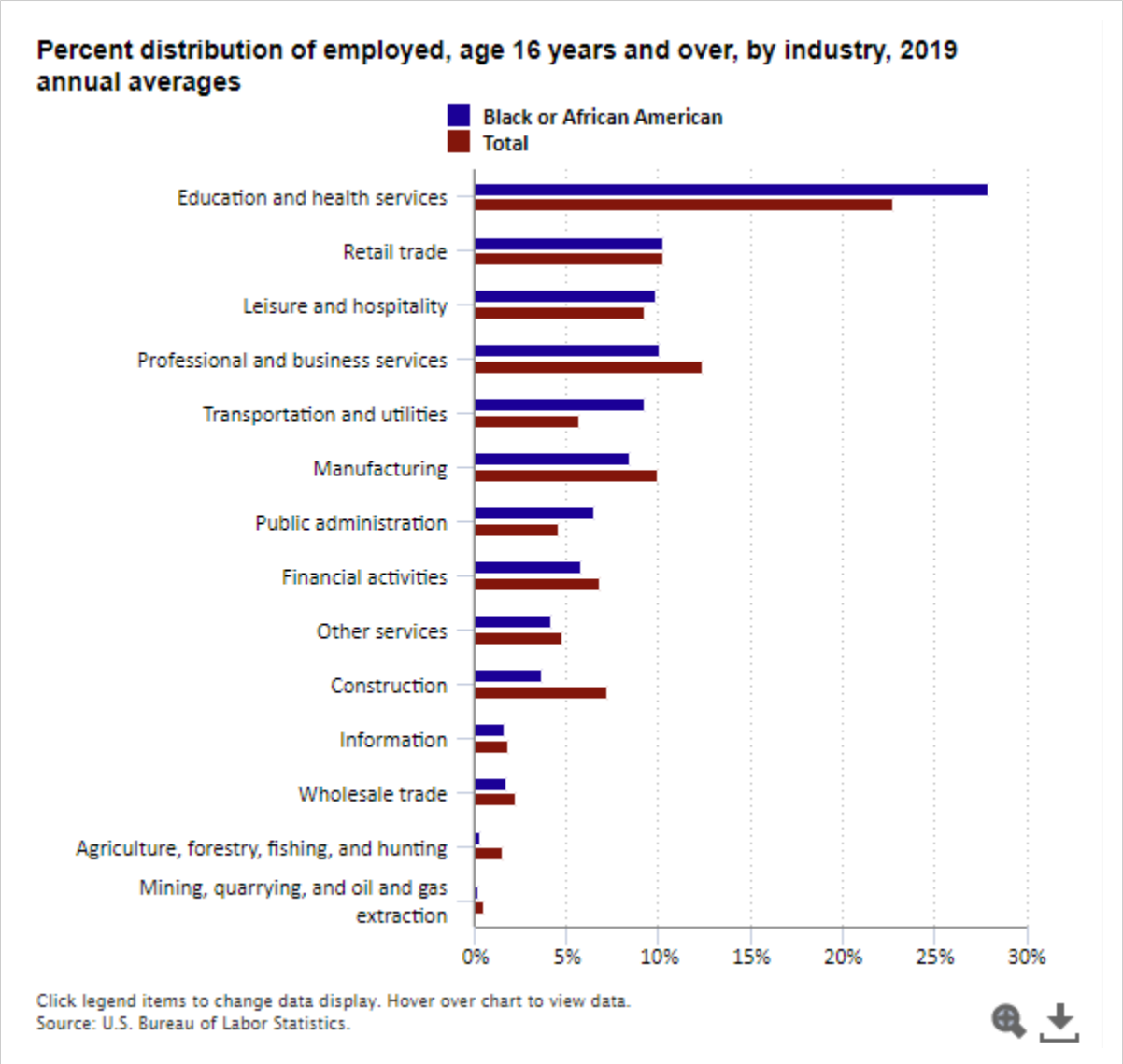
Greater educational attainment is also generally associated with increased earnings among the employed. Among full-time wage and salary workers, median weekly earnings of Blacks with an advanced degree ($1,284) were more than twice the earnings of Black high school graduates with no college education ($635) in 2019. Median earnings for Black workers were lower than the median earnings of workers overall at all levels of educational attainment.



