



Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy

**Why Focus on the Transition to Adulthood
For Vulnerable Populations?**

D. Wayne Osgood
E. Michael Foster
Constance Flanagan
Gretchen R. Ruth

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D. Wayne Osgood
E. Michael Foster
Constance Flanagan
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Why Focus on the Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations

Abstract

This is the introductory chapter for the volume *On Your Own Without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations*, which focuses on groups of adolescents and young adults who face the greatest challenges in the lengthening process of becoming an adult in the modern world. This introductory chapter sets the backdrop for the remainder of the volume by reviewing both the ways that the transition to adulthood has become longer and more difficult in the past half century and the many ways that youth in the general population remain dependent on their families for help during these years. In the decade after high school, youths in industrialized countries rely on their families in many ways: for financial support to obtain the lengthy education required for professional occupations, for child care when babies come sooner than steady incomes, and for a place to stay when marriages fail or jobs are lost. But what about those people in their twenties who have no family to call on, whose pasts are so troubled that they are likely to have lost their family's good will, or whose abilities are limited in ways that mean they will always need to rely heavily on others? This volume looks at the special problems of becoming an adult for groups such as youths who spent their childhoods in foster care or who must build a new life as they return to the community after incarceration. This introductory chapter also explains why we chose to include these particular vulnerable populations in the volume, as well as foreshadowing the themes that will be covered by the remaining chapters. As children and adolescents, government programs have played a major role in their lives of these vulnerable populations, and many of these youths have relied on government for much of what families typically provide. These governmental programs and the support they offer typically end between the ages of 18 and 21. For each of the seven vulnerable populations addressed in the book, there is a chapter presenting what is known about the challenges of the transition to adulthood and a chapter articulating the policy issues that must be confronted in order to help these youths to have a good chance for a productive and satisfying adult life.

Why Focus on The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations?

D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen R. Ruth

Pennsylvania State University

The period from the end of high school through the twenties is enormously eventful and consequential. As individuals move from childhood to adulthood, they complete their educations, begin full-time employment, change residences, enter (and often exit) marriages and cohabitations, and become parents. In fact, all of these demographic changes are concentrated in this period far more than during any other time of life (Rindfuss 1991). As Arnett (2000) summarized, 95 percent of twelve through seventeen year-olds live with one or more parent, 98 percent are unmarried, less than 10 percent are parents themselves, and over 95 percent are students. By age 30, 75 percent are married, 75 percent are parents, and less than 10 percent are enrolled in school. Young people must accomplish much during these ages, and for many this period is one of extended exploration as they try out alternative paths in all these domains before settling on long-term commitments (Arnett 2000).

What happens during the transition to adulthood also has great impact on young people's futures. Those who attain higher education, such as earning bachelors and post-graduate degrees, will find jobs that offer higher income and occupational status (Chen and Kaplan, 2003; Jencks et. al, 1979; Kerckhoff, Raudenbush, and Glennie, 2001). Higher levels of education are also associated with increased political and civic engagement (Kingston, Hubbard, Lapp, Schroeder, and Wilson, 2003; Milligan, Moretti, and Oreopoulos, 2003). In contrast, youths who enter unsuccessful marriages, become parents before marrying, or are entangled in drugs or

crime will have a more difficult time achieving financial security, satisfying family relationships, and so forth (e.g., Cherlin, 1992; McLanahan and Booth, 1989, Newcomb and Bentler, 1988).

The MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy sponsored and organized the present volume. This network, which is funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and is directed by Frank Furstenberg, was formed in recognition of the need for greater attention to this period of life by both researchers and policy makers. This is the second volume produced by the network, and it is a logical extension of the first, *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut, in press). *On the Frontier of Adulthood* presents research by a large and varied group of leading scholars who all address fundamental questions about the transition to adulthood using major national and international data sets. Their work documents many ways that this period of life has changed over the past century and notes how these changes present challenges to most youth and their families.

The research in *On the Frontier of Adulthood* concerns the broad, general population of youth in the United States (and some other industrialized countries as well). As the editors note (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten, in press; Settersten, in press), if the transition to adulthood proves difficult for a large share of this general population, then there is great reason for concern about groups of youth who enter adulthood with special vulnerabilities than others. The present volume takes up this latter concern by focusing on several groups of young adults who have especially poor prospects as they make the transition.

The William T. Grant Foundation's well known report, *The Forgotten Half: Non-College-Bound Youth in America* (William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988), highlighted the fact that some youth have far better prospects for

successful and satisfying adult lives than others. In particular, the report focused on ways in which the odds are stacked against the large portion of young people who do not attend college. We take this theme one step further and concentrate on smaller populations of youths whose life circumstances present considerably greater challenges. An analogy might be that, if middle-class college-bound youth pass through the transition on relatively well-greased wheels, the transition is prone to be rough sledding for working-class non-college-bound youth, and it can be a veritable mine field for the vulnerable populations.

The purposes of this edited volume are (1) to identify the challenges facing those adolescents and young adults for whom the lengthening process of becoming an adult in the modern world is likely most difficult and (2) to bring attention to policy issues concerning the transition to adulthood for these groups. These vulnerable youth often suffer from emotional and behavioral problems and have a history of problems in the school and the community. In addition, their families may be unable or unwilling to offer them the support that is so helpful to most other youth during this transition (Schoeni and Ross, in press). This support can include financial assistance needed to obtain the lengthy education required for professional occupations, child care when babies come sooner than steady incomes, and a place to stay when marriages fail or jobs are lost. But what about those people in their twenties who have no family on which to call, whose pasts are so troubled that they have lost their family's good will, or whose families lack the resources from which to provide support? These questions are especially important for youth whose skills and abilities are so limited that they will always rely heavily on others.

