



**Between Adolescence and Adulthood:
Expectations about the Timing of Adulthood**

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Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy

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These working papers have been posted to stimulate research and policy analysis on issues related to the transition to adulthood. The papers have not been formally reviewed by members of the network. The papers reflect the views of the authors and do not represent the views of the other members of the network nor of the MacArthur Foundation.

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Between Adolescence and Adulthood: Expectations about the Timing of Adulthood

In the period following World War II, adulthood came early to most Americans. The vast majority of Americans had assumed adult roles by their late teens or early 20s. Today, it takes much longer to make the transition to adulthood: adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends. We use opinion data from the General Social Survey, to describe contemporary attitudes about the nature and timing of this changing period of life. We find that although Americans believe that the transition to adulthood will begin in the late teens or early 20s, they have accepted that it often extends through the late 20s. The definition of adulthood that emerges from the GSS includes being financially independent, leaving home, completing school, and working full-time. Nearly half of Americans viewed marriage and parenthood, once defining markers of adulthood, as unimportant for the attainment of adult status

In the period following World War II, adulthood came early to most Americans. The vast majority of Americans had assumed adult roles by their late teens or early 20s. By this age, most males had completed school and were working full-time and most females were married and raising children. People who grew up in this era, who are today's grandparents, were economically self-sufficient and able to care for others by the end of adolescence. Today, adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends. Ask someone now in their early 20s whether they consider themselves to be an adult. What are they likely to say? You might get a laugh, a quizzical look or a shrug of the shoulders, and a response like the one we heard from a 24 year-old Californian, who answered: "Maybe 25. Next year."

Social scientists are beginning to recognize a new stage of life, which, for lack of a better phrase, we call *early adulthood*. This new stage of life is not merely an extension of adolescence as has been claimed in the mass media. Nor is it simply a refusal to accept adult responsibilities. Young adults are physically mature and often have formidable intellectual, social, and psychological skills. Most are actively involved in work and/or school, and are developing romantic relationships.

We can think of the attainment of adulthood, as demographers are inclined to do, as a cluster of transitions beginning with the completion of school, entry into the labor force, and exit from the parental household, followed by marriage and parenthood. Or, we can think of the attainment of adulthood in terms of the acquisition of the skills and attitudes needed to perform adult roles. But by either of these standards, and often by their own subjective assessments, many young people have not yet become fully adult because they are not ready or able to perform the full range of adult roles, and they have not forged a stable identity of who they are and where they fit into society. In fact, many do not complete the transition to adulthood these

days until their late 20s or even early 30. A 30-year mother from Iowa laughed when we asked her whether she considered herself an adult, and responded: “I don’t know if I’m an adult yet. ... I, ...still don’t feel quite grown up. Being an adult kind of sounds like having things, everything is kind of in a routine and on track, and [I] don’t feel like [I’m]...quite on track.”

How Has the Transition to Adulthood Changed?

Several years ago, the John T. and Catherine B. MacArthur Foundation assembled a team of scholars from a number of disciplines to consider what we know about this stage of life and whether policy makers should be thinking about how to strengthen the social institutions that touch the lives of young adults. Examining a considerable amount of available information and collecting some fresh data, the MacArthur Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy has made some important discoveries about how much life has changed for most Americans in the third and fourth decades of life and what these changes mean for them, their families, and society.

We have analyzed many of the existing national surveys that contain information on young adults both in this country and abroad. Using census data collected as far back as 1900, we have compared the lives of young adults in yesteryear with those coming of age today. We have also conducted nearly 500 in-depth interviews with young adults living in different parts of the U.S., including many of the recent immigrant groups that have altered the face of American society. The insights gained from this research are being used to rethink the social institutions are meant to support youth during the transition to adulthood, and we are targeting some of our efforts on transforming community colleges and military programs, which serve large numbers of vulnerable young people.

Findings from these diverse research initiatives point to the unmistakable conclusion that it does indeed take much longer to make the transition to adulthood today than decades ago. Figure 1, based on one-percent samples of 1960 and 2000 American censuses, shows the large decline in the past 40 years of the percentage of young adults who have completed the all of the major transitions (leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married and having a child). Using this strict definition of adulthood, only 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men age 30 in 2000 had attained adulthood, compared to 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men of the same age in 1960.