More than a quarter of employed Blacks work in education and health services

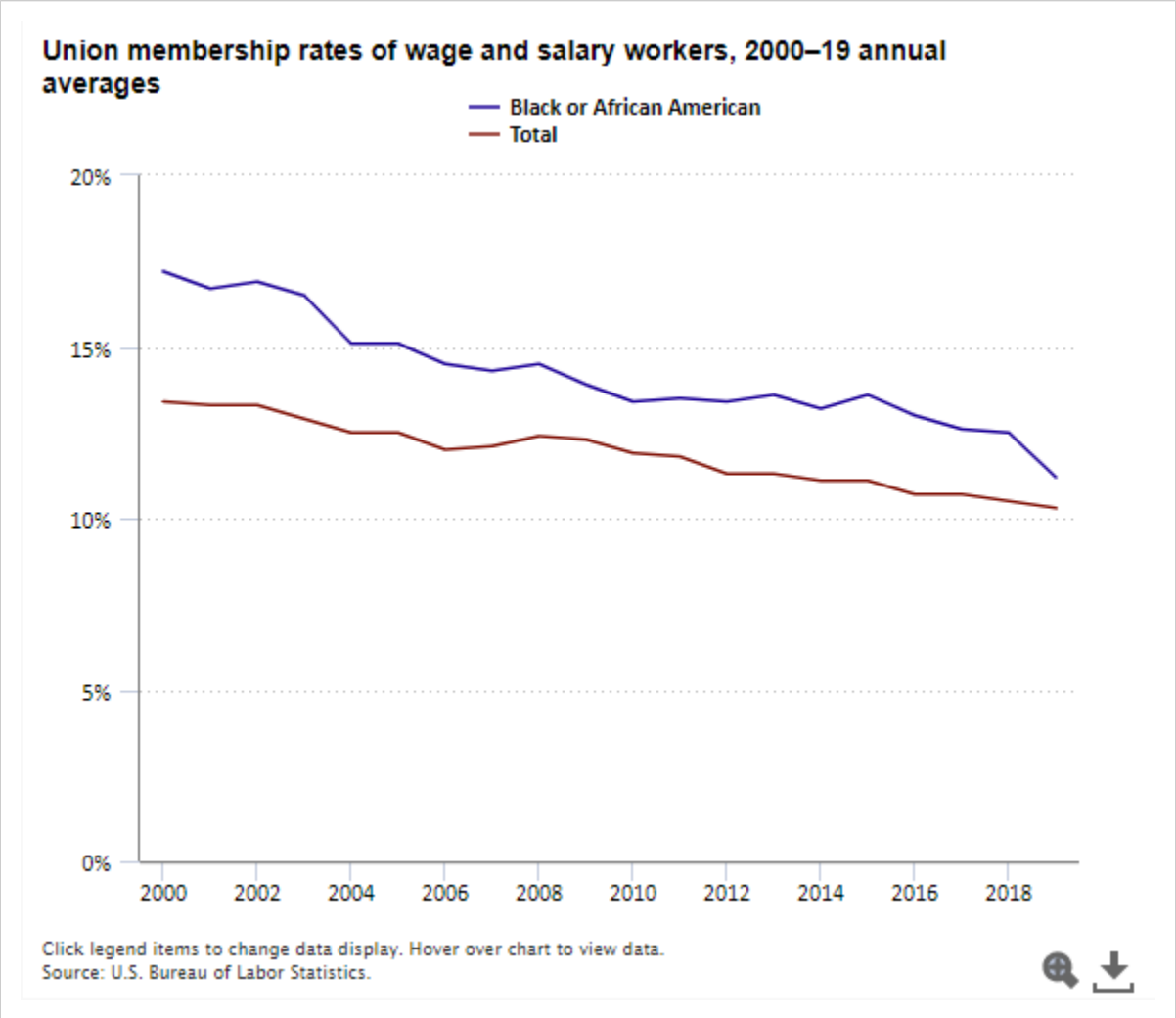
In 2019, 28 percent of employed Blacks worked in the education and health services industry, higher than the national average for that industry (23 percent). Another one-fifth of employed Blacks worked in retail trade (10 percent) and in leisure and hospitality (10 percent).

Employed Blacks were less likely to work in professional and business services, manufacturing, and construction than were employed people overall.



