



October 2004, Issue 1

On the Frontier of Adulthood: Emerging Themes and New Directions

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Rubén G. Rumbaut, and Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

Ages 18 and 21 are milestones in a young person's life. In the eyes of the law and society, they have crossed the threshold of adulthood. In reality, however, by age 21, few young people today would actually be considered "adult" based on the traditional markers—leaving home, finishing school, starting a job, getting married, and having children. More youth are extending education, living at home longer, and moving haltingly, or stopping altogether, along the stepping stones of adulthood. A new period of life is emerging in which young people are no longer adolescents but not yet adults. Yet, are today's youth truly disinterested in moving into adulthood, or is it that changes in the world around them have altered the very contour and content of early adult life?

A multidisciplinary team of scholars, brought together by the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, and funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, is exploring these and other questions with arguably the best secondary data sources available. The results are compiled in the book *On the Frontier of Adulthood* to be published by the University of Chicago Press in late 2004.

Although pinpointing the onset of adulthood is not easy, it is most certainly not the magic age of 18 or 21 that is most often used to define adulthood in social policies and the law. Today, the authors find, entry into adulthood is longer, more ambiguous, and generally occurs in a more complex and less uniform fashion than in the past. Young people, however, are not necessarily unwilling to take on adult roles. If anything, the opposite is occurring, as young people now seem more aware of what it takes to be autonomous and are disinclined to take on commitments they cannot honor.

An Emerging Stage of Life

The idea of adolescence as a distinct period of life emerged in the early twentieth century as major cultural and economic shifts took hold. Schooling became more universal, and the economic base moved from agriculture to industry, leaving teens no longer as readily suited to employment as in prior generations. Just as then, we are now witnessing cultural and economic shifts that are forcing youth to adapt in new ways.

The end of the plentiful industrial jobs, which in the postwar years allowed youth to move quickly from a parental home to adult independence, ushered in a new era for youth on the cusp of adulthood. Education and training quickly became necessary prerequisites to jobs in the current information-driven economy, where jobs are less permanent and careers more fluid. Although teens continue to work, a shrinking fraction enters full-time work before their early 20s, often cycling between work and school or simultaneously combining the two.

Interestingly, in certain respects, adult transitions today resemble some of the features of the era prior to industrialization, when most families earned a living from the land. Then, children often worked on family farms into early adulthood, when they would inherit the land themselves. Attaining self-sufficiency was a gradual process, as it is today. One difference, however, is that today, early adulthood is shaped much more by social institutions outside the family, particularly higher education.

(over)

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Four-year residential colleges and universities are the best example of a full-fledged social institution that shapes the lives of young adults. In a certain sense, they are virtual total institutions that provide shelter, directed activities, adult and peer support, health care, and entertainment. They are explicitly designed to bridge the family and the wider society and increasingly have been tailored to provide the sort of semi-autonomy that characterizes early adulthood. Military training, too, shares many of these characteristics.

More Choices, More Complexity

Pathways into adulthood have grown more varied and complex. Once, youth moved nearly in lockstep through the stages that mark adulthood. Now, they alternate or simultaneously pursue education and work, cycle between periods living at home and living independently, and delay marriage and parenting. Women, especially, have seen their options broaden. As a result, fewer young people at age 22, much less someone in their teens, know what they are going to do in the next 10 years than they did even a few decades ago.

This more ambiguous and extended path often finds youth extending their dependence on parents, creating a greater financial burden for many families. As Schoeni and Ross show in their chapter, parents provide, on average, \$38,000 in material assistance for their child, or about \$2,200 for every year between ages 18 and 34—considerably more than in the past. Clearly, not all families can afford to provide this level of support, and several authors attest to the fact that inequities matter not only when children are little, but when they are grown as well, with advantages and disadvantages accumulating over time.

Policy Implications

Public awareness and social policies have not yet caught up to the changes described in the book. Many features of American society operate on the assumption that reaching adulthood occurs much earlier than it ordinarily does today. Health insurance is but one example. An awkward gap exists from the late teens through the 20s when many young people have yet to become employed full-time, requiring families to pick up the slack.

How then might outdated policies be rewoven to smooth entry into adult life? A first step is to rethink traditional arrangements that penalize individuals for cycling between work and school, or who pursue both simultaneously. We must develop more open and coherent education and training programs that can also permit lifelong learning, and that better connect and actively combine education and work experiences.

Community colleges can be key institutions for new interventions, but financial, social, work, and psychological services must be bolstered to match those provided in four-year colleges. Workplaces, too, must be restructured in ways that allow workers to better balance work, education, and family. Paid training, flextime, family and medical leave, part-time parity in wages are but a few examples. The family clearly remains the primary institution that absorbs the costs of investment in the next generation. Given that not all families can afford these sizable outlays, better safety nets are needed for young people. This is especially true for those in foster care, juvenile justice, and special education systems. Most supports for these youth currently end at age 18, which is simply too early to stop investing in these young people when their more advantaged peers continue to receive sizable assistance from their families of origin. The costs of these supports do not come cheaply. However, the costs must be considered against the recognition that insufficient investment up front will come at huge psychological, social, and economic costs in the long run.

Based on Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Rubén G. Rumbaut and Richard A. Settersten, Jr., "On the Frontier of Adulthood: Emerging Themes and New Directions," in On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy. Edited by Richard A. Settersten, Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2004.

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., is the Zellerbach Family Professor of Sociology and Research Associate in the Population Studies Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Rubén G. Rumbaut is Professor of Sociology and co-Director of the Center for Research on Immigration, Population and Public Policy at the University of California, Irvin. Richard A. Settersten, Jr., is Professor and Chair of Sociology at Case Western Reserve University.

The Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy examines the changing nature of early adulthood, and the policies, programs, and institutions that support young people as they move into adulthood. Significant cultural, economic, and demographic changes have occurred in the span of a few generations, and these changes are challenging youth's psychological and social development. Some are adapting well, but many others are floundering as they prepare to leave home, finish school, find jobs, and start families. The network is both documenting these cultural and social shifts, and exploring how families, government, and social institutions are shaping the course of young adults' development. The Network is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and chaired by University of Pennsylvania sociologist Frank Furstenberg.