

# Becoming Adults: Challenges in the Transition to Adult Roles

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It is no longer news that the timetable for growing up in American society—and indeed, in virtually all societies with advanced economies—has been extended. Compared with the schedule observed in the middle of the last century when young people typically finished school, went to work, left home, and established a family (at what now seems like frighteningly early ages), the passage to adulthood is both more complex and more protracted. Historians have shown that the early timetable for growing up that was a prominent feature of the mid-20th century in America was something of an anomaly. In earlier centuries, the path to adulthood was circuitous and far less standardized than it was in the middle of the last century. In certain respects, the current pattern of growing up is more similar to the schedule of adult transitions that, as described by historian [Steven Mintz \(2015\)](#), prevailed for most of our history.

This article summarizes the reasons for the slower passage to adult status (at least measured by demographic markers) and discusses some of the important implications of what today's pattern of becoming an adult means for young people, their families, and the larger society. By no means should this article be considered a review of the growing body of evidence on the changing pattern of adult transition. Indeed, there are many reviews of the literature on this topic, including books by [Richard Settersten and Barbara Ray \(2010\)](#) and [Jeffrey Arnett \(2015\)](#). My

intention, rather, is to provide a short overview of the topic and to identify public policies needed to make social institutions capable of adapting successfully to this later regime for entering adulthood. Indeed, entering adulthood still involves school completion, home leaving, and entering a job that is full-time. For many young adults, it also includes forming a partnership and having children, though, as discussed later, these expectations are no longer universal in American society.

## Cause of the Delay in Adult Transitions

In the United States and to a lesser extent in Western Europe, Canada, and the other Anglo-nations, the exceptionally early pattern of coming of age largely emerged in the early decades of the 20th century with the rapid growth of industrialization and the steep decline of the agricultural economy. Labor laws in the Progressive era discouraged employment among young people. The introduction of mandatory schooling and the growth of secondary education introduced more age grading and standardization of children's behavior. The result of these developments was a new and more orderly schedule for coming of age in the early decades of the last century.

The Great Depression, however, slowed the age at which individuals went to work and were married. Not until the aftermath of World War II did the pattern associated with the Baby Boom era truly commence. The rapidly growing economy, especially from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, precipitated a marriage rush that preceded and accompanied the baby boom that indelibly marked the demographic history of the second half of the 20th century.

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Beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing today, there has been an abrupt turnabout in the timing of adulthood transitions. The loss of good manufacturing jobs along with the decline in labor unions and wages began to reshape the transition to adulthood. As the importance and availability of higher education grew, the passage to adulthood became later in the life cycle. The

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### *Young people have increasingly lingered in the natal household*

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rise of the skills- and knowledge-based economy both increased the value of education and made entrance to the labor force for the less educated and unskilled far more difficult and far less rewarding. Young people have increasingly lingered in the natal household, presumably because parental assistance was required for youth to attend tertiary education or to establish a foothold in the more challenging labor market of the late 20th and early 21st century.

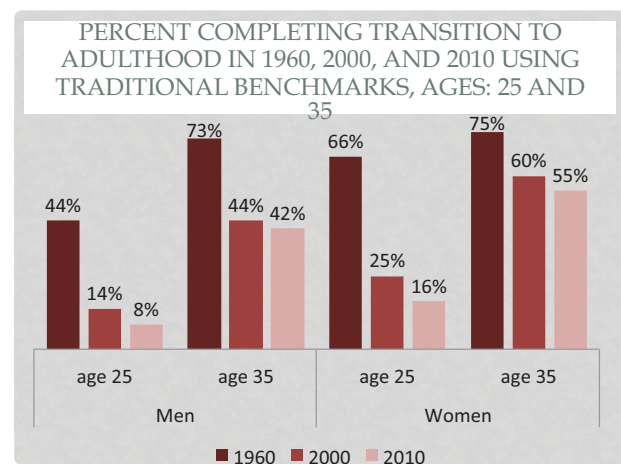
The so-called “traditional” marriage form characterized by a gender-based division of labor began to melt away in the final third of the 20th century. In fact, the nuclear family (i.e., two biological parents, with men and women occupying separate spheres) became a privileged form during the late industrial period when men entered the labor force while women assumed a greater share of domestic responsibility. The single-wage earner economy declined sharply in the latter third of the last century and has continued to shrink in the early decades of the new millennium. With it, the transition to adulthood began to converge for males and females who today look remarkably similar in their pattern of adult transitions. Marriage age rose rapidly from the late 1960s to the present. A growing share of couples began preceding marriage by living together, and more recently, living together instead of marrying.

