



**Young Adults in the United States:
A Profile**

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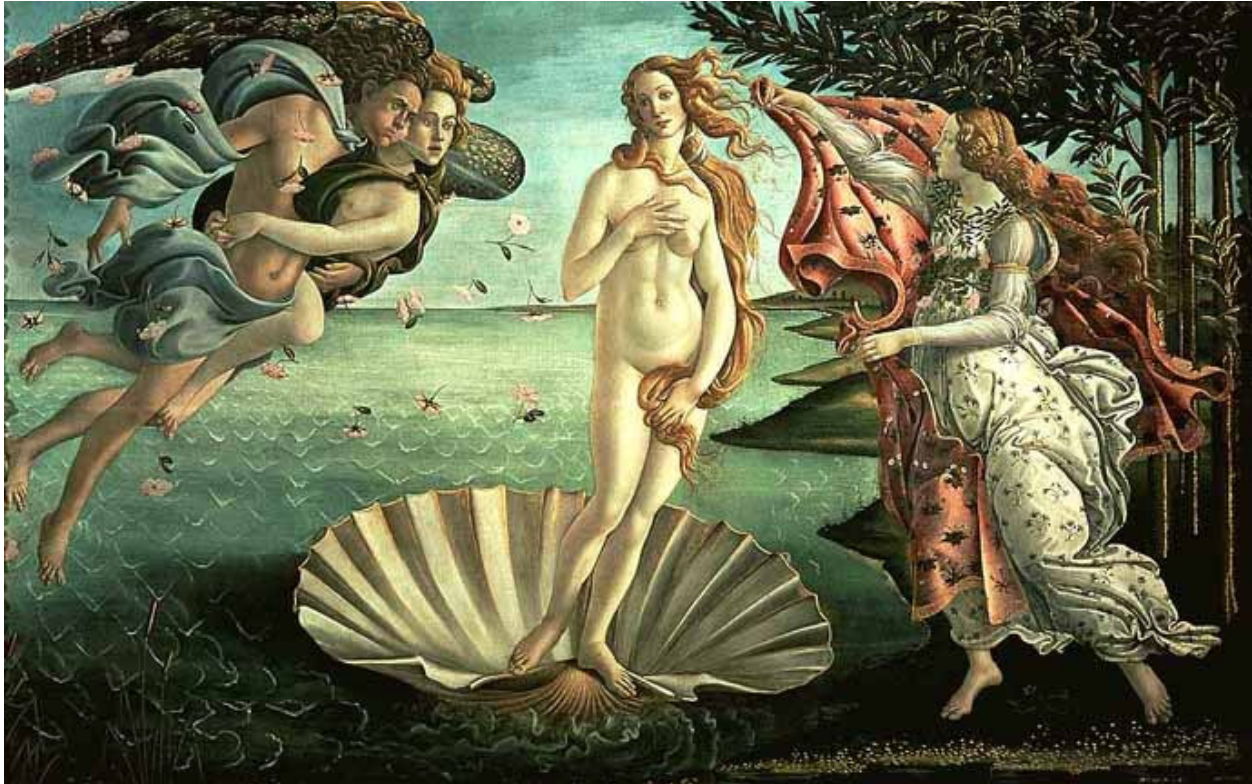
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Botticelli's "The Birth of Venus" (at the Uffizi, in Florence); idea for cover for "emerging adulthood" suggested by Bob Rose.

What do we know from the 2000 census about young adults in the United States? How many young adults are there between the ages of 18 and 34? What are their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics? What percent of them have “completed” any or all of the conventional milestones marking normative transitions into adulthood? How many have left home, finished school, work full time, have been married or had children—and by what age? Does the timing and sequencing of these transitions differ for young men and women? How does the “early-transition” cohort among young adults (ages 18-24)—in most respects the most vulnerable during this period of the life course—compare to older cohorts (ages 25-29 or 30-34)? Of those who have not yet formed households of their own, how many still live with their parents? How many live in college dorms or other group quarters? Especially among males in these age groups, how many are in the military, or in prison? This report sketches a profile of young adults in the United States at the turn of the century, based on an analysis of data from the 5% Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) of the 2000 census. For our purposes here, the data in the tables below are limited to young adults aged 18 to 34, and broken down for three age groups: 18-24 (“early transition”), 25-29 (“middle transition”), and 30-34 (“late transition”).