This volume examines the transition to adulthood for seven populations that may be especially vulnerable during this period due to the special challenges that they face. Each of these populations is distinguished by its involvement in particular governmental programs:

- Youth in the Mental Health System
- Youth in the Foster Care System
- Youth in the Juvenile Justice System
- Youth Reentering the Community from the Criminal Justice System
- Youth in Special Education
- Youth with Physical Disabilities and Chronic Illness
(The health care system)
- Runaway and Homeless Youth
(The juvenile court, foster care, and homeless shelter systems)

We chose these groups because they face exceptional challenges for making successful transitions into the major arenas of adulthood, such as employment, higher education, marriage, and parenthood. The greater challenges may stem from any or all of several sources. Some of the groups are hampered by limited abilities or skills, such as youth with physical disabilities and former special education students with learning disabilities. Others, such as young adults who spent their teen years in foster care and runaway and homeless youth, have been hampered by unreliable or non-existent familial support. Tasks of the transition to adulthood such as achieving financial and residential independence are likely to be daunting for young people with physical disabilities, chronic illness, or mental illness. For others, such as the formerly incarcerated, involvement in government systems may have exacerbated their initial problems or have stigmatized them in a way that makes success less likely.

Though the causes and nature of their involvement may differ, all of these youth have depended on public systems in special ways and often for many years. That involvement, therefore, poses new problems as they enter adulthood. Perhaps the most critical is the loss of

support from systems that had provided benefits to them as children. In some instances, involvement in the system is phased out; in others, involvement ends abruptly. Some youth may transition into other, adult-oriented systems, such as vocational rehabilitation. In a few cases (such as youth who receive special education services) programs are designed to smooth the transition to adulthood. From a public policy perspective these programs are noteworthy because they are among the few programs in the U.S. designed to improve the transition to adulthood per se.

These transitions generate a set of important and complex public policy issues. A major purpose of this volume is to consider the repercussions from ending this support at a time when other youth continue to receive so much assistance from their families.

The Challenge of Becoming an Adult in the United States Today

Two themes from research on the transition to adulthood in the general population form the backdrop to our work on vulnerable populations. Strong support for both of these themes can be found in research presented in *On the Frontier of Adulthood* (Settersten et al., in press), the earlier volume produced by the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, as well as in previous research on this period of life. The first theme is that the process of moving from adolescence to adulthood has become longer, more complex, and less orderly over the last fifty years. For these reasons, the transition to adulthood is now more challenging for all youth. The second theme is that a large share of youth in the general population draws heavily on the resources of their families as they make this transition. In this light it is especially problematic that governmental assistance for the vulnerable populations typically ends at the beginning of the transitional period.

The Lengthening Transition

At the start of the twenty-first century, making the transition to adulthood has become more difficult. Compared to the relatively orderly sequence that marked adult status for many (especially for middle-class who in the mid-twentieth century (Modell, Furstenberg, & Hershberg, 1976; Rindfuss, 1991; Winsborough, 1978), modal pattern reflects the experiences of youth today. Rather, what constitutes a successful and complete transition is now less clear, and youth are less secure that decisions and investments made today will be the right choices tomorrow.

From the early nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, the transition to adulthood became progressively more standardized and orderly (Shanahan, 2000). Improvements in health reduced the chances that the death of a parent would force teenagers into full-time work or care-taking (Uhlenberg, 1974), and the advent of social policies such as foster care and welfare also reduced the chances that adolescents would be forced into adult roles (Kohli, 1986). Furthermore, with rising standards for universal education, the end of high school became a clear norm as the minimum age for home leaving, full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood (Hogan, 1990). By 1950, entry into adulthood had become an orderly and quick sequence of transitions, with completion of education and full-time employment (for males) followed by marriage and then parenthood. In the decade after the Second World War, the rapid expansion of the American economy, the array of benefits to Veterans, and the growth of housing, permitted or even promoted a rapid passage to adulthood (May, 1990; Modell, 1989). Favorable economic conditions and optimism about the future among people in their late teens and early twenties resulted in early family formation. By the time they reached their early twenties, close to half of American men were full-time workers, and women, full-time mothers.

The historical era of the “marriage rush” and “baby boom” lasted only a couple of decades. In the final third of the twentieth century, several trends led to increasing complexity and growing duration of the transition to adulthood. During the 1960s, rapid changes took place in both the labor market and in social attitudes about

women's work and family roles. For example, by the mid-1970s, a high school education, which earlier in the century was uncommon, no longer sufficed to ensure a well-paying job, and many parents began to have difficulty supporting a family on a single wage (Furstenberg, 2000; Sagawa, 1998). Despite improving economic conditions in the 1980s and 1990s, the duration of the transitional period continued to increase, due at least in part to attitudinal changes of young people and to increasing educational expectations in the labor market (Fussell and Furstenberg, in press).

The lengthening of the transition to adulthood is especially evident in a growing period between leaving home of one's parents and forming one's own family (Fussell and Furstenberg, in press). Unlike earlier times, youth in the United States today move away from home by 18 or 19, with only about 10 percent of men and 30 percent of women remaining there until marriage (Arnett, 2000; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1994). Meanwhile, from just 1970 to 1996, the median age of marriage increased from 21 to 25 for women and from 27 for men (Arnett, 2000).

Accompanying this change, there is no longer a clear standard or modal sequencing of the major transitions to adult roles of ending education, marrying, entering the labor force, moving from home, and becoming a parent. Instead, sequences vary enormously across individuals who face very different sets of opportunities and groups with different cultural practices (Mollenkopf, Kasinitz, and Waters, in press). In effect, the coupling between marriage, parenthood, and leaving the home of one's parents is now loose (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1994). As the proportion of the population receiving higher education has grown from 14 percent in 1940 to 60 percent in the mid-1990s (Arnett, 2000), youth commonly mix schooling with employment and/or parenthood (Shanahan, 2000). Furthermore, women are delaying the birth of their first child, often until they reach their thirties (Rind et al., 1988, 1996). Where the youth of the 1950s could follow a simple and short path from adolescence to adulthood, youth today must chart their own, and most of them will take much longer to do so.