Women, who have traditionally formed families at ages younger than men, show the most dramatic changes at early ages. While 30 percent of 20-year-old women in 1960 had completed these transitions, only 6 percent had done so in 2000, and while 70 percent of 25-year old women in 1960 had attained this status only 25 percent had done so in 2000. The corresponding declines for men are less striking but nonetheless significant. Almost half of all 25-year old men in 1960 had completed these transitions, but fewer than 15 percent had done so by 2000. For both men and women these changes can largely be explained by much higher school enrollments and by the delayed entry into marriage and childbearing statuses. Changes in labor force participation play a smaller role: male labor force participation dropped, but by fewer than 10 percentage points at each age, and rose for women.

Similar patterns of change exist for both whites and African-Americans, although lower percentages of African-Americans at each age have been able to negotiate the passage to adulthood. For most young Americans the passage has merely been delayed; but for some, many of these experiences turn out to be unattainable. While high school graduation rates have increased greatly since 1960, a significant minority of young Americans, about 15 percent, still

leaves school without this degree. What is more, the employment prospects of male high school dropouts have greatly diminished over this period. Over 80 percent of male high school dropouts were employed in 1960 compared to 60 percent in 2000, and their school enrollment rates remained rare.

The prolonged passage to adulthood is not unique to the U.S. but is happening throughout the Western World. The primary reason for the prolongation of early adulthood is that it takes much longer to get a full-time job that pays enough to support a family than it did in the past. Attaining a decent standard of living today usually requires a college education if not a professional degree. To enter the middle-class, it is almost imperative to make an educational commitment that spans the early 20s, and often longer. Census data reveal that from 1960 to 2000, the percentage of Americans aged 20, 25, and 30 who were enrolled in school more than doubled at each age: reaching 50, 20 and 10 percent respectively by 2000. And unlike the 1960s, these educational and work investments are now required of women as well as men.

These increased demands are made even more difficult in the face of the limited resources of families and the skyrocketing tuition at four-year colleges and universities. Most American families simply do not possess the means to send their children to four-year colleges or universities, even with scholarships and government loans, much less shoulder the burden of education beyond undergraduate degrees. As a result, many young people must at least partially support themselves as they move through higher education. Rarely do they have the financial resources to complete schooling quickly. In order to complete their education and begin work careers, young people now often linger in a state of “semi-autonomy” during their 20s, combining support from their families with whatever they can make in the labor market and borrow.

Early adulthood has become a time when people figure out what they want to do and how they might realize their goals. If they are lucky enough to have a family that can help out, young adults may go directly through college, travel or work for a few years or perhaps participate in community service, and then enter graduate or professional school. This period of educational and career investment might not end before they reach their late 20s or even the early 30s, and only then are they prepared to settle down. But relatively few Americans have the good fortune to come from affluent families. Lacking sufficient resources, youth from less well-off families must move back and forth between work and school or combine both while they gradually gain their credentials. In the meantime, they feel unprepared for marriage or parenting. And, if they do marry or parent during these years, they often find themselves trying to juggle too many responsibilities at an early age and unable to adequately invest in their futures.

The longer time it takes for schooling and job preparation partially explains why many young adults prefer to cohabit before they marry and why the median age for marriage has risen to unprecedented heights. Family formation, young adults tell us, requires the economic security gained by obtaining a full-time job with benefits. A now-married woman in Iowa explained that she lived with her boyfriend for seven years before they married partly because: "I was in school off and on at that time, and ... I was waiting to get done with school before we got married." A single childless 25-year man, the son of Chinese immigrants, told us that having children would have to wait until he felt financially prepared: "I want to have more money financially to be able to support the kid. If that's settled, then I really don't mind having kids, if you have the time and the money, 'cause I don't want to bring a kid into the world and not have like money so I can support the kid and have the kids go through some things I went through." Most young people do not achieve this standard until their late 20s or early 30s, if at all.