The altered process of family formation was aided by important advances in reproductive technology allowing young adults (females especially) to gain greater control over fertility. Over a period of several decades, unplanned parenthood, which had been a major pathway to early marriage, has dropped among young adults. To an increasing extent, teens and couples in their early 20s are less likely to

become pregnant, and when they do, they are less likely to marry than they were a half-century ago.

The remarkable changes in the schedule for becoming an adult are illustrated in [Figure 1](#), which shows when young adults reached the set of milestones that have been widely considered by demographers and sociologists to be markers of the passage to adulthood. We can observe just how tightly the transitions were clustered together toward the end of the Baby Boom era in 1960. In that year, almost half of the males and about two-thirds of the females had completed their education, left home, entered the labor force, married, and had children by age 25. In contrast, in 2010 (a half century later) 8% of men and 16% of women had reached the same milestones by age 25. As the figure shows, it has taken the more recent cohort about 10 years longer to accomplish similar levels on the markers of adulthood. At age 35, many still have not married or had children, even if they had finished school and entered the labor force. Thus, it seems likely that a substantial minority of young adults will never reach all the milestones. This astounding shift marks a drastically different pattern of becoming an adult.

The dramatic change that can be seen in [Figure 1](#) is the product of two simultaneous demographic trends: First, *all* transitions now occur somewhat later than they previously did. For example, home leaving now takes place ~5 years later



**Figure 1.** Based on census tabulations created by author and Sheela Kennedy. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

than it did a half century ago. The second component is that a growing number of young adults will never make transitions to marriage and parenthood, and to a lesser extent, even to regular employment. In summary, the pattern of early adulthood has shifted from a highly orchestrated set of nearly simultaneous transitions to a less orderly two-phase process.

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*Early adulthood today looks more like a stage of life than a swift and coordinated set of transitions*

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Economic transitions (school completion, entrance to the labor force, and home leaving) occur now in the early to middle 20s, and marriage and parenthood generally do not take place until the late 20s or early 30s, if they occur at all. Clearly, marriage is no longer the “mainspring of adulthood.”

Indeed, a growing number of young adults are not going through an orderly sequence of transitions because they may enter parenthood (typically now without marrying) before they complete their school or enter the labor force, creating what has come to be called *fragile families*. For these youth, work and home leaving lag parenthood. When parenthood occurs in the teens or early 20s, it is typically unplanned, which leaves young adults and their young children in precarious circumstances. Although rates of early parenthood occurring in



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the teens and early 20s have been rapidly declining, it is still the route that many young adults take. It is particularly true for the poor and near-poor, who are more likely to have children before they have the economic wherewithal to support them.

Figure 1 reveals that much of the change being described took place before the new millennium. Even so, the trend toward later transitions continues in the first decade of the 21st century, which suggests that the pattern of later adult transitions has not reached its zenith. No doubt, the Great Recession in 2008 and its aftermath contributed to the trend between 2000 and 2010, but a closer look at Census data suggests that even before the onset of the economic decline, the pattern of later transitions was evident. It appears that the later regime that emerged in the late 20th century is continuing and perhaps even becoming more pronounced when it comes to delays in family formation.

There seems to be little prospect that it will reverse unless the economy becomes more welcoming to the less educated than it is today. Returning to the postwar pattern of an early and tightly packaged sequence of transitions to adulthood seems at least as remote as restoring the gender-based division of labor that prevailed during most of the last century. Early adulthood today looks more like a *stage of life* than a swift and coordinated set of transitions.

### **Effects of a Later Transition on Young People and Their Parents**

In recent decades, both young adults and their parents have begun to accept this later schedule for coming of age. It has offered some obvious advantages to both generations, even if it has required relinquishing the long-held ideal of early autonomy that accompanied early family formation. First, marriage, when it occurs, takes place later, which allows couples to have an extended period to test the strength of a relationship and to search for a suitable partner. Second, many parents relish the opportunity to coreside with their young adult children, and young people frequently benefit from the assistance that parents offer. Finally, the slower pace of reaching adult milestones has been accompanied by a style of more intensive parenting that has probably produced greater



levels of intimacy, trust, and mutual support on the part of parents and their young adult offspring.

