

the changing twenties



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Foreword

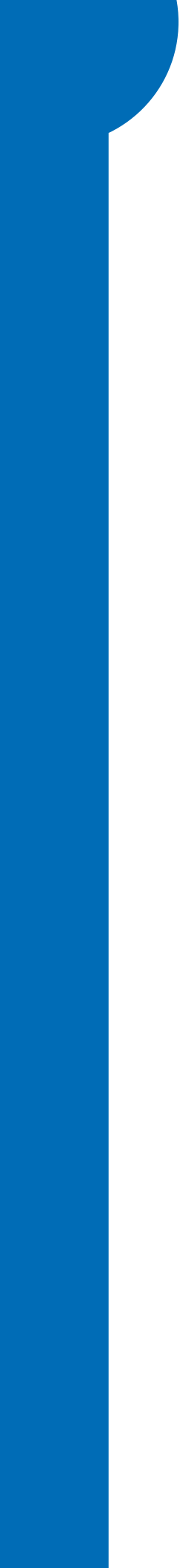
New York Times columnist David Brooks recently noted a new stage in life—one that he calls the *odyssey years*—“the decade of wandering that frequently occurs between adolescence and adulthood.” Similar phrases—such as “extended adolescence” and “failure to launch”—have begun to appear with increasing frequency in the press and popular culture to describe the current experience of 20-somethings.

In October 2007, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy hosted a day-long meeting dedicated to examining the experience of being in one’s 20s. A wide range of authors, social scientists, marketing executives, political strategists, policy leaders, members of the media, and others participated in an engaging discussion of everything from sex and marriage to contraception and politics.

Not surprisingly, one of the foundational questions for the event was whether being in one’s 20s at present is different in important ways from previous decades. Bill Galston—National Campaign Board member, Brookings Institution scholar, and one of the nation’s preeminent social scientists—set out to explore this very question. Galston concluded that despite all the changes that have occurred in society over the last several decades, the experience of being a child or young teen and being an adult remains largely similar to previous generations, but that being a young adult—a 20-something—is now quite different.

This monograph presents what Bill Galston offered at the October 2007 event on this most interesting issue. Words have been changed for clarification but little else has been done to magnify or modify Galston’s original presentation.

For those who want to learn more about teen and unplanned pregnancy, to download a copy of this publication, or to watch a video of the *20-Something in the 21st Century* event, please visit www.TheNationalCampaign.org.



Introduction

Despite all the much advertised changes in technology and popular culture, being 15 today is still much like being 15 a generation ago. Teens' lives are still framed in large measure by parents, schools, peers, and popular culture.

Farther up the age scale—despite all the changes in the economy—being 35 today bears more than a passing resemblance to being 35 a generation ago. Adults' lives are still framed by careers, marriage, children, and civic ties.

But I want to suggest that being 25 today is very different. Today's young adults are much less likely to have committed themselves to a mate or to a career. Unlike my generation, only a tiny fraction experience military service. Many go back and forth between episodic education and temporary jobs and between independent living and their parents' homes. Most young people in their 20s are living outside of institutions and, therefore, without the structure and norms that institutions provide. Many feel that they are living without a script and are making up their lives as they go. And despite the birth dates on their driver's licenses, many of them are not sure that they are adults at all.

This publication takes an empirical look at four dimensions of the changing 20s. First, what I regard as revolutionary shifts in the balance between young men and young women in education, employment, and earnings. Second, rapid changes in patterns of marriage and cohabitation. Third, changes in relations between 20-somethings and their parents regarding living arrangements and healthcare. And, finally, a startling shift in the definition of adulthood itself.

