Extended Abstract: The Changing Transition to Adulthood in the U.S.: Trends in Demographic Role Transitions and Age Norms since 2000[1]

Sheela Kennedy, Minnesota Population Center
Frank F. Furstenberg Jr., University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

In 1960, the transition to adulthood typically started early, with most young adults quickly passing through the demographic roles transitions that have traditionally defined adulthood in the normatively prescribed sequence. By age 30, two-thirds of men and three-quarters of women had finished school, become financially independent, left home, married, and had children. By contrast, just 30% of men and 46% of women had accomplished all of these transitions in 2000 (Furstenberg Jr et al. 2004). Moreover, these role transitions were increasingly accomplished out of order or were reversed after accomplishment: childbearing often preceded marriage; young adults frequently returned to school after entering the labor force, or with young adults moving back in with parents after leaving home for the first time (Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987; Mouw 2005). Young adults receive substantial financial support from parents throughout this life stage, both through extra-household transfer and through shared housing (Schoeni and Ross 2005). The development of this new, prolonged and disorderly life stage of early adulthood has been attributed to a number of long-run historical changes, including increasing economic the declining job market for young adults without a college, increased years many Americans are spending in school combined with the growing opportunities available to college-educated women, as well as the increasing acceptability of sex and fertility outside of marriage (Furstenberg Jr. et al. 2004; Danziger and Ratner 2010; Furstenberg Jr. 2010).

As the path through demographic role transitions has changed, so did the importance given individual the individual transitions. The negative opinions of single people and couples who were childless by choice that were widespread in the late 1950s and early 1960s had largely disappeared by 1980 (Furstenberg Jr. et al. 2004; Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2004) By 2002, when General Social Survey (GSS) respondents were asked which events were important to being considered an adult, they emphasized economic transitions (finishing school, financial independence, working full-time, being able to support a family), far more than family transitions (getting married, having a child). Family transitions, particularly becoming a parent, still impact whether a young adult considers herself or himself an adult (Shanahan et al. 2005; Benson and Furstenberg Jr. 2006), however as a society becoming a parent or getting married appear to be consider optional compared to becoming able to support oneself and one's family.

Despite the delayed timetable for completing the transition of adulthood in 2000, the age norms for the demographic role transitions remained quite young. The 2002 GSS respondents who considered a demographic event to be at least somewhat important for adulthood were then asked the age by which that event "should normally occur". Among young adults ages 18-29, the mean ages reported for financial independence and living on one's own were just 20 years old, 22 for full-time work; supporting and raising a family were older, 25-26 years of age (Smith 2003).

[1] This research is funded by a grant from the MacArthur Network on Adult Transitions.

The Great Recession 2007-2009 furthered eroded young adult economic opportunities—job losses were particularly larger for young workers; 15 percent of 20-24 year olds were unemployed in 2009 (Allegretto and Lynch 2010). The impact on living arrangements has also been substantial, including with rising levels of intergenerational living arrangements (Taylor et al. 2010; Mykyta and Macartney 2011), cohabitation rates increase markedly (Kreider 2010) while fertility rates fell, particularly among young women (Livingston 2012). The rise in intergenerational living arrangements was particularly large among young men: 4-5 percentage points among young men; for young women, the increase is smaller, 3 percentage points, and concentrated at ages 18-24 (Wimer and Kennedy 2012). Young adults 25-34 who lived with parents during the recession, most reported being satisfied with their living arrangements (Parker 2012). We don't know, however, whether these increases in and widespread social acceptance of intergenerational living arrangements will translate into rising age norms for leaving the parental home or declining importance given to leaving the parental home as a marker of adulthood.

In previous decades, family transitions, especially marriage, drove the delayed transition to adulthood. In contrast, we expect that rising rates of intergenerational living arrangements will be particularly important for understanding trends in the transition to adulthood during the 2000s. In addition, we expect changes in employment to also play an important role.

Our paper will examine trends in the complete of the key markers of adulthood, both as a set, and individually, from 2000 through 2011 using data from the decennial Census and American Community Survey (ACS). In addition, we will use GSS data currently in the field to examine more subjective definitions of adulthood. We will consider whether the importance given different demographic markers of the transition to adulthood has changed over the past 10 years. Finally, we will assess whether the normative age schedule for achieving these adult roles has changed to reflect the delayed transition to adulthood in general and rising rates of intergenerational living arrangements in particular. Our analysis will consider variation by gender, socioeconomic status (educational attainment), and race and ethnicity.