There is growing evidence that the benefits of coming of age more slowly are being recognized, if not appreciated, by American parents (though there are distinct differences by education and

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### *Americans are bringing their expectations in line with the prolongation of adult transitions*

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income). The working-class and poor have long favored early autonomy. Circumstances today, however, do not typically permit the orderly movement from home into early marriage in the way they did in the middle of the 20th century. The strain of managing to support young adults in tertiary education and in entering the labor force adds pressure on economically strapped families. Such families now include a rising share of middle-class families in which parents have some college education. Among the more privileged—the upper third who have at least a college education—the pattern of growing up more slowly has been embraced, albeit with some ambivalence. Returning to the natal home after college graduation has become far more accepted and acceptable. It is less clear whether the bottom two-thirds of the population, including middle-income and economically disadvantaged families, have managed as successfully with the new timetable. This lack of clarity stems in part from a recognition that the demands being placed on parents to support their children for longer periods of time requires resources that many parents do not possess.

To better understand the effects of a delayed transition and what policy initiatives were needed to bring youth serving institutions (the family, education, the military, social services, and the labor market) in line with the new demographic realities, the Network on Transitions to Adulthood was convened by the MacArthur Foundation. One of the tasks undertaken by the Network was to develop a module of questions to be inserted in the General Social Survey in 2002. These questions asked if young adults and their families were altering their attitudes and expectations about

whether and when they should reach particular milestones (i.e., home leaving, completion of education, entering the labor market, and family formation) that have long been part of the passage to adulthood. The same questions were repeated in 2012, just as the Network was concluding its decade-long research program. Findings suggested that change is occurring in norms governing the demographic transitions and the timing of coming of age.

Indeed, evidence from the module of questions included in the General Social Survey suggests that young adults and older Americans are bringing their expectations in line with the prolongation of adult transitions shown in [Figure 1](#). A nationally representative sample of adults, including about a third who were between the ages of 18 and 34, were asked questions about the importance of making each of the demographic transitions that formerly constituted adulthood in the Post-War era. If they answered that it was *very* or *somewhat* important for becoming an adult, they were then asked the age at which they thought the transition *should* occur.

Over the 10-year period, there are clear trends toward fewer people, young and old, saying that the markers were important, and there was overall movement toward later ages in most of the transitions. These findings suggest that a shift is occurring in norms governing the demographic transitions and the timing of coming of age. Americans over the decade appeared to be gradually relaxing their expectations of both how and when adulthood should occur. This change seems to have occurred both because of the Great Recession and because of the secular trend toward a later and less uniform passage to adulthood. On average, both the younger and older members of the General Social Survey panel shifted about a half a year later in their expectations over the decade in most of the transitions, a fairly sizable and statistically significant change in most of the transitions. Americans were also more likely to downgrade the importance of the transitions as necessary to accomplish before being considered an adult.

This shift in popular notions about coming of age is not unexpected. Sometimes normative change precedes behavioral change, as has occurred to some extent in gender roles. In other instances, however, behavioral change in the population ushers in shifts in cultural

norms and expectations, as seems to be the case here.

This gradual normative shift may help families adapt to the longer parental contract that now occurs in American society and among countries with advanced economies throughout the world. Recognition of the new

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*Institutions are under pressure to adapt to a later schedule of entering adult status*

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reality that it takes longer to come of age in advanced economies, however, is not the same as coping with it. As noted previously, the slower pace of attaining educational credentials and job experience, especially among low-income families, creates delays in family formation or results in the establishment of families before parents possess the resources to provide adequate support for their offspring.

Even for parents with a college education, assisting children in their younger years has become more demanding and burdensome, even if it offers gratification and perhaps contributes to greater intergenerational solidarity. Moreover, the timetable currently in place means that many parents of young adults will wait longer to become grandparents than they have in the past.

In a broader sense, this change requires a revision and extension of the parenting contract that existed before the end of the 20th century. Today, parents can anticipate approximately another 5 to 10 years of providing assistance to their offspring. For the privileged, this may involve financial support through college and beyond. For the less well off, such assistance may come in the form of bed and board.

The added economic responsibilities on parents may have important consequences. First, they restrict the ability of parents to save money in their prime work years for retirement. Thus, their offspring may be called upon to assist them later in life. Second, knowledge of the added economic pressures

on today's parents may curtail fertility in the future as parents begin to experience the shortfalls created by providing a greater level of assistance to their young adult children.

**Implications of the Later Transition to Adulthood for Institutions**

The family is not the only institution that is under pressure to adapt to a later schedule of entering adult status. Other institutions catering to young adults must change if they are to be effective in helping young adults and their families navigate the less predictable and more demanding course of entering adulthood in an economy that has increasingly been divided between the haves and the have-nots.

Most institutions supporting dependent children and their families have been designed to phase out as children reach the age of 18, an age that used to be a meaningful marker for the beginning of economic autonomy. That age now appears to be more and more antiquated, as few young people are economically, or even emotionally, self-sufficient at the age of 18 or even 21.

