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Study: Young adults linger at home longer

By Cheryl Hatch, Gazette-Times reporter | Posted: Wednesday, April 28, 2010 3:15 am

Like young adults before World War II, young Americans today are staying at home with their parents longer, but there's a key difference between the two generations, according to a study unveiled Tuesday: Unlike their counterparts in the early 1900s, young adults today aren't contributing to the household finances.

In fact, the study - cowritten by a professor at Oregon State University - found that parents are spending 10 percent of their annual income helping their adult children.

The study, crafted in part by OSU's Richard Settersten, a professor of human development and family sciences, showed that today's 22-year-olds have more in common with their grandfathers or great-grandfathers than they do with their parents.

Settersten wrote the article, "What's Going on with Young People Today? The Long and Twisting Path to Adulthood," with Barbara Ray, president of Hired Pen Inc. Settersten has conducted much of his scientific research as part of the decade-long MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. The study was published in the journal *Transition to Adulthood*.

"I'm somebody who's always studied life transitions," Settersten said. "There's a kind of script in our minds about when those kind of things are supposed to happen."

The typical markers of the transition to adulthood are called "the big five": leaving home, finishing school, finding work, marrying and having children. Today, most of these big events are happening more slowly and at a later age than in the baby boomer generation.

In the 1950s, young people were "quick to leave and quick to marry," Settersten said. Young adults in their 20s then shared their experiences with their spouses. This generation shares experiences with friends.

"In some way, friends are the new spouse," Settersten said, noting that the median age of marriage is now 27.

The young Americans who left home and raced into adulthood tended to be members of the baby boomer generations, but Settersten said those generations "are kind of an anomaly." In the 1950s, the heyday of the baby boomers, the economy was flourishing. "After the war, the pace of movement into adulthood quickened because times were prosperous," he said.

"We have this old idea," Settersten said. "The sure sign is being independent and being independent is the sure sign of being adult."

This notion is also a product of American culture. "In other cultures, children co-reside with their parents until they get married."

The delayed entry into adulthood can cause tension between parents and their children. There can also be a stigma attached to young people who stay at home, Settersten said.

"Boomer parents have these ideas about how things should be based on how things were," Settersten said. "Kids, what they want for their lives is different and the opportunities are different. It's a fertile ground for tension."

The current downturn in the economy has slowed the entry of 20-year-olds into adulthood.

"They're not hooked into jobs that provide decent wages, that provide insurance, that are stable and secure," Settersten said. More than one-half of all uninsured people are in the 18-to-34 age group. "The need to provide for growing adults is placing new and significant strains on a lot of American families, even middle-class families."

However, there are some benefits to children leaving the nest later.

"Sometimes parents actually like it," Settersten said. "Parents and kids are closer and more connected than ever before. The nature of the relationship between parent and kid is different."

"In my view, living at home can be a really smart decision."