Expectations of the Transition to Adulthood

The Network wanted to know whether Americans have accordingly shifted their expectations about when adulthood could be reasonably accomplished. To answer this question, we developed a special module of questions that was added to the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS), an opinion poll that is administered to a nationally representative sample of Americans every two years by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. We asked nearly 1,400 Americans aged 18 to 89 two series of questions about the timing of adulthood. First, we asked how important it was to accomplish certain demographic and social markers to be considered an adult: leaving home, finishing school, getting a full-time job, becoming financially independent from one's parents, becoming able to support a family, marrying, and becoming a parent. Then, for those who thought a milestone was at least "somewhat important" in becoming an adult, we asked them for the age by which it should occur. We then looked at whether expectations differed by age, gender, race, education and socioeconomic status. Here is what we found.

How do Americans Define Adulthood?

As shown in Figure 2, the most important milestone on the route to becoming an adult is completing school. Americans also put a very high priority on establishing an independent household and being employed full-time – the concrete steps associated with gaining financial independence, and ultimately possessing the ability to support a family. In fact, 95 percent of Americans consider education, employment, financial independence, and the ability to support a family to be important milestones on the path to adulthood. Despite the importance given the ability to support a family, nearly half do not believe that it is *necessary* to marry or to have

children *in order* to become an adult. While we do not have comparable historical data on the salience of marriage and parenthood as markers of adulthood, other historical evidence is consistent with the view that the importance of these family roles has declined. Compared to their parents and grandparents, for whom marriage and parenthood were virtually a *sine qua non* for becoming an adult, young people today more often view these as life choices, not requirements.

The definition of adulthood that emerges from the GSS, is one that does not necessarily include marriage and parenthood, but does include being financially independent, leaving home, completing school, and working full-time. If we re-analyze the Census data using a more contemporary definition of adulthood, we find that in 2000, 70 percent of men had left home, entered the labor force, and completed school by age 30. This represents a 40 percent increase in the proportion of men who had attained adulthood than under the more traditional analysis shown in Figure 1, and is only a 12-percentage point decline from 1960. Nearly 60 percent of 30-year old women met this new standard in 2000 (75 percent if we include married, full-time mothers).

We discovered that men and women hold very similar opinions about the most important markers of adulthood. At all ages, women are not more inclined than men to stress family roles or give lower priority to work roles. To our surprise, we also found that young, middle-aged, and older adults generally have very similar expectations about the milestones of adulthood. Older adults, however, did place more importance on marriage and childbearing (about two-thirds of adults 65 and older considered marriage and parenthood to be at least somewhat important, compared to less than half of those under age 35). We also found that these ratings differed little by race/ethnicity, class, or place of residence—urban, rural. African-Americans,

despite lower marriage rates than whites, accorded marriage an importance level similar to whites. Even people who attend religious services regularly assign only slightly more importance to these family transitions. Everyone, we suspect, now assigns a lower importance to marriage and parenthood as a sign of adulthood than they did during the Marriage Rush and Baby Boom era, which extended from the late 1940s to the early 1960s.

The degree of consensus among Americans on what it takes to be an adult is surprisingly high on most of the milestones. Nearly everyone says that becoming financially independent of one's parents is essential and the vast majority of Americans believe that the ability to support one's own family symbolizes full entry into adulthood. Paradoxically, more than at any time in recent history, parents are being called upon to provide financial assistance to their young adult children. One of the chapters in our forthcoming book, *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, points to the considerable aid provided by parents of young adults throughout their 20s and early 30s. Using conservative estimates, Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross found that nearly a quarter of the entire cost to parents of raising children is provided *after* age 17. Close to two-thirds of young adults in their early 20s received support from parents while about forty percent still received some support from their parents in their late 20s.

Families are called upon to help pay for college tuition, living expenses, and in-kind assistance when children remain at home or move back because they do not earn enough to establish their own household. A century ago, it was the other way around: young adults typically helped their parents when they first went to work, especially when they lived with their parents. Now, the financial resources flow primarily from parents to young adults: a substantial number continue to receive support from their parents even after they begin working. The exceptions seem to be in immigrant families, where young people more often provide financial

support to their parents. A 27-year old Chinese-American New Yorker explained why he continued to live with his parents despite wanting to move out, saying that his parents “want me [to stay] and they need me. Financially, they need me to take care of them, pay the bills, stuff like that, which is fine.”