Black workers more likely to belong to a union

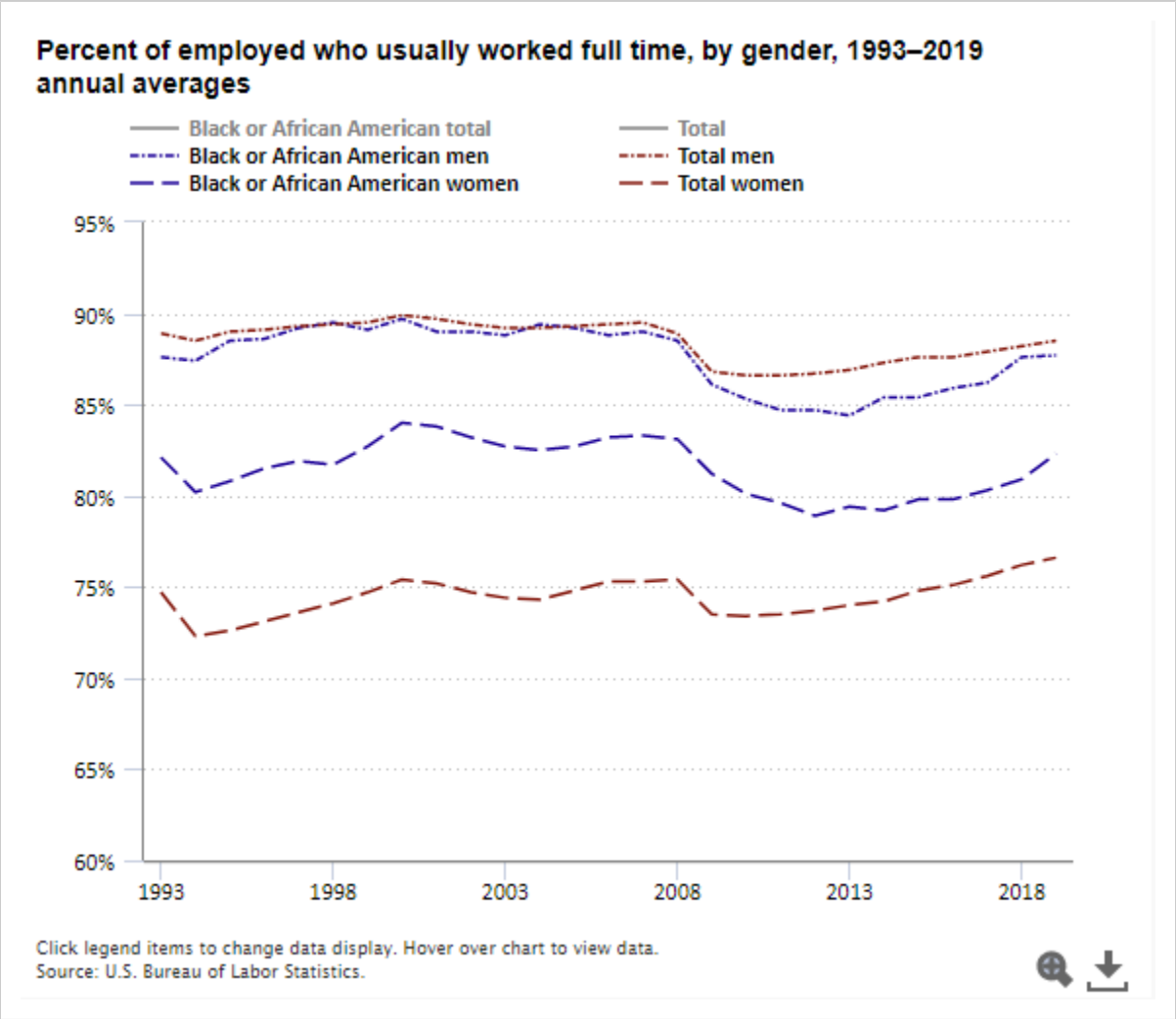
Historically, Black workers have had higher union membership rates than workers overall. The higher unionization rate for Blacks partially reflects their heavy representation in the public sector. Generally, workers in the public sector are more likely than those in private sector to be union members or represented by unions. In 2019, Black workers had a unionization rate of 11.2 percent, compared with 10.3 percent for all workers.



Black women more likely than all women to work full time

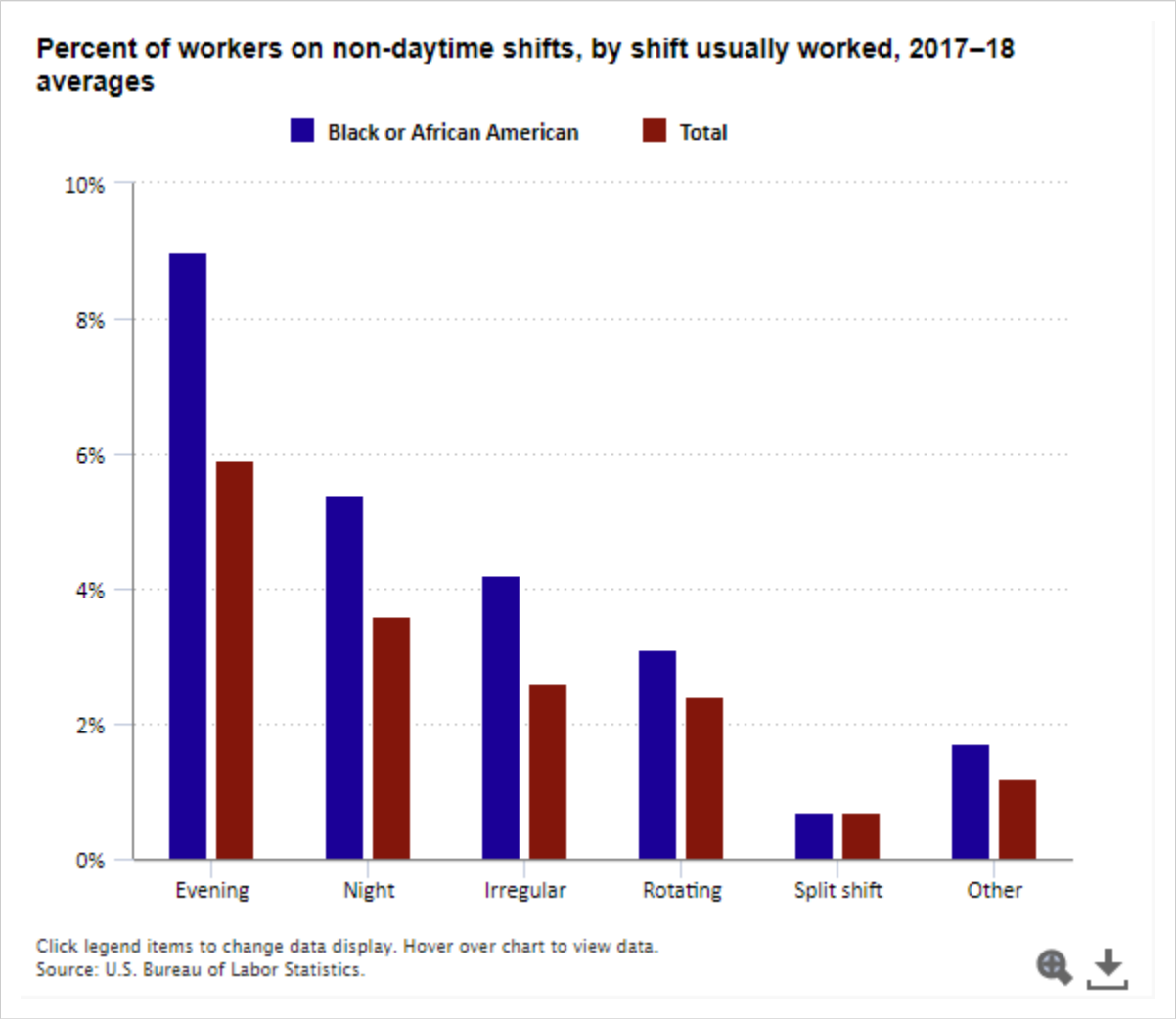
Employed Blacks have historically been more likely to work full time (35 hours or more per week) than all employed people. This reflects the fact that employed Black women are much more likely than employed women overall to work full time. For example, 82 percent of employed Black women usually worked full time in 2019, compared with 77 percent of employed women overall.

