

Transition From Teen to Adult Lengthens

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Even as American teens seem to be maturing physically earlier than ever, many are seeing the bridge between adolescence and adulthood extended far longer than did their parents or grandparents.

A new report on the shifting definition of adulthood, published Monday, finds that it takes longer for young people to make the transition today than it did a few decades back.

“In the past several decades, a new life stage has emerged: early adulthood. Many (young people) have not become fully adult yet- traditionally defined as finishing school, landing a job with benefits, marrying and parenting- because they are not ready, or perhaps not permitted to do so,” said Frank Furstenberg Jr., a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania.

He is the lead author of the report in the journal *Contexts*, published by the American Sociological Association.

“Many are caught between needing to learn new job skills and depending on their family to support them during the transition.”

The traditional definition of adulthood is changing, particularly regarding marriage and parenting, Furstenberg and colleagues from Penn’s Network on Adult Transitions noted.

Research done in the late 1950s and early 1960s found that most Americans frowned on people who remained unmarried or couples who were childless by choice. A survey done by psychologist Joseph Veroff and colleagues in 1957, for example, found that more than half of Americans viewed someone who did not want to get married as selfish, peculiar or morally flawed. But 1976, less than one-third of the people in a similar survey held such views.

According to the General Social Survey, a national opinion poll on sociological issues done every two years, today’s definition of adulthood does not necessarily include marriage and children.

“The most important milestones are completing school, establishing an independent household and being employed full-time- concrete steps associated with the ability to support a family,” Furstenberg said.

At least 95 percent of Americans surveyed consider education, employment, financial independence and the ability to support a family at least somewhat important to being considered an adult.

Using U.S. Census data collected since 1900, the researchers found that it is taking young people longer to make the transition to adulthood than it was a few decades ago, or at any other time in the nation’s history, when traditional benchmarks as marriage and parenthood were considered along with leaving home, finishing school and being financially independent.

By those standards, 65 percent of men had reached adulthood by the age of 30 in 1960, but just 31 percent had done so in 2000; for women, the numbers were 77 percent in 1960 and 46 percent in 2000. More dramatically, nearly 30 percent of women met the adulthood definition by age 20 in 1960, compared to just 6 percent in 2000. (Because women in 1960 rarely worked outside the home, married stay-at-home mothers were considered financially independent by the researchers in both eras.)

Using the more contemporary definition that excludes marriage and children, the contrasts are not so dramatic. In 2000, 70 percent of men aged 30 had left home, were financially independent and had completed schooling, just 12 points lower than was the case for 30 year-olds in 1960. And 75 percent of women met the standard by age 30, compared with 85 percent four decades earlier.

But Furstenberg said those numbers are still significant, and don't take into account the economic insecurity that many young adults feel.

"The primary reason for prolonged early adulthood is that it now takes much longer to secure a full-time job that pays enough to support a family."

For instance, one economic study done in the mid-1990s found that 70 percent of American men ages 24-28 earned enough to support themselves, but fewer than half earned enough to support a family of three.

More than at any other time since at least World War II, the researchers argue, parents are being called upon to give financial assistance for college or living expenses to their young adult children. Census data show that, percentage-wise, more than twice as many people ages 20, 25 and 30 are enrolled in college now than 40 years ago, while other research shows that nearly two-thirds of young adults in their early 20s still get financial help from parents, as do about 40 percent in their late 20s.

Furstenberg said the longer transition period isn't necessarily reflected in government social services or postsecondary educational systems, leaving many of those in early adulthood shut out from things like subsidized housing, mental-health services and health insurance.

"The timetable of the 1950s is no longer applicable. It is high time for policymakers and legislators to address the realities of the longer and more demanding transition to adulthood," he said.

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