

Network on Transitions to Adulthood

About the Network

Young adulthood is an overlooked era. Yet ages 18 to 30 is a time of profound change, when young adults acquire the skills and education they need for jobs and careers, when they establish households and relationships, begin families, and begin to contribute to society in meaningful ways. The Network on Transitions to Adulthood is examining this important developmental period, shedding new light on what it means to become an adult in America.

Established in 2000, the network spent its first five years documenting the significant demographic, economic, cultural, and sociological changes that have occurred in the past 30 years — publishing their findings in a seminal volume, *On the Frontiers of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy* (University of Chicago Press). Where once youth moved nearly lockstep through the markers of adulthood — leaving home, going to school, finding a job, marrying, buying a house, and starting a family — today, the Network has found, that path is much more circuitous and steeped in ambiguity. Jobs are no longer secure, marriage is delayed, buying a house and gaining an education are expensive, relationships are more tenuous, and the connection to community more fractured. *On the Frontiers* lays out this changed landscape and explores how institutions that have typically aided the transition — such as schools and workplaces — might better adapt to address the needs of young people in the 21st century.

Although the implications of this changing landscape are important for all youth, it poses particular challenges for vulnerable populations, who may not have the familial supports or who may face other barriers to assuming adulthood — youth in the juvenile justice system, youth in special education, in foster care, or those with mental or physical health barriers. The network examines these groups in depth in their second volume, *On Your Own without a Net* (forthcoming, University of Chicago Press).

Having documented the economic, demographic, and cultural changes that have occurred, the network is now looking more closely at the developmental implications of this new world for youth. The major program elements describe this new direction.

Major Program Elements

The network currently includes experts in the field of sociology, criminology, developmental psychology, policy/program evaluation, and economics. It also regularly taps experts in related fields, such as ethnography, labor economy, history, and education. The network focuses in the following areas:

Education. The transition from school to work depends largely on the level of education an individual attains. For those not attending college, the problem is not lack of jobs but lack

of good jobs. Community colleges are an underused resource for linking high schools and employers effectively. The network is evaluating a novel program, Opening Doors, that is working to improve the community college experience, especially for at-risk youth. The network is hoping to embark on an evaluation of a promising program offered by the National Guard (ChalleNGe) to re-engage youth who have dropped out of high school.

Economics. During the last two decades, the labor market has changed fundamentally, both for those with and without higher education. From a developmental perspective, the network is exploring how a constantly shifting job market affects identity. It is documenting how one's economic prospects affect marriage and childbearing, the role of housing costs in decisions to leave home, as well as, among other things, the spending patterns of young adults and the degree of debt they assume.

Civic and Community Participation. The role of civic participation is of particular interest to the network, especially from a developmental perspective. In a job market that is in flux, youth may be seeking other outlets than career for identity formation, and civic participation (traditional and new forms) may be one outlet. Issues such as social trust and multicultural interaction are also being explored.

Ethnography. The network documented the changing transition to adulthood using the highest quality surveys and quantitative data available. To look more closely at the developmental aspects of this era requires supplementing that information with in-depth interviews with the young adults themselves. The network has commissioned original research and is working with existing qualitative data sets to assemble a personal view of what it is like to come of age in the 21st century, with special attention to the growing diversity and immigrant experience. Two volumes are under way based on this extensive qualitative research.

Developmental Psychology. The network is identifying emotional and psychological constructs that are unique to this era and are working to create measures of those constructs. Several constructs currently under consideration include authenticity (how one builds a perception of one's core self in a rapidly shifting landscape), capacity for intimacy, planful competence (having realistic goals given existing conditions), developmental regulation, ethnic identity (how it changes as one moves out into the world), reflective capacity, sense of purpose/meaning/hope, and moral development.

Progress and Plans

The network's past accomplishments and current plans include:

- Using existing data to analyze emerging adulthood: publishing two volumes based on these analyses of the significant demographic, social, and cultural changes in the process of becoming an adult.
- Developing a descriptive, demographic picture of what life is like for young adults at the turn of the 21st century.
- Commissioning new and tapping existing qualitative datasets to fill out the portrayal of young adulthood established with quantitative data: Two volumes on these findings are under way.
- Using panel data to further flesh out how changes in certain economic factors affect the transition to adulthood; commissioning papers will each use multiple datasets to explore various topics.

- Identifying emotional and psychological constructs that are deemed important markers of adulthood, and creating measures of those constructs; constructs such as planful competence, authenticity, capacity for intimacy; also exploring ethnic identity, social trust, etc.
- Building strategic communications plan for disseminating network findings, including developing an undergraduate, interactive curriculum on this topic; building a content-rich Web site, developing media learning seminars on the topic, and other outreach.
- Leveraging the work of others to help build the field. We have collaborated with such research organizations as Chapin Hall Center for Children (exploring the meaning of adulthood for vulnerable populations of youth, such as those in foster care). We are drawing on the program evaluation expertise of MDRC to analyze the effectiveness of a community college program and a school-to-work program run by the National Guard. The network is also commissioning papers, organizing panels, and presenting findings in a variety of venues.

For additional information, contact the Program Administrator, Program on Human and Community Development, (312) 726-8000 or 4answers@macfound.org. Or see our Web page: www.macfound.org.

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