In contrast, the share of all employed men who work full time has historically been relatively close to that for Black men. In 2019, 88 percent of employed Black men usually worked full time; overall, 89 percent of employed men usually worked full time.



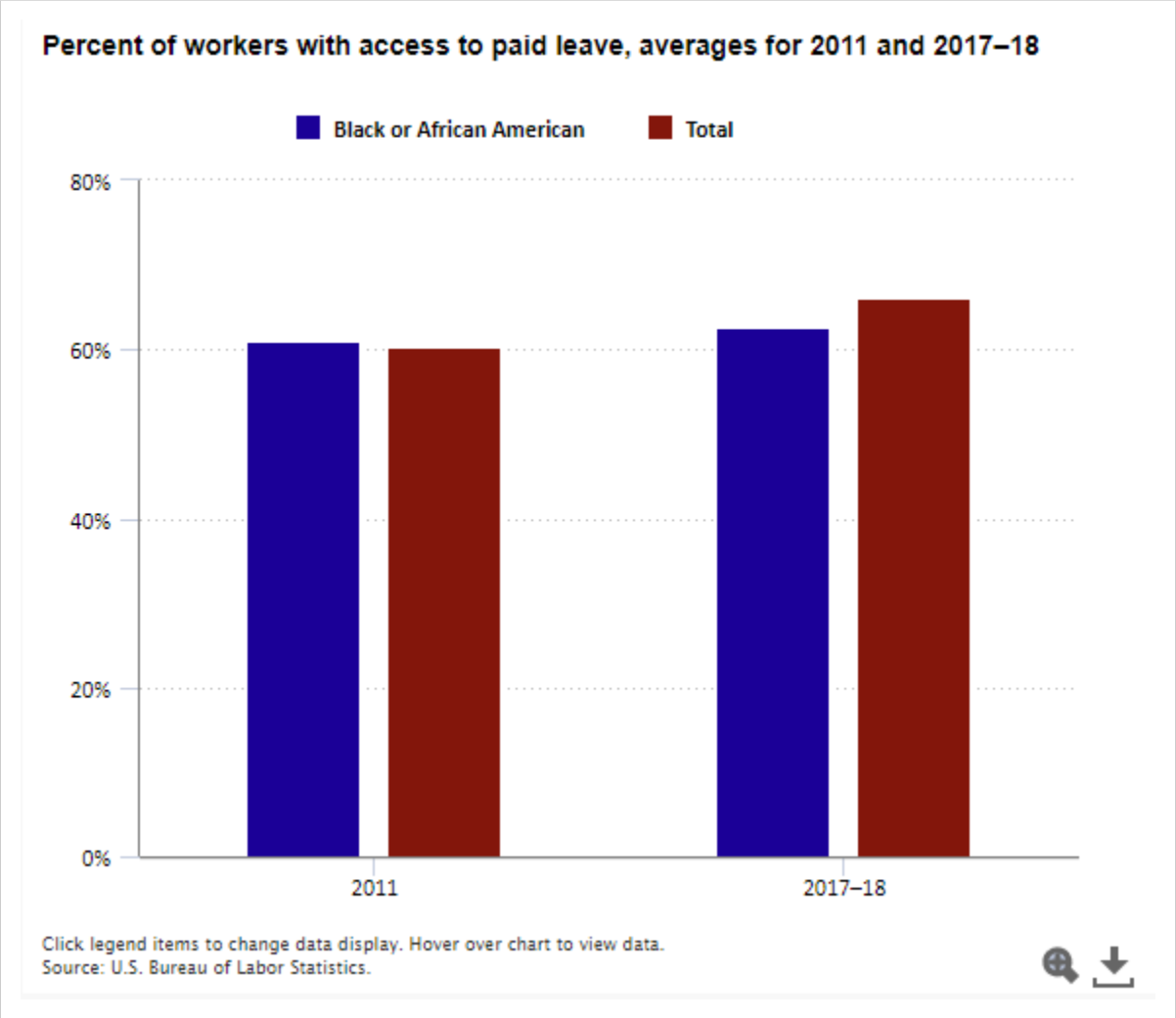
Blacks more likely than all workers to work non-daytime schedules