When Should Adult Transitions Occur?

Even though Americans seem to agree on *what* it takes to become an adult, they are less likely to concur on *when* these milestones should occur. For those who answered that it was at least “somewhat important” to complete the various milestones, we asked for the age by which each should be accomplished. Turning to Table 1, we see that close to 80 percent of Americans believe that four of these transitions – leaving home, completing schooling, working full-time, and attaining financial independence – should occur before age 25. A significant minority of Americans even thinks these transitions should occur by the late teens—at ages far lower than what is actually now accomplished by young people. For example, about a quarter says that young people should have left home, finished school, or gone to work full-time before they are age 20. Just 10 percent, however, think that all three should be completed by that age. Nonetheless, the sizable proportion of people who cite early ages for accomplishing these transitions suggests that the timetables in the minds of these individuals are well out of synch with what we know to be happening in the population. The analyses in our book *On the Frontier of Adulthood* repeatedly point to the protracted and highly variable nature of these experiences for contemporary cohorts of young adults.

At the same time, the findings from the GSS suggest that these early events precede what could be regarded as the endpoint of early adulthood, when young adults have the capacity to

support a family (which does not necessarily imply having entered marriage or parenthood). The majority of Americans do not believe that young people ought to be capable of supporting a family before their mid-20s, reflecting the fact that first and second jobs frequently do not pay enough to support a family or offer the kinds of job benefits that family life demands.

Americans seem to believe that the transition to adulthood will begin in the late teens or early 20s, but have accepted that it often extends through the late 20s. Indeed, one out of seven Americans say that adulthood does not have to be completed – if it includes the ability to support a family – before age 30.

We had expected to find considerable differences between younger and older adults – we thought that older Americans, having experienced adulthood at earlier ages than today's youth, would report similarly younger ages for when adulthood should occur. Yet, we found only minor differences when we compared different age groupings. If anything, the young, respondents under 35 years of age, had an earlier timetable for financial independence when compared to adults in mid-life and those in their later years. We suspect that the youngest members of the sample may define financial independence less strictly than their elders, who seem more conscious of the fact that young people often remain at least partially dependent on their parents until a later age. Responses to these questions varied much less by gender than they might have several decades ago.

The most consistent and marked differences that showed up were related to social class. Less educated and less affluent respondents – those who did not attend college and those at the bottom third of the socio-economic distribution – were more likely to subscribe to an earlier timetable for leaving home, completing school, obtaining full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood. These differences were most pronounced among younger respondents. These social

class differences in age norms for adult transitions probably stem from the reality that young people with more limited means do not have the luxury of investing in schooling and experimenting in the labor market. They feel they must become economically self-sufficient at an earlier age than youth whose families can afford to help them out financially while they complete their education and find a good job.

The largest differences in timing by socio-economic status occur in respondents' expectations about marriage and parenthood. The less well-off believe that family formation should occur much earlier than respondents who are college educated and more affluent. Around 40 percent of the less well-off in the GSS sample believe that they should marry before they turn 25 and a third felt young adults should have children by this age. By contrast, far fewer of the better off respondents felt these transitions should occur in the early 20s, just 25 percent and 10 percent respectively. About a third of the more educated and affluent think that these events – especially childbearing – can be put off until the thirties.

The dilemma that the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution face is that a significant proportion of young adults end up having children before they can shoulder the growing demands of parenthood. This pattern, we suspect, is an important source of the growing trend toward non-marital childbearing among young adults. More young people are putting off marriage, even after a pregnancy occurs, and are instead choosing to cohabit, because they feel economically ill prepared for marriage. The transitions that are viewed as preparatory to family formation have not been completed. Lacking sufficient training for a good job, pregnancy comes before many young adults feel ready to make life-long commitments. Neither they nor their partners have the kinds of jobs that are deemed necessary to make marriage work. Consider Mike, 23, and his girlfriend, who planned to marry when she completed school and started to

work. Despite the unanticipated birth of a son, Mike was unwilling to change these plans and did not expect to marry for another 3 years. He told us: “I think marriage is something that you earn ... And what we've talked about, if you graduate and I graduate, you can start working and we can afford [to marry], then that's when we can get married. It's not just cause we have a child that all of a sudden we need to run out and do it.”

