

**Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate  
Georgetown University  
Washington, DC**

**Catholic Deacons' Formation  
in the United States:  
Statistical Overview**



**July 2021**

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CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States.

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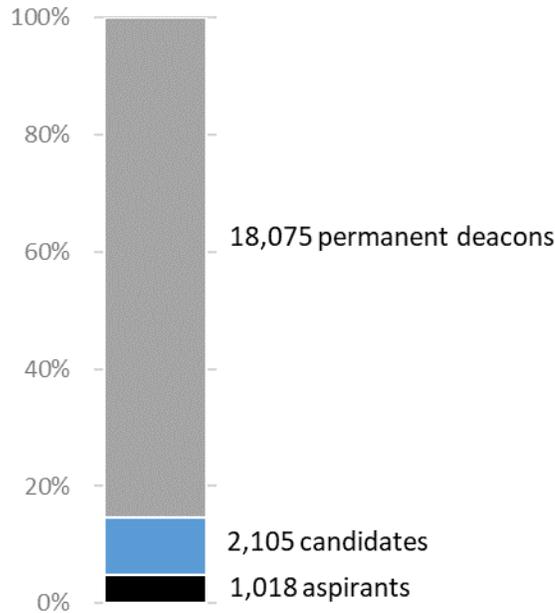
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## Overall Trends

### Number of Aspirants, Candidates, and Permanent Deacons

The number of permanent deacons in the United States has grown steadily since the restoration of this ministry in the years following the Second Vatican Council. According to the Official Catholic Directory, in 2020 (the most recent year available), there were 18,075 permanent deacons.<sup>1</sup> This number represents a decrease of 118 deacons (1%) from previous year. Based on the trend since 2003, there will be projected 19,478 permanent deacons  $\pm$ 960 (CI=95%) in 2026.

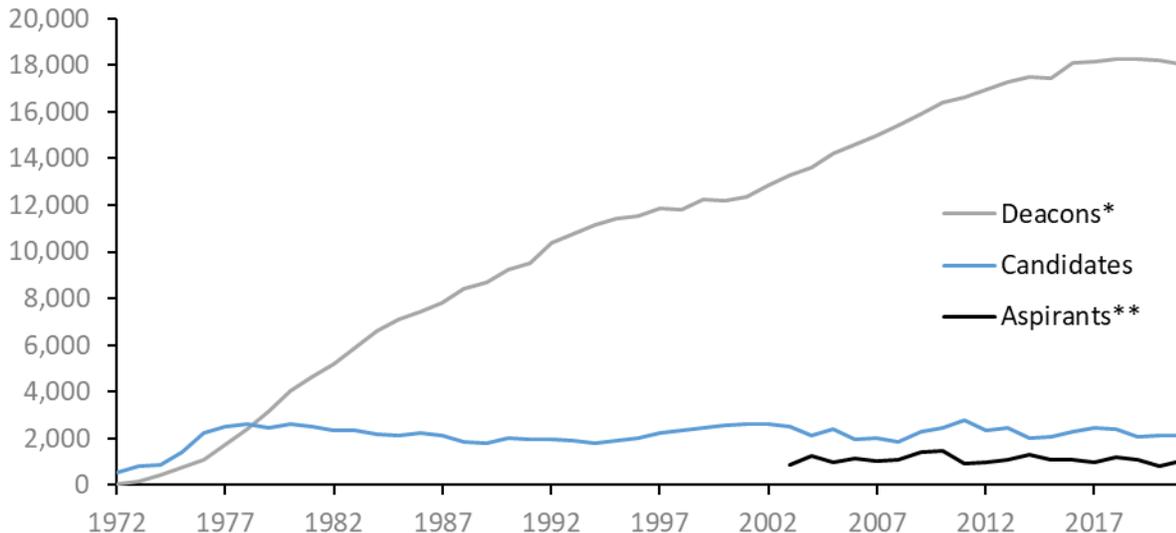
**Number of Aspirants, Candidates, and Permanent Deacons, 2020-2021**