Data and Methods

We will use data from the 2000 Decennial Census as well as ACS data from 2001-2011 ACS files to examine the percent of young adults who have finished school, left the parental home, become financially independent, married, had children, provided by IPUMS-USA. We will consider alternative definitions of financial independence: in the labor force, working at all, and working full-time, and married to a working-spouse, because these may vary by gender, education, race, and ethnicity. Likewise, we'll consider the implication of including cohabitation in our estimates of adulthood. Using ACS data from throughout the decade will allow us to evaluate the additional impact the recession had above and beyond secular trends in the transition to adulthood.

In addition, we will use GSS data from 2002 and 2012 to examine whether the subjective definitions of adulthood and the normative schedule for becoming an adult have changed. As described earlier, these data provide information on both whether respondents consider a particular marker important for becoming an adult, and, if they considered it a least somewhat important, the age by which this transition should normally occur. The 2002 questions were asked of all respondents, while 2012 GSS survey currently in the field is asking the questions of

young adults ages 18-39. We expect to receive these data in January. The GSS also collects information on marital status, parenthood, and household living arrangements, and employment.

We will examine proportions of young adults making all five transitions, and each transition individually, at ages 20, 25, 30, and 35. We will then examine whether these trends vary by gender, educational attainment (at ages 25 and older), and race and ethnicity. Finally, we will examine which of the individual transitions are most important for understanding the overall trends in the transition to adulthood, and whether this varies gender, education, and race and ethnicity. We will confirm our findings using multivariate logistic regression models.

We will look at the trends in the percent of respondents who reported that a given transition was important between 2002 and 2012 – overall and by demographic groups. We will then look at the ages reported, the means and interquartile range (to measure variation in age norms). We are interested not in the ages of individual transitions, but also whether the order of all transitions together follows the normative pattern (e.g. marriage before childbearing), and whether this varies by demographic groups. Again, we will estimates multivariate models to test for changes over time in the important given to individual transitions and to the age of these transition, and will control for a young adult's own demographic transitions.

Preliminary results

Figure 1 presents trends in the completion of the 5 traditional markers of adulthood by ages 20 and 30 in 2000, 2006, and 2010. For young men, only 2% completed the transition by age 20 in 2000 and this decreased to 1% by 2006. We see more movement at age 30, with a 3 percentage point decrease in each period, and an overall decline from 31% to 25% by 2010. For young women, we see decreases at both age 20 (from 6% to 2%) and at age 30 (from 46% to 39%); however, most of this change was concentrated in the first half of the decade, before the recession began in 2007. These results suggest that Great Recession may have had a bigger impact on the transition to adulthood for young men, which is consistent with disproportionate impact of the recession on the employment of young men.

[Figure 1 about here]

Figures 2 and 3 present the completion of the transition to adulthood at age 30 by educational attainment for men and women, respectively. In 2000, there is a strong inverted-U-shaped relationship between education and completing the transitions to adulthood – with high school graduates having the highest completion rates followed by some college graduates, less than high school and finally college graduates the lowest. This is consistent with both the delayed family formation of college graduates and the low marriage rates of those Americans who do not finish high school. By 2010, this pattern is nearly flat, because the changes in transition to adulthood have been concentrated among young adults with middle-levels of education. For college-educated women, in fact, we see only a 2 percentage point change between 2000 and 2010.

[Figures 2 and 3 about here]

Finally, Table 1 presents trends in the individual components of the adult transitions between 2000 and 2010 by gender. Beginning first with trends in intergenerational living arrangements, we see a large decrease of the percent of young adults who have left home at both age 20 and at age 30—at age 30, the decline was 4 percentage points for both men and women over the

decade. At age 30, this increase appears to be evenly spread across both time periods and thus unrelated to the recession; previous research suggests that we might see more of a shift during the recession when we extend our analysis to younger ages, particularly for men (e.g. ages 20-29).