In the top third of the income distribution, with the aid of families, young people feel that they should wait longer to marry and have children. These norms, and the behavior that accompanies them, create a different family pattern in which couples enter marriage and then plan their first birth, rather than face an impending birth and have to decide whether to marry. The less well educated set earlier deadlines for the onset of childbearing, regardless of whether it is preceded by marriage.

Building Institutional Support at the Transition to Adulthood

The Network has been exploring ways that social institutions can provide support during the early adult years to take account of the new reality that attaining adulthood takes longer today than it once did. For the fortunate few who attend a four-year residential college, and perhaps even go on to professional or graduate training, residential colleges and universities seem well designed for young adults. They offer everything from housing to health care while training young adults. Likewise, the military provides a similar type of milieu for those from less privileged families. However, only a small fraction of young adults – probably fewer than one in four – attend primarily residential colleges or join the military when they finish high school. The other three-quarters of the population look to their families for room and board while they attend school and enter the labor force during their late teens and early 20s. Many of these youth enter

community colleges or local universities that provide much less in the way of services and support. One of the programs that our Network is examining is an experimental effort to build support within community colleges around the country. We are testing the notion that greater financial and social support will enable young adults to make their way through the educational system more swiftly and with greater success than is currently the case.

The least privileged young adults are those whose families cannot offer much support and assistance. These vulnerable populations, consisting of 10 to 15 percent of the young adults, may come out of the foster care system, graduate from special education programs, or exit from jails and prisons. The lack of support for these young adults is costly to society because many, without adequate training and a family safety net, turn instead to the social welfare system or end up in the criminal justice system.

Our Network has been exploring policies and programs that may improve the chances of success for the vulnerable populations. We are evaluating a particularly innovative program designed to provide a second chance to one of the most vulnerable groups in the population – high school dropouts. Run by the National Guard, Youth ChalleNGe offers a short but intense residential experience coupled with a year of mentoring in the community for those who have been unable to make it in local high schools. To the extent that this program and others like it help young adults to graduate and even get post-secondary education, we expect them to boost the chances that young adults will find a place in the labor market and have better prospects of establishing and maintaining stable families.

The programs being evaluated by our Network are examples of the kinds of supports that may increase the odds of young adults without abundant family resources to secure a foothold in the society. Potentially, programs that improve the success of young adults by providing

support, guidance, and financial aid in their 20s may turn out to be cost-saving interventions because of the huge expense of dealing with those who lack the skills to make it in the labor market or to manage the increasingly demanding role of spouse and parent.

How can we justify spending more on young adults in a society that has trouble meeting its current obligations to children, adolescents, and the elderly? Perhaps, the question ought to be reversed. If we are right that many young adults are not capable of making the transition to adulthood without this kind of assistance, we might instead ask, how to provide them with the support and training they need but currently lack.

Recommended Resources

Booth, Alan, Crouter, Ann C., and Shanahan, Michael J., eds. 1999. *Transitions to Adulthood in a Changing Economy: No Work, No Family, No Future?* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

