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Samuel S. Peng
(202) 254-7230

High School Dropouts:
Descriptive Information from High School and Beyond

About 14 percent of high school sophomores of 1980 left school during or after their sophomore year before completing requirements for graduation. By the spring of 1982, many of these dropouts (over 27 percent) were unemployed or dissatisfied with their work and were looking for work. The majority of those who worked full- or part-time were engaged in low-skilled jobs. Most of the dropouts regretted their decision to leave school prematurely.

These are some of the findings provided by High School and Beyond (HS&B), a longitudinal study sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The HS&B base-year survey was conducted in spring 1980, involving about 30,000 sophomores and 28,000 seniors in 1980 from a national representative sample of 1,015 schools. In spring 1982, subsamples of the original HS&B base-year survey sample were recontacted. These included 12,200 seniors of 1980, as well as all of those 1980 sophomores who remained in the same schools they attended during the 1980 base-year survey (i.e., in-school students). They also included about 50 percent of those sophomores who had left the schools they attended in 1980, including dropouts, transfers, and early graduates. The response rates were very high: 96 percent for in-school students, 92 percent for early graduates, 91 percent for transfers, and 88 percent for dropouts.

During the first follow-up survey, dropouts were first identified by schools and later were confirmed by the students themselves. The students were asked to complete a questionnaire inquiring about their reasons for dropping out, their plans, and their activities after leaving school. They were also asked to take cognitive tests, including reading, mathematics, science, civics, and writing. This analysis was based on the questionnaire data only.

The primary purpose of this analysis is to provide descriptive information about dropout rates by various subgroups, their reported reasons for dropping out, and some selected activities after leaving school.¹

¹Group differences cited in the text are statistically significant at the 0.05 level on the basis of two-tailed t tests.

High School Sophomore Dropout Rates

Some frequently asked questions about high school dropouts are: What percent of high school students drop out during or after their sophomore year? How do dropout rates vary by sex, racial/ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes (SES), and types of school (table 1).² (It should be noted that students who dropped out of school before the sophomore year were not included in the sample, and hence findings can be generalized only for the 1980 sophomores.)

Overall, in a 2-year span from spring 1980 to spring 1982, about 14 percent of the 1980 sophomores dropped out of school.³ In population numbers, this percentage represents over one-half million students. This dropout rate is consistent with estimates from previous studies.⁴ Most of these dropouts left school in the 11th grade (47 percent). About 29 percent left school in the 12th grade, and 24 percent left in the 10th grade (not shown in the table).

A breakdown by subgroups shows that male sophomores were more likely than female sophomores to drop out (15 vs. 13 percent, respectively). This sex difference occurred for all of the subgroups except the general high school program and the different "self-reported grades." Among the racial/ethnic groups, American Indians and Alaskan Natives had the highest dropout rates, over 29 percent. Hispanics and blacks (18 and 17 percent, respectively) had higher dropout rates than whites (12 percent), while only 3 percent of Asian Americans left school early.

Previous studies indicated that low socioeconomic (SES) background, poor academic performance, and non-academic program were related to higher dropout rates (e.g., Rumberger, 1981). HS&B data support this finding. As seen in table 1, low SES students had a higher dropout rate than high SES students; the corresponding dropout rates for the low, middle, and high SES students were 17, 9, and 5 percent, respectively. (The SES measure in this analysis is a

²Dropout rates are based on computation that involved the use of sampling weights to make adjustments for 1) unequal probabilities of students being included in the sample, and 2) differential response rates of varying key subgroups. Thus, the results are unbiased estimates of population values.

³The first follow-up data collection took place between February 20 and June 25, 1982. It was possible that some respondents could have dropped out within this period after they had returned their questionnaires. However, the number is believed to be very small, and thus it will not change the estimates significantly.

⁴For example, see Rumberger, R. W., "Why Kids Dropout of Schools," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Los Angeles, California, April 12-17, 1981.

Table 1.--1980 high school sophomores who dropped out before graduation,
by sex and selected background variables

Background variable	Male	Female	Total
		Percent	
All students	14.7	12.6	13.6
Race/ethnicity			
American Indian & Alaskan Natives	27.2	31.8	29.2
Hispanic	18.1	18.0	18.0
Black	20.3	14.1	17.0
White	13.0	11.5	12.2
Asian American	3.5	2.7	3.1
Socioeconomic status			
High	7.0	3.2	5.2
Middle	9.6	8.3	9.0
Low	17.8	17.1	17.4
Unknown	32.3	30.9	31.6
Community type			
Urban	20.8	17.0	18.9
Suburban	12.5	11.0	11.8
Rural	13.6	12.0	12.8
Geographic region			
Northeast	13.4	9.0	11.3
North Central	12.2	11.7	12.0
South	16.4	14.0	15.2
West	17.0	16.3	16.6
High school program			
Academic	4.5	3.6	4.0
General	12.7	13.0	12.9
Vocational-tech.	16.9	13.2	15.1
School type			
Public	15.5	13.6	14.5
Catholic	3.2	1.6	2.3
Other private	--	--	--
Self-reported grade			
Mostly A's	2.0	3.5	2.9
Mostly B's	7.8	8.4	8.1
Mostly C's	18.1	19.1	18.5
Mostly D's	41.7	44.1	42.5

--Estimates are not presented because of a small sample size and a high non-response rate in the base-year survey.

- NOTES: 1. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.
2. Corresponding standard errors and sample sizes for entries in this table are included in appendix.

4 categories: school-related, family-related, peer-related, health-related, and other reasons (see table 2). (Respondents could mark all reasons that applied.)

