



The Transition to Adulthood: Introducing the Issue

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Introducing the Issue

Gordon Berlin, Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Mary C. Waters

That the schedule for coming of age has been rather sharply revised both in the United States and more broadly throughout the industrialized world is by now widely recognized. Over the past decade, especially, the mass media have trumpeted the findings of a growing body of research showing that young people are taking longer to leave home, attain economic independence, and form families of their own than did their peers half a century ago. The forces behind this new timetable have been evident for several decades, but social science researchers, much less policy makers, were slow to recognize just how profound the change has been. A trickle of studies during the 1980s about the prolongation of young adulthood grew to a steady stream during the 1990s and then to a torrent during the first decade of the new millennium.¹ Now that researchers have shown how and why the timetable for becoming an adult has altered, policy makers must rethink whether the social institutions that once successfully educated, trained, and supported young adults are up to the task today.

Changes in the coming-of-age schedule are, in fact, nothing new. A century or more ago, the transition to adulthood was also a protracted affair. In an agriculture-based economy, it

took many young adults some time to gain the wherewithal to leave home and form a family. Formal education was typically brief because most jobs were still related to farming, the trades, or the growing manufacturing sector. By their teens, most youth were gainfully employed, but they frequently remained at home for a time, contributing income to their families and building resources to enter marriage and form a family.

By contrast, after World War II, with opportunities for good jobs abundant, young Americans transitioned to adult roles quickly. In 1950, fewer than half of all Americans completed high school, much less attended college. Well-paying, often unionized jobs with benefits were widely available to males. The marriage rush and baby boom era at mid-century was stimulated not only by a longing to settle down after the war years but also by generous new government programs to help integrate veterans back into society.

Today young adults take far longer to reach economic and social maturity than their contemporaries did five or six decades ago. In large part, this shift is attributable to the expansion of higher education beginning in the late 1960s. Employers have become

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increasingly reluctant to hire young people without educational credentials. Failing to complete high school all but relegates individuals to a life of permanent penury; even completing high school is hardly enough to ensure reasonable prospects. Like it or not, at least some postsecondary education is increasingly necessary. In short, education has become an ever more potent source of social stratification, dividing the haves and the have-nots, a theme in this volume to which we will return.

Many observers, especially in the mass media, worry that this new timetable for adulthood has created a growing sense of entitlement and a lingering pattern of dependency.

The boom in higher education is not the only reason why young adults are taking more time to gain independence from their families and establish themselves in adult roles. The schedule for growing up, no doubt, has been affected by the lengthening of the life span over the past century. Most young adults today can expect to live into their late seventies, a decade longer than their counterparts even fifty years ago. It makes sense to continue investing into the third and even fourth decades of life when one can expect to live another fifty years or more.

Cultural changes, such as the post-1960s shift in sexual attitudes and practices, have also slowed what was once a rush into adult roles. Fifty years ago, premarital sex was still highly

stigmatized. Although the stigma did not deter many young couples from breaching the norms, marriage served as a safety net in the event of a premarital pregnancy. Today, most young people expect to have sex before marriage and have the means to prevent unwanted childbearing. Their contraceptive efforts are still imperfect, but the point is that they need not marry to have sex, and they will not necessarily become pregnant when they do.

The past several decades, then, have witnessed a big change in how and when youth take on adult roles—to put it another way, another notable shift in the “normal” pattern of moving from adolescence to adulthood. Although today’s delayed schedule is reminiscent of the pattern a century ago, however, the two are fundamentally different. Today, young people (unless they are the children of recent immigrants) rarely contribute earnings to the household; by and large, they are either fully or partially beholden to their parents for support while they complete their schooling and find a foothold in the labor force. Typically, they defer marriage in favor of cohabitation even when they do leave the natal household.

Although today’s young adults and their parents value independence highly, both tolerate and even endorse a slower schedule for attaining economic and social maturity. In effect, what is becoming normal, if not normative, is that the age of eighteen, or even twenty-one, has lost its significance as a marker of adult status. The transition to adulthood is drawn out over a span of nearly a decade and consists of a series of smaller steps rather than a single swift and coordinated one. Moreover, the social construction of adulthood seems to rely much less on the traditional demographic markers—home

leaving, full-time work, and family formation—and more on personal psychological self-assessments of “maturity.” At any rate, the traditional markers do not any longer stand for attaining adulthood.