About one-fourth of Black wage and salary workers usually worked a non-daytime schedule in 2017–18, compared with 16 percent of all workers. Nine percent of Black workers usually worked evenings, 5 percent worked nights, and 4 percent worked an irregular schedule. The remaining Black workers had a rotating shift, split shift, or some other schedule.



Black workers less likely to have paid leave

In 2011, 61 percent of Black wage and salary workers and 60 percent of all wage and salary workers had access to paid leave. In 2017–18, 63 percent of Black workers had access to paid leave, compared with 66 percent of all wage and salary workers.

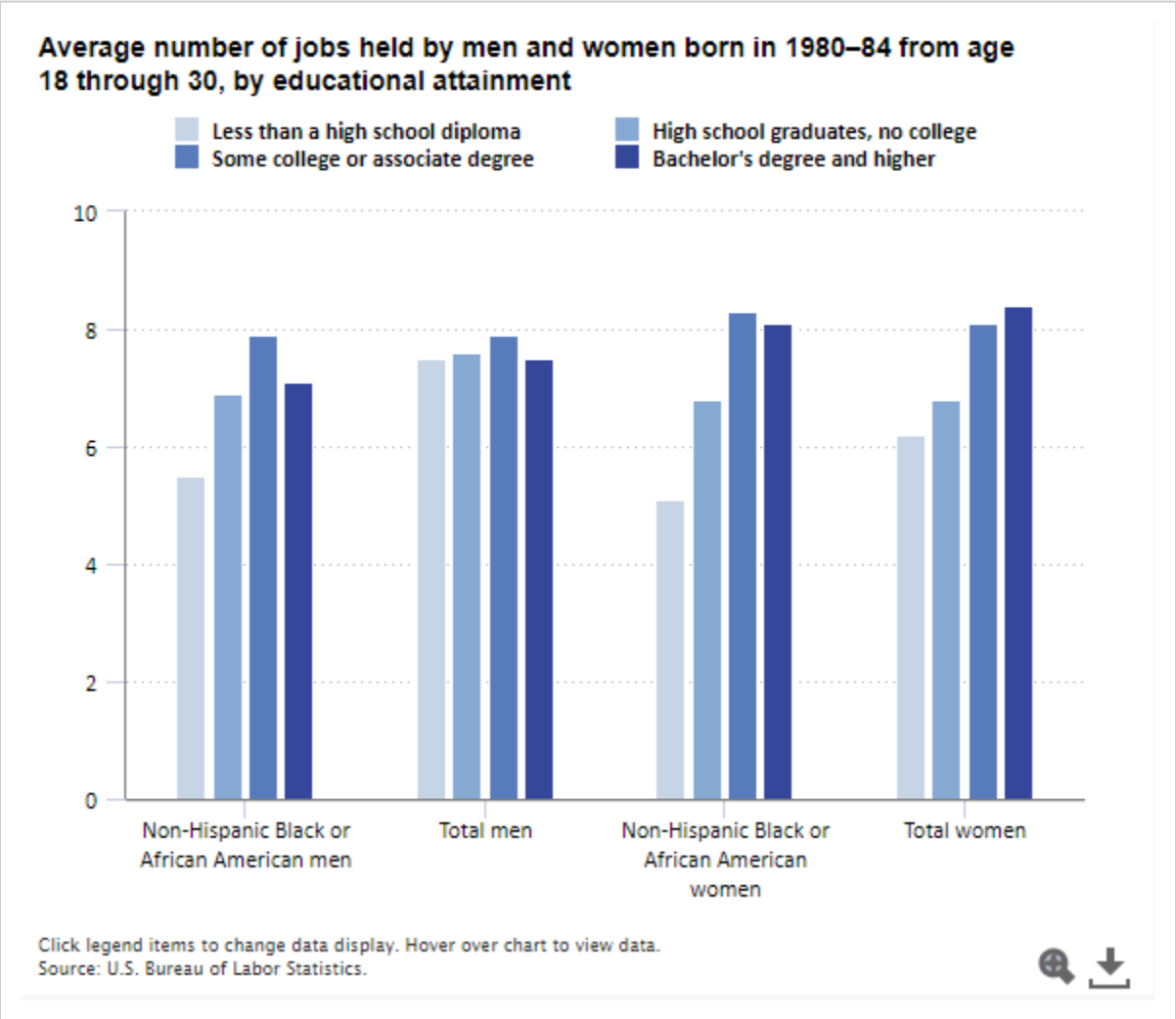


Black men and women with less than a high school diploma have held fewer jobs on average

Among people ages 18 through 30 with less than a high school diploma, Black men and women had held fewer jobs than men and women overall. Black men in this educational category held an average of 6 jobs, while Black women had an average of 5. Both were lower than the overall averages for men (8 jobs) and women (6 jobs) with less than a high school diploma. (These data were collected in 2015–16.)

