

Why Should We Care About the Transition to Adulthood?

Today young adults take far longer to reach economic and social maturity than their contemporaries did five or six decades ago, taking longer to leave home, attain economic independence, marry, and form families of their own. In large part, this shift is attributable to the increased importance of higher education in today's high-skilled workforce.

The conditions driving the shift in the schedule of young people's transition to adulthood are likely to be long-lasting. In particular, the longer period of transition needed to attain higher education—which some parents can help support and others cannot—is a potent source of social stratification dividing the haves and the have-nots. Class inequality has grown substantially with regard to sequencing of education, full-time employment, home-leaving, marriage, and parenthood, with lower-income young people less likely to follow an orderly and predictable sequence and higher-income young people more likely to follow the traditional sequence, but taking longer to complete it. Policy makers must begin to rethink and renovate the social institutions that were suited to a world where adulthood began at eighteen or twenty-one.

Focus of the Volume

Contributors to this volume examine some of the institutions that house and serve young adults—the family, higher education, the workplace, the community, and, for a group of especially vulnerable youth, the juvenile justice, foster care, and related systems. Authors assess the ability of each of these institutions to support young adults in their quest for economic independence, intimacy, and civic responsibility. The authors summarize research findings and suggest policies to make these institutions more effective.

Contributors to the volume address issues facing young adults transitioning to adulthood including:

- Strains that longer adult transitions put on families and institutions that traditionally support young adults including higher education, the military, service organizations, and employers.
- Demographic changes in America and the ways in which generation and national origin shape the experience of young adulthood, including barriers faced by immigrant youth.
- Trends in college attendance and persistence and interventions aimed at improving college outcomes, including enhanced student services and financial aid systems.
- The struggle to attain financial independence, especially among young men, and programs to increase the incomes of workers including ways to raise educational attainment and work supports.
- How a longer transition to adulthood may provide opportunities for increased civic engagement, and evidence young people are becoming more politically engaged.
- The greater stability found in the transition to adulthood of young people in the military, as seen through their participation in the career-oriented system and wider community, and earlier attainment of economic independence and family formation.
- A survey of the special challenges and need for greater coordination of services faced by vulnerable and at-risk youth including those involved in the foster care or justice systems, those with special education or mental or physical health needs, or runaway and homeless youth.
- The ways in which race and class shape very different patterns in young adulthood, with long-lasting consequences for economic well-being. For higher-income young people, a longer transition can offer a better chance to obtain higher education before entering the job market, marrying, and starting a family. For lower-income young people, the transition is less likely to follow the traditional sequence—with marriage and education postponed, but not childbearing—and job opportunities limited.

What Approaches Should Be Implemented to Assist Vulnerable and At-Risk Youth?

An extended transition to adulthood brings several consequences to youth, their families, and systems which serve them. Children in the care of the state—foster care, special education, the juvenile justice system—have been particularly hard hit by the new transition. These systems end their support abruptly at age eighteen. In effect, the most disadvantaged—those most in need of transitional help well into adulthood—have been left “on their own without a net.” We suggest several approaches designed to help ease the transition, especially for the most vulnerable youth, including:

Increase Access and Persistence in Higher Education.

The twin problem of access and persistence, especially at the nation’s community colleges, is a threat to the long-term success and economic mobility of young people. Policymakers must strengthen these critical institutions that bridge the gap between a generation ill-prepared for college-level work and a labor market that is demanding ever more complex skills. Promising initiatives include: reforms and expansions in student grant and loan programs, especially increases in Pell Grant amounts; investments in community college facilities; strong accountability measures; instructional innovation; and investments that would help institutions meet the needs of a twenty-first century student body and workforce.

Identify and Prepare At-risk Youth for the Transition.

There is a need to design and implement effective new programs to help young people in danger of dropping out of school complete their secondary education so that they are better prepared to take the next step, whether directly into the labor force, into military or other service, or into higher education. For example, the ChalleNGe program combines an intensive military-academy style residential program that emphasizes schooling, service, leadership, and other skills needed in adulthood with an extended mentoring program to create a successful transition to postsecondary education, work, or military service. There is encouraging evidence that the ChalleNGe program could offer valuable lessons for tackling this difficult set of problems. Further coordination is required to build both better programs and a better service system for at-risk youth and a bridge between policies, programs, and services for young people and comparable policies, programs and services for adults.

Create Systems to Support Vulnerable Youth in their Transition.

A better-integrated system of care is needed to assist the most vulnerable youth – particularly those in the care of the state in foster care or the juvenile justice system. Policy makers are beginning to recognize the need for change—witness the passage in 2008 of federal legislation extending services in the foster care system from age eighteen to twenty-one. Other efforts to coordinate these systems at the federal level are also under way. But more remains to be done. One way to stimulate change would be to free a few willing states from federally imposed categorical restrictions and ask them to experiment with integrated systems of care geared toward making mainstream links and providing supports that extend into adulthood.

Taken as a whole, these initiatives would significantly help to relieve the burden of parents and drive key institutions to adapt to the changing needs of young adults in transition. But as is the case for all policy changes, the devil will be in the details of on-the-ground practice. The articles in this volume provide a blueprint for harnessing resources to need and policy to practice that could help put derailed young people back on the pathway to adulthood in the twenty-first century.