Figure 1: College Enrolled, 1980-2003, by Gender (%)¹

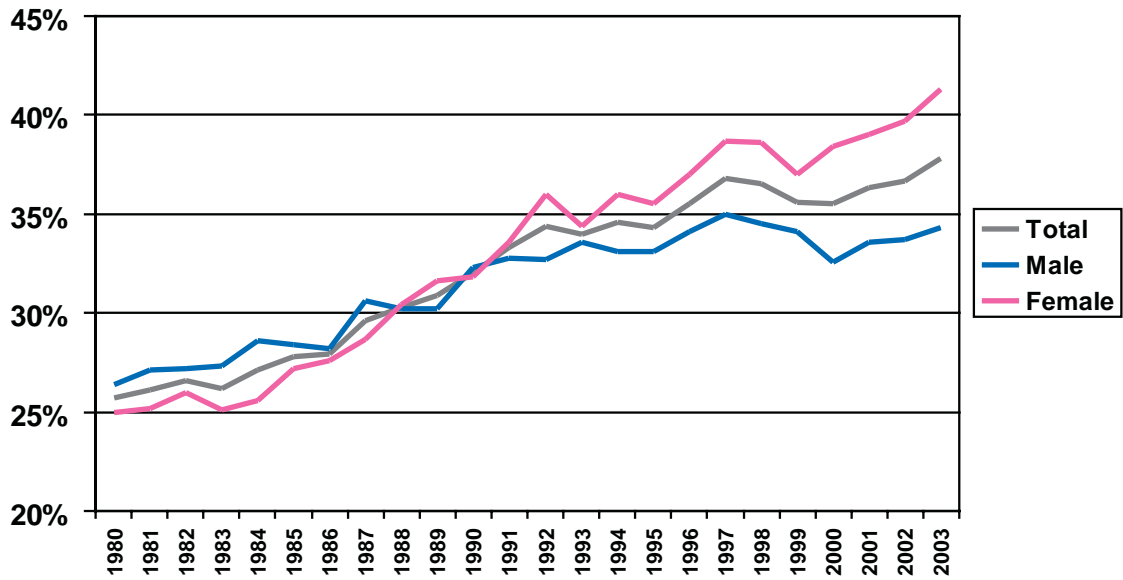


Figure 2: BA or Higher, by Gender and Age Cohort (%)²

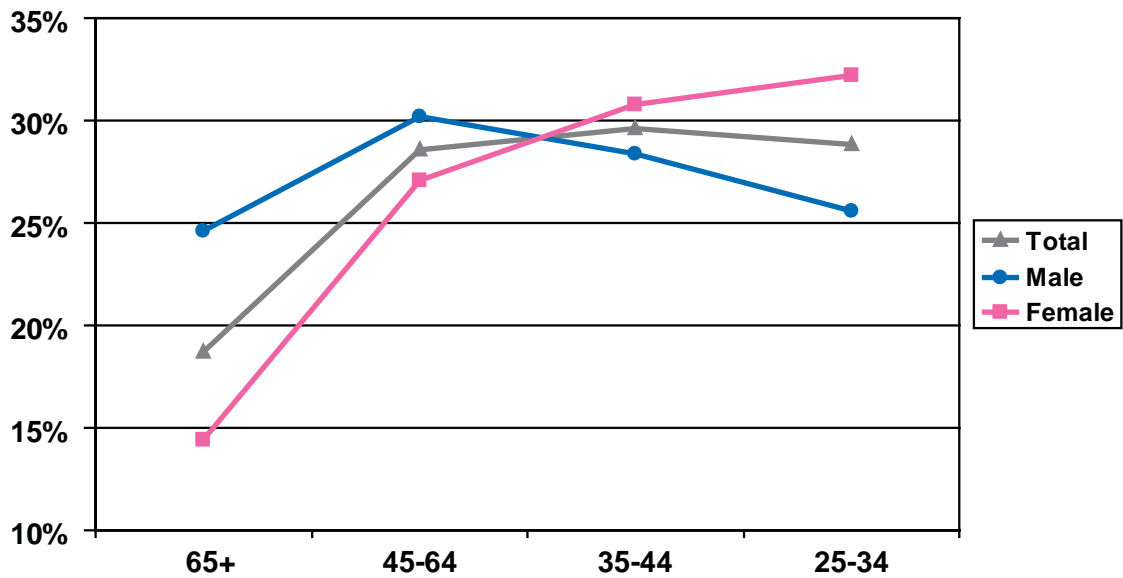
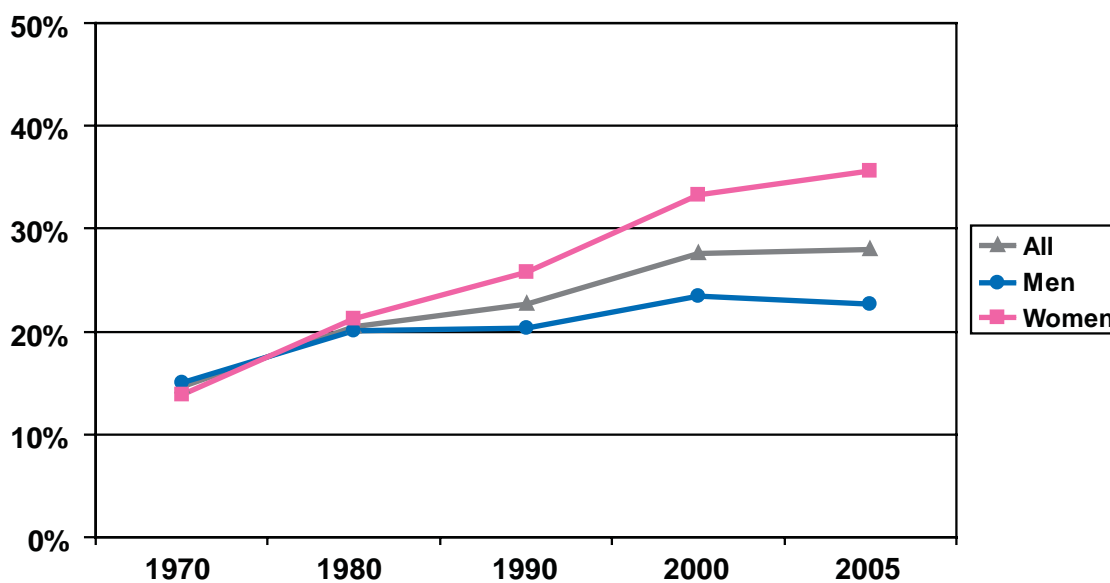