Many observers, especially in the mass media, worry that this new timetable for adulthood has created a growing sense of entitlement and a lingering pattern of dependency. Much of the evidence, however, points to a different conclusion: attaining adult roles (as measured by independence from the natal family, union formation, and parenthood) is simply more difficult than it was, especially three or four decades ago. In fact, the vast majority of young adults in their late teens and early twenties are not at leisure—they are working, going to school, or doing both at the same time. Many unemployed and undereducated young people are desperate to work but cannot secure stable employment or make enough money to live on their own. Although they probably do receive support from their families during this period of semi-autonomy, most do not exhibit the signs of entitlement that are frequently ascribed to them.

The nation’s young adults are highly unlikely to return any time soon to the schedule for growing up that was normative among their parents and grandparents. The conditions driving the shift in the schedule are likely to be long-lasting. Policy makers must therefore begin to rethink and renovate the social institutions that were suited to the past, a time when the age of eighteen or twenty-one signified something different than it does today.

Understanding the New Schedule

Concern about the mismatch between the new realities of coming of age and the social institutions that once successfully supported young people moving toward adulthood gave

rise, in 1999, to the MacArthur Network on Adult Transitions and Public Policy. The Network, a team of twelve researchers from diverse social science disciplines, began its work by assessing the demographic, economic, sociological, and psychological evidence on adult transitions to learn what had changed and why. In a series of recent publications, the Network has documented that the changes in the timing, sequencing, and even attainment of adult roles have indeed been substantial and that they are affecting young adults in varying socioeconomic circumstances quite differently.² Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data in the initial phase of its work, the Network reported that young adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four are employing some familiar and some different strategies than those that their parents and grandparents used to make a successful transition to adult work and family roles. In particular, young adults and their families are much more skeptical about the wisdom of early transitions to work and marriage, even taking into account geographical, religious, and socioeconomic differences. The Network also discovered that gender differences in the timing of adult transitions had virtually disappeared.³ By contrast, differences by social class have, if anything, become more pronounced.

These changes coincided with and were reinforced by a wave of immigration during the 1980s that attracted many young adult immigrants as well as immigrant families to the United States. These immigrants have imported traditional family practices while simultaneously demonstrating a high level of adaptation to American ways. First-generation immigrants often arrive as young adults—the peak age period for immigration. Socialized in their sending society, they enter the United States seeking work and are often cut

off from their parents and extended family. They achieve independence very young and are more likely to be in the labor force than native-born Americans of the same age and educational background. Second-generation immigrants—native-born children of immigrants—are more likely to live at home as young adults than are comparable natives, and they achieve higher levels of education than natives of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result they have more extended transitions to adulthood than both their parents and comparable native-born Americans.

Network researchers then turned to the challenging task of examining 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. The aim of the second phase of the research program was to assess the ability of each of these institutions to support young adults in their quest for economic independence, intimacy, and civic responsibility—goals widely shared among both young adults and their parents. This volume of *The Future of Children* provides a summary of research findings to date and suggests policy steps that could make these institutions more effective.

How Well Do Traditional Supports Work?

One important if not unexpected finding of the Network was that existing institutions work much better for affluent young adults than they do for most others. Family resources and the opportunities they afford have become more central to educational attainment. And, with educational attainment an increasingly potent predictor of economic success and stable family life, growing levels of inequality have created an ever larger

chasm between the affluent third (roughly corresponding to college graduates) and the rest of the population. The economic burden on families, particularly those in the bottom two-thirds of the income distribution, has been growing far more rapidly than their capacity to undertake a longer and more expensive period of investment in their children's futures. Increasingly, parents are being asked to take on the costs of education, health care, and, often, support of children in their early twenties (and often later).

Although parents of all social strata seem to understand and accept the new schedule for growing up, middle- and lower-income parents are ill-equipped to handle the costs entailed, and the result is a sharply tilted playing field for young adult development. The new demands of supporting young adults for longer periods create impossible burdens for lower-income households and pose serious problems for all parents who must balance the need to make increased financial (and emotional) investments in their adult children against the need to ensure their own retirements. This privatized approach to investment in the nation's young is quite different from the accepted public approach to education for children below the age of eighteen.

Health care represents a glaring example of how the nation's public arrangements simply do not work for young adults who follow the new schedule for coming of age. Today's health care system more or less protects low-income children up to age eighteen, or in some instances twenty-one, but it does nothing for older youth who lack work-based or school-based health insurance. All but the most affluent parents are frustrated in their efforts to fill the health insurance gap. The pending health care bill, if passed by

Congress and signed by the president, will go a long way toward correcting the problem.