Table 2.-- Reasons 1980 sophomore dropouts reported for leaving high school before graduation, by sex

Reasons	Male	Female
Percent		
School-related:		
1. Expelled or suspended	13.0	5.3
2. Had poor grades	35.9	29.7
3. School was not for me	34.8	31.1
4. School ground too dangerous	2.7	1.7
5. Didn't get into desired program	7.5	4.5
6. Couldn't get along with teachers	20.6	9.5
Family-related:		
1. Married or planned to get married	6.9	30.7
2. Was pregnant	N/A	23.4
3. Had to support family	13.6	8.3
Peer-related:		
1. Friends were dropping out	6.5	2.4
2. Couldn't get along with students	5.4	5.9
Health-related:		
1. Illness or disability	4.6	6.5
Other:		
1. Offered job and chose to work	26.9	10.7
2. Wanted to enter military	7.2	.8
3. Moved too far from school	2.2	5.3
4. Wanted to travel	7.0	6.5
Sample size		
	1,188	1,101

- Notes: 1. Students might report more than one reason.
2. Instruction for the computation of standard errors is included in appendix.
3. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.

A large percentage of female dropouts reported that they were homemakers (without other jobs) in the first week of February 1982 (about 32 percent). This was consistent with one of their major reasons for dropping out: "got married or planned to get married."

When asked about the kind of work they did for pay on their current or most recent job, dropouts frequently reported the kind of work that did not require much training. As table 4 shows, only about 14 percent of the males and 3 percent of the females reported doing skilled trade work. Other kinds of jobs often reported by males included: waiter (14 percent), manual laborer (12 percent), factory worker (11 percent), farm worker (9 percent), and gas station attendant (8 percent). For female dropouts, the most frequently cited job was working as a waitress (23 percent). This was followed by jobs as a store clerk (15 percent), baby sitter (14 percent), and office or clerical worker (10 percent).

Table 4. Work that 1980 sophomore high school dropouts did on their most recent job, by sex

Kind of work	Male	Female
	Percentage Distribution	
Total	100.0	100.0
Lawn work, odd jobs	6.0	2.9
Waiter, waitress	14.1	23.0
Baby sitting or child care	.1	14.0
Farm work	8.7	1.5
Factory work	10.9	8.0
Skilled trade	13.9	2.8
Other manual labor	12.1	8.1
Store clerk or salesperson	5.9	15.2
Office or clerical	1.2	10.2
Hospital or health	.9	2.5
Gas station, car wash	8.4	1.9
Delivery jobs	1.7	.4
Military	5.8	2.4
Other jobs	10.4	7.2
Sample size	1,188	1,101

Notes: 1. Columns may not add to 100.0 because of rounding.

2. Respondents were asked to choose the job that paid them the most per week if they had more than one kind of work.

3. Instruction for the computation of standard errors is included in appendix.

4. All percentages are based on computations using weights that made adjustments for non-response and unequal probabilities of sample selection.

Appendix

Standard errors (in percentage points) and sample sizes for entries in table 1.

Background variable	Male		Female		Total	
	Standard error (sample size)					
All students	.48	(13,905)	.45	(14,214)	.33	(28,119)
Race/ethnicity						
Black	1.55	(1,721)	1.25	(1,991)	.99	(33,712)
White	.56	(9,162)	.53	(9,383)	.38	(18,545)
Hispanic	1.21	(2,589)	1.24	(2,450)	.87	(5,039)
Asian American	2.01	(213)	1.78	(213)	1.34	(426)
American Indian & Alaskan Natives	5.65	(159)	6.34	(138)	4.22	(297)
Socioeconomic status						
High	.70	(3,356)	.52	(2,956)	.45	(6,312)
Middle	.61	(5,931)	.56	(6,208)	.42	(12,139)
Low	1.15	(2,819)	1.02	(3,499)	.76	(6,318)
Unknown	1.76	(1,799)	1.88	(1,551)	1.29	(3,350)
Community type						
Urban	1.17	(3,080)	1.05	(3,304)	.78	(6,384)
Suburban	.64	(6,799)	.60	(6,961)	.44	(13,760)
Rural	.86	(4,026)	.83	(3,949)	.60	(7,975)
Geographic region						
Northeast	.98	(3,092)	.81	(3,189)	.64	(6,282)
North Central	.83	(3,960)	.81	(4,026)	.58	(7,986)
South	.90	(4,303)	.83	(4,499)	.61	(8,802)
West	1.17	(2,550)	1.18	(2,500)	.84	(5,050)
High school program						
Academic	.52	(4,144)	.44	(4,687)	.33	(8,831)
General	.71	(5,608)	.71	(5,751)	.50	(11,359)
Vocational-tech.	1.17	(2,622)	1.08	(2,497)	.80	(5,119)
School type						
Public	.52	(12,000)	.49	(12,411)	.36	(24,611)
Catholic	.82	(1,167)	.53	(1,449)	.47	(2,616)
Other private	--	--	--	--	--	--
Self-reported grade						
Mostly A's	.41	(4,148)	.45	(5,359)	.31	(9,507)
Mostly B's	.64	(5,553)	.64	(6,006)	.45	(11,559)
Mostly C's	1.13	(3,524)	1.38	(2,452)	.87	(5,976)
Mostly D's	3.42	(547)	4.72	(287)	2.77	(834)

Standard errors computation

The approximate standard error of a percentage (p) in this paper can be obtained by $s.e.(p) = D [p(100 - P)/n]^{1/2}$ where n is the sample size and D is a correction factor estimated to be 1.6. To contrast two subpopulation percentages, $d = P_1 - P_2$, the standard error of the difference, $s.e.(d)$, may be approximated by taking the square root of the sum of the squares of the standard errors for P_1 and P_2 ; that is, $s.e.(d) = [s.e.(p_1)^2 + s.e.(p_2)^2]^{1/2}$. The approximation will be conservative because of the exclusion of the covariance term for P_1 and P_2 in the estimation formula.