Figure 3: U.S. Workers in Their 20s with at Least a BA, by Gender (%)³



Comment

Over the past 25 years, what was once a male edge in college enrollment has been replaced by a very substantial female edge in college enrollment (Figure 1). And because women, unlike many of their male peers, are very diligent in finishing their education, as you go from my parents' cohort, to mine, to Gen X, to today's young adults, you can see that a male edge in education at the level of BA or higher is replaced by a female edge (Figure 2).

This educational differential carries over into the work force. Consequently, today there is a very large gap among male and female workers in their 20s with a BA (Figure 3).

Figure 4: Labor Force Participation Rate, Ages 25 to 35, by Gender (%)⁴

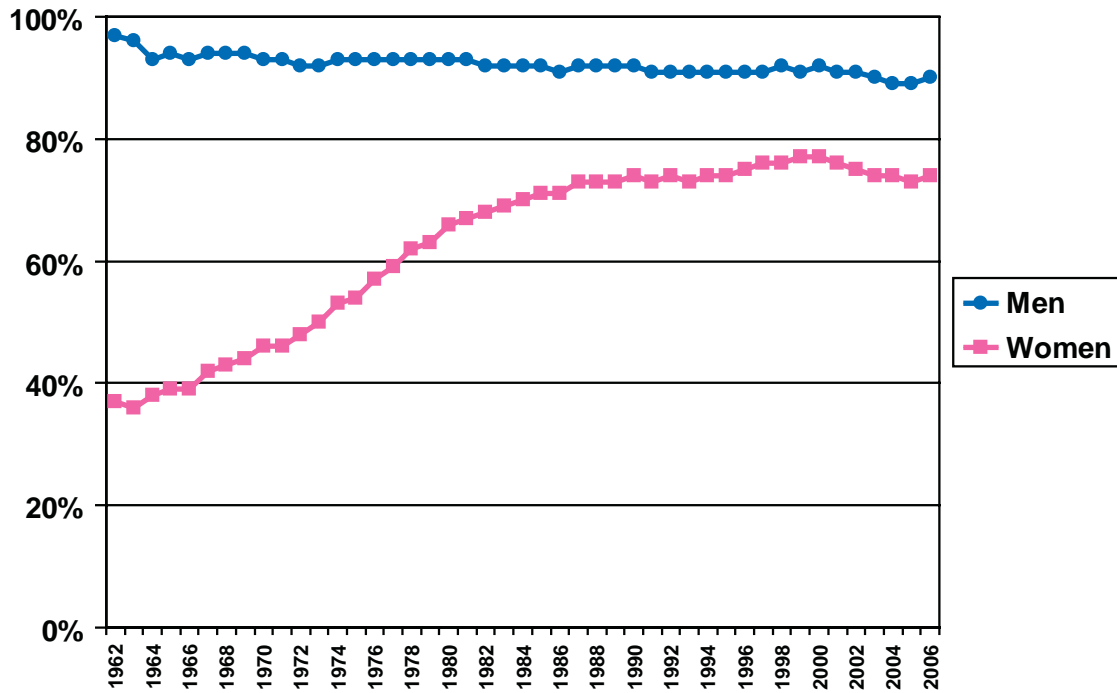


Figure 5: African-American Labor Force Participation Rate, Ages 25 to 35, by Gender (%)⁴

