



August 2006, Issue 28

Sticking Around: Delayed Departure from the Parental Nest in Western Europe

Katherine Newman and Sofya Aptekar

“When I was your age....” If teens and young adults had a dollar for every time a parent said that, they could afford to leave home. When cultural and generational seismic shifts take hold, hands are wrung and pundits fire up the computer—until the new trend settles in and becomes the norm. The United States may be experiencing one of those seismic shifts, as young people slow down the advance into adulthood, living at home longer, taking longer to finish school, marry, and start a family. But if it’s any consolation to today’s parents, they are not alone. Their European counterparts are experiencing many of the same patterns. In fact, in Italy, more than one-half of all young men now live with their parents until age 30.

Katherine Newman and Sofya Aptekar in their chapter in *The Price of Independence* trace the transition to adulthood in Europe, finding that youth there are responding to high housing costs, less stable jobs, and higher unemployment by living at home longer.¹ They also find that living with parents is associated with less life satisfaction, but the effect on satisfaction is moderated by how widespread the practice is. In other words, as norms change, stigma eases, and the more satisfied youth and families become. In some countries, in fact, general well-being and satisfaction seem to be enhanced by long stays in the family home, and the family can be a critical, and welcome, buffer in the face of economic instability.

Housing and Employment Lead Young Adults to “Stick Around”

Trends in living with parents vary greatly from northern to southern Europe. Data from the European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS) show that only 10% of those aged 18–34 live with their parents in Scandinavian countries. In northern European countries, 15% to 30% do. However, in southern Europe, as many as 60% of young adults live with their parents.

The authors find that two factors in Europe are linked with this rise in living with parents: housing markets and employment conditions. A 10% increase in homeownership in a country is associated with an approximately 4% increase in the proportion living with parents. Housing explains about 12% of the variance between countries in the prevalence of young adult children living with their parents.

For instance, in the Netherlands, where fewer young adults live with their parents, 42% of the total housing stock is in the public sector, with housing built specifically for young students and workers. In contrast, only 8% of the rentals in Spain are public housing, and more than 70% of people own their dwellings. With little government assistance for first-time home buyers (and with required down payments of roughly 50-70%), it is quite difficult to make the move. Even though Spain experienced a construction boom after entering the European Union, much of it was higher-end dwellings, second residences, and tourist accommodations. With limited rental options, most

¹ Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Rouse, editors, *The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, under review). Danziger and Rouse are members of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood. For additional Network books on the transition to adulthood, see www.transad.pop.upenn.edu.

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

Spaniards buy a house *before* leaving the parental home rather than renting for a period, as roughly three-fourths of the French do.

Employment policies also affect the ability of youth to live independently. As the spring 2006 demonstrations in Paris showed, the rise of “temporary” work contracts, mainly directed at young workers, is a divisive issue. Complaints of too many restrictions on employers, especially in their ability to lay off or fire workers, led to the emergence of short-term temporary work contracts beginning in the mid-1980s. Today, more than one-half of Spanish male workers aged 25 to 29 are governed by temporary contracts.

Yet, although students protested the increase in these contracts, the authors find that as protections grow stronger, youth unemployment rises, another factor in their tendency to live at home with parents. In fact, moving up one percentage point in the employment protection scale is correlated with an additional 7% of young people living with their parents. This relationship between unemployment and living with parents explains 17% of the variance in living arrangements between countries, slightly more than housing market effects.

A country’s social protections can help to cushion the lack of a job. According to the Eurobarometer Survey in 2001, parent and family resources, not government resources, are the primary source of support for young adults in southern Europe. In contrast, in the Nordic countries and some liberal democracies, such as Ireland and the United Kingdom, unemployment and social security provide the lion’s share of support to unemployed youth. Continental regimes, such as France, Germany, and Belgium, fall in the middle. Where government benefits are available, on average 14% fewer 18–34-year-olds live with parents. Benefit availability explains 28% of the variance in living arrangements among youth, even more than either housing or labor market effects.

Less Stigma in Living with Parents, Less Dissatisfaction with Life

Using data from the European Quality of Life Survey, Newman and Aptekar explore whether living with parents affects one’s life satisfaction, after accounting for age, sex, marital status, parental status, employment and its precariousness, student status, income, economic hardship, home ownership, and crowdedness of the living arrangements.

They find that as the incidence of living with parents increases, life satisfaction falls among young adults. However, the more widespread the practice, the less stigma associated with it and less dissatisfaction. The authors suggest that perhaps Europe, and America to follow, is witnessing a new developmental stage, one they term “in-house adulthood.” This stage is structured less in terms of authoritative parent and submissive child, and more like co-equals who reside together and enjoy one another’s company and support. A recent report by Teresa Jurado Guerrero, for example, finds that more than one-half of all Europeans think it is a good thing that adult children live longer with parents.² With the growth of two-income households and the attendant time pressures during children’s early years, Newman and Aptekar suggest parents may have less of an “itch” to see their children depart. Guerrero in fact finds that both parents and children feel that the main disadvantage of leaving home is emotional loss.

² Teresa Jurado Guerrero, *Youth in Transition: Housing, Employment, Social Policies and Families in France and Spain*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2001.

Policy Implications

As Margaret Mead showed many decades ago, there are many ways to organize family life. Autonomy is but one possibility for young adults. Although tension may go hand in hand with change, the flipside of autonomy, familial affection and intimacy, may come to be valued equally.

However, the underlying reasons for the delayed departure are harbingers of other, more worrisome concerns: the effects of economic instability. Although families may welcome their adult children in their homes, their continued high unemployment rates, less stable employment futures, and high housing barriers can have serious consequences. For example, declining birth rates pose serious dilemmas for the social security systems of countries such as Italy, Spain, and Japan. Particularly in conservative welfare regimes, which rely on families to care for their own before the state steps in, the capacity of young people to “graduate” to adulthood in time to husband the resources to care for their parents may be compromised. Absent a sharp change in the economic fortunes of young adults or a widespread change in social policies toward Scandinavian-style social supports, the trend will likely continue.

Based on Katherine Newman and Sofya Aptekar, “Sticking Around: Delayed Departure from the Parental Nest in Western Europe,” in The Price of Independence: The Economics of Early Adulthood, edited by Sheldon Danziger and Cecilia Rouse (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, under review).

Katherine S. Newman is the Malcolm Forbes Class of 1941 Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University. Her most recent book is *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low Wage Labor Market* (Harvard/Russell Sage, October 2006). **Sofya Aptekar** is a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology and a graduate fellow in the Demography program, Office of Population Research, at Princeton 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.