

Transition to Adulthood

The Future of Children, Vol. 20, No. 1, Spring 2010



Today's young people are taking longer to leave home, attain economic independence, and form families of their own than did their peers half a century ago. Rather than reaching the milestone of adulthood at age eighteen or twenty-one, as happened during the mid-1950s, some young Americans today are well into their thirties before they attain that goal today. The lengthened transition not only burdens parents who need to be providing for their own retirement, but is a potent source of social stratification. The forces behind the lengthening transition—employers' reluctance to hire young people without educational credentials, the longer time it is taking many young adults to finish their postsecondary education, longer life spans, shifting sexual attitudes and practices—are unlikely to change any time soon. The question for policy makers is whether families and the social institutions that have successfully educated, trained, and supported young adults are up to the task today. Not surprisingly, researchers find that existing institutions work much better for affluent young adults than they do for most others, leaving the playing field for young adult development sharply tilted.

Focus of the Volume

Contributors to this volume examine some of the institutions that house and serve young adults—higher education, the workplace, the community, the military, and, for a group of especially vulnerable youth, the juvenile justice, foster care, and related systems. The contributors review research that assesses how well these institutions support today's young adults in their quest for education, economic independence, family formation, and civic responsibility. They also suggest policies to make these institutions more effective.

Among important research findings are:

- Longer transitions do indeed put strains on families and institutions that traditionally support young adults, including postsecondary education, the community, service organizations, and the workplace.
- Race and class have significant and long-lasting consequences for the transition to adulthood and for the economic well-being of young adults. The longer transition offers higher-income youth a better chance to get a postsecondary degree before entering the job market, marrying, and starting a family. But for lower-income young people, the lengthened transition often disrupts that traditional sequence—postponing marriage and education, but not childbearing—and limits job opportunities.
- Immigration is remaking America, and among newcomers, generation and national origin importantly shape the experience of young adulthood.
- College attendance and completion rates remain low, but researchers and policy makers are achieving some success in improving college outcomes through providing enhanced student services and financial aid, thus allowing community college students to get a degree or secure a job that might be otherwise unattainable.
- Many young adults, especially men, are struggling to attain financial independence, though policy makers are offering help through programs that increase the incomes of less skilled workers by providing work supports and raising educational attainment.
- Opportunities for civic engagement and volunteering are more widely available than ever, and political engagement among young adults is on the increase.
- The armed forces offer young adults excellent opportunities through a career-oriented system and excellent community services that enable enlisted men and women to attain economic independence and form families more quickly than nonmilitary youth.
- The transition poses special challenges for vulnerable and at-risk youth, many from poor and minority backgrounds. Institutions that serve youth in foster care or justice

systems, youth with special education or mental or physical health needs, or runaway and homeless youth must adapt to current realities, because many of these at-risk young adults lack family support and face life-long problems.

Key Policy Issues and Initiatives

The newly extended transition to adulthood poses problems for youth, their families, and the systems that serve them. There are three urgent policy issues. The first is the twin problem of access to and completion of postsecondary education, especially at the nation's community colleges. Federal policy makers are moving forcefully to strengthen these often neglected institutions so that they can bridge the gap between a generation ill-prepared for college-level work and a labor market that is demanding ever more complex skills. Promising initiatives include reforms and expansions in student grant and loan programs, especially increases in Pell Grant amounts; investments in community college facilities; strong accountability measures; and instructional innovation.

The second key policy need is to design and implement effective programs to help struggling students complete high school so that they are better prepared to take the next step, whether directly into the labor force, into military or other service, or into higher education. One such initiative combines an intensive military-academy style residential program that emphasizes schooling, service, leadership, and other adult skills with an extended mentoring program in the youths' own communities to smooth the transition to postsecondary education, work, or military service. Evidence shows that the initiative offers valuable lessons for tackling this difficult set of problems.

The third policy priority is diagnosing the problems of especially vulnerable youth and the systems that serve them, like foster care and juvenile justice, and rethinking how the nation might build a better integrated system of care. Children served by these systems have been particularly hard hit by the new transition. Their support systems come to an end abruptly when they reach age eighteen. In effect, those youths most in need of transitional help well into adulthood are left on their own without a net. It is essential to provide a better-integrated system of care for the most vulnerable youth, particularly those in state foster care and juvenile justice systems. Policy makers are beginning to recognize the need for change, as shown by the passage in 2008 of federal legislation extending services in the foster care system from age eighteen to twenty-one. But more remains to be done to coordinate these systems at the federal level. One possibility would be to free a few willing states from federally imposed restrictions and ask them to experiment with integrated systems of care to provide supports that extend into adulthood.

Taken as a whole, these initiatives would significantly help to relieve the burden of parents and drive key institutions to adapt to the changing needs of young adults in transition. As is the case for all policy changes, the devil will be in the details of on-the-ground practice. The articles in this volume provide a blueprint for harnessing resources to need and policy to practice that could help put derailed young people back on the pathway to adulthood in the twenty-first century.