In the academic year 2020-2021, 124 programs reported 2,105 candidates to permanent diaconate. This is a decrease of 50 candidates (2%) from previous year. Based on the trend since 2002-2003, there will be projected 2,135 candidates  $\pm$ 708 (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Furthermore, 74 programs reported 1,018 aspirants to permanent diaconate. This number represents an increase of 178 aspirants (21%) from previous year. Based on the trend since 2002-2003, there will be projected 897 aspirants  $\pm$ 445 (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

**Number of Aspirants, Candidates, and Permanent Deacons, 1972-2021**



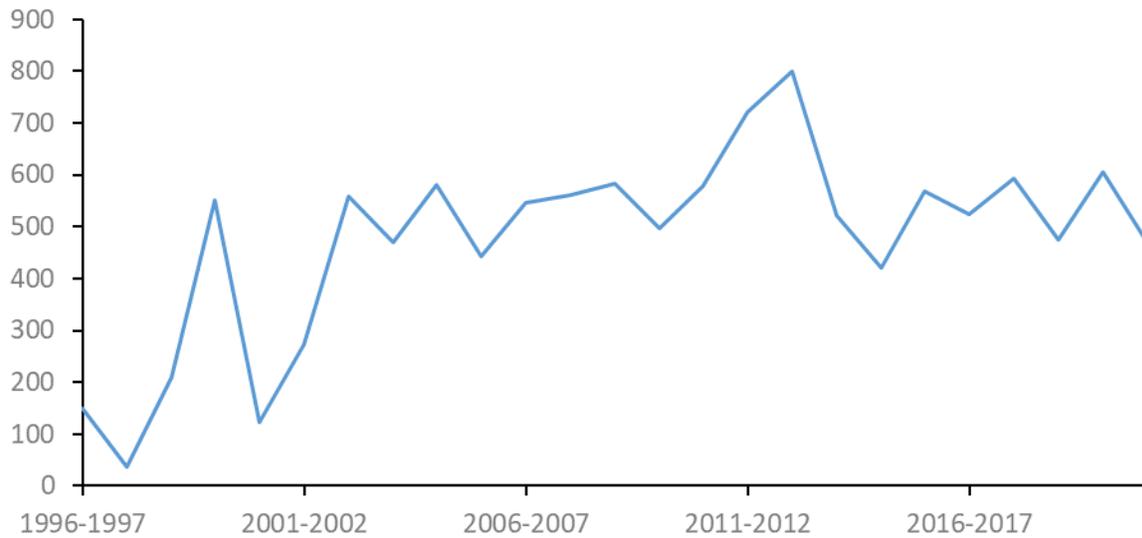
\*The data on the number of deacons comes from the Official Catholic Directory.

\*\*CARA first asked programs to report the number of aspirants in 2002-2003.

## Number of Anticipated Ordinations

During the 2020-2021 academic year, there were 473 anticipated ordinations to permanent diaconate. This is a decrease of 133 anticipated ordinands (22%) from previous year. As illustrated in the chart below, ordinations follow the cyclic pattern found in many diaconate formation programs, which often accumulate aspirants for several years and then create a candidacy class who go through formation together.

**Number of Anticipated Ordinations to Permanent Diaconate, 1997-2021**



## **Characteristics of Diaconate Formation Programs**

### **General Overview**

Diaconate formation programs vary considerably according to local needs and situations. Overall, 17 dioceses or eparchies include deacon candidates from other dioceses or eparchies in their program, often to accommodate dioceses that are in the process of reorganizing or creating a new diaconate formation program.

### **Admission Requirements**

Diaconate formation programs differ in their requirements for admission, program duration and number of required courses, the frequency with which candidates meet, and tuition and fees. Average tuition per academic year among the 109 programs that report a charge for tuition is \$3,035 and the other fees reported by 72 programs average \$515. Program costs are often shared by participants, parishes, and dioceses, with the largest share typically paid by the diocese (on average, 69%).