[Table 1 about here]

Both men and women were substantially less likely to marry and to become parents in 2010 than in 2000. This pattern, especially delayed parenthood, is most important for understanding the delayed transition in the first half the decade. Next, we extended our definition of marriage to include cohabiting unions and parenthood to include the children of cohabiting parents. While this increased the levels of adults completing these transitions, the overall trends were unchanged.

We also see a decrease in the percent of young adults who have are not attending school at age 20, but no change at age 30. Because so few young adults completed the transition to adulthood by age 20 in 2000, school enrollment no long plays an important demographic role in explaining further delays in the transition to adulthood.

Finally, we look at labor force participation and full-time employment. We see a decline in labor force participation at age 20, but little change at age 30. More important for understanding the delayed transition to adulthood is the large decline in full-time employment in the second half the decade which is clearly linked the recession. Between 2006 and 2010, the percent of men working full-time decreased from 78% to 70%; for women, this declined from 57% to 54%.

Discussion and next steps

Our results indicate that the percent of young adults who completed all five demographic makers of the transition to adulthood declined throughout the decade. The magnitude was similar for men and women, 6-7 percentage points, the timing was different—for women, the decline was concentrated early in the decade, while for young men, changes were concentrated during the second half of the decade and likely are related to the recession. This decrease was particularly large among young adults with a high school degree or some college, and smallest among college graduates and resulted in a flattening of educational differences at age 30. Our analysis also indicates that the components contributing to this decline varied over the course of the decade. Delayed home-leaving mattered throughout the decade. Delayed marriage and fertility mattered most at the beginning of the decade, while declining full-time employment matter most during the latter half.

Our next steps will be to examine these changes in greater detail, using additional years of the ACS, additional age categories, and examining gender, educational, and race and ethnic differences in greater detail, and by formally evaluate our findings using multivariate models. Finally, we will examine trends in the importance young adult assign to key adult transitions and in the age norms for accomplishing these transitions.

References

Allegretto, Sylvia, and Devon Lynch. 2010. "The composition of the unemployed and long-term unemployed in tough labor markets." *Monthly Labor Review* 133(10):3–18.

Benson, Janel E., and Frank F. Furstenberg Jr. 2006. "Entry into adulthood: Are adult role transitions meaningful markers of adult identity?" *Advances in Life Course Research* 11:199–224. Retrieved September 20, 2012.

Danziger, Sheldon, and David Ratner. 2010. "Labor Market Outcomes and the Transition to Adulthood." *The Future of Children* 20(1):133–158. Retrieved September 21, 2012.

Furstenberg Jr., Frank F. 2010. "On a new schedule: Transitions to adulthood and family change." *The future of children* 20(1):67–87. Retrieved September 21, 2012.

Furstenberg Jr., Frank F., Sheela Kennedy, Vonnie C. McLoyd, Ruben G. Rumbaut, and Richard A Settersten Jr. 2004. "Growing up is harder to do." *Contexts* 3(3):33–41.

Kreider, Rose M. 2010. "Increase in Opposite-Sex Cohabiting Couples from 2009 to 2010 in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC) to the Current Population Survey (CPS)." Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division Working Paper Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division.

Livingston, Gretchen. 2012. "In a Down Economy, Few Births." Pew Social & Demographic Trends Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Mouw, Ted. 2005. "Sequences of Early Adult Transitions: A Look at Variability and Consequences." in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, edited by Richard A Settersten Jr, Frank F. Furstenberg Jr, and Ruben G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mykyta, Laryssa, and Suzanne Macartney. 2011. "The Effects of the Recession on Household Composition: 'Doubling Up' and Economic Well-Being."#2011-4. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

Parker, Kim. 2012. "The Boomerang Generation: Feeling OK about Living with Mom and Dad." Pew Social & Demographic Trends Washington DC: Pew Research Center.

Rindfuss, Ronald R., C. Gray Swicegood, and Rachel A. Rosenfeld. 1987. "Disorder in the Life Course: How Common and Does It Matter." *American Sociological Review* 52:785–801.