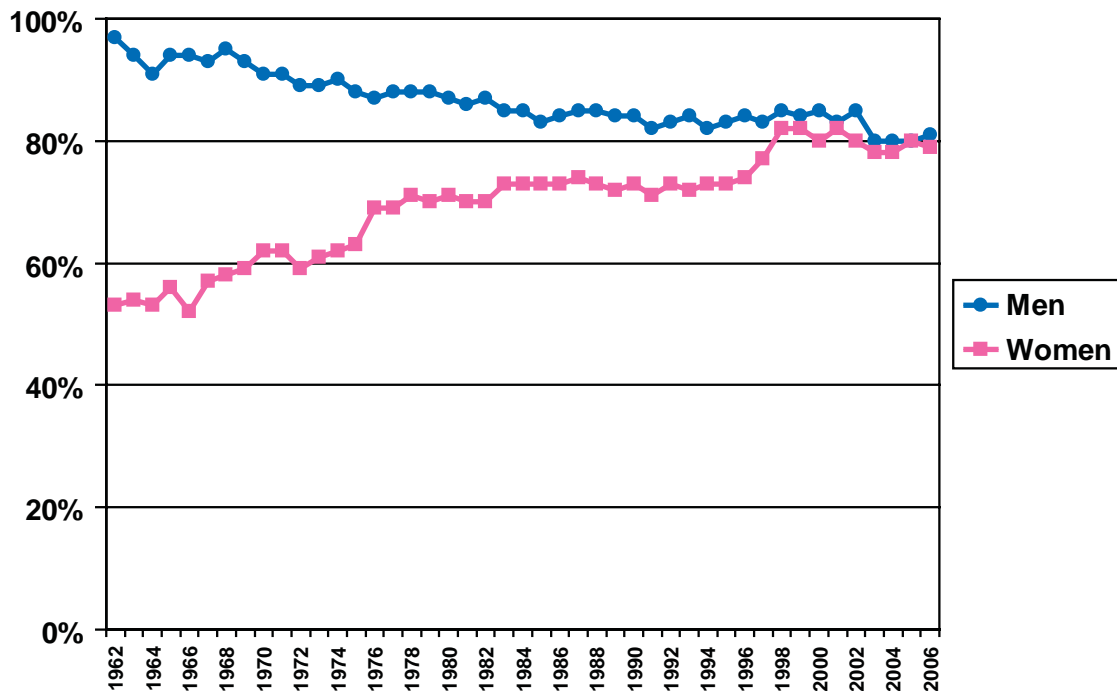
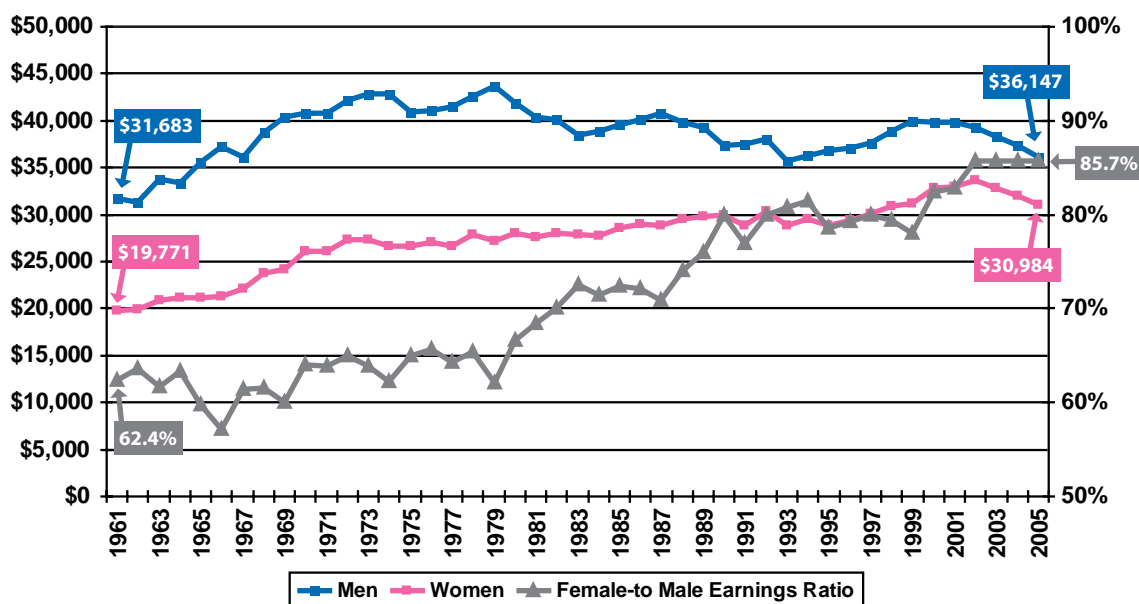


Figure 6: Female-to-Male Earnings Ratio and Median Earnings of Full-Time, Year-Round Workers, Ages 25 to 35, by Gender⁴



Comment

Not surprisingly, the increase in women’s education has been accompanied by a sharp rise in labor force participation among women. What was once a 50-point gap between men and women ages 25-35 is now only about one-third of that (Figure 4).

Among African-Americans there has been a total convergence. African-American young women ages 25-35 are just as likely to be in the labor force as African-American men—a participation rate of about 80% (Figure 5).

All this can be summarized by illustrating what’s happened to the earnings of full-time, year-round workers, ages 25-35 (Figure 6). In the 1960’s and almost through the 1970’s, women were stuck between 60-65% of men’s earnings. But since 1980, in the past 25 years, the ratio of women’s earnings to men’s earnings has shot up and is now close to 86%. In some of the nation’s major cities that figure is more like 120%. This new reality has given rise to articles like the one that appeared in the *New York Times* in late 2007 that described the plight of young women who are making a lot more than young men and then find themselves out on a date in a fancy restaurant trying to figure out the payment ritual. Talk about making it up as you go along...