The new public-private approach to supporting higher education is equally problematic. Parents of modest means are hard-pressed to help their children obtain a college education. Although, as described in several articles in this volume, the nation makes both grants and loans available to low-income students, the process for applying for that money—and for finding out how large the grant or loan would be—is complex, intimidating, and cumbersome. As a result, many low-income students simply do not apply. Others end up borrowing and eventually owe considerable amounts of money or try to put themselves through school by working. These two options may not represent a problem for low- and moderate-income families whose children are well-prepared for college. But many youth from these families grow up in areas with poorly functioning school systems and are ill-prepared to make the transition to college. Without adequate economic and social support, they may flounder in the transition to college, creating a nightmare scenario where they fail to get a degree that enables them to repay their educational debts. Although the educational burdens on upper-income families are considerable, these parents are better equipped to help meet the costs of higher education, and their children are better prepared to succeed in college. Here too recent efforts to amend the student financial aid system and to increase Pell Grants and other sources of support could help to address these challenges for low- and moderate-income families.

Once students arrive at college, they tend to receive strikingly different levels of support depending on their economic background. Most four-year residential institutions, which

are largely populated by relatively affluent youth, are extremely well-suited to assist young adults in transition. They provide orientations for incoming students and their families, an array of services and counseling should students encounter problems, mentoring delivered by older students, recreational and extracurricular programs, health and mental health services, and, of course, residences. Students who get off track receive academic and emotional guidance. Many of these colleges and universities even offer career counseling and job placement for graduates. Furthermore, these institutions are conveniently linked to postgraduate education programs that are, generally speaking, similarly well-designed for youth in their mid- and late-twenties.

By contrast, the two-year community colleges that less affluent students are likely to attend are typically bare-bones institutions stretched thin by a myriad of demands and insufficient resources. Although potentially useful portals of entry for students hoping to move on to a four-year college, a skilled job, or a semi-profession that requires an associate's degree or a licensing exam, many two-year colleges lack the most basic amenities offered by a four-year residential college or even a four-year commuter school. Campus life is frequently limited, and the services afforded are meager or nonexistent. Students, often unprepared and overcommitted by outside obligations, pose serious challenges to the sometimes underpaid, overburdened faculty and administrators. Rather than serving as beacons of opportunity, too many of these two-year colleges are revolving doors through which students wander aimlessly in search of future direction. Indeed, research supported by the U.S. Department of Education shows that close to half of students who enter a community college do not earn a degree and

are not enrolled in any other postsecondary institution six years later.

In collaboration with MDRC, Network researchers undertook an assessment of how community colleges could realize their mission of providing academic training to allow students to get a degree or secure a job that might be otherwise unattainable without special training. Analysts examined several programs aimed at improving student outcomes, including changes in instructional practices, enhancements to student services, and increases in financial support. Although not all the programs were successful, some led to significant improvements in students' academic performance and persistence. The findings, as presented in the article in this volume by Thomas Brock, suggest that policy makers and educators need not accept high dropout rates as a given. Rather, by making changes in institutional practices—including new forms of flexible financial aid that incentivize and reward students who get good grades and complete courses, as well as innovative “learning community” programs that integrate courses and create study peer groups—they can boost the odds that more young people will earn college degrees and succeed in the labor market.

During the middle decades of the twentieth century and extending through the Vietnam War, military service represented an attractive possibility for youth who were not college bound. It provided, as Ryan Keltly, Meredith Kleykamp, and David R. Segal report in their article in this volume, an effective bridge from high school to work for a large number of young men who lacked vocational direction. Although the military continues today to provide a supportive environment for men and women who want to serve their country, leave home, and get training, it is increasingly

meant to provide a military career rather than a transition to the civilian labor market. Smaller and more select than the draft-era military, today's military is disinclined to afford training to youth who may exhibit educational deficits. Other youth-oriented institutions could learn much from the way the military trains and supports young adults, but the military itself is no longer a significant remedial institution for poorly functioning young adults.

Countless studies have assessed and evaluated the effect of service corps of various types. One rigorous study concluded that they can and often do play a useful role.