Family Support During the Transition to Adulthood

Becoming an adult does not happen all at once, but rather it involves an extended period of semi-autonomy during which youth move away from full dependence on their families (Arnett 2000; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999). Indeed, for this reason it is important to recognize the transition to adulthood as a special period in life when people face unique challenges. Although they leave behind the restrictions of childhood and adolescence, their financial resources are limited as are the experiences and connections that would land them jobs with good pay. Thus, only gradually can they take on adult responsibilities. Typically, they remain at least partially dependent on others for various kinds of assistance, especially upon their parents. For some, families provide partial support as they remain at home for a period after high school; for others parents pay a large share of college expenses. Furthermore, steps toward independence are often reversed. For instance, during their late teens and twenties, 40 percent of American youth move back to their parents' home after leaving at least once (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1994).

Families provide assistance to their children during the transition to adulthood in many ways. Parents continue to provide food and shelter; they may give their children money to assist with bills or major expenses such as the down payment for a house; and they can help their children by giving their time for tasks such as child care. Families also may provide social or emotional support and the motivation crucial to achieving success during this transition. Attachment to parents, indicating positive parental support, is associated with higher academic achievement (Cutrona, Cole, Colangelo, Assouline, and Russell, 1994) and higher perceptions of scholastic competence during college (Fass and Tubman, 2002). Parents can also be a key source of guidance for their young adult offspring, providing advice about such things as careers, money management, housing, and health care. At the same time, the character of the parent-child relationship changes significantly during this period and one of the important tasks for young adults and their parents is to develop a more peer-like relationship.

During childhood and adolescence, governmental programs have played a major role in augmenting family resources for meeting the needs of the vulnerable populations, but those program services typically end early in the transition period. How problematic is the termination of program involvement? It is useful to consider that question in light of the amount of assistance that families provide to youth in the general population during the transition to adulthood.

Schoeni and Ross (in press) recently estimated the amount of money and time that parents provide to their children from age 18 through 34. They concluded that the average monetary value of parental support (in 2000 dollars) across this age period was \$2200 annually, representing roughly one-third of the amount provided during the years of childhood. On top of this financial assistance, parents continue to give their children a great deal of their time. The average time assistance was 367 hours per year, which corresponds to the time spent in nine weeks of full-time employment. Schoeni and Ross also concluded that the amount of assistance has increased considerably over the last thirty years due to longer schooling, later age of marriage, and the increase in single-parenting.

The amount of assistance that families provide during the transition clearly depends a great deal on the family's resources. For instance, youth receive less assistance if their families have less income, if the parents have less education, or if there are more siblings in the family (Amato and Booth, 1997; Jayakody, 1998; Steelman and Powell, 1991). Schoeni and Ross calculated that the quarter of U.S. households with the highest incomes provide at least 70 percent more assistance to their children from age 18-34 than do the quarter with the lowest incomes. Thus, assistance during this age period contributes to a dynamic of diverging pathways (Kerckhoff, 1993) in which parents' educational and economic resources contribute to growing advantages for some youth over others. It seems likely that these vulnerable populations, who face a combination of larger challenges and reduced family support, will be at the greatest disadvantage in negotiating the transition to adulthood.

Why These Vulnerable Populations Deserve Our Attention

In this section we make the case for special attention to these particular vulnerable populations in terms of the greater challenges they face in making the transition to adulthood and in terms of the ending of their eligibility for governmental programs as they enter this critical age period.

Sources of Greater Challenge During the Transition to Adulthood

These vulnerable populations deserve our attention because they face great challenges in several areas during the transition to adulthood. First, some populations must accomplish additional tasks that most people in this age period do not face. For instance, runaway and homeless youth begin the transition in need of housing, rather than having the security of their family's home. Youth with physical disabilities often need to arrange for medical services or devices to assist them with daily tasks. Youth involved in the juvenile or adult justice systems often owe restitution in the form of money or labor, and their freedom may depend on following conditions of probation or parole that restrict their activities. Such burdens may well reduce the chance of obtaining the additional education that would improve future job prospects or of finding an appealing partner and nurturing that relationship to become a satisfying marriage.

Many of the vulnerable populations also confront greater challenges in the form of limitations on their skills, and these limitations may directly preclude opportunities available to others. For instance, reduced strength and range of movement (for youth with physical disabilities) or learning disabilities and cognitive impairments (for youth in special education) would rule out some appealing occupations. Indeed, members of many of these vulnerable populations have very limited skills at dealing with ordinary tasks of daily living for the transition to adulthood, such as managing money, obtaining housing, or even (for a substantial

proportion of youth in special education) looking up telephone numbers (Foster and Gifford, in press).

Another type of limitation is learning disabilities, which are quite common not only among children and adolescents in special education, but in several of the other vulnerable populations as well. In the juvenile justice system, for example, 30 to 50 percent of all confined youth have identified learning disabilities (Foster and Gifford, in press). Other limitations include mental illness (for youth involved in the mental health system) or behavioral difficulties (for youth involved in the justice system, and many runaway and homeless youth or youth in foster care). Though these limitations would not preclude the physical and intellectual tasks required by a job, they could reduce the probability of successfully coping with requirements such as punctuality, reliability, and maintaining positive relationships with coworkers.

A third source of challenge for many of the vulnerable populations is the lack of family support. As we discussed above, youth in the general population typically receive a great deal of assistance from their families, and this support often appears critical for overcoming difficulties like becoming a single parent or losing a job. Furthermore, the greater financial resources of middle class families allow them to continue to elevate their children's prospects of success above those of working class and poor families. In contrast, youths in these vulnerable populations often come from families whose economic resources are limited. In other instances the quality of the relationships in their families is degraded, poor, or entirely absent. For example, children from poor, single-parent families are over-represented among youth in the juvenile justice system, and delinquent youth are especially likely to have poor relationships with their parents or care-givers (Foster and Gifford, in press). Similarly, children from poor, single-parent families are over-represented in special education, with sixty-eight percent of those in

special education from families with incomes of less than \$25,000 compared with only 40 percent of students in the general population. We should be especially concerned about those vulnerable populations that have no families to which they can turn, such as youth exiting from foster care and runaway and homeless youth.

