

On Your Own without a Net

The Transition to Adulthood
for Vulnerable Populations

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Foreword

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There are currently twenty-four million twelve- to seventeen-year-olds in the United States. By the time they reach age twenty-five, the great majority of these youth will have made at least a minimally successful transition into early adulthood; they will have acquired the skills needed to connect with the labor force on a regular basis, and they will have established positive social support systems.

However, based on past trends, it is likely that at least a million and a half of these youth, from 5 to 7 percent, will reach age twenty-five without having successfully transitioned to independent adulthood. At an age when most young adults are benefiting from full-time work and close interpersonal relationships, these youth will not have connected to the labor force, and many will lack positive social support systems. About 60 percent will be men. Of these, over half will be in prison, while the remaining men will be mired in protracted spells of long-term unemployment. By age twenty-five, nearly all of these young women will have started families. Most of these young mothers, however, will face the daunting challenge of raising their children alone and with little income or with the help of their own impoverished families.

There are compelling reasons to decrease the number of youth who will not make a successful transition. Helping them become productive and emotionally stable would produce enormous social benefit. They now contribute little to the economy. Rather, as a group, they impose significant social costs, including criminal activity and the use of very expensive services. Most of the women face the challenge of raising children on their own; many have difficulty providing adequate care. Their children experience numerous problems and are at increased risk of placement in foster care.

The moral case for not abandoning these youth is equally compelling. Most were afforded little opportunity to succeed. The great majority grew up in very poor households. Many were abused or neglected by their families. They are the victims of failed schools, failed child welfare systems, and failed neighborhoods. Their poor outcomes are exactly what is predicted when children grow up under these circumstances. Moreover, while around 5 percent of the overall youth population does not make a minimally adequate transition, the proportion more than doubles for minority males, especially African-American males. Our society is unlikely to ever achieve racial equality if it abandons this group.

Over the past thirty years, there has been relatively little attention paid to this group by policy makers and researchers. The focus of both research and public policy has been primarily on younger children. Yet more than one in five adolescents will drop out of school, be incarcerated in the juvenile justice system, experience foster or residential placement, or become an unmarried parent. Many will experience several of these problems.

This book, a product of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, focuses on seven groups of youth who face especially great challenges in making a successful transition. Along with its companion volume (*On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*), it provides a comprehensive, in-depth examination of the processes involved in the transition from adolescence to young adulthood and the ways in which social programs and policies support or hinder successful transition. It is an enormously important volume.

The research reported in this volume makes clear that the adolescents within these groups face especially great challenges for making a successful transition. A significant proportion of these youth do not succeed. Unfortunately, all of the authors find that current policies often impede, rather than facilitate, the transition processes for these youth.

It is not surprising that the youth in these groups often fare poorly as young adults. As children and adolescents, they experienced learning problems, behavioral difficulties, and physical and mental illness. Many grew up in highly dysfunctional families. They all were identified as needing special services. However, due to major deficiencies in the quality and quantity of these services, and the depth of the problems facing these adolescents, many of these youth turn eighteen woefully unprepared to enter the labor force or to continue their education.

Their situation often worsens after they reach the legal age of adulthood. As the authors discuss, the process of transition from adolescence to adult independence has become longer and harder for all youth over the past fifty years. The increased importance, even necessity, of postsecondary education in order

to earn an adequate income has lengthened the period of dependence. Those who do not go to college enter a highly unstable labor market. Most young adults experience detours on the road to economic independence, including periods of unemployment and periodic interruptions in their education. As a result, in our society, almost all youth require support until they have connected successfully with the labor force, which generally does not occur until their midtwenties.

Unfortunately, the majority of youth identified in this volume have extremely limited support systems, including family support, to help them through the difficult transition to adulthood. In fact, a constant finding of all of the authors is that public support is often cut off once these youth turn eighteen. Many lose access to special education, to health care, especially mental health services, to housing, and to protective services. These young adults are no longer required to attend school, and in some cases they may not be allowed to attend high school. Those who commit crimes have aged into a punitive adult criminal justice system. With the exception of those young adults who have aged out of foster care and are entitled to “independent living” services, there is no system responsible for helping young adults experiencing substantial difficulties. A variety of programs are available to some older youth, ranging from job training to various forms of adult education. However, these programs do not, for the most part, focus on the highest-risk youth. They generally serve youth who seek out training or education. The services they provide are critically important but not sufficient.

The lack of societal support for these most vulnerable youth stands in stark contrast to the extensive support provided to the best situated, most-likely-to-succeed young adults—the 25 to 30 percent of all youth who attend four-year colleges and obtain bachelor’s degrees.