Typical admission requirements include a period of discernment, recommendation by the candidate's pastor, the support of the candidate's wife, letters of reference, psychological testing, and multiple interviews. Overall, three in ten programs (30%) report requiring the MMPI-1 and seven in ten (69%) require the MMPI-2 for admission. Furthermore, one in five (18%) require the Deacon Perceiver, and one third (32%) require clinical interview. Although many programs do not specify academic prerequisites, some stipulate a high school/equivalency diploma or college degree. Overall, a quarter (26%) report that deacon candidates must complete a lay ministry formation program as a prerequisite for diaconate formation and one third (33%) of the programs include lay ministry formation as a part of the diaconate formation program.

### **Language of Instruction**

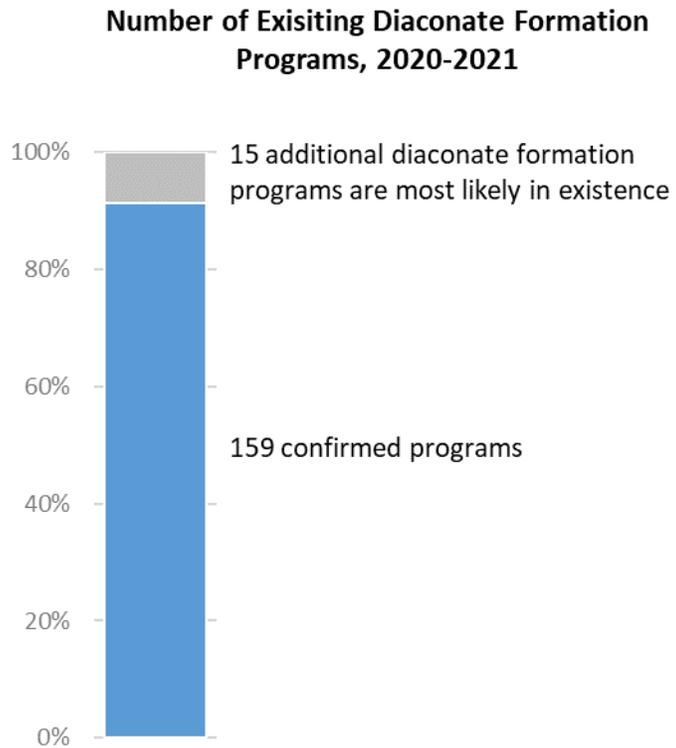
A total of 42 programs offer formation in both Spanish and English, including the Archdiocese of Chicago, which has an administratively separate diaconate formation program in Spanish. Some programs provide separate English-language and Spanish-language tracks within the same program and others conduct some of their classes in Spanish. Additionally, four provide instruction in other languages or train candidates to serve particular ethnic or cultural groups: Rural Deacon Program in the Diocese of Fairbanks conducts its programs in Yupik, the Permanent Diaconate Program in the Diocese of Birmingham conducts its programs in Spanish (homiletics only), Office of Ministries in the Eparchy of Our Lady of Lebanon of Los Angeles conducts its programs in Arabic, Office of Diaconate Formation in the Eparchy of Stamford (Ukrainian) conducts its programs in Ukrainian.

### **Ordination Requirements**

Deacon candidates typically meet one or two evenings or weekends in a month for an average of 152 hours annually in the classroom. They also spend 90 hours in pastoral training annually. Program length ranges from 3 years to 6 years, with an average length of 4.7 years. Shorter programs typically stipulate the prior completion of a ministry formation program.

## Number of Diaconate Formation Programs

In 2020-2021 academic year, CARA obtained enrollment data from 159 identified diaconate formation programs. These programs currently exist in 48 states (all except for Delaware, Utah) and in the District of Columbia. These programs are found in 158 of the 196 dioceses and eparchies whose bishops belong to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Overall, 4 directors indicated that the program is on hold at this time or currently operated through another diocese, most often because of a change in bishops. Several other programs have been reactivated or newly formed within the last few years; others have been redesigned in light of the new norms for diaconate formation. Overall, 35 of the 159 responding programs report no deacon candidates for the 2020-2021



academic year, although 15 of those programs report that they have aspirants – men who are preparing to become deacon candidates. If the trend since 1996-1997 continues, there will be projected 189 diaconate formation programs  $\pm 24$  (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Additionally, there were 15 diaconate formation programs that are most likely in operation in 2020-2021 academic year, but that did not respond to the requests for updated information, thus they could not be included in the analysis presented in this report.