We hasten to add that in many cases parents and extended family of vulnerable youth strive to be supportive, and thus it is often not a lack of motivation that hinders their support. As noted, for some families the financial burdens outweigh resources. Yet even committed families with good resources have a difficult task in helping young adults in these vulnerable populations succeed in confronting the challenges detailed in the remaining chapters of this volume.

The End of Eligibility for Governmental Programs

These specific vulnerable populations are of special interest, in part, because each is already the target of government policies and programs. For these youth, the transition to adulthood means the transition out of programs in which they have been involved, often for many years. In some instances, that involvement is phased out; in others, it ends abruptly.

For instance, children in foster care are required to leave state care between the ages of 18 and 21. Such policies reflect simplistic and outdated notions of childhood dependence and adult independence. Although independence may be a goal, it does not occur simply because one turns 18. In fact, late adolescence through early adulthood is a time for practicing independence by gradually assuming responsibility, with the guidance and support of adults. Many youth in foster care, like their age-mates who are not in the system, need the kinds of supports and guidance that families would provide. But when youth become too old, the state no longer provides supports for foster families. Thus, youth in this system may transition into other, adult-oriented systems, such as vocational rehabilitation.

Some systems do extend services into early adulthood and even accommodate the kinds of services they offer to the developmental needs of a specific population as it makes the transition to adulthood. For example, the federal law regulating special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), mandates that public K–12 education systems develop a transition plan for each youth beginning at age 14. That plan stipulates that each child’s individualized education plan include post-transition goals and services plan for achieving these goals. These goals extend beyond education per se and include vocational training and life skills more generally.

For other groups, the age of majority signals a radical change in the character of treatment. Perhaps this is most obvious for those young people involved with the justice system. Without exception, youth are ineligible for the juvenile justice system for any offense committed after reaching the age of majority (18 in most states). At that point offenders are legally adults who are no longer dependent. Furthermore, our policies treat them as less malleable, assuming that they are unlikely to benefit from intervention and therefore less worthy of investments by the state. Accordingly, where the juvenile justice system is at least nominally oriented towards rehabilitation, the adult criminal justice system is explicitly punitive in orientation.

A common theme extending across all these groups, however, is that, because the individuals are no longer children, the state assumes less responsibility for them. During the transition to adulthood, the systems designed to address the needs of vulnerable groups during childhood either are no longer available, offer programs of greatly reduced scope, are complicated by new eligibility requirements, or are transformed to different missions. Even when systems of care are available (as is the case for youth who were in special education or who have chronic illnesses), professionals are rarely trained to be attentive to the needs,

competencies, and desires of young people at the brink of adulthood. Most professional training for service providers is specific to practice with children or with adults. Recently, there has come to be some specialized training for practice with adolescents, but there is virtually none for practice with young adults.

The present volume addresses the question of whether the programs during childhood and adolescence have been sufficient to prepare the vulnerable populations for successful transitions to adulthood. The growing duration and complexity of the transition to adulthood suggests that they are unlikely to be. If the transition to adulthood requires considerable family assistance for youth in the general population, then it is likely to be especially challenging for these vulnerable populations who have required additional assistance at earlier ages. After all, their involvement in governmental programs often has lasted over many years, and it is not obvious that their needs have been fully resolved. For instance, children in foster care remain in state care for nearly three years on average (33 months) (Foster and Gifford, in press). Similarly, many youth in all of the other vulnerable populations have had long involvements with those systems and in some cases their families have been intimately involved with the system as well.

More than Vulnerability

Though this volume is devoted to groups identified by their vulnerabilities, those vulnerabilities do not tell the whole story. Finding strategies for improving chances for successful transitions to adulthood requires that we also attend to the potential for overcoming the challenges these vulnerabilities present. Accordingly, in this section we discuss the potential for positive developmental change during the transition to adulthood as well as two themes that will play a recurring role in our discussion of these groups and their experiences: resilience and

social exclusion. These themes are important because they counter any sense that members of these groups are powerless victims or that the odds facing them are insurmountable.

Change and development during the transition to adulthood. Growth and development do not end when one becomes an adult, and each person's transition to adulthood is likely to be marked by both continuities with the past and turning points that bring divergence in new directions. Although the transition presents bigger hurdles for the vulnerable populations discussed in this volume, many will end up leading productive adult lives. In focusing on these groups we are not suggesting they are doomed to fail. In fact, with the right set of scaffolds from family, friends, systems of care, and professionals who understand development during this phase of life, many will overcome these hurdles. The state has recognized the vulnerabilities of these populations at earlier points in their lives and has provided entitlements and programs to address their needs. It would be naïve to assume that further attention by policy makers would be pointless either because previous assistance has permanently resolved all difficulties or because the challenges are so great that their fate is sealed. Given the malleability of the young adult period and the potential for continued growth and development, extending systems of support during the transition should increase the likelihood that more members of these groups will lead productive adult lives.

The Theme of Resilience. The concept of resilience is especially valuable as part of a balanced view of the strengths and challenges facing the vulnerable populations in the transition to adulthood. The study of resilience seeks to understand how some individuals succeed in the face of difficult circumstances (Hauser, 1999). A focus on resilience calls attention to strengths as well as deficits and to protective factors as well as risk factors. Protective factors can come from many sources, including individual attributes such as skills and personality traits, positive

relationships with people who are supportive, and involvement in churches, clubs, and other community groups. Attention to resilience is a critical part of formulating effective social policy: we must understand the sources of successful transitions before we can design policies to enhance people's chances of success. Furthermore, resilience-based policies enable youth to take an active role in achieving success rather than merely "doing for" or "doing to" them. Accordingly, throughout this volume identifying protective factors and sources of resilience will be part and parcel of our consideration of the challenges facing these groups.

