

**Becoming an Adult:
The Changing Nature of Early Adulthood**

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.
Sheela Kennedy
Vonnie C. McLoyd
Rubén G. Rumbaut
Richard A. Settersten, Jr.

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A new life stage—early adulthood—has emerged in the past several decades. No longer adolescents, but yet not ready to perform the full range of adult roles, many young people, especially those with fewer means or special needs, are caught between the increased skill demands of employers and social institutions unprepared to support them throughout this prolonged transitional period.

In the period following World War II, adulthood came early to most Americans. The vast majority had assumed adult roles by their late teens or early 20s. By this age, most males had completed school and were working full-time, and most females were married and raising children. People who grew up in this era of domestic mass production—many of today’s grandparents—were economically self-sufficient and able to care for others by the end of adolescence. Today, adulthood no longer begins when adolescence ends. Ask someone in their early 20s whether they consider themselves to be an adult, and you might get a laugh, a quizzical look, a shrug of the shoulders, or a response like the one we heard from a 24 year-old Californian, who answered: “Maybe 25. Next year.”

Social scientists are beginning to recognize a new stage in the life course, which, for lack of a better phrase, we call *early adulthood*. In certain respects, some of the features of this period resemble the coming of age patterns of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when youth lingered in a state of semi-autonomy, waiting until they could establish the economic wherewithal to marry, have children, and establish an independent household. There are, however, importance differences in how young people today achieve adulthood from those of the both recent and more distant past.

This stage of life is not merely an extension of adolescence, as has been claimed in the mass media. Unlike adolescents, young adults are physically mature and often possess formidable intellectual, social, and psychological skills. Nor does this time of life represent a reluctance by young people to accept adult responsibilities. Instead, early adulthood has become a time of investment during which young people work to build educational credentials and practical employment skills in an ever more demanding labor market. Most are actively involved in work and/or school, and they are developing romantic relationships. Yet, many have not yet become fully adult because they are not ready or, perhaps not permitted, to perform the full range of adult roles, and most have not yet forged a stable identity of who they are and how they fit into society. For a growing number, this will not happen until their late 20s or even early 30s.

This new stage of life is creating some consternation for social institutions, and especially families, who are having to adjust to the changing pace of adult transitions. Among the most privileged, who receive ample support from their parents, this period has become a time of unparalleled freedom: freedom from family responsibilities and freedom for self-exploration and development. For the less advantaged, early adulthood is a time of struggle to gain the skills and credentials required for a job that can support the family they wish to start (or perhaps have already started), and a struggle even to feel in control of their lives. A 30-year single mother from Iowa laughed when we asked her whether she considered herself an adult: “I don’t know if I’m an adult yet. ... I... still don’t feel quite grown up. Being an adult kind of sounds like having things, everything is kind of in a routine and on track, and [I] don’t feel like [I’m]...quite on track.”

Changing Notions of Adulthood

Traditionally, the transition to adulthood involves establishing independence from parents and family, or, as the life course scholar John Modell described it “coming into one’s own.” As the quotation implies, the demographic events that make up the transition to adulthood are also accompanied by a psychological sense of commitment, purpose, and identity.

Although we lack systematic evidence on how adulthood was defined in the past, it appears that marriage and parenthood represented an important marker. A review of 19th century popular fiction, journalism, sermons, and self-help guides finds almost no reference to finishing school or entering the workforce, and only occasional references to leaving home or becoming the head of one’s own household. Marriage references, on the other hand, are common, suggesting that marriage was considered (at least by middle-class writers) a critical marker of adult status.

By the 1950s and 1960s, most viewed family roles and adult responsibilities as nearly synonymous. For men, having the means to enter marriage and support a family was the gateway to adulthood, while for women, merely entering through the gate—getting married and becoming a parent—conferred adult status. As Alice Rossi explained in 1968:

On the level of cultural values, men have no freedom of choice where work is concerned: they must work to secure their status as adult men. The equivalent for women has been maternity. There is considerable pressure upon the growing girl and young woman to consider maternity necessary for a woman's fulfillment as an individual and to secure her status as an adult.