Figure 7: Married at Age 25 (%)⁵

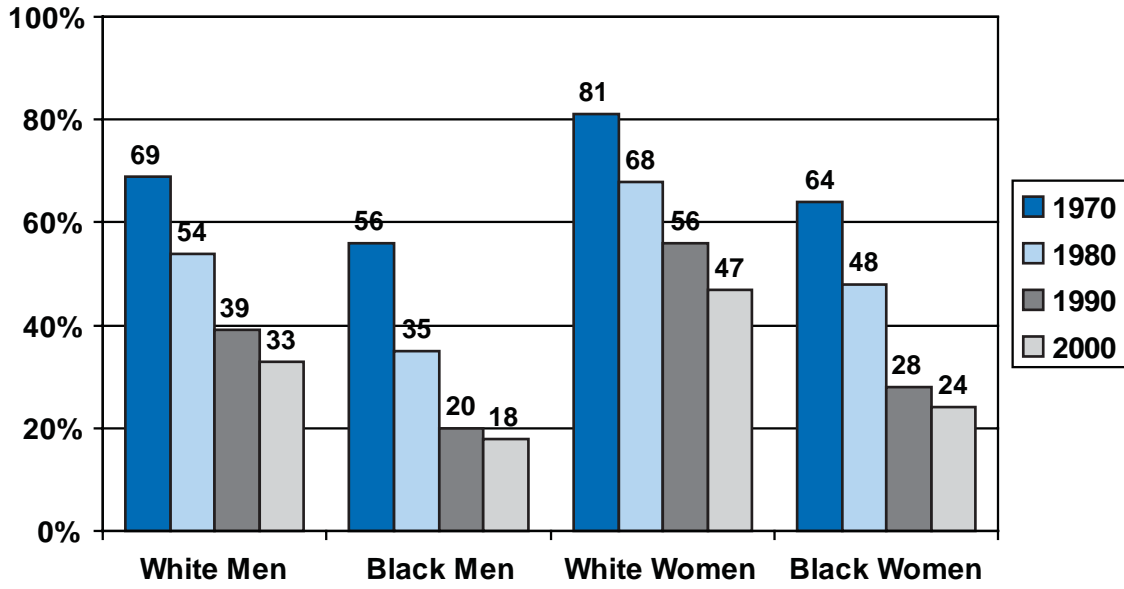


Figure 8: Married at Age 30 (%)⁵

