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SAT scores show disparities by race, gender, family income

By [Mary Beth Marklein](#), USA TODAY

Average national SAT scores for the high school class of 2009 dropped two points compared with last year, a report out today says. And while the population of test takers was the most diverse ever, average scores vary widely by race and ethnicity.

On one end, students who identified themselves as Asian, Asian-American or [Pacific](#) Islander posted a 13-point gain. On the other end, students who identified themselves as Puerto Rican posted a 9-point drop in average scores.

The SAT's owner, the nonprofit [College Board](#), highlighted the 40% minority participation rate among test-takers this year, up from 38% last year and 29.2% in 1999. Also up from previous years: More than a third of students say they are first-generation college students whose parents never went to college, and more than a quarter said English is not their first language.

"We are tremendously encouraged by the increasing diversity," said College Board president [Gaston Caperton](#). "More than ever, the SAT reflects the diversity of students in our nation's classrooms."

The report also noted that scores often decrease when a larger, more diverse pool of students take the test, so the relative stability is "a good sign," says Laurence Bunin, senior vice president.

But Bob Schaeffer, spokesman for the National Center for Fair & Open Testing, a critic of standardized tests, says that what stands out to him "is widening gaps of all sorts — race, gender and income — at a time when the nation is spending billions of dollars allegedly trying to close those gaps. The promise of No Child Left Behind and of many high-stakes state testing programs is that testing is going to improve educational quality. That's not what the data show."

The differences in total SAT scores by ethnicity was most extreme between Asian students (who had an average total score of 1623 out of a possible 2400) and black students (who averaged 1276, a four-point drop). Puerto Rican students averaged 1345. The national average was 1509. Top score is 800 in each of the three SAT sections.

Total scores also dropped two points for white students (who averaged 1581) and Mexican and Mexican American students (who averaged 1362). They increased two points for American Indian or Alaskan natives (average score 1448).

Disparities in scores by gender and income also widened:

- Average scores dropped 5 points for females and 2 points for males. While females represent more than half (53.5%) of test takers, their total average score (1496) is 27 points below the average score for males (1523).

- The highest average score of all (1702, up 26 points) was posted by students who said their families earned more than \$200,000 a year. Students who reported family incomes of less than \$20,000 a year averaged 1321, up 1 point.

The report's analysis notes that students who had completed a core curriculum, taken their school's most rigorous courses and familiarized themselves with the test were among the strongest performers.

For example, students who took an Advanced Placement or honors math course scored an average of 79 points above the national average math score. And students who had previously taken the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test scored 121 points higher on average than those who did not take the test.

But Caperton stressed that not all students have access to such programs.

"As a country we must do better at providing students of every background equal access to education, equal access to the best teachers, and equal access to the best counseling," he said.

SAT: CRUNCHING THE NUMBERS

- 1707:** Average for AP, honors students
- 1702:** Average for students reporting family incomes of more than \$200,000 a year
- 1623:** Average for Asian students
- 1581:** Average for white students
- 1506:** Average for students reporting family incomes of \$60,000-\$80,000 a year
- 1448:** Average for American Indian or Alaskan native students
- 1364:** Average for Latino students
- 1276:** Average for Black students

AVERAGE SCORES, BY SUBJECT

Top score is 800 in each SAT section:

- Critical reading**
- Average score: **501**
 - Females: **498**
 - Males: **503**

- Math:**
- Average score: **515**
 - Females: **499**
 - Males: **534**

- Writing:**
- Average score: **493**
 - Females: **499**
 - Males: **486**

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