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Census data show regional disparities in educational attainment

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We live in the Silicon Forest, but the landscape of educational attainment in the Portland region varies greatly from east to west and north to south.

Consider Orenco Station, a transit-oriented development midway between downtown Beaverton and downtown Hillsboro. According to newly released 2005-2009 American Community Survey (ACS) estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, about 39 percent of residents of the census tract that includes Orenco Station had at least a bachelor's degree. Not bad when you consider that just 27.5 percent of the U.S. population and 32.9 percent of the metropolitan area had a bachelor's or better but this corner of Washington County is Intel Corp. country, after all.

So where are the metroscape's best and brightest? Go east of Hillsboro, but not too far.

Census tracts with the highest educational attainment where upward of 75 percent of residents age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher were exclusively on the City of Portland's west side. This belt includes the West Hills neighborhoods, stretching from Forest Park to Hillsdale, as well as the southern edge of downtown near Riverplace/South Auditorium, and the Northwest District, west of NW 23rd Avenue.

Other census tracts with relatively high educational attainment where 65 to 75 percent of residents had a bachelor's degree or higher were found in Southwest and Northwest Portland, including the Pearl District. Similar percentages were found amid the Raleigh Hills/West Slope area of Washington County, Lake Oswego, and several Portland neighborhoods within one-to-three miles east of the Willamette River.

In Clark County, census tracts with the highest educational attainment were east of Interstate 205 in Fishers Landing and Camas. Between 50 and 55 percent of residents here had a bachelor's or better, according to ACS population and housing data collected between Jan. 1, 2005, and Dec. 31, 2009. Keep in mind that these survey data are estimates and carry margins of error (MOEs) that vary by census tract, with most MOEs within the range of 4 to 8 percent.

Washington County was a land of sharp contrasts. In the tract south of the Max line that passes Orenco Station in Hillsboro, just 11.9 percent of residents had a bachelor's degree or higher. North of Orenco, the percentage increased to 51.7. Head a few miles west of Hillsboro to Forest Grove, and the number dipped to 10.2 percent.

Clickable Map of Census Tracts



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey. 2005-2009.

The census data also show major change over time in some tracts.

Several census tracts with the largest increases of educational attainment are in North Portland, including Central St. Johns, where the share of residents with a bachelor's degree or higher increased from 5 percent in 1990, to 15 percent in 2000, to 36 percent within the five-year ACS period. In four contiguous tracts along I-5 and the Interstate Avenue MAX line in the Overlook, Arbor Lodge and Kenton neighborhoods, the population with a bachelor's degree or higher did not exceed 13 percent in 1990 and 19 percent in 2000. But according to 2005-2009 ACS estimates, the ranks of the college-educated living within this area is now about 40 percent.

Though not as dramatic as the growth in North Portland, several census tracts in Southeast Portland areas between 39th and 82nd Avenues that once had relatively low levels of educational attainment have recently made significant gains. Amid the Mt. Scott-Arleta, Foster-Powell, and Creston-Kenilworth neighborhood tracts, between 8 and 12 percent of residents age 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or higher in 1990. The figure surpassed 30 percent during the ACS period.

Large increases in educational attainment also occurred amid census tracts that include Portland's Pearl District and Vancouver's Esther Short Park. Both of these areas have benefited from high-density residential development since the 2000 census.

Most census tracts with the lowest levels of educational attainment where the share of residents age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher was 12 percent or less were clustered in four distinct areas: a crescent-shaped area in outer Southeast Portland, including portions of Portland's Brentwood-Darlington, Lents and Powellhurst-Gilbert neighborhoods, as well as Clackamas County's unincorporated Southgate community; a roughly four-square-mile-area east of 162nd Avenue that encompasses Gresham's Rockwood and North Gresham neighborhoods and portions of the Centennial neighborhoods along the Portland-Gresham border; the Central Vancouver neighborhoods of Harney Heights and Bagley Downs; and portions of East Vancouver and Orchards near Fourth Plain Road east of I-205. The share of residents in each of these areas with a bachelor degree or higher has changed very little since the 1990 and 2000 censuses.

Other census tracts with similarly low educational attainment where the share of residents age 25 and older with a bachelor's degree or higher was 12 percent or less include portions of Battle Ground (Clark County), Cornelius and Hillsboro (Washington County), St. Helens and Goble (Columbia County), Molalla (Clackamas County), Willamina/Sheridan (Yamhill County), Wood Village (Multnomah County), and in a downtown Portland census tract where a majority of residents are inmates of the Multnomah County Detention Center.

Educational attainment correlates with income, and it's interesting to view the relationships between educational attainment and poverty. To view the latest census data on poverty rates for the region, refer to the related article here.