Research conducted during the late 1950s and early 1960s demonstrated a widespread antipathy toward people who remained unmarried and toward couples childless by choice. As the decades passed, however, these views would begin to shift, rendering the transition to adulthood more ambiguous and uncertain. A widely cited study by Joseph Veroff, Elizabeth Douvan, and Richard Kulka found that more than half of adults in 1957 viewed someone who did not want to get married as selfish, immature, peculiar, or morally flawed. By 1976, fewer than one-third held such views. A 1962 study found that 85 percent of a sample of mothers believed that married couples should have children. Nearly 20 years later, only 40 percent still agreed, and only one in five of their daughters agreed in 1993. Arland Thornton and Linda Young-Demarco, who have studied attitudes toward family roles during the latter half of the twentieth century, conclude that “Americans increasingly value freedom and equality in their personal and familial lives while at the same time maintaining their commitment to the ideals of marriage, family, and children.”

The Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy, an interdisciplinary team of scholars funded by the MacArthur Foundation, wanted to understand how Americans now define the milestones of adulthood. To answer this question, we developed a set of questions for the 2002 General Social Survey (GSS), an opinion poll administered to a nationally representative sample of Americans every two years by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. The survey asked nearly 1,400 Americans aged 18 and older how important it was to accomplish certain traditional markers to be considered an adult: leaving home, finishing school, getting a full-time job, becoming financially independent from one's parents, being able to support a family, marrying, and becoming a parent.

The definition of adulthood that emerges from the GSS is one that does not necessarily include marriage and parenthood, but does still include being financially independent, leaving home, completing school, and working full-time. As shown in Figure 1, the most important milestone is completing school. Americans also place a very high priority on establishing an independent household and being employed full-time—the concrete steps associated with gaining financial independence, and ultimately the ability to support a family. In fact, 95 percent of Americans consider education, employment, financial independence, and the ability to support a family as key steps on the path to adulthood. Despite the importance of being able to support a family, nearly half do not believe that it is *necessary* to marry or to have children to become an adult. As a young mother from San Diego explained to us, having a child didn't make her an adult; instead she began to feel like an adult when she realized, only recently, that “all of us make mistakes, but you know, we can fix them and if you keep yourself on track, ... everything will come out fine.” Compared with their parents and grandparents, for whom marriage and parenthood were virtually a *sine qua non* for becoming an adult, young people today more often view these as life choices, not requirements.

The Lengthening Road to Adulthood

Not only are the parameters of adulthood changing, but with them, the time it takes to achieve traditional markers of adulthood. To map the changing transitions to adulthood, the Network also examined a number of national surveys that contain information on young adults both in this country and abroad. Using U.S. census data collected as far back as 1900, we compared the lives of young adults over time. We have also conducted about 500 in-depth interviews with young adults living in different parts of the United States, including many of the recent immigrant groups.

Our findings, and the work of other scholars, point to the unmistakable conclusion that it takes much longer to make the transition to adulthood today than decades ago, and arguably longer than it has at any time in America's history. Figure 2, based on one-percent samples of 1960 and 2000 U.S. censuses, shows the large decline in the past 40 years of the percentage of young adults who, by age 20, 25, or 30, have completed all of the major adult transitions (leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married and having a child). Using traditional markers of adulthood, only 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men aged 30 in 2000 had completed all five transitions, compared with 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men of the same age in 1960.

Women, who have traditionally formed families at ages younger than men, show the most dramatic changes at early ages. Although 30 percent of 20-year-old women in 1960 had completed these transitions, only 6 percent had done so in 2000, and although 70 percent of 25-year-old women in 1960 had attained this status, only 25 percent had done so in 2000. The corresponding declines for men are less striking but nonetheless significant. For both men and women, these changes can largely be explained by extended education and delayed marriage and childbearing.

Using a more contemporary definition of adulthood that excludes marriage and parenthood, we find that in 2000, 70 percent of men had left home, entered the labor force, and completed school by age 30, representing only a 12-percentage point decline from 1960. Nearly 60 percent of 30-year-old women met this new standard in 2000 (75 percent if we include married, full-time mothers). This still constitutes a substantial change, and the census data provide no indication of how many of these young people feel that they are capable of capacity to support a family.