From the Depression-era's Civilian Conservation Corps, to the Great Society's Peace Corps and VISTA, to the 1980s state and urban conservation corps, and to the 1990s Corporation for National and Community Service and its dramatic expansion in the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009, policy makers have experimented episodically with institutions that serve the community while providing training and experience for young people who are unemployable or who simply want to gain skills, serve the community, or move on to independent living. Countless studies have assessed and evaluated the effect of service corps of various types. One rigorous study concluded that they can and often do play a useful role in providing time and space for young people to gain experience, acquire useful work skills and direction, and build a sense

of commitment to the larger community. If such results can be extended and built on by the Serve America Act, community service programs could begin to reach the scale needed to provide a new “institution” to help meet the needs of youth making the extended transition to adulthood.

Often coming as a year-long experience between high school and college or work, or as a year off during or after college, youth service programs could be a valuable bridging program with double social utility. Through these programs, young people do important work in their local communities—in hospitals, schools, and other public and nonprofit settings—and gain many experiences needed to make a successful transition to adulthood. In the long-standing debate about the pros and cons of mandatory national service for all, the passage of the Serve America Act may signal a commitment to build a voluntary, as opposed to a mandatory, system of opportunities for a diverse group of young people. This signal notwithstanding, unless concrete steps are taken to build the capacity of service models that work, to collect evidence of their ongoing effectiveness, and to build a record of their accomplishments—much as the WPA’s accomplishments were documented and remain for all to see in the nation’s parks and other structures—history suggests that expansion could be followed by contraction. After all, it was only a few short years ago that the Corporation for National and Community Service survived a near-death experience in Congress. But this time, getting it right may matter more than it has in the past, given the dearth of institutions to help meet the demands of a lengthened transition to adulthood.

Some proportion of young adults—those exiting foster care; youth in special education or with physical, emotional, or cognitive

limitations; the homeless; and the many exiting jail or prison—are at much higher risk in the transition to adulthood. Because these populations often overlap, however, it is hard to estimate their number precisely. Most experts believe that the share of youth who are at risk of encountering serious problems is significant. The vast majority come from poor and near-poor families that are disproportionately African American and Latino.

Much of the Network’s attention has been focused on the very expensive systems that serve these vulnerable populations as children—foster care, juvenile justice, special education, and social security disability. No easy or cost-free solutions are available to help these youth improve their prospects as young adults. Early detection of youths with problems, better schooling, and better alternatives to foster care and incarceration could reduce the share that enters early adulthood without the requisite skills to take advantage of educational opportunities and eventually find good jobs. But even with the best schooling and most effective preventive and ameliorative services, another challenge would be how to integrate the diverse systems that serve vulnerable youth. In addition, these youth often lack the family supports that other young people have as they age into young adulthood. The failure of existing institutions to adapt to current realities and the dearth of new institutions to serve young people without family supports are huge problems, as many of these young adults at risk will face lifelong problems that must be paid for one way or another.

The Changing Nature of Young Adulthood

The premise of this issue of *The Future of Children* is that the nation’s public policy and its social institutions fail to reflect the realities

of the new transition to adulthood—and thus do not adequately serve the needs of young adults. Although each article in the volume opens with a full summary, in this section we briefly highlight some of the findings we think are the most important.

Overview

Richard Settersten of Oregon State University and Barbara Ray of Hired Pen, inc., open the issue by surveying the changes that have taken place over the past few decades in the timing and sequencing of young adulthood. They describe the later age at marriage, the rise in the number of young people living at home with their parents into their twenties, and the longer period of time young people are staying in school. They stress that these changes create strains not only on the families of young adults but also on the institutions—colleges and universities, the military, youth service organizations, and the work setting—that have traditionally supported them. Noting that these institutions are not designed for this new pattern of life choices, Settersten and Ray raise the question of whether the risks and costs newly associated with the early adult years should be borne privately by families or publicly by government. They also point out that despite the problems it creates, the lengthening transition to adulthood creates opportunities for some young people, especially those from more affluent backgrounds, to explore careers and lifestyles before settling into traditional adult roles.

Immigration

One of the most notable changes in American young adulthood is a demographic one. Young adults today are remarkably ethnically and racially diverse, owing in no small part to the enormous volume of immigration during the past four decades that has swelled the

ranks of first- and second-generation immigrants and children of immigrants. Rubén Rumbaut and Golnaz Komaie of the University of California–Irvine document these demographic changes and explore the ways in which generation and national origin shape the experience of young adulthood. The first generation of immigrants, having arrived in this country as young adults themselves, are the least likely of all young adults in the United States aged eighteen to thirty-four to live in their parents' households. They are also the least likely to be attending school, but the most likely to be working full time, to be married, and to have children. By contrast, the second generation is the most likely to live in the natal household and to be attending school between eighteen and thirty-four; they are by far the least likely to be married and to have children. In addition to these vast differences between the generations, immigrant groups also experience gaps in social, economic, and legal status that are even greater than the gaps between native whites and blacks. Sizable segments of immigrant youth, especially the undocumented and the less-educated poor, face structural barriers in their transitions to adulthood, and the authors discuss possible policy options to deal with those barriers.