Schoeni, Robert F., and K.E. Ross. 2005. "Material assistance from families during the transition to adulthood." Pp. 396–416 in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, edited by Richard A Settersten Jr, Frank F. Furstenberg, and Ruben G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shanahan, Michael J., Erik J. Porfeli, Jeylan T. Mortimer, and Lance D. Erickson. 2005. "Sequences of Early Adult Transitions: A Look at Variability and Consequences." in *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, edited by Richard A Settersten Jr, Frank F. Furstenberg Jr, and Ruben G. Rumbaut. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Tom W. 2003. "Coming of Age in 21st Century America: Public Attitudes towards the Importance of and Timing of Transitions to Adulthood." GSS Topical Report #No. 35. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.

Taylor, Paul et al. 2010. "The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household." Social & Demographic Trends Report Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved (http://pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/752-multi-generational-families.pdf).

Thornton, A., and L. Young-DeMarco. 2004. “Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63(4):1009–1037. Retrieved September 21, 2012.

Wimer, Christopher, and Sheela Kennedy. 2012. “Understanding Trends in Young Adult Poverty during the Great Recession: The Role of the Safety Net and Intergenerational Living Arrangements.” Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association: Denver.

Table 1.

Family and Living Arrangements

Left home

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	50%	88%	58%	91%
2006	44%	86%	50%	89%
2010	44%	83%	48%	87%

Traditional marital families

Ever Married

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	12%	65%	19%	74%
2006	5%	58%	10%	67%
2010	3%	53%	7%	63%

Parenthood -- excludes children of cohabiting partner

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	4%	40%	15%	60%
2006	3%	36%	10%	56%
2010	2%	33%	10%	56%

Married and cohabiting families

Ever in union (ever married -- or currently cohabiting)

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	16%	71%	26%	79%
2006	8%	65%	16%	73%
2010	6%	62%	13%	71%

Parenthood -- includes children of cohabiting partner

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	5%	42%	17%	62%
2006	4%	39%	11%	58%
2010	3%	36%	11%	58%

School Enrollment and Employment

Finished school

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	55%	90%	46%	89%
2006	51%	91%	39%	88%
2010	47%	90%	37%	87%

In labor force

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	73%	86%	69%	73%
2006	71%	89%	68%	75%
2010	67%	88%	65%	77%

Working Full-Time

	Men		Women	
	age 20	age 30	age 20	age 30
2000	40%	76%	27%	55%
2006	37%	78%	24%	57%
2010	25%	70%	17%	54%

Figure 1. Percent completing transition to adulthood in 2000 and 2010 using traditional benchmarks