There were, as of 2000, approximately 67 million persons in the United States between the ages of 18 and 34—more than 27 million of whom were between the ages of 18 and 24. They were born between 1966 and 1982, and have “come of age” chiefly in the post-Cold-War 90s. There are more males than females in these age groups (about 51% to 49%)—the opposite of what is the case for middle-age adults 35-64. In part, this reflects a new demographic that has scarcely been noticed to date: while the foreign-born population of the United States has grown rapidly in recent years, already accounting for over 11% of the total population by the year 2000, immigrant flows consist disproportionately of young adults. As Table 1 shows, one of every seven Americans aged 18-24 today is an immigrant, but much more remarkable is the fact that one of every five Americans aged 25-34 (almost 20%) was born outside the United States.

One result of this is reflected in the changing and increasingly diverse ethnic makeup of young adulthood: while 84% of Americans 65 years and older self-reported as “non-Hispanic whites” in the 2000 census, that figure declined to 74% among those aged 35 to 64, dropping further to 65% among 30-34 year olds, less than 62% among 18-29 year olds, and fewer still among children under 18. Instead, *Hispanics (mostly of Mexican origin) already accounted for one of every six young adults, compared to only one in nine of the middle aged (35-64 year olds), and fewer than one in twenty among elder adults (65 and over).* Similar disproportions are found among Afro-Caribbean and Asian-origin ethnicities among younger Americans relative to older natives—an ethnic shift that will become more pronounced in a burgeoning second generation of young adults as a result of continuing international migration (especially from Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia) and the significantly higher fertility of immigrant women in the U.S. relative to native-born women.

Concomitantly, the economic disadvantage of earliest adulthood is underscored by the census data on poverty: with a national poverty rate of 15.7% in the year 2000, *fully 30% of young adults 18-24 were below the poverty line*—about double the 15% poverty rate of those ages 25-34, and triple the 10% poverty rate of middle aged adults 35-64. Indeed, all other age groups in the country had poverty rates well below the 30% figure reported for 18 to 24 year olds; for example, 15.8% of the elderly and 18.8% of children under 18 fell below the poverty line. Part of that economic vulnerability is a function of the transitions to adulthood that 18-24 year olds are undergoing during this period of the life course, as suggested below. Many in the 18-24 age group had not completed the school-to-work transition (nearly half, 45%, were still attending school). A fourth of them (25%) had not completed high school, compared to 16% of 25-34 year olds; and less than 8% of 18-24 year olds had graduated from college, compared to almost 28% of 25-34 year olds. Similarly, only 71% of 18-24 year olds were in the labor force, compared to 79% of 25-34 year olds (the latter figure basically matching the 81% of 35-54 year olds who were in the labor force). For those who were employed, Table 1 also looks at their occupational status (as measured by Duncan SEI scores). Two fifths (41%) of 18-24 year olds were employed at the bottom of the labor market (low-wage jobs with SEI scores below 25), compared to less than one third of 25-34 year olds. Conversely, while only about one fifth (22%) of 18-24 year olds were employed in professional, technical and higher status white-collar occupations (with SEI scores above 50), about two-fifths of the 25-34 year olds were employed in such occupations.