Family Changes

Frank Furstenberg of the University of Pennsylvania surveys the important family changes that characterize the transition to adulthood. He notes that both patterns of family formation and the shape of the family have changed often in American history and that the period often used as a benchmark for measuring family change—that immediately after World War II—was in reality an anomaly in the long sweep of family history, notable for its very early pattern of attaining such markers of adulthood as employment, marriage, and

childbearing. It should therefore come as no surprise that U.S. family formation patterns today differ dramatically from those of fifty years ago. Young adults are on average marrying later, and a substantial fraction, not at all. Cohabitation has become increasingly acceptable as an alternative to marriage, and the average age of childbearing has risen. Furstenberg documents two major trends in these family formation patterns. First, gender equality has increased, with men and women growing more alike in the age at which they leave home, marry, and have children. And, second, class inequality has grown substantially, with lower-income young people less likely to follow an orderly and predictable sequence of education, full-time employment, home-leaving, marriage, and parenthood. Higher-income young adults are more likely to follow the traditional sequence, but they take longer to complete it and often must go through an extended period of financial dependence on parents while they complete their education. The share of young adults residing with parents has risen since the 1960s, when adult transitions started at an earlier age. Furstenberg argues that the popular media often portray these changes as objectionable for parents and young adult children, but the few studies to examine this question find that parents and young adults accommodate well to the new schedule.

As a result of delays in establishing themselves financially, young people tend to depend longer on their families of origin. Although all industrialized countries have experienced this same pattern, the U.S. welfare state is relatively undeveloped, meaning that the burden of supporting young adults falls more heavily on American families. Furstenberg calls for further research on how families are managing these new demands and warns that the need for active parenting

extending into their children's twenties and even thirties may discourage people from becoming parents in the first place, leading to a trend toward lower fertility, especially among more affluent families.

Second Chances for High School Dropouts

The American labor market has little to offer workers who do not complete high school, and at least some college is increasingly required to attain a well-paying job. Yet somewhere between 9 and 16 percent of young people aged sixteen to twenty-four have not completed high school. Over the past several decades a variety of "second-chance" programs have been developed to help dropouts finish high school or obtain a General Educational Development (GED) credential and get a foothold in the labor market. Dan Bloom of MDRC reviews the types of programs available, as well as their efficacy, and then considers their implications for the transition to adulthood. Although he notes that it is difficult to prove that the collapse of the job market for high school dropouts over the past several decades caused the steep decline in the share of dropouts who marry—from 68 percent of men aged twenty-two to thirty-two in 1970 to only 26 percent in 2007—the two trends certainly reflect each other. Bloom surveys eleven major programs intended for young dropouts, dividing them into three categories—work programs, training and education programs, and mandatory, welfare-based programs for teen mothers. All have been evaluated using rigorous random-assignment techniques. Though the evaluation findings are mixed, they show at least short-term modest effects for many of the programs. Bloom also cites descriptive studies showing that young people who obtain a GED tend to do relatively poorly in the labor market, in part because they are much less

likely to pursue postsecondary education than those who get a high school degree. Based on these findings, Bloom proposes three focuses for future research and policy: strengthening programs for youth who voluntarily seek to continue their education or find jobs, including building tighter links between GED preparation programs and postsecondary occupational certificate programs; identifying strategies to engage disconnected youth who are unlikely to volunteer for programs such as the Job Corps; and analyzing local systems to support disconnected youth.

Improving Higher Education Outcomes

Even though the value of a college education has increased markedly over the past forty years, with college graduates earning 1.8 times as much as high school graduates, college graduation rates have not improved in decades, largely because students' rates of persistence to a degree have not improved. The five-year college graduation rate is 60 percent at four-year colleges, but only 32 percent at community colleges. The low community college graduation rate is a growing concern, because more than a third of all college students attend two-year colleges. Meanwhile, access to college has improved substantially, with the share of women on campus catching up to and surpassing that of men and the share of nonwhite college students doubling in the past two decades.