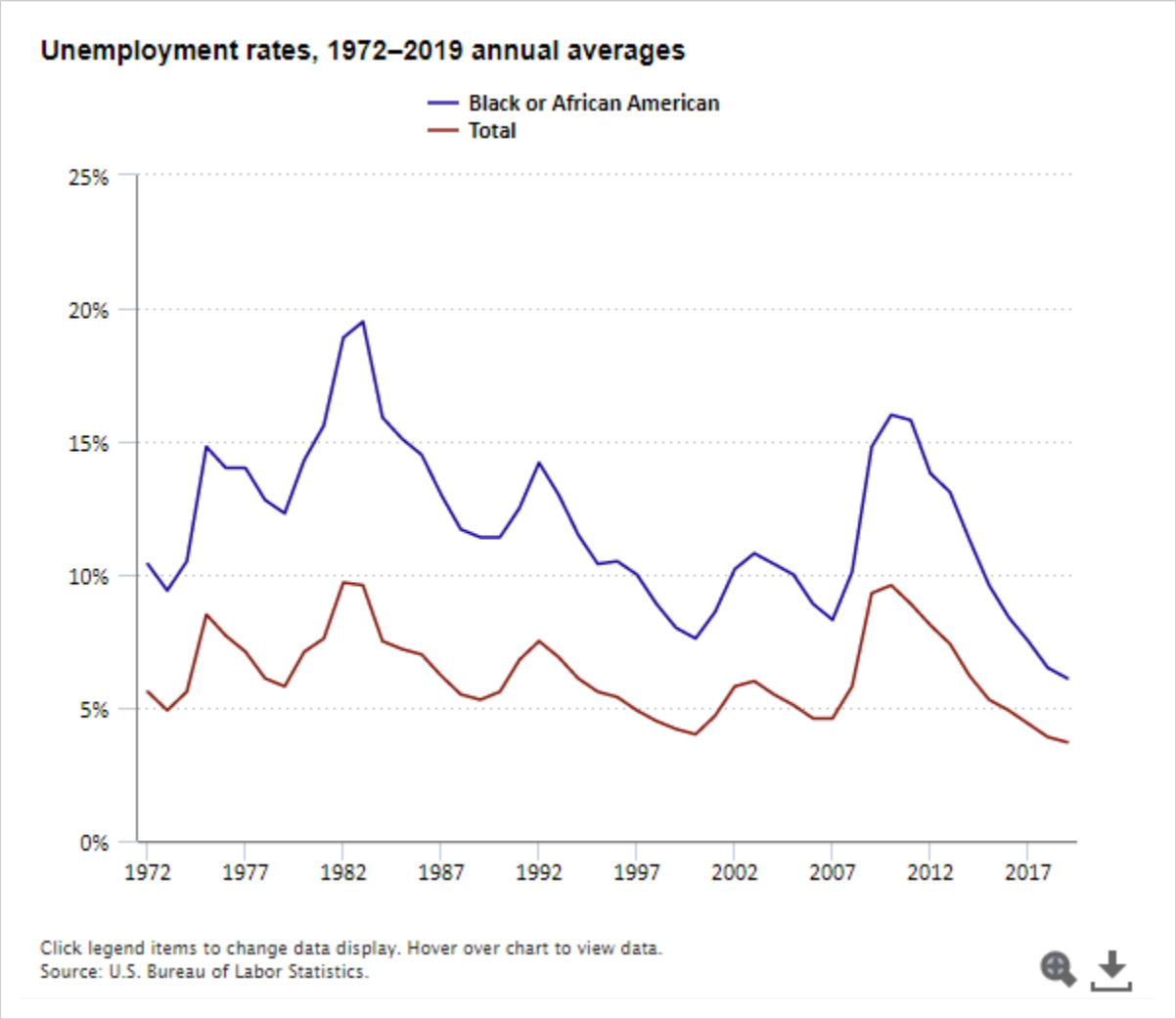
Black men with less than a high school diploma had held fewer jobs, on average, than Blacks with more education. By contrast, the average number of jobs held by men overall varied little by educational attainment.

For both Black women and women ages 18 through 30, those with a high school diploma or less held held fewer jobs, on average, than those with more education.



