



October 2004, Issue 9

Off to a Good Start? Higher Education versus Single Motherhood

Gary Sandefur, Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck, and Hyunjoon Park

Several factors in life that can put a young person on the road to success. Two, however, stand out: education and avoiding early parenthood. Gary Sandefur, Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck, and Hyunjoon Park, in their chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, explore these two decisions by comparing the outcomes of two cohorts, one born in 1964 and the other born in 1974, based on their education and childbearing choices and their family and school characteristics.

Their findings confirm trends noted elsewhere in the book of expanding educational opportunities for young people between the two decades and the delay in marriage. The findings also reflect the national rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing. Beyond these patterns, however, Sandefur and coauthors find that family social structure and resources and the type of high school one attends greatly influence outcomes.

Trends between the Two Cohorts: Expanded Education, Delayed Marriage, and Rise in Single Parenthood

The authors use two data sets to compare two cohorts of youth born a decade apart. The High School and Beyond Survey (HSB) includes youth born in 1964 and who were 28 at the time of the authors' study, and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) includes youth born in 1974 who were age 26 at the time of the study. Based on a latent class analysis, the youth clustered into five general categories. The first was labeled "limited postsecondary education/family" (LPSE/FAM), a group composed of youth who did not attend college, had married, and had children. A second group was the "limited postsecondary education/no family" (LPSE/NO FAM). The third group (BA/NOF) had completed four years of college and had not started a family. The fourth group (BA/FAM) had completed four years of college and had started a family. A fifth group (LPSE/CHI) included women who had limited postsecondary education and were unmarried with a child.

Reflecting a general trend away from early marriage documented elsewhere in the volume, 63% of the women in the earlier cohort (born in 1964) fell into one of the two marriage classes compared with 50% of the later cohort; similar patterns were found for men. Reflecting expanding educational opportunities in general, a higher percentage of women and men in the later cohort fell into one of the BA categories (e.g., 51% of women in the earlier cohort versus 46% in the later). Most individuals were working and living independently by ages 26 or 28. Finally, reflecting the national rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing, the percentage of unmarried mothers with little or no postsecondary education increased from 14% in the earlier cohort to 22% in the later cohort.

A word of caution in interpreting these categories: latent class analysis reveals interesting patterns only. Assigning too much weight to the associations can oversimplify the categories and trends. With that caveat in mind, the results are nevertheless informative about whether individuals are moving toward a successful start to their adult lives, and how they are doing in realms of concern to policymakers.

Family's Influence in Starting Out on the Right Foot

The findings mirror societal trends in family formation and education but say little about the factors that direct youth into particular groups, factors such as race-ethnicity, parental education, family structure, and whether the youth attended a public or private high school during his or her senior year.

(over)

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

The effect of race and ethnicity on the likelihood of getting a bachelor's degree while delaying family (BA/NOF group) changed over time. In the earlier cohort, only Asian men and women were more likely than whites (the comparison group) at ages 26 and 28 to have a college degree and to have delayed marriage and family.

A decade later, however, all groups differed significantly from whites. Asians remained the most likely to go to college and delay family, and Native Americans were the least likely to do so. Black men were less likely than white men to get a BA and postpone a family, while black women were more likely than white women to do so. The findings suggest that Native Americans, black men, and Latinos are at greater risk for poor starts by not getting the needed skills for a changing economy, and that the risks may have become more pronounced over time. Native Americans, blacks, and Hispanics—and especially black women—are also at greater risk than whites and Asians of starting a family outside of marriage while getting very little, if any, postsecondary education.

Family, the authors find, plays a significant role in starting off on the right foot. The probability of going to college increased dramatically when parents themselves had more than a high school education. (There was little difference between youth whose parents had a high school degree and those whose parents did not graduate from high school.) Whether youth come from a single-parent family appears not to influence college prospects, unless the youth was living with neither parent in his or her senior year of high school (perhaps living in foster care or with kin).

Family structure, however, does affect the prospects of becoming a single mother with little education. Women from two-parent families were, at ages 26 and 28, significantly less likely to be single mothers. Again, youth living with neither parent their senior year in high school were the most likely to be single parents. Youth of parents who had some college were significantly less likely to be single mothers.

The type of school attended during the youth's senior year in high school—whether private or public—also influences the decision to get a college degree and delay family. Those who attended a Catholic school or other private high school were significantly more likely at ages 26 and 28 to have attained some college and delayed family formation. The same applies to single motherhood. Those who went to Catholic School were less likely to be single mothers than those who attended public schools.

Policy Implications

The findings show that social structure, reflected in the social circumstances of childhood and adolescents, plays an important role in the early transition to adulthood. Young people who are white, have highly educated parents, or who have attended private schools are more likely to start off on the right foot toward adulthood. Parental education and type of school have been shown to influence life chances in a number of ways, including lifetime income, role modeling of parents, knowledge and insights into the importance of secondary education, among others. Of course, it is nearly impossible to change parental education levels of the current generation of youth. However, the findings suggest that increasing the availability of financial aid for higher education and improving the information available to middle- and high school students about higher education could improve their chances for success. As D. Wayne Osgood and coauthors in their chapter in *On the Frontier of Adulthood* find, early attitudes toward education, regardless of social class, strongly influence the directions youth take. Further, the important role of private schools in fostering successful transitions suggests the need for further research on the difference between private and public schools that can account for these differences.

Based on Gary Sandefur, Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck, and Hyunjoon Park, "Off to a Good Start? Post-Secondary Education and Early Adult Life," 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. Gary D. Sandefur is professor in the Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Jennifer Eggerling-Boeck and Hyunjoon Park are doctoral students in the Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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.