Thomas Brock of MDRC outlines these trends in college attendance and persistence and reviews the research on interventions aimed at improving college outcomes for young adults. The changing nature of young adulthood, with more youth combining work, school, and parenthood, results in a diverse college student population—one that is older, more part time, and more likely to attend episodically than has been conventional until

recently. Indeed, Brock reports that only 27 percent of current undergraduates are “traditional students” who attend full time immediately following high school and who rely on parents for financial support. Of all undergraduates in 1999–2000, 28 percent were highly nontraditional—in their twenties or older, combining work with school, and raising children. And nontraditional students are much less likely than traditional students to persist to a degree. Brock surveys a number of interventions that have been evaluated by rigorous random-assignment design. Among the more promising interventions are remedial education courses that foster more student engagement and belonging on campus, enhanced student services such as counseling and support, and performance-based scholarships that tie financial incentives to successful course completion. Brock concludes that many of the interventions show modest positive effects and that performance-based scholarships show pronounced positive effects. Although many people believe that making federal financial aid more effective will also increase persistence, surprisingly little systematic research has addressed that question. One clear finding is that simplifying the application form for federal financial aid (FAFSA) has a substantial payoff in increasing college enrollment.

The Labor Market

One of the key markers of the transition to adulthood, and arguably one necessary for success, is finding stable and well-paying employment. Dramatic changes in the labor market in recent decades, however, have complicated young people's prospects of finding such employment. In their survey of the labor market and the transition to adulthood, Sheldon Danziger and David Ratner of the University of Michigan contend that young people now must struggle to attain

financial independence—a development with implications in other areas. Although it cannot be proved, for example, that the delay in achieving financial independence has caused delays in leaving home and in marrying, these trends are correlated.

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Danziger and Ratner stress that gender plays an important part in the story of the labor market. The prospects of young men, especially less-educated young men, have declined precipitously, while more young women are working and their earnings have increased relative both to inflation and to the earnings of young men. The median annual earnings (in constant 2007 dollars) of men between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-four who worked at some time during the year fell 21 percent between 1973 and 2007, whereas the median earnings of women rose 62 percent. Job turnover—what economists call “churning”—has also increased dramatically. The fraction of individuals in jobs lasting less than one year has risen faster for younger than for older workers. The share of workers in longer-term jobs declined precipitously for men, while

holding steady for women. Employment for men with the least education also fell during the past few decades, with the sharpest declines for African American men with less than a high school education. Because of the increasing labor market returns to education and the importance of postsecondary education for employment, Danziger and Ratner recommend programs that increase educational attainment, including early childhood education and second-chance programs such as those described by Dan Bloom. They also support raising the minimum wage and expanding the earned income tax credit (EITC), both of which could raise the incomes of workers at the lower end of the distribution.

Civic Participation

In their article on civic participation, Constance Flanagan of Penn State University and Peter Levine of Tufts University reinforce a theme running throughout the volume—the ways in which class, race, and immigrant status shape very different patterns in young adulthood. They find that more affluent young people are more likely to be civically engaged than the less affluent, both in terms of political activity such as voting and in terms of volunteering. This civic divide is a consequence both of cumulative disadvantage in the pre-adult years and of a dearth of institutional opportunities for young adults who are not in college. The authors argue that young adulthood is a critical period for forming political beliefs and behaviors, and they trace the ways in which an elongated transition to adulthood might provide opportunities for increased civic engagement among young people. They also trace generational differences in political attitudes and behaviors and suggest that young people in more recent cohorts may be shifting to more active engagement.

The Military

Although only a small fraction of U.S. young adults serve in the nation's all-volunteer military, young adults are very much the focus of the military, because the majority of military personnel fall into this age group. In their article on young adulthood and the military, Ryan Kelty of Washington College, Meredith Kleykamp of the University of Kansas, and David R. Segal of the University of Maryland explain that in periods of mass conscription, such as during World War II, the military is for most people a hiatus between adolescence and adulthood. By contrast, today's all-volunteer military is more likely to be a period of active transition into young adulthood and, often, into a career in the military.

The military's new, more career-oriented system has led it to implement a number of policies to cope with the family needs of young adults. Indeed Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal document the ample material support the military provides to young adults—reasonable wages, generous in-kind transfers, free medical care, housing, educational benefits, and training designed to promote responsible membership in intimate relationships and the wider community. As a result, the pattern of family formation in the military is earlier and more stable than it is among civilians of the same age. The majority of enlisted personnel are parents, and the racial differences in family formation that exist among civilians do not characterize the military. No black-white gap in marriage exists among military personnel. The transition to adulthood, including economic independence from parents, is thus much more stable and orderly for military personnel.

Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal note that much about what the military does cannot easily be replicated in the wider society. As an

institution, the military has unique control over young adult behavior through its code of conduct. It also restricts who can enlist, barring openly homosexual personnel, restricting the occupations available to women within the military, drawing recruits who have high school diplomas, and refusing to enlist high school dropouts or people with criminal records. The authors also note that the military in a time of war holds dangers for young adults, most especially in the long-run effects of injuries, both psychological and physical, from the war and the long-run effects of the physical and symbolic violence women experience in a male-dominated institution.

Justice System and Social Services

All the articles in this volume stress the varying needs of young adults and the ways in which young people with fewer financial resources, less education, and less support from their families of origin have a harder time than their more affluent peers in making a successful transition to independent adulthood. The point holds particularly true in the case of vulnerable youth—defined by D. Wayne Osgood and E. Michael Foster of Penn State University and Mark E. Courtney of the University of Washington as those involved in the social service, health, and justice systems in childhood and adolescence. The authors survey the special challenges faced by youth involved in the mental health system, the foster care system, the juvenile justice system, the criminal justice system, special education, and the health care system, as well as runaway and homeless youth. Although noting that these populations overlap and that many young people need services from multiple systems, Osgood, Foster, and Courtney show that the categorical ways in which state and federal funding for these systems are designed often keep

these issues compartmentalized and prevent service providers from seeing or helping the whole person. The authors explain that at age eighteen or twenty-one, young people age out of more supportive and inclusive systems designed for children to either no services or services with less support designed for adults. Many of these systems still function as if youth become independent adults overnight, and they are at odds with the longer period of semi-autonomy that characterizes young adulthood today. The authors point to the poor outcomes among these vulnerable youth and stress the need to redesign targeted services for them. They also argue that universal programs for all young adults would greatly benefit vulnerable populations. Finally, they highlight recent promising policy developments such as the 2008 Fostering Connections Act, which extends government responsibility for youth in foster care from age eighteen to age twenty-one, and the Shared Youth Vision Initiative, designed to improve and coordinate systems that serve vulnerable youth as they transition to adulthood.

Key Policy Issues

The Network's research has revealed three urgent policy issues. The first is the twin problem of access and persistence in higher education, especially at the nation's community colleges. In response to findings from research, some of it supported by this Network, federal policy makers are moving rapidly and forcefully to 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.

The second pressing need is to design and implement effective new programs to identify and prepare at-risk youth for the transition.

Such programs, for example, would help young people to complete their secondary education so that they are better prepared to take the next step, whether directly into the labor force, into military service or alternative forms of service, or into higher education. Although the Network's focus was on the period of adult transitions (age eighteen to thirty-four), one signal research effort was an evaluation of ChalleNGe, a unique program developed by the National Guard to provide an alternative for high school dropouts between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The program intervenes early to help these young people complete high school or obtain a GED during a five-month military-academy style residential program that emphasizes schooling, service, leadership, and healthy living among other skills needed in adulthood. After youth complete the residential portion of the program, trained mentors work with them in their own communities over the next twelve months to effectuate a successful transition to postsecondary education, work, or military service. As the articles in this volume by Dan Bloom and by Sheldon Danziger and David Ratner demonstrate, the consequences of school dropout are devastating to the long-term transition to adulthood. Early evaluation results from a randomized controlled trial of the ChalleNGe program present encouraging evidence that the program could offer valuable lessons for tackling this difficult set of problems.

The third policy priority is diagnosing and attending to the problems of especially vulnerable youth and the systems that serve them, like foster care and juvenile justice, and rethinking how the nation might build a better integrated system of care. The list of systemic issues is long. One key problem is the failure to coordinate among systems that often define their jurisdiction narrowly,

especially when young people are known to more than one system and when needs overlap. Another is conflicting missions and funding sources. Yet another is the age at which services end—a crucial issue at a time of lengthening transitions to adulthood. Although families with means are extending help to their children well into their twenties and beyond, the special education, foster care, juvenile justice after-care, and related systems end service eligibility abruptly, often at age eighteen and only rarely much past age twenty-one. Promising strategies would reward collaboration and coordination, extend the reach of these systems well into adulthood, strengthen existing services and develop new ones to meet the special developmental needs of vulnerable youth at this stage of life, and better integrate services with those from more mainstream systems. Examples include building links to programs like ChalleNge for foster care youth who drop out of school or facilitating access to community colleges and four-year colleges when skills permit. Here too, 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 to making mainstream links and providing supports that extend into adulthood.