Black unemployment rate is higher than the national average

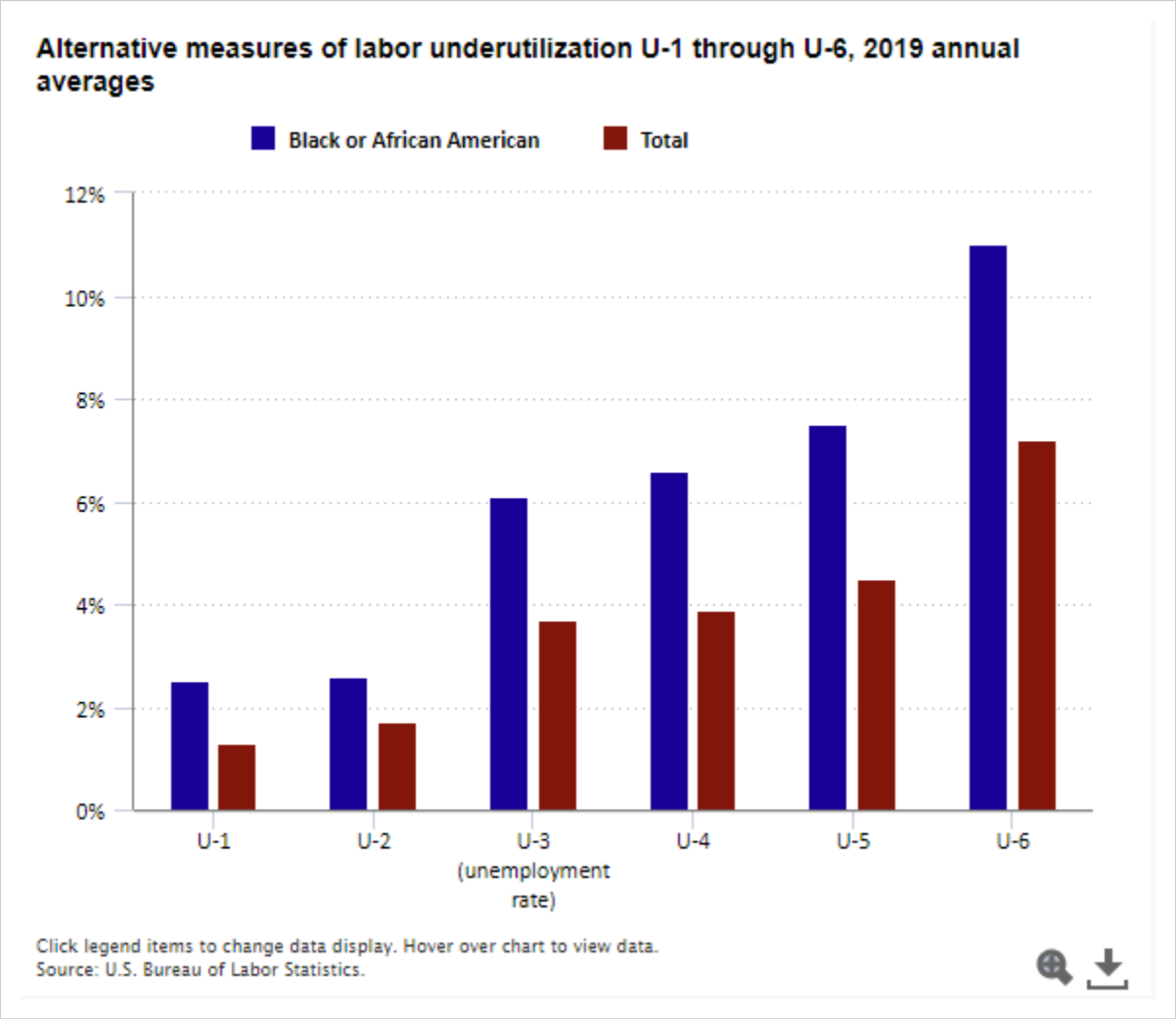
In 2019, the unemployment rate for Blacks was considerably higher than the overall rate of 3.7 percent. The unemployment rate for Blacks was 6.1 percent in 2019, the lowest annual average in the history of the series (which begins in 1972). Though higher, the unemployment rate for Blacks has generally followed the same pattern as the overall unemployment rate.



Black rates are higher at all alternative measures of labor underutilization

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) publishes various measures of unemployment and other labor market difficulties—known as the alternative measures of labor underutilization—which provide insight into a broad range of problems encountered by workers in today's labor market. Two of the alternative measures are more narrowly defined than the official unemployment rate, and three are defined more broadly.