Table 1
Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics of Young Adults, Ages 18-34

Selected Characteristics		Age Groups in Young Adult Transitions			Total
		(18-24 yrs)	(25-29 yrs)	(30-34 yrs)	(18-34 yrs)
		Early transition	Middle transition	Late transition	
Total young adults:	N	27,117,388	19,178,062	20,325,174	66,620,624
Sex:					
Female	%	48.9	49.6	49.8	49.4
Male	%	51.1	50.4	50.2	50.6
Nativity/generation:*					
Foreign-born (1st gen.)	%	14.4	19.2	19.0	17.2
Native-born (2nd+ gens.)	%	85.6	80.8	81.0	82.8
Pan-ethnicity:					
Hispanic:	%	17.3	17.4	15.3	16.7
Non-Hispanic:					
White	%	61.7	62.1	65.0	62.8
Black	%	13.6	12.6	12.4	12.9
Asian	%	4.1	5.1	4.7	4.6
American Indian, Other	%	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.9
Two or more "races"	%	2.3	2.0	1.8	2.1
Poverty rate (below poverty line):	%	30.0	15.6	13.5	20.8
Educational attainment:					
Less than high school	%	25.2	16.4	15.7	19.8
HS graduate, some college	%	66.9	56.4	56.3	60.7
College graduate or more	%	7.8	27.2	27.9	19.5
Labor force participation:	N	19,321,735	15,199,287	16,057,535	50,578,557
	%	71.3	79.3	79.0	75.9
Occupational status index:**					
Higher (SEI > 50)	%	21.9	38.6	41.1	32.7
Middle (SEI > 25)	%	37.3	28.9	27.9	31.9
Low-wage labor (SEI < 25)	%	40.8	32.5	31.0	35.4
Living arrangements:					
In households:	N	24,271,071	18,663,890	19,850,770	62,785,731
	%	89.5	97.3	97.7	94.2
In group quarters:***	N	2,846,317	514,172	474,404	3,834,893
	%	10.5	2.7	2.3	5.8
College dorms	N	1,994,167	48,831	14,986	2,057,984
	%	7.4	0.3	0.1	3.1
Military	N	274,204	40,454	13,928	328,586
	%	1.0	0.2	0.1	0.5
Prison (males only)****	N	419,876	318,327	314,854	1,053,057
	%	3.0	3.3	3.1	3.1

Source: 5% PUMS, 2000 U.S. Census.

* 1st generation includes persons born in Puerto Rico; 2nd+ generations include mainland-born Puerto Ricans.

** Socioeconomic index (SEI): higher = professional, technical, white-collar occupations with Duncan scores above 50; middle = services and skilled blue-collar jobs with Duncan scores above 25; low = jobs with SEI scores below 25.

*** Includes institutions (prisons, hospitals, nursing homes), military, and college dorms.

**** No precise data on female incarceration available from the Census.

Moreover, 18-24 year olds also stand out from 25-34 year olds in the patterns of their living arrangements. Virtually all (almost 98%) young adults aged 25-34 lived in households, *but 10.5% of the 18-24 year olds were found in group quarters*: 7.4% (about 2 million persons) were in college dorms, another 1% were in the military (about 275,000, including both males and females), and—among 18-24 year old males only—3% (about 420,000 young men) were in prison. In general, one pattern that stands out in Table 1 is that for most of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics shown, the two older age groups (25-29 and 30-34) look very similar to each other, but stand in sharp contrast to 18-24 year olds. There are, however, significant differences among each of these three age groups when we examine particular aspects of their adult transitions, as is made clear in Table 2.

Table 2
Number and Types of Adult Transitions

Selected Characteristics	Age Groups in Young Adult Transitions			Total (18-34 yrs)	
	(18-24 yrs)	(25-29 yrs)	(30-34 yrs)		
	Early transition	Middle transition	Late transition		
Total young adults:	N	27,117,388	19,178,062	20,325,174	66,620,624
Number of adult transitions:					
None or 1	%	40.7	6.6	2.5	19.2
2 or 3	%	43.0	41.7	28.0	38.0
4 or 5	%	16.3	51.7	69.5	42.7
Mean number of adult transitions		1.98	3.42	3.90	2.98
Types of adult transitions:					
Not living with parents	%	55.7	84.1	91.4	74.8
Not attending school	%	55.4	85.5	91.2	75.0
Working full-time	%	48.1	73.7	74.0	63.4
Married or ever married	%	24.6	60.4	76.7	50.8
Has one or more children*	%	13.8	38.5	56.4	33.9

Source: 5% PUMS, 2000 Census

* Refers to respondents' children living in the household.

