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## Social Policy and the Transition to Adulthood

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Major cultural and economic shifts in the last 50 years have dramatically altered the lives of young adults. These shifts have brought new freedoms and demands, and with them, more choices and a greater chance of drift. Young people in the United States are largely cut loose in their early 20s to navigate the markets for education, jobs, and partners using whatever knowledge and resources they have acquired. Some succeed remarkably; others seriously flounder.

Richard Settersten, in his chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, argues that better and more coherent social policies must be developed to help young people enter adult life. Rather than reinforce the traditional lock-step nature of full-time education followed by full-time work, policies must recognize that adults now alternate between education and work experiences, or simultaneously combine these experiences, while also managing family obligations. Families should be strengthened and supported, and youth should be encouraged to contribute to community and society through civic engagement. Safety nets must be provided to those who need them, and programs and services should provide support not only in times of need, but throughout life.

### Policies to Support Work and Education

Work is the cornerstone of Western societies, and the workforce is changing rapidly, constantly demanding new knowledge and skills. Adequately preparing youth for the labor market is a crucial policy goal. Building on recent recommendations of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Settersten highlights proposals to strengthen work and educational institutions, and to create links between them. These include modifying school and work schedules to adapt to the needs of the workforce, creating better dialogue between employers and educators, giving employers greater say in programs that combine education and work, providing resources to stimulate local partnerships and to recruit youth, increasing the availability of part-time and temporary work, and systematically relating what students learn at work and school. Policies should also aim to improve the training of personnel who guide and counsel young people and better relate information to their talents and interests.

Community colleges are a key institution for new interventions. They reach large numbers and a wide variety of young people, serve many purposes, are flexible, and offer connections to a range of career paths. They have not, however, been fully successful in engaging young adults. The drop-out rate is high, and students often fail to make the leap from remediation courses to vocational training. To turn the revolving door into a route to employment, the above noted work-school connections can be strengthened, as can study and support groups and tutoring and mentoring programs. On-site child care can be provided, and flexible course timetables can be offered.

Once in the workforce, young adults are faced with the prospect of lifelong learning to stay current in a highly competitive workforce, as is evident in the growing number of young adults who remain in school longer and frequently combine work and school. Yet, policies rarely support such a balancing act. Health care benefits, for example, are typically only offered to full-time employees. Of the 45 million uninsured in 2003, 10 million of those were young people aged 25–34, according to the Census Bureau. Similarly, tuition assistance programs in most companies are available only to full-time employees. Colleges and universities, too, typically only offer scholarships and financial aid to full-time students.

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## Strengthening Families and Fostering Civic Engagement

Parents are a primary resource for young adults, and family resources can help or hinder early adult transitions. Those from disadvantaged families clearly have a harder time finding their way. Strengthening fragile families—both young adults' families of origin and the families they form themselves—should be a key policy aim. Building support for young unmarried and married couples with children is essential. Restructuring the workplace in ways that permit individuals to better manage their family responsibilities will also help substantially—for example, creating flextime schedules; improving wages, benefits, and training opportunities for part-time employees; or providing a handful of days for family and medical leave.

Strengthening the safety nets of “vulnerable” populations is also critical, especially for young people involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, whose support typically ends at age 18. It is important to consider the repercussions of terminating their support at a time when most young adults continue to receive significant assistance from their families.

Fostering civic engagement is also a goal that deserves the attention of policymakers. The idealism of youth can be harnessed and activated through government-organized public services, or less formally, through private-public partnerships and grassroots efforts. There are both short- and long-term benefits of instilling a commitment to civic activity early in life, and these benefits accrue not only to the communities and societies they serve, but to young people themselves.

These are all daunting, and costly, challenges, but the price of doing nothing is much greater. The first few decades of life are defined and structured by social policy systems that establish relations between childhood and adolescence. Yet, as young people stand on the frontier of adult life, they are offered only a fragmented and haphazard set of policies and programs.

Policies related to young adults must be recast as opportunities for social investment, the benefits of which must be weighed not only against immediate, but also long-range, risks and costs. Policies should make school more attractive to the widest possible range of students, thereby preventing drop-out; widen the definition of risk beyond unemployment; devise tracking methods to quickly identify those at risk; provide tailored assistance based on individual needs; coordinate services across different levels of government; and target interventions for individuals in their twenties instead of waiting.

Social policies must be rethought with the entire life course in mind, rather than treated as spot coverage during specific times of vulnerability. This is especially important if we are to ensure that young adults have the tools and opportunities not only to start off on the right foot, but to remain productive members of society thereafter.

*Based on Richard Settersten, Jr., “Social Policy and the Transition to Adulthood: Toward Stronger Institutions and Individual Capacities,” 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.*

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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.