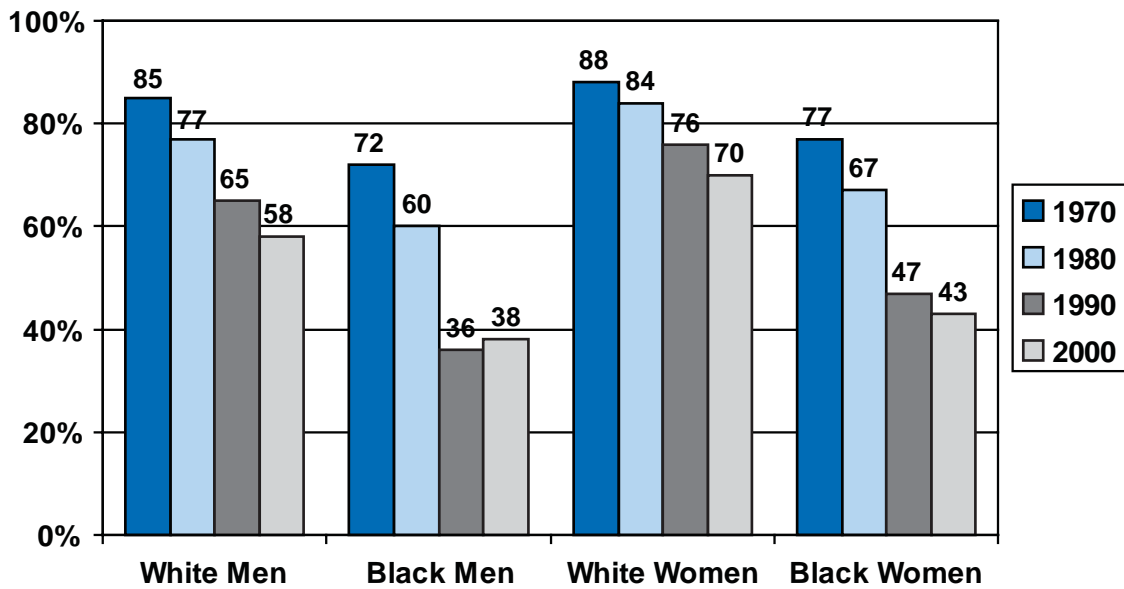
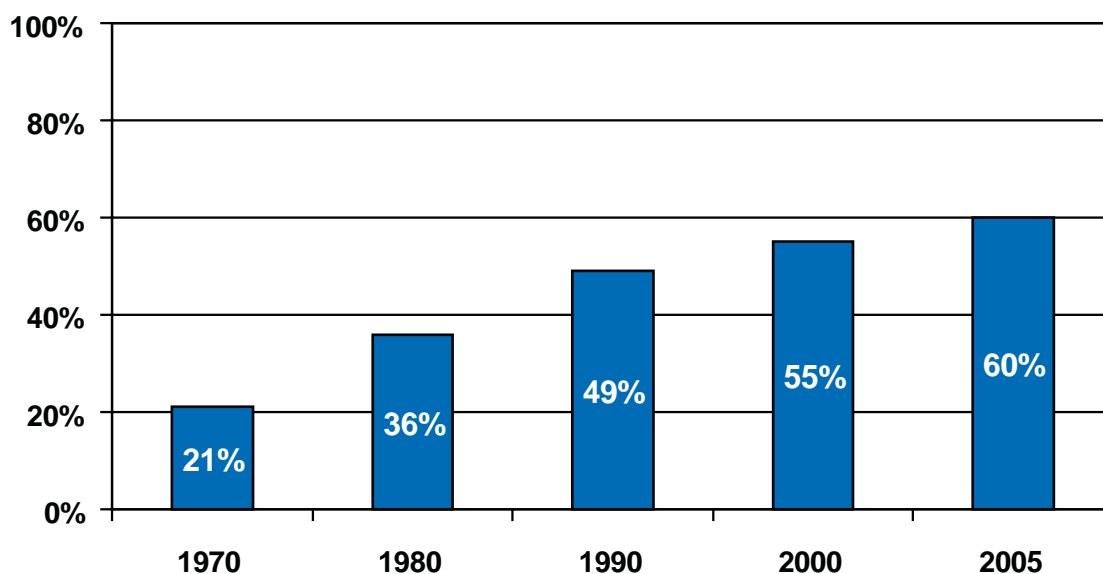