The Theme of Social Inclusion. Where an understanding of resilience shapes the portrayal of vulnerable youth, social inclusion emphasizes the importance of society's orientation to such groups. The theme of social inclusion rests on the principle that democratic societies are enriched by the full inclusion of their citizens in the ebb and flow of community affairs. Thus, the social inclusion paradigm focuses on policies and practices that alienate groups from their communities. Core themes of the social inclusion perspective include reciprocity (between states and citizens and between members of a local community); agency and rights of vulnerable groups; their power to negotiate as an interest group; and their sense of affection for and obligation to society. Social inclusion is a lens for viewing the unique ways that current policies and programs exclude particular groups of young adults. In terms of implications for policy, the social inclusion perspective pushes us to ask what policies would level the playing field and enable groups who are otherwise left out to participate fully as adult citizens.

Chapters on the Challenge of Becoming an Adult

Half of the chapters in this volume consider the challenge of the transition to adulthood for members of these seven vulnerable populations. Their purpose is to summarize what available research reveals about the transition for the members of the group, identifying areas

where they are more and less successful, specifying which members of the population fare better and worse in the transition, and examining the factors that produce those patterns. These chapters identify the issues that will be addressed in the remaining chapters, which concern the policy issues for the transition to adulthood in these same groups.

Here we briefly review some core topics that will be addressed in the chapters on challenges in the transition. Due to the limitations of available research, however, not every chapter will be able to address each topic. Answering these questions requires long-term follow-up studies of groups that are often difficult to track, and relatively little funding has been available for this task.

Success at entering adult roles. The transition to adulthood is often defined in terms of entering adult roles, such as becoming a parent and obtaining full-time employment, so these role changes will be a major focus of the chapters on challenges. Though this is far from the whole story, these roles loom large on the agenda of what must be accomplished between 18 and 30 in order to set the stage for a satisfying adulthood.

Many of the transitions into adult roles revolve around the *family*. A key transition in family roles is to leave the home of parents and guardians and establish one's own household. Doing so initially may involve moves to relatively transitory arrangements such as institutional housing (college dormitories or military barracks) and apartments with room-mates. In the longer term, Americans generally expect to find more permanent living arrangements, as reflected in terms such as home ownership and long-term living partners. A second type of family transition involves stable romantic partnerships, including steady dating, cohabitation, and culminating, for most Americans, in marriage. Stability of and satisfaction with long-term romantic partnerships is another important aspect of adjustment during the transition to

adulthood. The third principal role transition to adulthood in the domain of family is becoming a parent. Of course we are interested not only in whether members of the vulnerable populations become parents, but also how well they fulfill that role.

A second area of transition into adult roles is *education and training*. Though the end of schooling is a standard marker of movement toward adulthood, obviously it does not in itself indicate success. Rather, the more education or training youth acquire, the better their prospects in the world of employment as well as in other domains of life. We will be interested in the number of years of schooling, degrees earned (including high school, graduate equivalency, and college degrees), and other types of job preparation, such as occupational or vocational training.

Employment is a critical adult role, with entry to full-time employment as the usual marker. The nature and quality of employment has many dimensions. These includes hours of employment, earnings, and job stability as well as job satisfaction and occupational prestige.

Managing adult life. In addition to these transitions to adult roles, the chapters on the challenges of the transition will consider how the vulnerable populations fare in managing a variety of life tasks that are part of entering adulthood. One such task involves finding affordable *housing*, and thereby avoiding homelessness. This will be most problematic for youth who cannot fall back on their families for shelter. Maintaining one's *health* is another critical task. Most directly, doing so entails avoiding illness and injury. Thus, youth are more likely to enjoy good health if they avoid behaviors such as dangerous driving and high risk sexual activities. Youth also are at risk, however, if they are not covered by health insurance. Obtaining that insurance can be especially problematic because so many youth in this age period have part-time or short-term employment.

For many youth in the vulnerable populations, the biggest challenges during the transition to adulthood come from avoiding problematic behavior. Getting in *trouble with the law* is a path that produces many life difficulties in the transition to adulthood, as is serious involvement in the use of *illegal drugs or alcohol*. Avoiding these types of trouble is an obvious issue for youth previously involved in the juvenile or criminal justice systems, but the issue is important for youth in many of the other groups as well. Youth leaving special education, for example, have high rates of arrest during early adulthood. Similarly, it is also important to maintain positive *mental health* during the transition to adulthood.

Race and ethnicity. Many youth in the populations featured in this volume face additional challenges associated with other aspects of their lives. Of particular concern in this volume is the role that *race and ethnicity* play for the vulnerable populations. Youth from racial and ethnic minority groups are overrepresented in all of these groups, and being a racial or ethnic minority group member may add to an individual's disadvantage when making the transition to adulthood. Therefore, the issue of race and ethnicity and how this relates to the transition to adulthood will be addressed throughout the chapters on the challenges of the transition whenever useful research is available.

Chapters on Policy for the Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations

The second chapter in the pair addressing each vulnerable population will examine those policies and programs affecting the group. As Settersten (in press) noted in *On the Frontier of Adulthood*, there are many ways that public policies might be changed to enhance the prospects for the transition to adulthood for the general population of youth in the United States. No doubt many of these changes would be at least as beneficial to the vulnerable populations as to other youth. For instance, Settersten recommended that community colleges offer more useful courses

of study and provide better student services. Doing so should increase the chances of success for those vulnerable youth who attempt to gain post-secondary education outside of four-year institutions. The policy chapters in the present volume will concentrate on issues that are specific to the vulnerable populations. In doing so, however, they often echo themes relevant to all youth, such as strengthening the institutions that serve this age group and enhancing the personal skills and resources of young people (Settersten, in press).

Each policy chapter will cover several basic themes: it will describe the programs, policies and services affecting young people leaving each system; will define and discuss program eligibility; will outline the way in which services are delivered; and will review existing evidence regarding the effectiveness of services offered. The goals of each policy chapter are to provide readers with a sense of the magnitude and adequacy of existing programs; to identify gaps in eligibility and service delivery; and to identify gaps in existing research.