There are, however, consistently and markedly different views by social class on how long it should take to achieve adulthood. Less educated and less affluent respondents—those who did not attend college and those at the bottom one-third of the economic distribution—were more likely to subscribe to an earlier timetable for leaving home, completing school, obtaining full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood. Around 40 percent of the less well-off in the GSS sample believe that young adults should marry before they turn 25, and one-third believed they should have children by this age. Far fewer of the better-off respondents thought these transitions should occur in the early 20s, and about one-third believed that these events could be delayed until one's 30s. These social class differences probably stem from the reality that young people with more limited means do not have the luxury of investing in school or experimenting in the labor market.

As John Modell's research has shown, the reasons for this lengthening path to adulthood are varied, ranging from shifting social policies to changing economic forces. In the post-war era, the swift transition to adulthood was aided by a huge amount of government support. The GI bill helped veterans return to school and subsidized the expansion of education. Similarly, early family-building was encouraged by government programs that provided affordable housing. At the same time, the benefits of Social Security were extended to more older adults, and young people were no longer compelled to support their parents. The disappearance or reduction of those subsidies during the past several decades has dramatically undermined the pattern of early family formation and may help to explain the prolongation of adult transitions for some Americans.

In addition, the growing costs of school as well as housing forces many youth to straddle between full dependency on their family and full independence, spending some years in a state of semi-autonomy, accepting some support from their parents while they establish themselves economically. When a job employment disappears or they need additional schooling or a partnership dissolves, they increasingly look to their family for assistance. Thus, the sequencing of adult transitions has become increasingly complicated, owing to the less linear pattern and reversibility of transitions.

The primary reason for a more prolonged early adulthood, however, is that it takes much longer than it did in the past to secure a full-time job that pays enough to support a family. As Timothy Smeeding and Katherin Ross Phillips have found, in the mid-1990s, just 70 percent of American men aged 24–28 earned enough to support themselves, while fewer than half earned enough to support a family of three. Attaining a decent standard of living today usually requires a college education, if not a professional degree. To enter or remain in the middle class, it is almost imperative to make an educational

commitment that spans at least the early 20s. Not only are more Americans attending college than ever before, but it takes longer to complete a degree than in years past. Census data reveal that from 1960 to 2000, the percentage of Americans aged 20, 25, and 30 who were enrolled in school more than doubled at each age. Unlike during the 1960s, these educational and work investments are now required of women as well as men. Little wonder then that many young people linger in early adulthood, delaying marriage and parenthood until their late 20s and early 30s.

New Demands on Public and Private Institutions

The growing demands on young Americans to invest in the future have come at a time of curtailed government support, creating unprecedented demands on the family. Here, as in so many other areas of American life, the growing level of inequality in our nation shapes very different futures for more and less privileged Americans.

Early adulthood has become a time when people figure out what they want to do and how best to realize their goals. If they are lucky enough to have a family that can help out, they may proceed directly through college, travel or work for a few years, or perhaps participate in community service, and then enter graduate or professional school. Relatively few Americans, however, have this good fortune. Lacking sufficient resources, youth from less well-off families must move back and forth between work and school or combine both while they gradually gain their credentials. In the meantime, they feel unprepared for marriage or parenting. If they do marry or parent during these years, they often find themselves trying to juggle too many responsibilities and unable to adequately invest in their futures. Like our Iowa mother, they don't feel "on track" or in control of their lives.

More than at any time in recent history, parents are being called on to provide financial assistance (either college tuition, living expenses, or other assistance) to their young adult children. Using conservative estimates, Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross found that nearly one-fourth of the entire cost to parents of raising children is provided after age 17. Nearly two-thirds of young adults in their early 20s received support from parents, while about 40 percent still received some support in their late 20s.

A century ago, it was the other way around: young adults typically helped their parents when they first went to work, if (as was common) they still lived with their parents. Now, a substantial number continue to receive support from their parents even after they begin working. The exceptions seem to be in immigrant families, where young people more often provide financial support to their parents. A 27-year-old Chinese American from New York explained why he continued to live with his parents despite wanting to move out, saying that his parents "want me [to stay] and they need me. Financially, they need me to take care of them, pay the bills, stuff like that, which is fine."