In the recent past there was a heavy reliance on the family, schools, religious and social organizations (e.g., scouts, farm groups, and unions) to guide the younger generation into work and marriage. These organizations are not well designed to take on the task of supervising young adults in the same fashion as they managed to involve adolescents. Consider, for example, the military. The military was a route to adulthood for a large fraction of the young, male population in the past century. The military was accustomed to serving young adults and provided training and employment in World War II and in the Korea, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf wars. The military provided a path for young men and increasingly young women into the labor force. Today the more professionalized military is showing less interest in performing a training function for youth who have just completed high school and, to a growing extent, is placing its emphasis on recruiting college-educated young adults.

Institutions that are specifically designed to provide a pathway from secondary education into the labor force have become more selective. Colleges and universities are now the major and almost only route into the economy. The costs of

tertiary education, however, have become prohibitive for all but the affluent and academically talented working-class and low-income youth who receive enough assistance to pay for a residential college. Increasingly, even middle-income families cannot afford to pay for

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*The United States has failed to invest adequately in our children's development*

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their children's higher education. A vast majority of poor, working class, and middle-income youth, if they attend college at all, must settle for a local 4-year institution or a community college that offers few of the amenities routinely offered by residential colleges, such as health and counseling services, job placement, and extracurricular activities that create social capital, social skills, and civic commitment. Many 2- and 4-year local teaching institutions are often not well designed to serve the populations that are flocking to them for training relevant to finding employment.

In addition, the system of financing higher education has been stressed to nearly the breaking point by rising costs at the same time that state governments have off-loaded educational support to young people and their families. The federal government has replaced financial aid with packages of loans that most lower-income families and their offspring can ill afford. Although the number of students enrolling in some college education has continued to climb, our college graduation rates have budged upward only slightly. Half of all students who enter college will not graduate with either a bachelor's or an associate's degree. Some of these students lack adequate preparation for college, but others are forced to terminate their training purely for financial reasons.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the United States' international standing in educational attainment has steadily declined over the past two decades. In 1970, we led all nations in the proportion of the population with a college education. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States has dropped

to 14th in the percentage of young adults (25–34 year-olds) with a college degree. This trend is not surprising given that a number of nations provide free tertiary education for all who qualify, and almost all provide a higher level of preparation and support to college-bound young adults.

The slow progress in educational attainment in the latter decades of the last century and the beginning decade-and-a-half of the 21st century is both a cause and consequence of the growing economic divide. This divide begins in the family, as rich and poor parents differently prepare their children for schooling. States are gradually expanding pre-K education and childcare, but the pace of growth has been painfully slow. Many children in poor and working-class families still are placed in childcare and preschools that focus on safety but not stimulation.

This divide widens as children enter primary school. These schools have different resources and populations, depending on the income of the residents surrounding the school. Thus, schooling widens rather than diminishes the impact of early socialization, and rich and poor parents are quite differently prepared to shepherd their children through schooling systems that increasingly rely on parental input and resources. The United States has failed to invest adequately in our children's development, at least by standards set by other nations with advanced economies, and in the level of support provided to families and schools in the middle of the last century.

The Network on Transitions to Adulthood, in partnership with the policy research organization MDRC, began a series of experiments designed to strengthen community colleges by increasing the availability of financial aid, counseling, and academic services to ease the transition into college and give assistance to students who are often underprepared and overwhelmed. Early evaluations of MDRC have shown promising results of strategically reinforcing community colleges with resources targeting transitional services, counseling, and financial aid.

If the system of prosocial education for children and young adults is grossly insufficient in the United States, we do even less for youth who fall behind for academic, social, and emotional reasons. Although the United States expends a



good deal of money on remediation, the United States does a particularly poor job of providing services for those who lag behind developmentally. Because America tolerates a higher level of poverty than does any other nation with an advanced economy, the size of the population that needs special assistance is large. The MacArthur Network examined the state of social services for youth with special needs and emotional and behavioral problems and concluded in a book by social psychologist D. Wayne Osgood and colleagues (Osgood, Foster, Flanagan, & Ruth, 2005): “. . . If middle-class college-bound youth pass through the transition on relatively well-greased wheels, the transition is prone to be rough sledding for working-class noncollege bound youth, and it can be a minefield for the vulnerable populations.”