**Number of Confirmed Diaconate Formation Programs, 1997-2021**



## List of Formation Programs with Highest Enrollment

<b>Diaconate Formation Programs with Highest Enrollment, 2020-2021</b>			
	<b>Diaconate Candidates</b>	<b>Aspirants</b>	<b>Anticipated Ordinations in 2021</b>
	<b>[#]</b>	<b>[#]</b>	<b>[#]</b>
Archdiocese of San Antonio	74	16	18
Diocese of Galveston-Houston	71	61	23
Archdiocese of Los Angeles	61	19	19
Archdiocese of Newark	54	0	0
Diocese of Charleston	49	0	0
Diocese of Little Rock	48	0	0
Archdiocese of Denver	44	0	20
Diocese of Yakima	42	12	18
Archdiocese of Atlanta	40	8	6
Archdiocese of St. Louis	40	0	0
Archdiocese of Santa Fe	40	0	0
Archdiocese of Philadelphia	40	5	9
Diocese of San Bernardino	34	7	11
Archdiocese of Chicago (program in English)	34	5	10
Diocese of Rockford	34	13	15
Diocese of Brooklyn	32	16	10
Archdiocese of Chicago (program in Spanish)	31	8	11
Diocese of Pittsburgh	30	0	1
Archdiocese of Oklahoma City	27	0	0
Diocese of Tucson	26	0	26

The table above displays 20 largest diaconate formation programs in terms of their total number of diaconate candidates. In total, these 20 programs enroll 851 deacon candidates (40% of all deacon candidates) and have another 170 aspirants in discernment (17% of all aspirants). These 20 programs expect to ordain 197 deacons (42% of all deacon ordinations expected in 2021).

## Active Diaconate Formation Programs

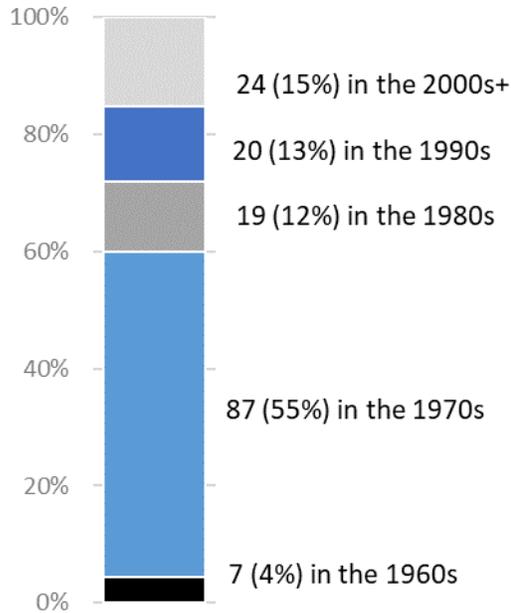
In the 2020-2021 academic year, there were 159 active diaconate formation programs. All of them reported the year that their program was organized. The average year of organization was 1983. Overall, three in five programs were organized in the 1960s (4%) and in the 1970s (55%).<sup>2</sup> The share of these programs declined from 64% in 2003-2004 to 54% in 2013-2014. It later rebounded increasing steadily to 59% in the 2020-2021 academic year.

A quarter of the programs were organized in the 1980s (12%) and in the 1990s (13%).