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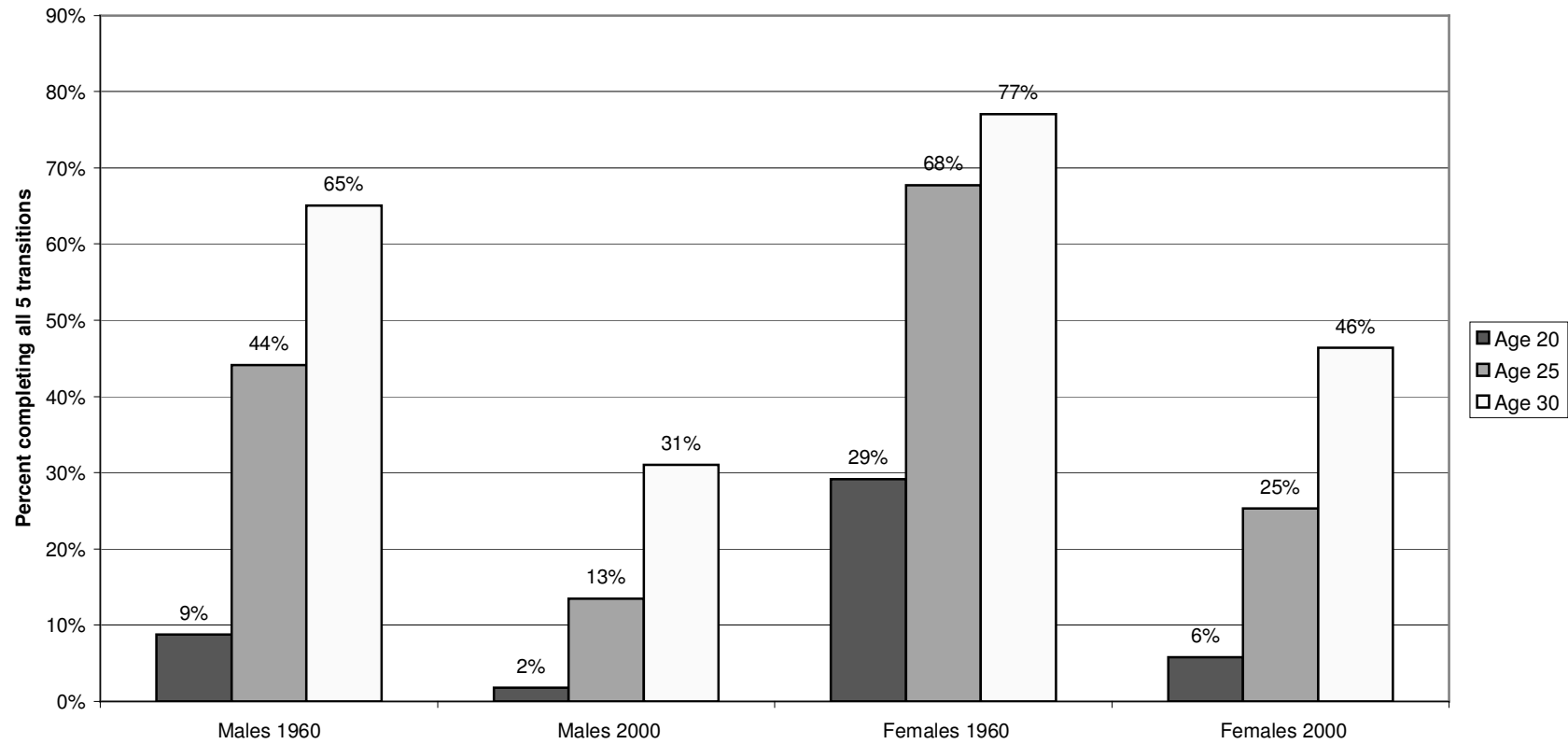
Table 1. Percent of Americans Who Believe Transition Should Occur by Various Ages

<i>Transition</i>	Maximum Age			
	<i><20</i>	<i>20-24</i>	<i>25-29</i>	<i>30+</i>
Be Financially Independent	34%	52%	12%	2%
Leave Parents' Home	29%	55%	15%	1%
Complete Education	25%	52%	19%	3%
Work Full-time	32%	52%	15%	1%
Be Able to Support a Family	6%	36%	44%	13%
Get Married	2%	29%	48%	21%
Have a Child	2%	20%	54%	24%

Source: General Social Survey, March 2002.