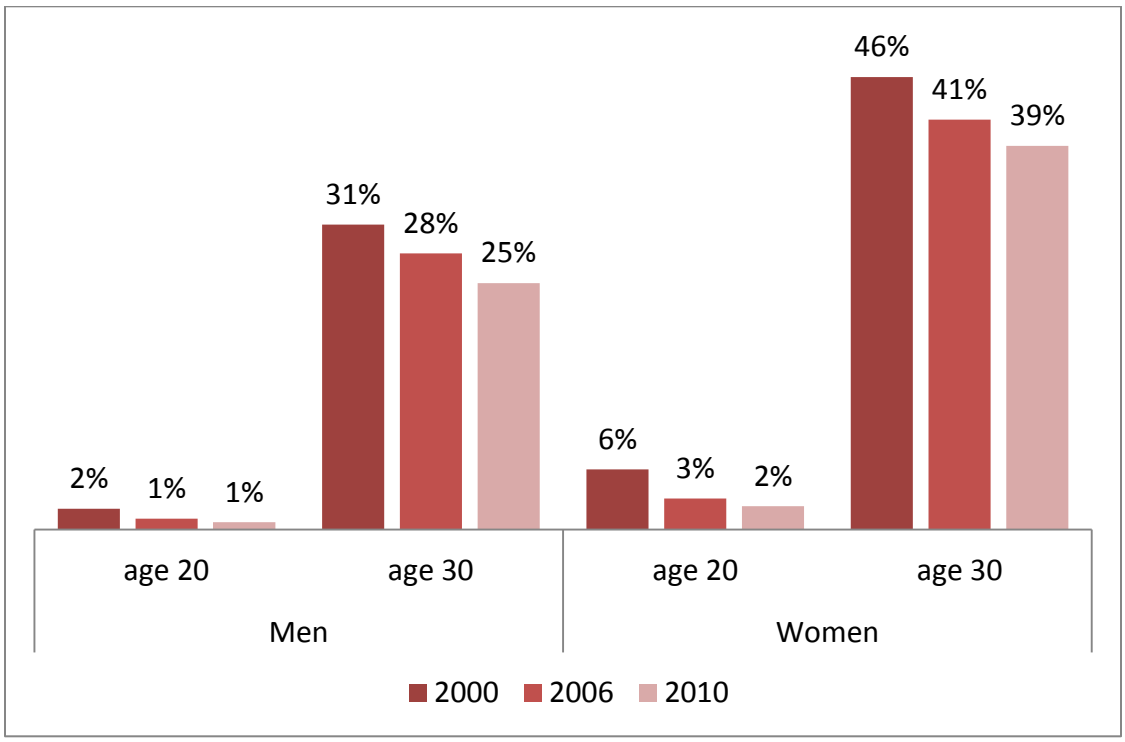

Figure 2. Percent of men completing transition to adulthood using traditional benchmarks in 2000 and 2010 at age 30 by educational attainment

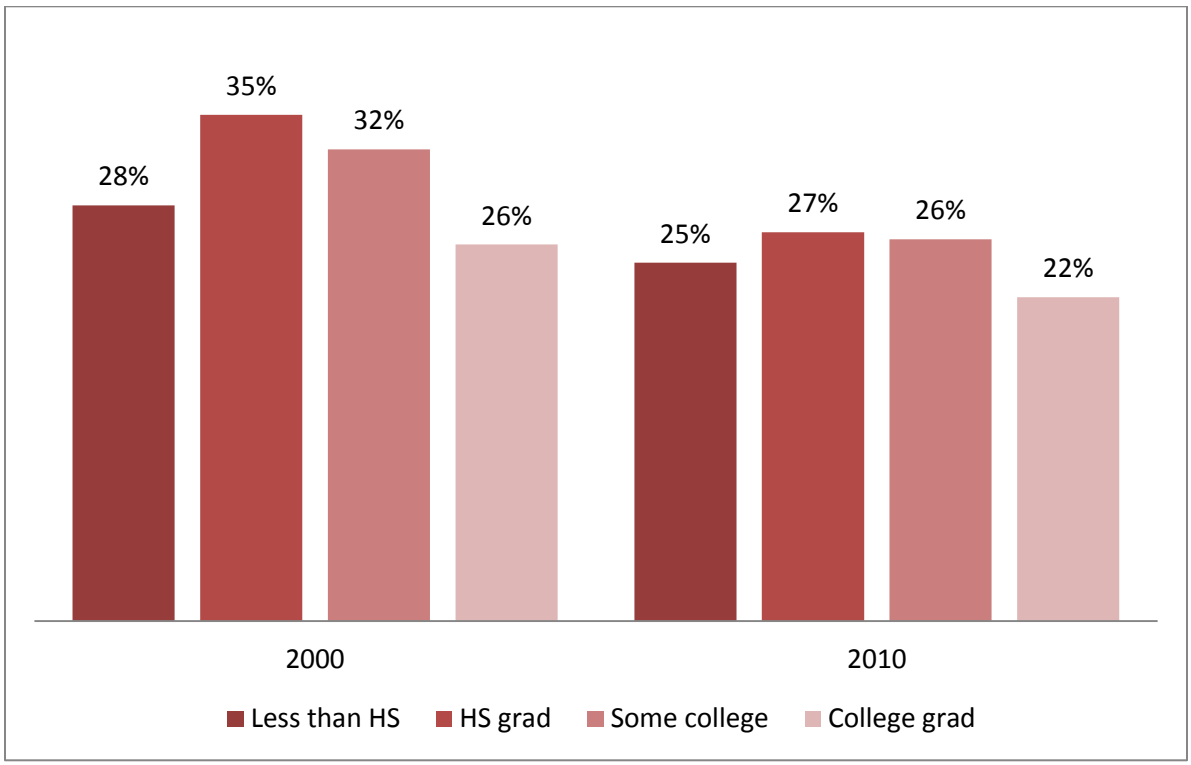

Figure 3. Percent of women completing transition to adulthood using traditional benchmarks in 2000 and 2010 at age 30 by educational attainment