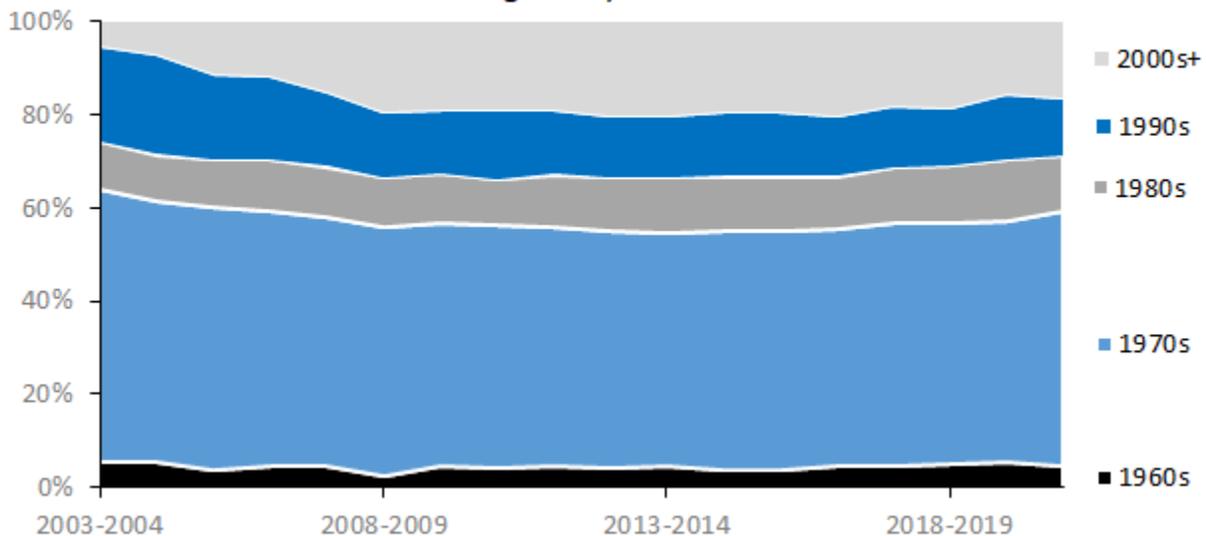
The remaining one in seven programs was organized in 2000 and later (15%). The share of these programs grew from 5% in the 2003-2004 academic year to 20% in the 2016-2017 academic year.

In the following years, their share declined to 15%, which may be an indication that some of the newer less established programs had to close.

**Distribution of Diaconate Formation Programs, by Decade When Organized, 2020-2021**



**Distribution of Diaconate Formation Programs, by Decade When Organized, 2004-2021**



## Profile of Diaconate Candidates

### Age Distribution and Marital Status

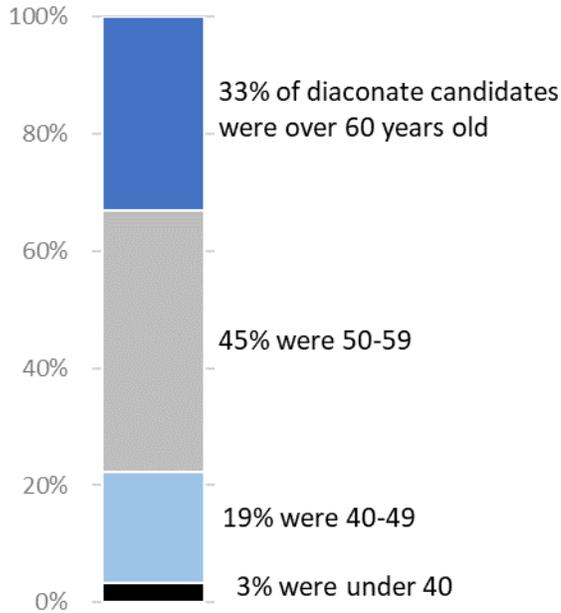
In the 2020-2021 academic year, one in five candidates for the permanent diaconate was in his thirties (3%) and forties (19%). According to Canon Law, married deacon candidates must be 35 or older to be ordained. The share of candidates in these two younger age groups declined from 44% in the 2002-2003 academic year to 22% in the 2020-2021 academic year. Based on this trend, the share of candidates under 50 is projected to further decline to 18%  $\pm$  7% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

About half of diaconate candidates (45%) were in their 50s. This age group remained relatively stable since 2002-2003 and, based on the trend since the 2002-2003 academic year, it is projected to stay at 45%  $\pm$  7% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