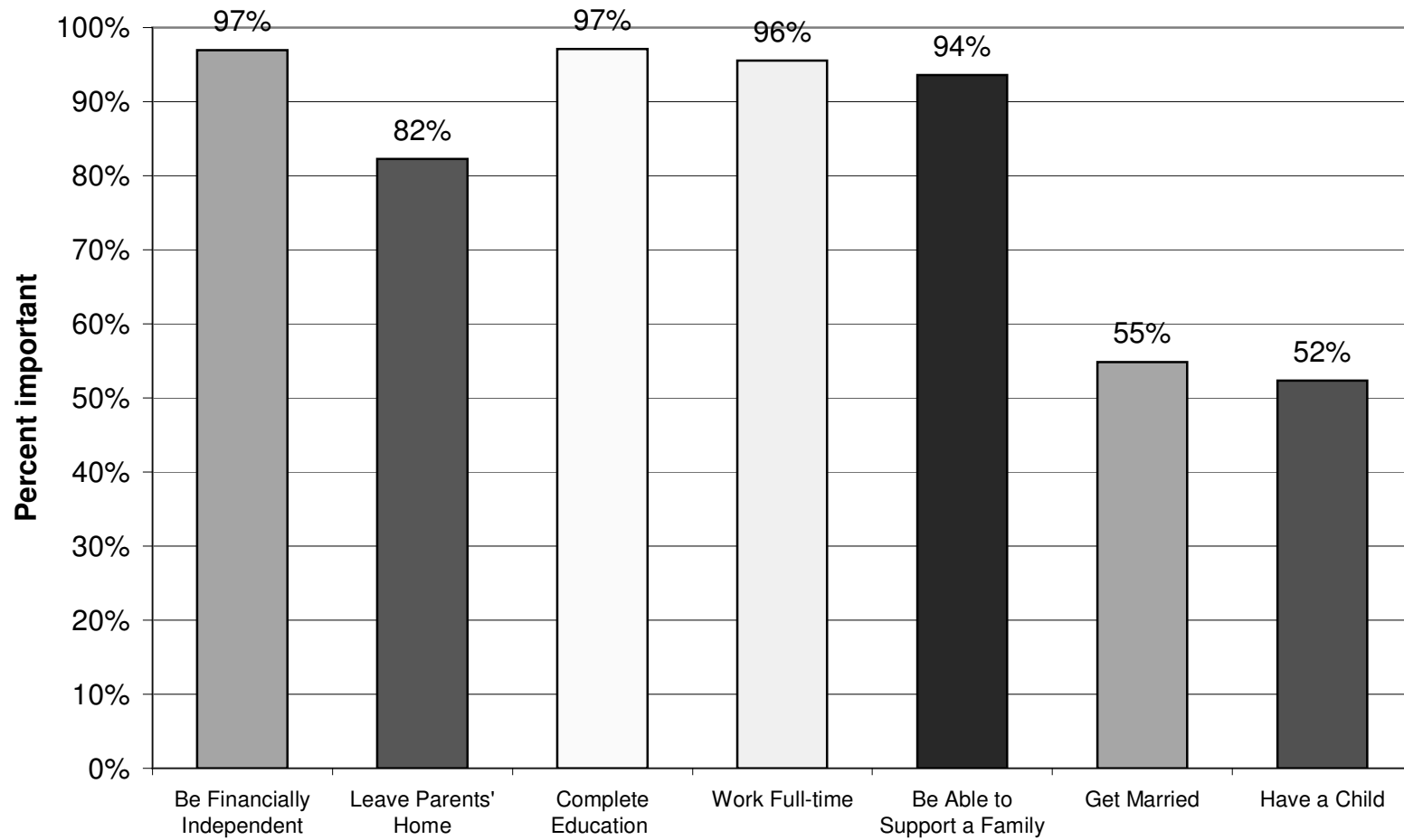
Note: Ages are available for those who answered that a given transition was at least “somewhat important” to be considered an adult.

Figure 1. Completing the Adult Transition in 1960 and 2000
 Leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child



Notes: Data are from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series extracts (IPUMS) of the 1960 and 2000 U.S. Censuses. Men are defined as financially independent if they are in the labor force; women are defined as financially independent if they have completed all transitions except employment in the labor force.

Figure 2. Percent of Americans Who Feel Event Important for Adulthood



Source: General Social Survey, March 2002.

Note: Respondents were asked how important each transition is for someone to be considered an adult. The percentages displayed here are based on those who reported that a transition is at least "somewhat important" (or higher).