Figure 9: Never Married at Age 25 (%)⁶



Comment

A second category of exploration is marriage and cohabitation. I took four slices—1970, 1980, 1990, 2000—and I asked: what is the probability that young men and young women in these categories will be married? As shown in Figure 7, there is a sharp plunge downward between 1970 and 2000. Fully 69% of white men in 1970, for example, were married by the age of 25. That figure in 2000 was 33%. There were equally sharp declines among white women, among black men and women, and among the percentage of 30 year-olds who are married (Figure 8). Today if you are a white man at age 30, the odds are only slightly better than 50/50 that you are married. If you are an African-American man the odds are just a bit better than one-third. The statistics look better for women, but the trend is still unmistakable.

To put this slightly differently: in 1970, only 21% of 25 year-olds had never been married. Today that figure is an excess of 60% (Figure 9).

Figure 10: Median Age at First Marriage, 1950-2006⁷

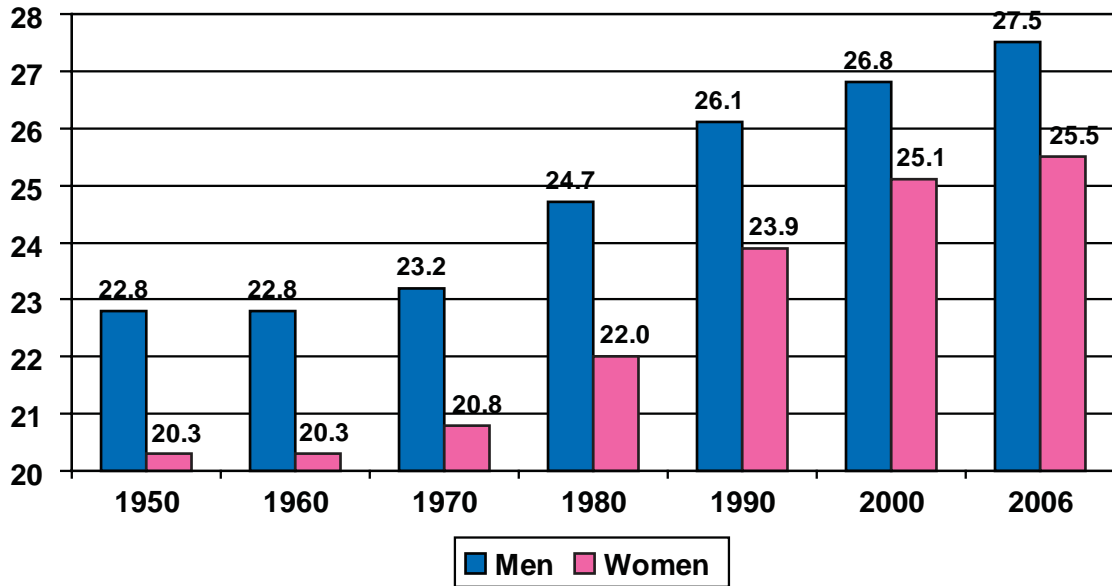


Figure 11: Median Age at First Marriage, 2000, by Country⁸

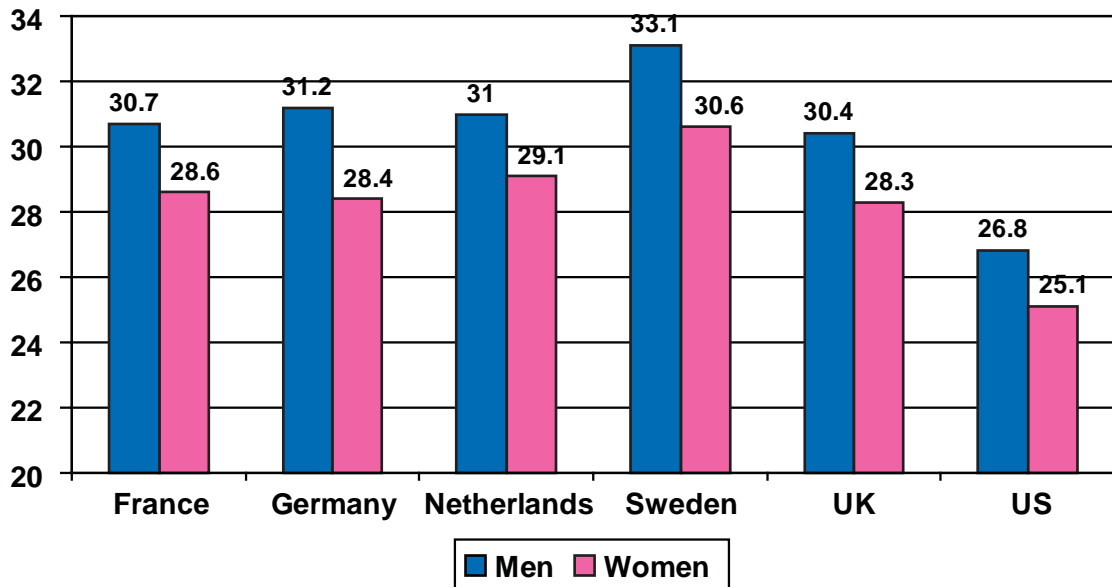


Figure 12: Increase in Median Age at First Marriage, 1980-2000 (Years)⁸

<i>Country</i>	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>
France	5.5	5.6
Germany	5.1	5.0
Netherlands	5.6	6.0
Sweden	4.1	4.2
UK	5.1	5.3
US	2.1	3.1

Comment

Not surprisingly these changes in marriage have been accompanied by, or are perhaps a synonym for, a very sharp rise in the median age of first marriage for young men and women. In 1950, 1960, and 1970, there was rough stability in the median age of first marriage. But since that time, the median age of first marriage has gone up by more than four years for both young men and young women (Figure 10).

You may think that the United States is experiencing a unique cultural and social revolution. Not so. We actually lag behind many major European countries. As shown in Figure 11, many of these countries—and I could have selected many others—have median ages of first marriage substantially higher than ours.

In addition, all of these countries have experienced faster rates of change in this metric in the past 20 or 25 years (Figure 12). I infer from such data that those who believe that the United States has reached some sort of plateau in this area and who believe that things will stabilize after decades of change ought to rethink that assumption. I see no reason to believe that's true and many reasons to suspect that it's not.