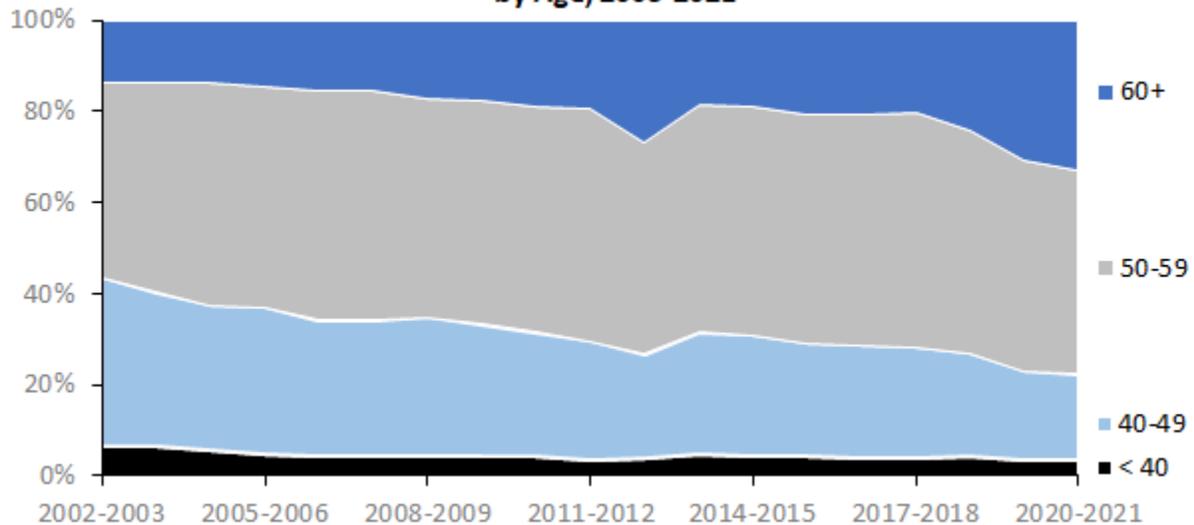
One third (33%) was age 60 or older. Based on the trend since the 2002-2003, the share of candidates in this age group is projected to be 35%  $\pm$  8% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

The vast majority of candidates, 95%, were married men. Furthermore, 2% were single, never married, and 2% were widowed or divorced.

**Percentage Distribution of Diaconate Candidates, by Age, 2020-2021**



**Percentage Distribution of Diaconate Candidates, by Age, 2003-2021**



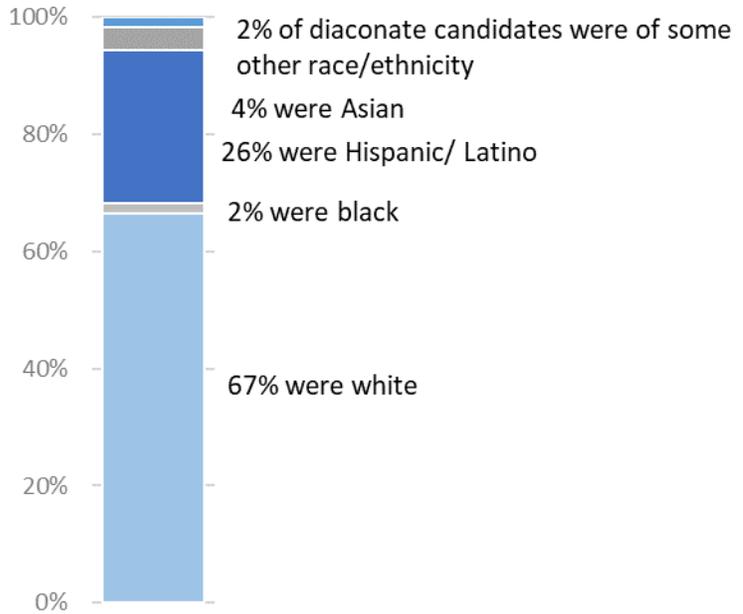
## Racial and Ethnic Background

During the 2020-2021 academic year, seven in ten deacon candidates (66%) were white/Anglo/Caucasian. The racial and ethnic distribution of candidates to permanent diaconate is gradually becoming more diverse. In 2002-2003, 76% of candidates were white. If this trend continues, the share of candidates who are white is projected to decline to 64%  $\pm$ 6% (CI=95%) in the diaconate formation programs in the 2025-2026 academic year.