Each chapter will begin by describing the programs and services available to young people making the transition to adulthood among special populations. This basic review will identify the key programs and the legislation that established and/or supports them. Each chapter will provide basic information on the size of those programs, in terms of both expenditures and number of participants. As the chapters will reveal, local, state and federal policy makers all shape the various programs and services involved. In the case of special education, for example, transition services are mandated and partially funded by the federal government. Local school districts, however, are responsible for organizing and delivering the appropriate services. (For details, see Chapter 9.) A key focus of the discussion, therefore, is on how responsibility for operating and financing each program is spread across the various levels of government. This variation is essential for understanding differences within and between states in program services

and other characteristics. This variation is a key feature of these programs and is highlighted in the chapters themselves.

For several of the groups considered, recent years have seen dramatic changes in the programs and services affecting children and youth transitioning out of these systems. For example, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 dramatically increased funding for the independent living program, which offers services to young people leaving the Foster Care system. Each chapter will review recent policy changes and will consider the ways they have affected the size and nature of the programs involved.

A second focus of each chapter is program eligibility. This discussion will include a review of how children and youth enter the systems examined. As discussed in the chapters, many children and youth encounter these systems, but not all are eligible for whatever transition services they provide. Some youth exit the systems before reaching the age at which services are available or are never involved to the degree required to receive transition services. In the case of juvenile justice, for example, many youth are handled informally by juvenile courts; they are returned to their families and/or receive punishments that do not involve out-of-home placement. (For details, see Chapter 4.) Understanding the process by which youth enter and exit (at younger ages) is essential to understanding the needs of young adults aging out these systems.

After reviewing how children and youth enter these systems, the chapters also will describe the program rules and features that affect eligibility for and receipt of transition services themselves. The discussion will highlight the key ages and transitions that end eligibility.

A third focus of each section involves service delivery. As the chapters will make apparent, the various programs offer an enormous array of services—educational opportunities,

vocational training, counseling and support services, training in daily living skills, outreach services, family planning, parenting classes among others. A key topic addressed in these chapters is identifying the goals of these programs and the degree to which they match the needs of the youth involved (as identified in the first chapter in the pair). As with eligibility, each chapter also will consider the impact of recent legislation and policy initiatives on services provided.

The fourth focus of each policy chapter involves the effects of services and programs provided to youth transitioning to adulthood. Each chapter will review findings from available evidence and provide a sense of its quality. Each chapter will identify areas where existing research is inadequate for determining whether existing services are appropriate and efficacious. As discussed below, available research suffers from a variety of problems, such as samples that are small and unrepresentative and weak quasi-experimental designs that make it difficult to identify causal relationships between services and outcomes.

Outline of the Volume

The chapters of this volume document the special challenges facing seven vulnerable populations during the transition to adulthood and they articulate policy issues surrounding this transition for them. Chapters 2 through 13 concern the seven vulnerable populations discussed above. For each population there is a pair of chapters, the first devoted to the challenges of becoming an adult for that group and the second to policy issues.ⁱ Again, the purpose of chapters on the challenges of becoming an adult is to summarize what we know about the transition for each group, identify areas in the transition that are more and less problematic, and explain why some members of the population fare worse than others in the transition. The second chapter in each pair examines those policies and programs affecting young people leaving the seven

systems included in this volume. Each policy chapter provides a description of the programs and policies targeting the population of interest and addresses program eligibility, service delivery, and program effectiveness.

Summary of the Chapters

In Chapter 2, Courtney and Hughes describe the challenges facing foster youth as they leave the protection of the child welfare system and examine current policies directed at helping these youth achieve independence. They start with a brief introduction to the child welfare system and describe the basic demographic characteristics of youth who age out of the foster care system. They then review the literature on the young adult outcomes of former foster youth. Putting these findings in perspective, the authors explore how the background conditions of these youth and the experiences they have while they are in out-of-home care may contribute to the difficulties they face as they make the transition to adulthood. The chapter also provides a historical overview of policies intended to support foster youth in the transition to independent living and point out the limitations of current policies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of current policy issues. These revolve around the opportunities and challenges afforded by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 as well as well gaps and problems yet unaddressed by policy makers. These gaps include themes that span the other chapters in the volume, such as the poor integration of services.

Chung, Little, and Steinberg focus on the developmental needs of youth in the juvenile justice system and the ways that a successful transition to adulthood is compromised for this population in Chapter 3. More than other chapters in the volume, these authors focus on the psychosocial capacities that develop during the adolescent years which lay the foundation for a successful transition to adulthood. These capacities include gains in mastery and competence, in

interpersonal relationships and social functioning, and in self-definition and self-governance.

Incarceration during the adolescent years arrests development in these areas in large part because it cuts youth off from the natural support systems and opportunities in the community that would scaffold their development. The policy shift in recent years towards punishment rather than rehabilitation has further limited the likelihood that youth will exit the juvenile justice system psychologically mature and ready for a successful transition. Chung and her colleagues summarize the literature on turning points, i.e., that juvenile offenders who later make a successful transition to adulthood typically do so because they form intimate and committed relationships. Based on this knowledge about ‘what works’, they recommend that juvenile justice systems adopt practices that would enable young offenders to eventually commit to such relationships. In short, the system would have to adopt a more developmental approach to rehabilitation, one that would help offenders learn to make autonomous decisions, establish interpersonal relationships, and exercise self-governance.

Altschuler’s chapter (Chapter 4) on policies affecting youth who have been involved in the juvenile justice system begins by clarifying the several avenues by which youth arrested as juveniles can remain involved in the justice system during the transition to adulthood. He then considers the varying goals or philosophies that may guide the system and their consequences for the transition to adulthood. He concludes that it is much more difficult to promote resilience and social inclusion for these youth when priority is given to goals of deterrence and punishment, as has been the increasing emphasis of juvenile justice in recent years. Evidence indicates that several types of programs have promising results for juvenile offenders, both for incarcerated youth and for juvenile offenders in the community. Altschuler argues that continuity of care between these settings is critical to a successful transition to adulthood for youth who spend time

in juvenile correctional institutions. He specifies five components of continuity of care: 1) continuity of control (i.e., a gradual reduction in restrictiveness), 2) continuity in the range of services, 3) continuity in service and program content, 4) continuity of social environment, and 5) continuity of attachments to responsible adults. Altshuler's chapter concludes with an analysis of the organizational issues that must be addressed to successfully implement such a program.

