

# Bad Economy Delays 'Adulthood'

**By Jeanna Bryner, LiveScience Managing Editor**  
**posted: 27 April 2010 10:11 am ET**

A 22-year-old today might have much more in common with his or her grandfather or even great-grandfather than his own parents, a new study suggests. The reason: Young Americans, like their counterparts in the early 1900s, are taking their time leaving home and becoming full-fledged adults.

The researchers say it comes down to economics, as young people today are more financially insecure and take home lower wages. The result: greater burden on parents, of course.

The result can be more than close quarters for burgeoning personalities and bodies. We're in the [middle of a recession](#) (though experts argue on whether we're truly in or out of the financial dive), which is already putting pressures on middle-class families, say the researchers, Richard Settersten, a professor of human development and family sciences at Oregon State University, and Barbara Ray, president of Hired Pen, Inc.

The [longer path to adulthood](#) strains families as well as institutions that have traditionally supported young Americans in making that transition — residential colleges and universities, community colleges, the military, and national service programs.

"Only by continuing or increasing investments in young people after the age of 18 can policymakers implement the supports needed to make the road to adulthood less draining for families and less perilous for young people," Settersten said.

Possibly even more disconcerting is their finding that unlike 1910, today's young adults are being supported financially by their parents, instead of helping to support their parents as they might have in the early 20th century.

Their research, which includes decade-long work by Settersten as part of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, is detailed in the journal *Transition to Adulthood*.

## Generation basics

The mid-1900s, considered the baby boom, is often used as a comparison for judging young people today. But Settersten and Ray suggest that generation is an anomaly. Supporting this idea,

past research has shown differences between the GenX-ers (born between 1965 and 1981) and baby boomers, such as [differences in work attitude](#).

In the post-World War II baby boom, high-paying industrial jobs were plentiful, and a prosperous economy meant workers with little education could find secure employment with decent wages and benefits. The researchers found that since then, downward trends in wages and economic opportunities have been directly linked to young people staying at home longer, returning home later, and postponing or even forgoing marriage and children.

That same delay described young people in the early decades of the 1900s who were slow to leave their family homes and start families. Becoming an adult then, as now, was a gradual process characterized by "semi-autonomy," with young people waiting until they were self-sufficient to set up their own households, marry and have children.

"Having an income that's adequate to support oneself and a family — or at least the ability to earn one — has always been a precursor to living independently and taking on adult roles, such as marrying and settling down," Settersten said.

### **Highlights from the research**

- In 2005, even before the current recession, roughly three in 10 white men (up to age 34) with a high school degree were not in school, in the military or at work. More than half of young black men were not in school, in the military or at work.
- Even those with an education weren't as likely as their counterparts in the 1960s and 1970s to get a good-paying job. Young men (25-34 years old) with a high school degree or less earned about \$4,000 less in 2002 than in 1975 (with earnings adjusted for inflation). Men with some college education earned about \$3,500 a year less in 2002 than in 1975.
- Every age group, except those with graduate-level college education, had greater amounts of people earning below poverty level in 2002 than in 1975.
- In 1969, only about 10 percent of men in their early 30s had wages that were below poverty level. By 2004, that proportion had more than doubled.

### **Parents shoulder burden**

Though the researchers found similarities between today's young adults and their grandparents, there were also differences. For instance, young people today don't contribute to the household as they once did. Instead, [parents shoulder the burden](#) of launching their children into adulthood.

"Parents are now being called on to provide financial and other kinds of assistance to their young adult children," Ray said. "A century ago, the opposite was true. Then, young adults often helped their parents when they went to work and especially if they still lived together."

They found parents spend some 10 percent of their annual income to help their adult children, regardless of their income level. "And that's a whole lot of money for some kids to get — and for many parents to give, or to afford," Settersten said.

Despite today's "adults" staying with mom and dad longer, they do venture out and spend years living independently from parents during early adulthood, Settersten noted. And the percentages of people who have [never married](#) and who are intentionally childless are also higher now than at any other time in American history.

"Today, the young adult years are filled up with many different kinds of living arrangements, some of which more often involve parents," he said. "But what is perhaps more significant is the fact that these arrangements don't as often involve spouses."