The great majority of these youth are embedded in networks—families, friends, and communities—that provide guidance, support, and help, both financial and otherwise, when they face the crises that are an inevitable part of the transition. The majority live in households with higher incomes. Beyond what their parents provide, society invests billions of dollars in these youth and provides them with an extensive support system. At college, they are provided room and board, health and mental health services, and have dorm counselors to guide them. They have the best-paid and most highly qualified teachers. There are career-counseling offices and employers often come directly to campus to recruit. Youth and their families receive federally subsidized loans or benefit from highly subsidized tuition at public universities. They are among peers who encourage and facilitate their progress. While students attending two-year colleges have fewer support services, they too benefit from a system designed to

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aid their development and transition. Colleges also convey to their students a sense of being special, a message that is rarely, if ever, conveyed to vulnerable youth, who are ignored at best and demonized at worst.

As each of the authors shows, there is a compelling need to create a similar system of support and opportunity for those youth least likely to make a successful transition by age twenty-five and to attract youth to it. These youth need access to medical care, special educational services, economic support, and, in some cases, housing. These are often unavailable due to eligibility requirements or lack of resources. Moreover, access to needed services may require involvement with multiple agencies. Beyond individual services and programs, many need the continuing attention of a person dedicated to helping them overcome the many barriers they face in making a successful transition. Transition is a process, not an event. As Patience White and Leslie Gallay indicate in chapter 13, most of these youth need long-term sequential planning if they are to reach the goals of self-management and independence. Moreover, the youth must be fully involved in the decision-making process; many have little experience as independent decision makers.

Creating a comprehensive system is challenging. The population is diverse. Different youth face different barriers. There is variation in the nature and level of problems faced by women and men and by different ethnic groups. Young African-American and Native American males are at especially great risk. The fact that many of these youth are concentrated in a few highly disorganized urban neighborhoods, or live in rural areas with few services, exacerbates the problem of helping them.

Moreover, there is little in the way of research that can guide program planners. A continuing theme across the authors of this volume is the absence of longitudinal data. There is a pressing need to better understand the factors that serve as both incentives and barriers to these youth as they make decisions about whether to seek schooling, training or work.

But this challenge is not insurmountable. It is feasible to fund the services that are needed. In fact, many dollars are already being spent on these youth, but mainly in ways that do not promote their ultimate connection; for example, in corrections and emergency health care. There also are individual programs that have been quite successful in reconnecting these youth.

The critical step is creating public will. Thus, the starting point for any reform is changing the public's awareness and image of the population. The public and policy makers at the local, state, and federal levels must conclude that society has an interest in helping, and an obligation to help, these youth through the transition to successful adulthood.

Each of the chapters in this volume offers important ideas on the steps that

need to be taken to develop a comprehensive system. There are some promising developments as discussed in the chapters on foster youth (chapter 2), youth receiving special education services (chapters 8 and 9), and homeless youth (chapter 7). For example, federal law now requires that youth emancipating from foster care continue to receive services. Transition planning also is required for those receiving special education. However, as the authors point out, these systems are still drastically underfunded and the majority of youth are not being served.

The situation is far grimmer with respect to adolescents suffering from severe mental illness (chapters 10 and 11) and those in the justice systems (chapters 3 through 6); there is, of course, a great deal of overlap. There is little public support for helping these youth move towards successful lives. In fact, the justice systems even fail to prevent recidivism among the most troubled youth. It is essential to alter the goals of the juvenile justice system, so that helping these youth make a successful connection to education and/or the labor force becomes central. In addition, current laws dealing with young offenders, those eighteen to twenty-four, should be reconsidered. In the past, many states had young offender systems, recognizing that young adulthood is still a time of development and transition and therefore that efforts should be made at helping offenders succeed. There should be a return to young offender programs. A whole new system also is needed to meet the needs of those suffering from mental illness. As Lyons and Melton state, "Young people with mental health problems . . . move from one fragmented and disorganized patchwork of agencies and funding streams into another" (chapter 11).

Through the creation of the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, the MacArthur Foundation has provided a major stimulus for improving our knowledge of the critical period of early adulthood and the challenges various populations face in making a successful transition. This volume provides both a framework and specific information that should help policy development at the local, state, and national levels. Our country is now well on its way to developing a comprehensive system of services for children under age five. Hopefully, this volume, the ongoing activities of the network, and efforts by MacArthur and other foundations, will start us on the way to developing a comprehensive system for older youth and young adults as well.