

Table 3 – Educational attainment

Technical notes updated on 24 October 2008

Table 3 presents population 15 years of age and over, by educational attainment, sex, age and urban/rural residence for each census between 1985 and 2004.

Description of variables: Statistics presented in this table are from population censuses. Data obtained from sample surveys are shown for those countries or areas where no census of the total population was held during the period. These have been footnoted accordingly. Unless otherwise indicated, data refer to the de facto (present-in-area) population.

Educational attainment is defined as the highest grade attained or the highest level completed by the person in the educational system of the country. A grade is a stage of instruction usually covered in the course of a school year¹. For international comparison, the 1997 International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED1997)² defined the levels of education from ISCED 0 to ISCED 6. ISCED1997 is the revised version of ISCED 1976³. The data published here are presented for units of completed grades in the first, second and third levels. In addition, categories are shown for "Level not stated" and for "Special education".

First level education corresponds to ISCED1. It customarily begins with the first year of compulsory education, which is usually between ages 5 and 7. This level covers typically six years of full-time schooling⁴. The first education level is a term which includes elementary school, primary school and so forth, but excludes nursery school, kindergarten, infant schools and the like, which are considered as preceding the first level for purposes of this table. Throughout ISCED 1 education level the programmes are organized in units or projects rather than by subjects. This is a principal characteristic differentiating programmes at this level in most countries from those at the second level.

Second level education consists of two stages: ISCED 2 and ISCED3. The first stage (ISCED2) begins at about age 11 or 12. The contents of education at this stage are typically designed to complete the provision of basic education which began at ISCED1 level. The second stage (ISCED3) typically begins at the end of full-time compulsory education for those countries that have a system of compulsory education. More specialization may be observed at this stage than at the first stage of the second level and often teachers need to be more qualified or specialized than for ISCED level 2. The entrance age to this level is typically 15 or 16 years⁵. Included in this level are programs for semi skilled and skilled jobs, apprenticeship programs, vocational programs and in some countries, teacher-training programs.

Third level education corresponds to ISCED levels 5 and 6. It begins at the end of ISCED levels 3 or 4⁶. It includes programmes offered in universities, teachers colleges, and higher professional schools.

Within each level, grades are classified as follows: 1 through 5, 6 and over, and grade not stated. In addition, a category is provided for persons who have completed less than the first grade at the first level. This category includes those who have received no schooling.

Age is defined as age at last birthday, that is, the difference between the date of birth and the reference date of the age distribution expressed in completed solar years. The age classification in this table is the following: 15 years and over, 15-19, 20-24, 10-year groups through 55-64 years, and 65 years and over and age unknown.

Data on the educational attainment of the school-age population are not meaningful unless they are cross-classified by school attendance. This table has, therefore, been limited to population 15 years of age and over. However, the link between educational attainment and school attendance of individuals should be made with caution.

The urban/rural classification is that provided by each country or area; it is presumed to be based on the national definitions of urban population that have been set forth at the end of table 6.

Reliability of data: No special reliability codes have been used in connection with this table.

¹ UNESCO, Revised recommendations concerning the International Standardization of Educational Statistics (20C/33).

² UNESCO/UIS, International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 1997

(http://www.uis.unesco.org/ev.php?ID=3813_201&ID2=DO_TOPIC)

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Limitations: Statistics on population 15 years of age and over, by educational attainment, sex and age are subject to the same qualifications as have been set forth for population statistics in general in section 3 of the Technical Notes.

Errors in national census data can arise at any stage of the collection processing or presentation process, and these errors may limit the quality and international comparability of census statistics presented in the Demographic Yearbook. Two major types of errors in census data are often distinguished: first, coverage errors, which lead to the over-enumeration or under-enumeration of the population in the census, and second, content errors, which affect the accuracy of the recorded information for the covered population.

Because coverage errors may occur more frequently among some population sub-groups than others, coverage errors may affect not only the absolute number of persons in any given category but also their relative distribution. Levels and patterns of coverage and content errors differ widely among countries and even, at times, from census to census for a specific country. Further limiting the international comparability of census statistics are variations among countries in the concepts, definitions and classifications used in their censuses.

The difficulties of obtaining internationally comparable statistics on level of education are due in large part to the diversity in the structure of the national educational systems and in the duration of training possible in each level of education. A detailed discussion of the nature of this diversity is presented in the International Standard Classification of Education.⁷ It is evident from this analysis that international comparability of these statistics is not possible in terms of levels alone. The duration of secondary education, in turn, varies greatly from one country to another, depending mainly on the duration of the preceding primary education. Because of this, as can be seen in the above-mentioned Classification, the diversity at the second level is more marked than that at the first level. When it is recalled that some distributions are limited to level only, with no subdivision by grade, it will be seen that the degree of comparability is a matter of conjecture.

Variation in the type of question on which the statistics are based, and in the kind of tabulations made, is also a factor in comparability. In some cases, the question on educational attainment was asked in terms of types of diplomas or certificates received; in others, tabulations referred to only a segment of the population, for example, to those having completed their education or to the literate population. Whenever it was possible to do so, coverage differences of this type and the assumptions made on the basis of these are explained in a footnote.

The differences between countries in the concept of what constitutes "second level" and "third level" education also impair comparability to some extent. Vocational, trade and technical schools may be counted as second level in some countries and as third level in others. The allocation of teacher training schools also presents problems, as does the treatment of schools not part of the regular educational system.

Because these statistics are classified according to age, they are subject to the limitations with respect to accuracy of age reporting similar to those already discussed in connection with section 3.1.3 of the Technical Notes.

The comparability of data by urban/rural "residence is affected by the national definitions of urban and rural used in tabulating these data. When known, the definitions of urban used in national population censuses are presented at the end of table 6. As discussed in detail in the Technical Notes for table 6, these definitions vary considerably from one country or area to another.

Coverage: Population 15 years of age and over, by educational attainment, sex and age is shown for 54 countries or areas. Data are presented by urban/rural residence for 13 countries or areas.

Earlier data: Population by educational attainment and by sex has been shown previously in issues of the Demographic Yearbook featuring population census statistics as the special topic. This series updates information published in previous issues as indicated in the Index.

The age variable was introduced in the 1971 issue and has been shown again in each subsequent issue. Data have been presented by urban/rural residence beginning in the 1971 issue.

⁷ Ibid.