Table 2 presents basic data on five conventional markers of transitions into adult statuses: leaving home, finishing school, entering the workforce, getting married, and having children. Looking first at the number of adult transitions, among 18-24 year olds only 16% had reached as many as four or all five of these “milestones,” while 43% had accomplished two or three, and 41% had reached only one or none of the five. By contrast, 70% of the 30-34 year olds had accomplished four or all five of these transitions into adult statuses, and another 28% had achieved two or three, while a mere 2.5% had reached only one or none of the five. The 25-29 year olds were in between, although closer to the patterns for the older age group: just over half (52%) had accomplished four or all five of the “milestones,” and another 42% had achieved

two or three; only 6.6% had reached only one or none of the five. I computed a summed index of these (“adultra”), ranging from 0 to 5, which is also provided in Table 2. As a whole, young adults 18 to 34 nationally had “completed” three transitions on average (a mean index score of 2.98). The youngest age group (18-24 year olds) averaged only two of these transitions (a mean index score of 1.98), the older age group (30-34) averaged four (an index score of 3.90), and the 25-29 year olds were in between with a mean score of 3.42. By way of comparison, nationally, the mean score on this index for middle-age adults (ages 35-64) is 4.01—it increases with age until the early forties, peaking at ages 40-44 (with an index score of 4.2) and then decreasing as grown children begin to leave the home and as older adults begin to withdraw from full-time employment (after age 55 the index drops below 3.9, and after age 65 it drops below 3.3).

Turning more specifically to the types of transitions, Table 2 shows that among all young adults 18 to 34, three fourths (75%) were no longer living with their parents or attending school, almost two thirds (63%) were working full time, half (51%) were married (or had been married) or cohabiting, and a third (33.9%) had children. These proportions increased significantly with age, although the three age groups differ in their patterns for the five types of transitions. Identical proportions are seen for two types of transitions: 55% of the 18-24 year olds, 85% of the 25-29 year olds, and 91% of the 30-34 year olds not living with their parents *and* no longer attending school. Less than half (48%) of the 18-24 year olds were employed full time, while three fourths (75%) of the 25-34 year olds were full-time workers. The sharpest differences among the three age groups, however, are seen with respect to marital status and parenthood. Among 18-24 year olds, only one fourth (24.6%) was married or cohabiting, compared to 60% of the 25-29 year olds and 77% of the 30-34 year olds. And only 13.8% of 18-24 year olds had children, compared to 38.5% of the 25-29 year olds, and 56.4% of the 30-35 year olds.¹

These differences by age groups are amplified by gender differences, as spelled out in Table 3—which breaks down key variables for males vs. females within each of the three age groups. Women, for example, are more likely than men to accomplish more of the five adult transitions overall as well as within every age category. Overall, almost half (47%) of women 18 to 34 years old had reached four or all five of the traditional markers, compared to 38.6% for the men—with differentials of 7 to 10 percentage points within every age group. Young women are much more likely than men to be married or cohabiting and especially to have own children living at home; they are also somewhat more likely to have left home and, among those in group quarters, to reside in college dorms (men are much more likely to be in the military or in prison). On the other hand, men are more likely than women not to be attending school, to be in the labor force, and especially to be working full-time. Overall, 72% of the men 18 to 34 were working full time, compared to only 54% of the women—with the differentials widening with increasing age. By ages 30-34, for instance, 86.3% of the men were working full-time vs. 61.6% of the women, while only 46.8% of the men had own children in their households compared to 66.1% of the women. The gender differences extend beyond their respective transitions and trajectories into adult statuses and into socioeconomic achievement: at every age group, young women are

¹ These data refer to respondents’ own children living in the same household. They do not include own children who may be living elsewhere (e.g., in divorce cases).

more likely than men to have college degrees and much more likely to be employed in higher-status occupations, whereas young men are much more likely to be found in low-wage labor.