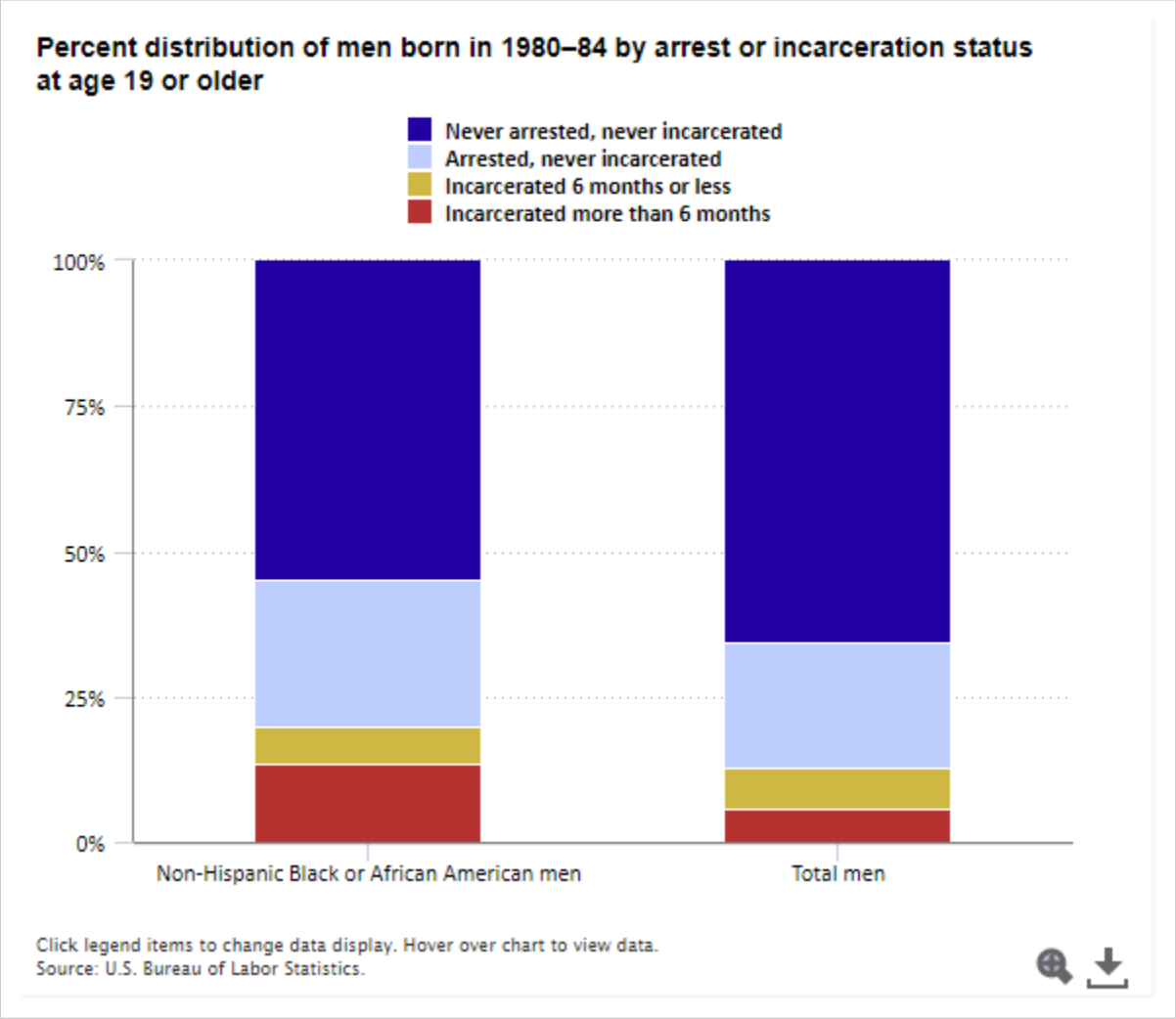
For all of the alternative measures, the rate for Blacks was higher in 2019 than for the population overall. The broadest alternative measure, U-6, was 11.0 percent for Blacks, compared with 7.2 percent for the overall population. The U-6 rate is defined as the sum of the unemployed, people who are marginally attached to the labor force, and those who are working part time for economic reasons, as a percentage of the labor force plus the marginally attached.



Non-Hispanic Black men more likely to be arrested or incarcerated

About two-thirds of men born in the years 1980–84 had never been arrested or incarcerated. This figure was lower for non-Hispanic Black men—55 percent. (These data were collected in 2015–16.)

In contrast, non-Hispanic Black men were more than twice as likely as men overall to have been incarcerated more than 6 months (14 percent, compared with 6 percent). Non-Hispanic Black men were also slightly more likely to have been arrested, but not incarcerated, than were men overall (25 percent and 22 percent, respectively).



For more information

Vernon Brundage is an economist in the Division of Labor Force Statistics, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. For questions about this Spotlight on Statistics, please email him at Brundage.Vernon@bls.gov.

Sources of data in this *Spotlight on Statistics:*

- The data in slides 2–10, 14 and 15 are from the Current Population Survey.
- The data in slides 11 and 12 are from the American Time Use Survey.
- The data in slides 13 and 16 are from the National Longitudinal Surveys.
- More information about alternative measures of labor underutilization (U-1 through U-6) shown in slide 15.

For more information about Blacks or African Americans, please see the following resources:

- Labor force characteristics by race and ethnicity, 2018
- National labor force statistics with demographic characteristics available from the Current Population Survey
- Employment of young men after arrest or incarceration
- Access to and Use of Leave Summary
- Job Flexibilities and Work Schedule Summary