As young people and their families struggle with the new reality that it takes longer to attain adulthood today, Americans must recognize current weaknesses in the social institutions designed to aid the transition to adulthood. For the fortunate few who attend a four-year residential college and perhaps even go on to professional or graduate training, residential colleges, and universities seem well designed for young adults. They offer everything from housing to health care while training young adults. Likewise, the military provides a similar milieu for those from less-privileged families. However, only a small fraction of young adults—about one in four—attends primarily residential colleges or joins the military after high school. The other three-quarters of the population look to their families for room and board while they attend school and begin work. Many of these youth enter community colleges or local universities that provide much less in the way of services and support.

The least privileged young adults are those whose families cannot offer much support and assistance. These vulnerable populations, consisting of 10 percent to 15 percent of the young adults, may come out of the foster care system, graduate from special education programs, or exit from jails and prisons. These young adults, lacking the skills to make it in the labor market, need help to secure a foothold in the society.

Efforts to strengthen educational opportunities, strengthen school-to-career paths, and to help students who cannot afford post-secondary education must be given higher priority, even in a time of

budget constraints. The United States, once a world leader in providing higher education to its citizens, now lags behind several nations in the proportion of the population that completes college.

Expanding military and alternative service programs also can help provide a bridge from school to higher education or the labor force by providing financial credit to those who serve their country. Such programs also can offer health insurance to young adults, who are often cut off from insurance by arbitrary age limits. Finally, programs for the vulnerable populations of youth coming out of foster care, special education, and mental health services must not assume that young people are fully able to stand on their own at age 18 or even 21. In our current economy, the timetable of the 1950s is no longer sustainable.

Recommended Resources

Booth, Alan, Crouter, Ann C., and Shanahan, Michael J., eds. *Transitions to Adulthood in a Changing Economy: No Work, No Family, No Future?* Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999. This volume examines the changing transition to adulthood during a period of increasing economic inequality.

Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr., Thomas D. Cook, Robert Sampson, and Gail Slap, eds. *Early Adulthood in Cross-National Perspective (Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 580, March)*. London: Sage Publications, 2002. The contributions in this volume provide a description of the emergence of this life stage across countries and an analysis of the wide variation between countries in the patterns of adult transitions.

Larson, Reed W., Brown, Bradford B., and Mortimer, Jeylan T., eds. *Adolescent's Preparation for the Future: Perils and Promises*. Ann Arbor, MI: The Society for Research on Adolescence, 2002. The articles in this interdisciplinary volume consider how well adolescents, across societies, are being prepared for adulthood in a rapidly changing and increasingly global world.

Modell, John. *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States 1920-1975*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. Modell documents dramatic twentieth century changes in the transition to adulthood and places these shifts within the context of larger economic, political, and technological changes.

Portes, Alejandro, and Rubén G. Rumbaut. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001. Findings from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS), on the adaptation process of the immigrant second generation during adolescence.