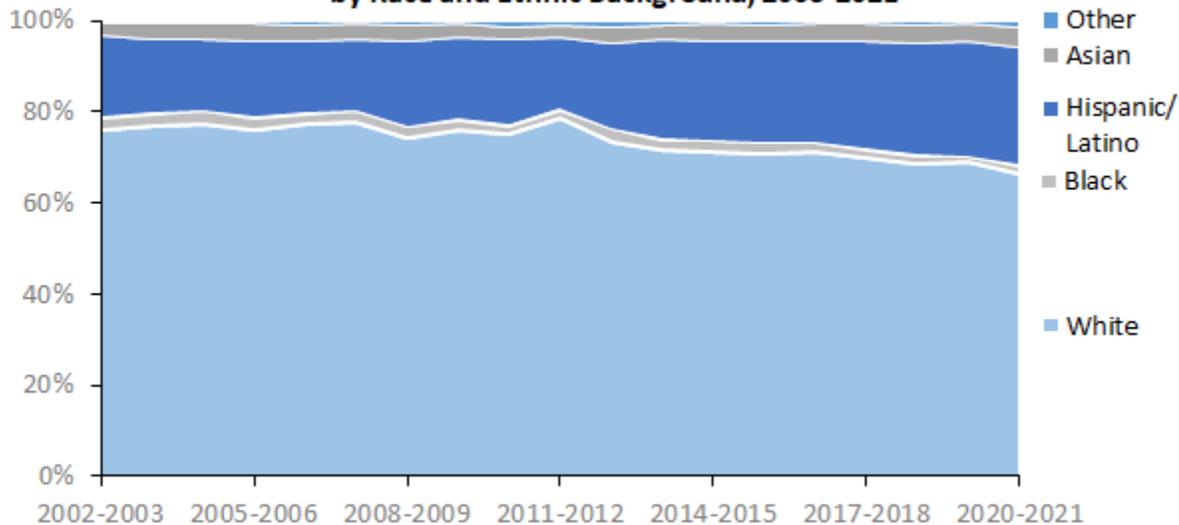
A quarter of deacon candidates in formation programs (26%) were Hispanic/Latino. If the trend since the 2002-2003 academic year continues, the share of Hispanic/Latino candidates is projected to grow to 29%  $\pm$ 5% (CI=95%) in the diaconate formation programs in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Asians/Pacific Islanders comprised 4% of deacon candidates. Blacks/African Americans accounted for 2%. And, Native Americans, multi-racial, and other ethnicities made up the remaining 2%. Since the 2002-2003 academic year, the combined share of candidates of these racial and ethnic groups remained relatively stable fluctuating between 6% and 8%.