In sum, when the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy began its work more than a decade ago, the lengthening of the transition and the concept of early adulthood as a distinct stage in

human development were only dimly perceived. As a result, the real and tangled implications of young people taking a decade or more after leaving high school to attain the markers commonly associated with adulthood—full-time work, an independent household, a stable relationship with a significant other in marriage or cohabitation, child-rearing, civic engagement, and, increasingly in the twenty-first century, at least some postsecondary education or training—were only poorly understood.

Research uncovered several important consequences of the extended transition. The first was the growing burden placed on the middle- and lower-income families who were providing their children with schooling, housing, health insurance, and income well beyond the age range of eighteen to twenty-one, the traditional age of majority. Instead of saving for retirement, or meeting their own needs, parents found themselves continuing to invest in their children's future. The second consequence was the unexpected strain being imposed on key social institutions. Many young adults found themselves without health insurance and with few viable options to obtain it. Colleges often labeled students who came back to school later in life as “nontraditional,” when in fact taking time off to work, see the world, or volunteer was increasingly the norm and not the exception for young adults. And the academic, financial, social, and emotional needs of this new breed of students differed from those of fresh-out-of-high-school students. Third, few new institutional options were available to promote development at this stage of life. Youth corps and other volunteer programs existed, but the total number of slots available was generally small. Possibly most consequential of all, children in the care of the state—foster care, special education, the juvenile justice

system—had been particularly hard hit by the new transition. These social systems continued to end their support abruptly at age eighteen, even while low- and middle-income families were increasingly stepping in to help their more advantaged young adult children weather a longer transition. In effect, the most disadvantaged—those least able to adapt and most in need of transitional help well into adulthood—had been left “on their own without a net.”

A decade later, as the articles in this volume testify, recognition and change are in the air. While families still bear the brunt of the burden and institutions have not completely made the transition, policy and practice are now both astir. Out of necessity, to attract and hold a volunteer army, the military has made a number of changes to encourage and support the transition to adulthood—paying for higher education, offering more attractive pay, and providing better housing, supports, and work hours for married couples. For vulnerable youth, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 extends the definition of a “child” up to age twenty-one and offers federal matching funds to states that opt to allow young people to remain in foster care past age eighteen. It also encourages states to provide that support in more constructive ways that facilitate mastery of the skills needed to become productive adults and lead independent lives. Similarly, the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act of 2009, as noted, expands and extends the work of the Corporation for National and Community Service. It more than triples (from 75,000 today to 250,000 by

2017) the number of positions available each year for young people to engage in service learning opportunities in education, health, clean energy, economic opportunity, and other national priorities, thus providing a new rite of passage to adulthood in the way that military service did during the draft era. In the health care area, sweeping new legislation would offer health insurance options for all Americans, including young adults who have not yet connected with employer-based health insurance and who are not covered by college-based plans. Change is stirring in higher education as well. The Obama administration has proposed a bold, potentially transformative set of reforms and expansions in student grant and loan programs including significant increases in Pell Grant amounts, a \$12 billion investment in community college facilities, accountability measures, instructional innovation, and programs—investments that would help these strategically placed institutions meet the needs of a twenty-first century student body.

Taken as a whole, these developments signal an unusually bold set of initiatives and, most important, resources that would significantly help to relieve parental burden 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 to put derailed young people back on the pathway to adulthood in the twenty-first century.

Endnotes

1. William S. Aquilino, "Two Views of One Relationship: Comparing Parents' and Young Adult Children's Reports of the Quality of Intergenerational Relations," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (1999): 858–70; Frances K. Goldscheider and Calvin Goldscheider, "The Effects of Childhood Family Structure on Leaving and Returning Home," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60 (1998):745–56; Frances K. Goldscheider and Linda J. Waite, *New Families? No Families? The Transformation of the American Home* (University of California Press, 1991); Michael J. Rosenfeld, *The Age of Independence: Interracial Unions, Same-Sex Unions, and the Changing American Family* (Harvard University Press, 2007); Michael Shanahan, "Pathways to Adulthood in Changing Societies: Variability and Mechanisms in Life Course Perspective," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 667–92.
2. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood, www.transad.pop.upenn.edu.
3. Richard A. Settersten, Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut, eds., *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).