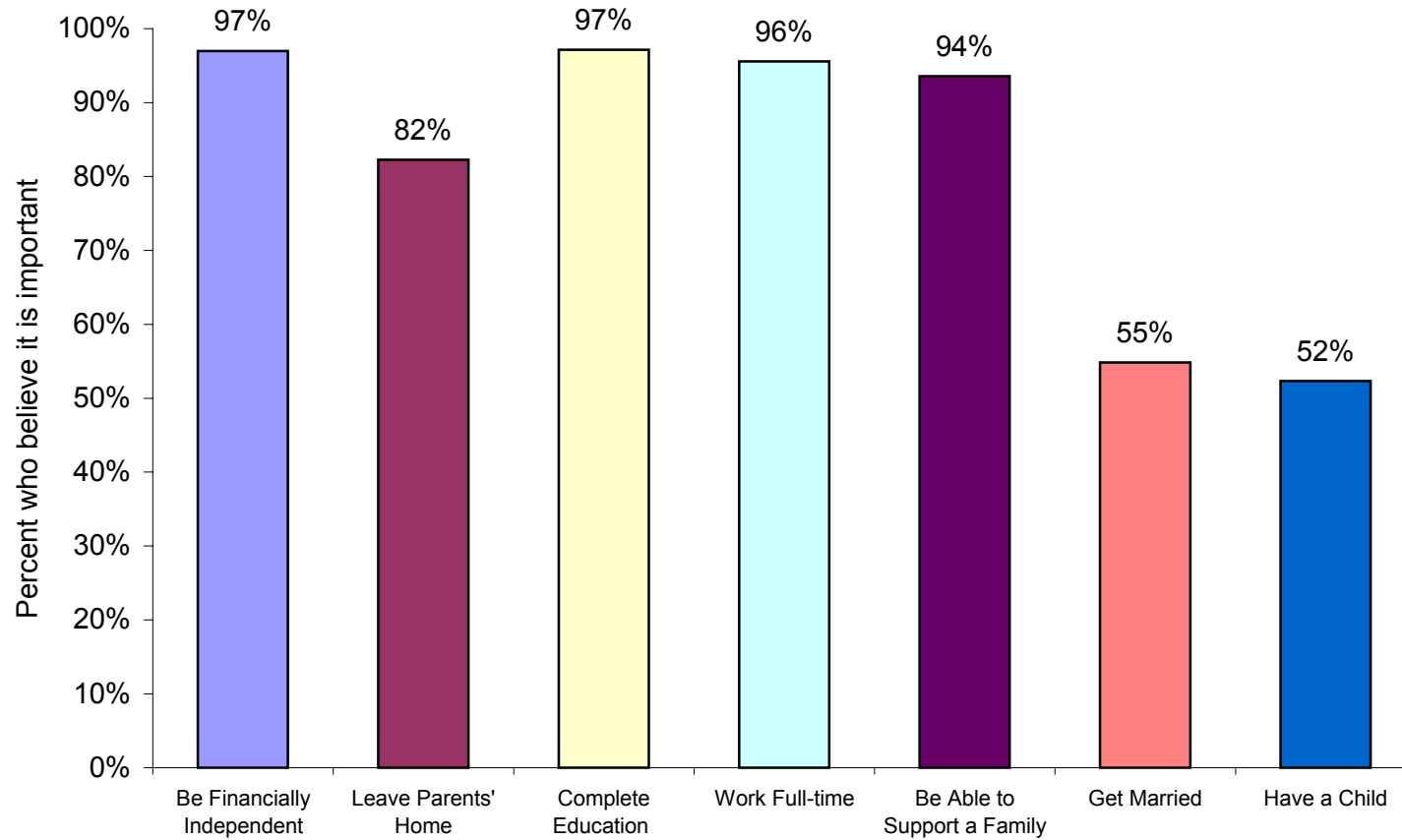
Schoeni, Robert and Karen Ross. "Material Assistance Received from Families during the Transition to Adulthood." In Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut (eds). *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming. The authors estimate the amount of financial assistance given to young adults by their families at different points during early adulthood.

Settersten, Richard A., Jr., Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Rubén G. Rumbaut, eds. forthcoming. *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. This collection of papers describes the increased complexity of school, work, and family transitions during early adulthood, with a focus on vulnerable populations and social policy.

Smeeding, Timothy and Katherin Ross Phillips "Cross-National Differences in Employment and Economic Sufficiency." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 580 (2002): 103-133. Smeeding and Phillips examine the economic independence of young adults in seven industrialized countries.

Thornton, Arland and Linda Young-DeMarco. "Four Decades of Trends in Attitudes Toward Family Issues in the United States: The 1960s Through the 1990s." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 63 (2001): 1009-37.