In chapter 5, Uggen and Wakefield address the challenges of becoming an adult upon reentering the community from the criminal justice system. They argue that young people entering the criminal justice system fall behind their age cohort in standard markers of adulthood, and likely reenter the community upon release with the same deficits. Drawing upon survey data and qualitative interviews from prisoners, the authors describe experiences prior to entering prison, including the economic status of the family of origin, juvenile criminal history, substance abuse, health problems, and educational and occupational attainment, which all highlight the multitude of problems faced early on by this population. The authors argue not only that this population starts off with deficits that will negatively affect a successful transition to adulthood, but that imprisonment further disrupts participation in adult roles, including those related to employment, family life, and civic engagement. The chapter proceeds to discuss how prisons fail to address such needs of inmates, which makes the transition to adulthood that much more difficult upon release. The chapter also reviews the challenges prisoners face when reentering the community after criminal punishment, and how these challenges delay a successful transition. With a focus on work, family, civic life, and stigma, the authors use a life course perspective to describe how early life disadvantages coupled with a punitive criminal sentence creates great vulnerability for prisoners reentering the community and thereby severely

impedes the transition to adulthood. The chapter concludes by considering cross-national patterns in criminal punishment and age, race, and gender disparities in criminal sentencing that may further hinder transitions from prison to adulthood.

Travis and Visher's chapter (Chapter 6) discusses policy issues concerning the transition to adulthood for young adults returning to the community from the criminal justice system. They explain that recent policy trends have exacerbated rather than eased the difficulties of this group as they return to the community. While incarceration rates have skyrocketed in recent decades, prison programs that might aid the transition have declined dramatically. There has also been an increase in "invisible punishments" that restrict former prisoners opportunities, such as ineligibility for jobs and government programs. Travis and Visher review promising programs in the areas of employment, family, and health. They point out that currently few prisoners either work or receive job training while in prison, though there is good evidence that employment is associated with a successful reentry to the community. Family members are the most likely source of critical guidance and support after incarceration, but distant prisons, complex rules for prison visits, and expensive phone calls make it hard for prisoners to maintain family relationships. Travis and Visher point out that the high rates of infectious disease among prisoners mean that this captive population provides an important opportunity for reducing community wide rates illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases. In all of these areas they stress the need for coordination between correctional agencies and local community service providers.

In Chapter 7, Hagan and McCarthy address both the challenges of the transition to adulthood and policy issues for homeless and runaway youth. The difficulties of these youth often trace to earlier life, with maltreatment by their families and early difficulties in school. Not

surprisingly, they are considerably less likely to complete high school or have successful (and legal) employment. Their rates of early and risky sexual activity are high, and they spend their daily lives in dangerous settings. This chapter is unique in this volume for its attention to theoretical matters. Hagan and McCarthy develop an explanation of why some youth will succumb to a continued life on the street while others will find a path to long term employment and a more conventional lifestyle. They see continued involvement in the street life as springing from a spiral of shame and defiance that results from a combination of early family maltreatment and negative interactions with law enforcement. This emotional reaction precludes enduring the demands of the low-wage service jobs available to homeless youth. Hagan and McCarthy's theoretical analysis is especially interesting for the larger purposes of this volume because it raises issues faced by the many youth in all of the vulnerable populations who have difficult past and present life circumstances. Hagan and McCarthy then turn to policy issues, discussing services for homeless and runaway youth, which typically are poorly funded and available for relatively few youth. The chapter ends with a comparison of the experiences of youth in two cities that take very different approaches to runaway and homeless youth. Hagan and McCarthy conclude that a heavy reliance on law enforcement rather than social welfare programs leads homeless youth into a subculture of street crime where conventional employment is uncommon and disdained.

Chapter 8 addresses the challenges during the transition to adulthood faced by youth who have been in special education. Levine and Wagner begin the chapter with a description of the characteristics of youth who receive special education services. Focusing on students with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or mental retardation, the authors highlight challenges such youth face, particularly during their high school careers, and how this affects the

transition period. They argue that high school experiences are crucial to success or failure in the transition, particularly as high school completion is described as significantly affecting trajectories during the post-school period. Specifically, the authors show that special education students have higher rates of course failure, grade retention, and absenteeism, while also being less likely to receive beneficial post-secondary education. The challenges youth receiving special education services face during the transition to adulthood are discussed in terms of themes of employment, independence, and social adjustment.

Levine and Wagner continue the discussion of youth who have been in special education and the transition to adulthood in Chapter 9 by addressing the legislation and policy decisions aimed at this group. They describe how laws and regulations regarding education practices for youth with disabilities have evolved, including policies targeted at youth during high school as well as during the transition to adulthood. The ways in which these policies affect opportunities for these youth to make a successful transition to adulthood are addressed. In particular, the authors discuss the lack of collaboration across and within agencies serving the population, and they argue that transition planning and post school services and support are central to successful transitions. Levine and Wagner review strengths and weaknesses of existing policy make recommendations for system reform.

In chapter 10, Gralinski-Bakker and colleagues use psychological and psychiatric perspectives to address the challenges faced by youth with serious mental disorders receiving residential mental health treatment. The authors begin with a review of the costs and prevalence of mental disorders during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. Because there is considerable continuity in mental disorders from adolescence through the transition to adulthood, Gralinski-Bakker and colleagues argue that this population is at great risk of failing to achieve

success in the transition, in part because mental disorders during adolescence negatively affect normal development. In particular, the authors note that youth with mental disorders face multiple challenges related to their disorders and their treatment which compromise their ability to achieve major milestones of social development during adolescence. For example, adolescence is a period when developing autonomy and interpersonal relationships are important for development, and can have a great impact on success or failure during the transition to adulthood. Such difficulties are especially acute for youth in residential treatment. The authors argue that achieving autonomy and developing positive relationships, particularly with family members or a caregiving adult, is very difficult. In a review of the literature, including a 25-year longitudinal study of inpatient psychiatric treatment by the authors, Gralinski-Bakker and colleagues discuss the poor outcomes displayed by many with mental disorders during the transition to adulthood, with a particular focus on difficulties faced in the community after receiving residential mental health care. For example, they note that this population has an especially difficult time finding employment due to both the stigma associated with their disorder and the difficulty such individuals have in regulating emotions and behaviors. The authors conclude with a discussion of resilience among this population, using clinical research interviews to describe adolescent perceptions and perspectives regarding their mental disorders and subsequent experiences impact success during the transition to adulthood.