Table 3
Socioeconomic Characteristics of Young Adults and Types of Adult Transitions, by Sex

Selected Characteristics	Age Groups in Young Adult Transitions						Total		
	(18-24 yrs)		(25-29 yrs)		(30-34 yrs)		(18-34 yrs)		
	Early transition		Middle transition		Late transition		Male	Female	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female			
Total young adults:	N	13,859,821	13,257,567	9,659,493	9,518,569	10,205,887	10,119,287	33,725,201	32,895,423
Number of adult transitions:									
None or 1	%	40.5	41.0	7.5	5.7	3.1	2.0	19.7	18.8
2 or 3	%	46.6	39.2	45.7	37.5	31.2	24.7	41.7	34.2
4 or 5	%	13.0	19.8	46.8	56.8	65.7	73.4	38.6	47.0
Mean number of transitions		1.92	2.03	3.35	3.50	3.88	3.92	2.92	3.04
Types of adult transitions:									
Not living with parents	%	52.4	59.2	81.9	86.4	90.0	92.9	72.2	77.4
Not attending school	%	57.8	52.9	86.3	84.8	91.9	90.6	76.2	73.7
Working full-time	%	54.3	41.6	82.7	64.5	86.3	61.6	72.1	54.4
Married or ever married	%	19.7	29.8	54.8	66.1	72.9	80.5	45.8	55.9
Has one or more children*	%	7.8	20.0	28.8	48.3	46.8	66.1	25.6	42.4
Educational attainment:									
Less than high school	%	28.5	21.8	18.6	14.2	17.6	13.8	22.4	17.1
HS graduate or some college	%	65.1	68.8	56.7	56.1	55.6	57.1	59.8	61.5
College graduate or more	%	6.4	9.3	24.8	29.8	26.8	29.1	17.8	21.3
Labor force participation:	%	73.5	69.0	84.7	73.7	86.1	71.9	80.5	71.2
Occupational status index:**									
Higher (SEI > 50)	%	16.8	27.3	31.7	46.0	34.7	48.0	26.7	39.1
Middle (SEI > 25)	%	31.6	43.4	27.3	30.6	27.3	28.6	29.0	35.1
Low-wage labor (SEI < 25)	%	51.6	29.3	41.0	23.4	38.0	23.4	44.3	25.8
Living arrangements:									
In households:	%	88.2	90.9	95.5	99.1	96.1	99.2	92.7	95.8
In group quarters:***	%	11.8	9.1	4.5	0.9	3.9	0.8	7.3	4.2
College dorms	%	6.5	8.2	0.3	0.2	0.1	0.1	2.8	3.4
Military	%	1.7	0.3	0.4	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.8	0.1
Prison (males only)****	%	3.0	--	3.3	--	3.1	--	3.1	--

Source: 5% PUMS, 2000 Census.

* Respondents' children living in the household.

** Socioeconomic index (SEI): higher = professional, technical, white-collar occupations with Duncan scores above 50; middle = mid-status services, skilled blue-collar jobs with Duncan scores above 25; low = jobs with SEI scores below 25.

*** Includes institutions (prisons), military, and college dorms.

**** No precise data on female incarcerations available from the Census.

A caveat is in order here. The five conventional “milestones” or “markers” in transitions to adult statuses, as measured and reported here, should be seen only as a snapshot, a frozen moment in the life course, not as “completed” or irreversible social accomplishments or changes in social status. Indeed, most (and arguably all) of the five are reversible, both in principle and in practice. For instance, young adults who leave home at one point in time may return to live with their parents at a later age; those who are no longer attending school may do so subsequently, and those who “drop out” of college may “drop in” years after; those who hold a

full-time job now may lose it or leave it for any number of reasons. In addition, marriage or cohabitation are scarcely permanent arrangements, but may eventuate in separation or divorce (or in the death of a partner) and into a newfound marital status as a single (although the data reported here distinguish only the never married from the ever married or cohabiting). Even having a child of one's own living in one's household can be subject to status change. Nonetheless, it remains the case that those traditional normative markers do reflect key exits and entrances into adult statuses, and as such the typology of the five transitions remains useful as a means to sketch, if with broad brush strokes, a heuristically meaningful empirical portrait of the social situation of young adults.