**Percentage Distribution of Diaconate Candidates, by Race and Ethnic Background, 2020-2021**



**Percentage Distribution of Diaconate Candidates, by Race and Ethnic Background, 2003-2021**

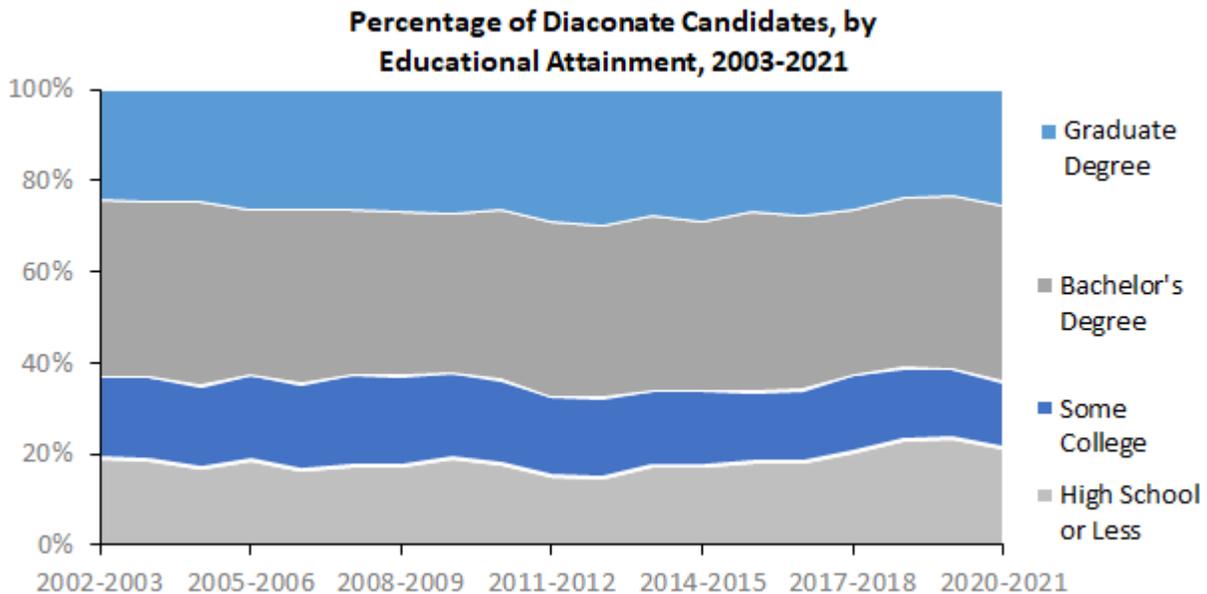
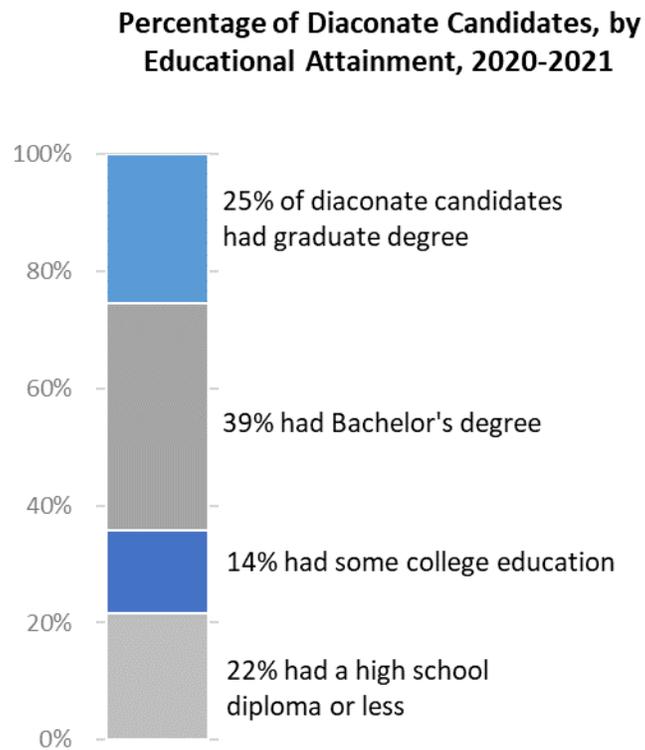


## Educational Attainment

In the 2020-2021 academic year, one in five deacon candidates (22%) had a high school education or less. Another one in seven deacon candidates (14%) had some college education. So, 36% together. If the trend since 2002-2003 continues, the share of candidates who attained some college education or less is projected to remain at 36%  $\pm$ 4% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

Two in five deacon candidates (39%) had a bachelor's degree. If the trend since 2002-2003 continues, the share of candidates who attained this education level is projected to be 38%  $\pm$ 4% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.

A quarter of deacon candidates (25%) had a graduate degree. If the trend since 2002-2003 continues, the share of candidates who attained this education level is projected to be 26%  $\pm$ 7% (CI=95%) in the 2025-2026 academic year.



## Methodology and End Notes

### Note about Methodology

CARA completed the first study of diaconate formation programs in 1996–1997 and updated the information at the beginning of each academic year since then.

The data are gathered in the fall of each year.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This number includes only the 196 dioceses and eparchies whose bishops belong to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

<sup>2</sup> Following the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council, the permanent diaconate was re-established on June 18, 1967, by the Apostolic Letter *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*. It was approved for the United States on August 30, 1968, the year in which the first four programs were established.