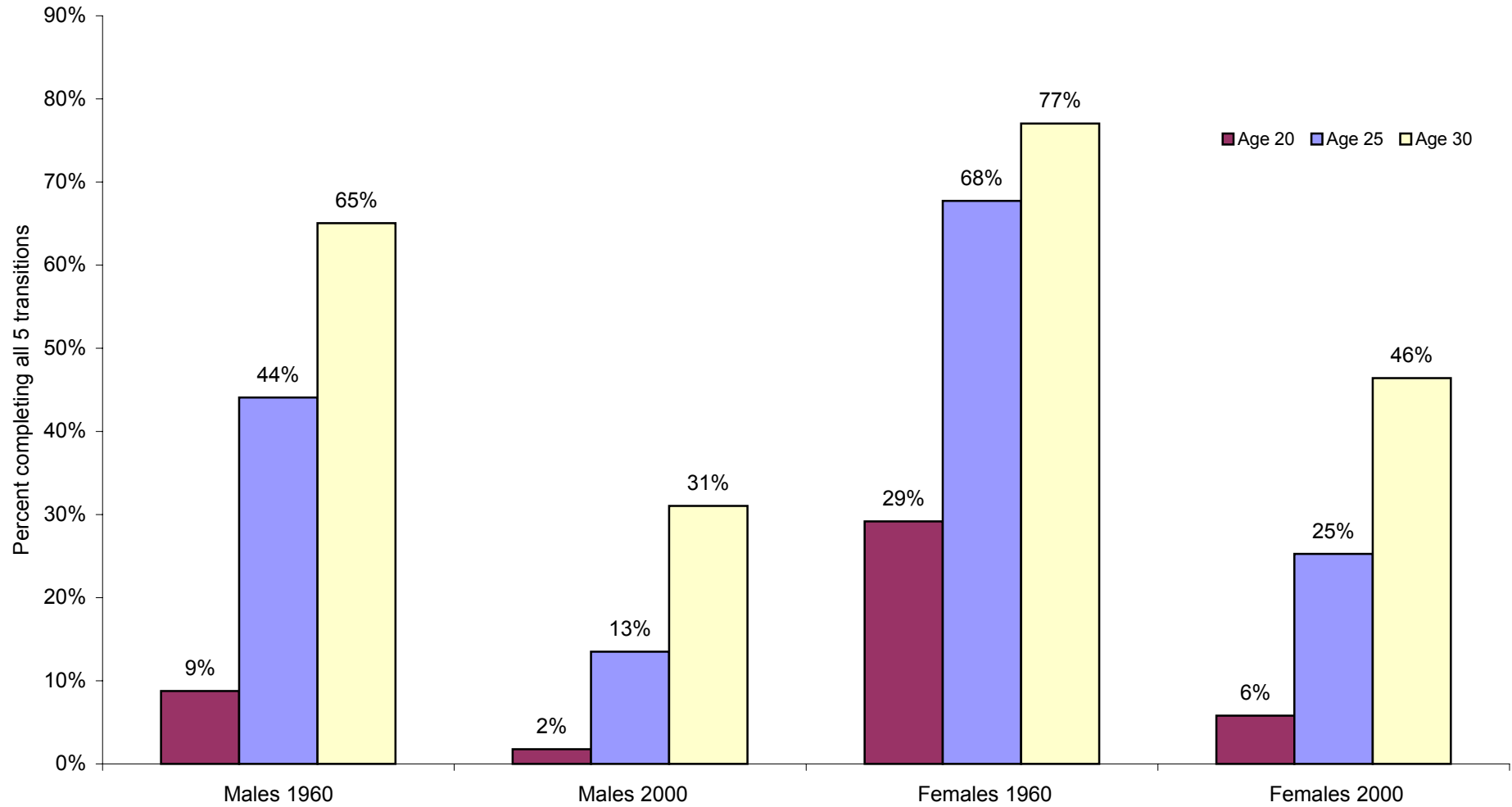
Figure 1. Percent of Americans Who Believe Event Is Important for Adulthood



Source: General Social Survey, March 2002.

Note: Respondents were asked how important each transition is for someone to be considered an adult. The percentages displayed here are based on those who reported that a transition is at least "somewhat important" (or higher).

Figure 2. Percent Completing the Adult Transition in 1960 and 2000
(leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child)



Notes: Data are from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series extracts (IPUMS) of the 1960 and 2000 U.S. Censuses. Men are defined as financially independent if they are in the labor force; women are defined as financially independent if they have completed all transitions except employment in the labor force.