In chapter 11, Lyons and Melton contend that young adults with mental illnesses face a confusing patchwork of agencies and funding streams to obtain services. They note that even in childhood, eligibility for mental health services tends to flow through institutions such as schools or juvenile justice where an individual can be diagnosed and referred. In young adulthood not only are there fewer institutional connections through which mental health services could flow,

but the door to service eligibility often closes. Even the diagnostic categories that make children eligible for services change as they approach adulthood. According to the authors, policy in mental health policy should include universal services responsive to transient problems that may be associated with the transition to adulthood. It also needs to include services targeted for specific populations with chronic mental health problems, and the authors make a detailed case for the need for differentiated services for different presenting problems. An effective system would also provide basic services needed by most young adults with mental health problems including vocational and housing services and family support, would focus on local community-based services, and would be sensitive to issues of stigma associated with mental illness. Despite consensus about these core services, a focus on the individual and his/her problems is the more common approach. Lyons and Melton conclude their chapter with recommendations for what should happen were the mental health system to be truly responsive to individuals as they transition to adulthood.

Blum reviews what is known about adolescents with chronic physical conditions as they make the transition to adulthood in chapter 12. Unlike prior generations, today over 90 percent of children born with disabling conditions survive to adulthood, making the transition to adulthood a new and uncertain experience. Understanding what these individuals may encounter along the way, therefore, is important for those developing policies and programs for youth and adults with disabilities. Blum begins the chapter with a definition of disability, distinguishing this from impairment and handicap. Although legislation aimed at creating equal opportunities for people with disabilities has grown, this population still faces many challenges during the transition to adulthood. The end of formal education marks a great social disruption for adolescents with disabling conditions. Educational and employment opportunities and

achievements are limited for this population. In addition, youth with chronic physical conditions face challenges in forming relationships during the transition to adulthood, so social isolation is a major consequence of having a disability. The emotional well-being of adolescents with disabilities presents another challenge during the transition, as youth with chronic disabilities have an increased risk of developing psychological and behavioral problems. Such negative outcomes point to low levels of independence achieved by many young adults with disabilities. Using a model of person-family-environment fit, Blum argues that the level of independence a young adult with a disability achieves, and thus, the level of success during the transition, is determined by factors involving the individual, his or her condition, the family, and environment in which they live, as well as the fit between the four. Therefore, issues related to the individual, such as gender and disclosure, to the condition, such as degree of visibility and severity of condition, to the family, such as life expectancy and genetic risks, and to the environment, such as peer, health professionals and community issues and support, interact to impact the functioning of young adults with disabilities. In conclusion, Blum notes that the problems faced by youth with disabilities discussed in the chapter largely reflect the social creation of disabilities rather than being a consequence of the inherent physical limitations of the disability itself.

In chapter 13, White and Gallay discuss policy issues concerning youth with special health care needs and disabilities (SHCN/D). The population of young adults with chronic illnesses or disabilities has grown exponentially over the past few decades in part due to medical advances that have helped members of this population survive to adulthood. Monitoring and managing their health status is an everyday routine for this group and long term planning for continuity of care means that planning for the transition to adulthood is a salient issue for this group. Unfortunately, like other vulnerable populations, young adults with SHCN/D must deal

with access and eligibility issues of the health care system when they come of age. In addition, this group has to cope with a web of bureaucratic rules and regulations because their lives are so intimately tied to the public health care system. Lack of access to health care is especially troubling insofar as health problems that may be routine for the average young adult often result in hospitalization for this population. Even when access to health care is available, young adults with SHCN/D face additional hurdles in getting developmentally appropriate treatment. Health care systems are organized to treat children or adults, but not those in transition to adulthood. Furthermore, the medical model is oriented towards curing disease, so people with disabilities are often treated as deficient. Instead of a medical model the authors recommend an interactional model that focuses on repairing relationships between individuals and institutions.

The volume concludes with a chapter by the editors that offers some final thoughts on the vulnerable populations discussed in the preceding chapters. The authors begin by reviewing shared themes that emerge from the preceding chapters, including the over-representation of certain groups in these populations and the overlap among the vulnerable populations. Adolescents involved in one of these governmental programs, such as juvenile justice or foster care, are at high risk of being involved in others as well, such special education or the mental health system. This chapter draws together evidence from a variety of sources to estimate the total size of the various combinations of these different groups. Furthermore, the authors consider the policy implications of this overlap, such as the potential concentration of extreme risk among youth with multiple vulnerabilities. The authors continue with a discussion of the problematic outcomes during the transition to adulthood that are common among the populations. In general, outcomes for these populations are negative across many domains. The concluding chapter also discusses the need for additional research on the transition to adulthood

for vulnerable populations and how programs and policies addressing these populations could be improved to facilitate the transition. The authors drawing on the theme of social inclusion as an overarching perspective on policy toward the vulnerable populations. This point of view emphasizes that negative outcomes for any one group have public costs for the larger society, and that an important policy goal for a democratic society is to provide opportunities that encourage full participation of all citizens.

In sum, the concluding chapter draws together the combined findings and implications of the preceding chapters. It calls for greater attention to the needs of these groups, in which society has already invested so heavily, during a problematic period of life during which most now receive little assistance.

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Endnotes

ⁱ For two of the groups, foster care and homeless youth, these two topics are combined in a single chapter because a single author had the expertise necessary for both.