Needs outstrip the provision of services, and many young people flounder as they encounter pitfalls during their late teens and early 20s. Over the past several decades, a growing number of young people spend time in late adolescence and early adulthood neither in school nor in the labor force. Some are drawn to the underground economy and eventually get caught up in the increasingly complex web of the criminal justice system. The retributive policies that were instituted in 1980s to curb criminal behavior have resulted in the incarceration of a growing number of youth and young adults, especially among the poor and minorities. There is a vast and ever growing literature on the adverse effects of imprisonment of young people in American society. The highly punitive approach to dealing with problem youth has been both costly and counterproductive. Imprisonment has resulted in a huge growth of impoverished minority youth whose lives have been stalled, if not undermined, by involvement in the criminal justice system. Ironically, American taxpayers have sponsored this major investment in incarceration and related criminal justice services while disinvesting in schools, recreational services, and job training programs that build rather than destroy human capital. The need for supportive services is especially relevant to families lacking information on how to help their young adult offspring enter and remain in college or finding job training programs that offer vocational direction.

Apart from the inadequacy of funding, there is a long list of problems in the development of services for adolescents and especially young

### Suggestions for Further Reading

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adults. For example, the Network discovered a sharp discontinuity between services (e.g., mental health) provided in juvenile and welfare systems and service systems available to adults. In short, many youth simply drop off of treatment rolls once they reach the age of majority. Creating pathways between youth- and adult-serving systems is urgently needed. This need is especially relevant for support services for families who largely lack information and aid on how to help their young adult offspring.

An experiment of sorts has taken place in the foster care system where the federal government has extended financial support to states that continue to care for youth in the foster care system beyond age 18 until 21. Evaluations of extending care into early adulthood have shown dramatic positive improvements, such as

lessening involvement in the criminal justice system, raising educational enrollment, and promoting better emotional well-being for those who are permitted to remain longer in the foster care system. It seems likely that some of the same effects could be achieved by extending services to young adults in mental health, remedial education for school dropouts, and housing services for the homeless.

One of the most promising areas for innovation is getting young adults to participate in community service organizations. Federal, state, and local governments fund a variety of programs that are designed to train youth by giving them opportunities to serve their communities. We know less about the effects of these programs than we should. Whether they work to provide reliable pathways into employment or back to school and for whom they can be most effective are questions that need more attention than they have received by the social science community.

In summary, the efforts to build new institutions or renovate existing ones, especially for noncollege bound youth, designed to build skills and provide access to jobs that can launch young adults into financial autonomy have been meager and underfunded. As a nation, we seem to lack the political will to invest in the population of young adults who are treading water or, worse yet, sinking because they become disconnected from social institutions as they enter their third decade of life. Most of these youth fall back on their families, which are not adequately equipped to provide the material resources, social capital, and knowledge about how to enter the new economy. Without greater support from schools, the labor market, and youth-serving institutions, many young adults are finding it difficult to become financially independent and socially responsible.

## Conclusion

To reiterate, young people generally stay in school longer, enter the labor force later, and leave home only when they have gained a secure job. Because these events take longer to achieve, the family has borne many of the costs of this delay by helping to support their young adult children to continue in school or until they find jobs that enable them to live independently. This

change in the timing of adult transitions has placed a considerable burden on the parents, especially for low and middle-income families who are often helping their children at the expense of their own future economic security. The question remains of how these parents will fare in the long run and whether their children will be willing and able to make up the economic shortfall created by the longer passage to adulthood.

The United States has been slow to respond to what some consider to be an emerging crisis in this nation—a growing gap in the human capital required to maintain a vital and growing economy in a more globally competitive world. We are underinvesting in children and families in ways that leave them unprepared to enter this more demanding economy. The MacArthur Network on Adult Transitions spent more than a decade calling attention to the problem and identifying a range of possible solutions. The Network stressed the urgent need to rebuild existing institutions that are not properly designed to serve young adults. We need to fill a vacant space for many young adults who do not enter college or do so only to find that they cannot survive because of poor skills or insufficient funds. President Obama's proposal for free education for all who enter community college would be a good start if it were enacted. Presently, there are few signs that it will be in the near future. The country also needs to build alternative routes for youth who will not enter college and are unable to find employment because they lack marketable skills. Whether community service is a viable alternative pathway to the world of work remains an open question, but some form of subsidized training is badly needed for the next cohort that is currently coming of age.

If we fail to act, we are going to raise a generation that is not fully capable of supporting themselves, much less their offspring when they have them. As a result, a smaller and smaller workforce will be required to support a larger mature population who will require help and services in their old age. We are not preparing for the aging of the Baby Boomers. Failing to do so imperils the future welfare of our nation.

**Keywords:** transition to adulthood; family change; policy for young adults