Figure 13: Cohabit at Least Once Prior to Marriage (%)⁹

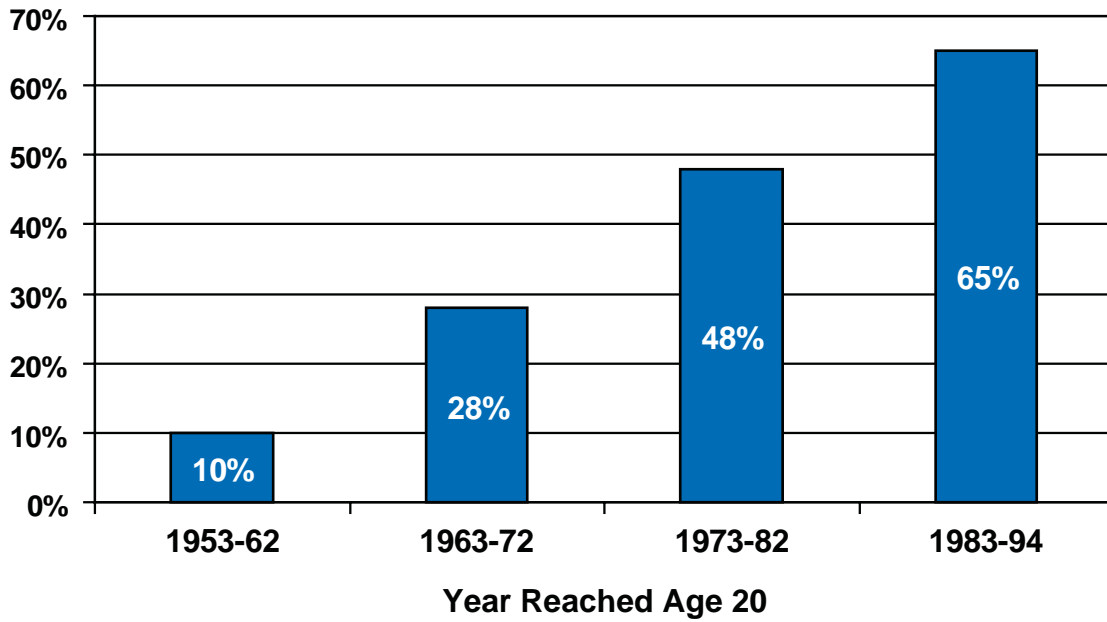


Figure 14: Births to Cohabiting Couples as % of Births to Unmarried Women¹⁰

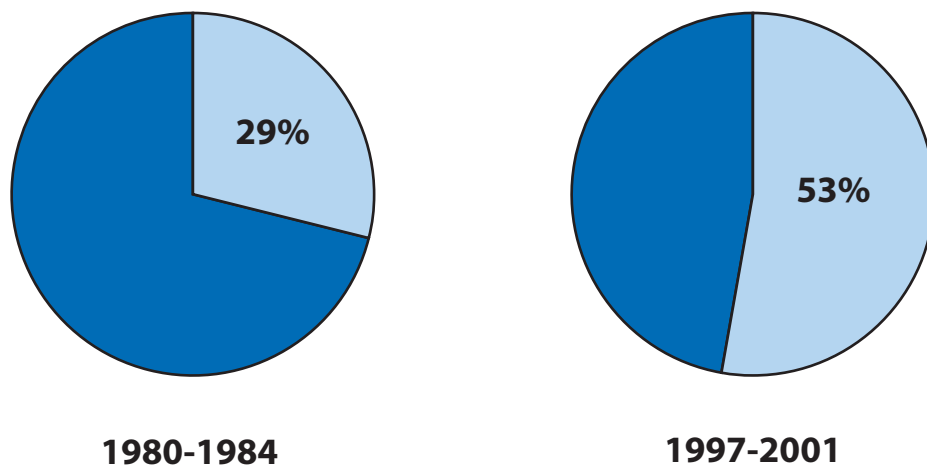
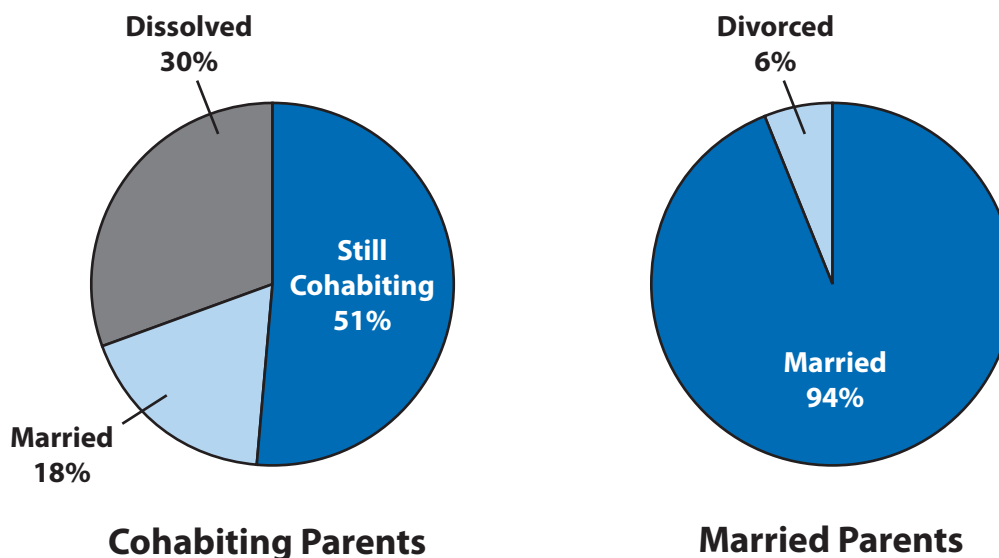


Figure 15: Status of Couples When Baby is Age 2, by Status at Birth¹¹



Comment

We now switch from marriage to cohabitation. Here you have a steady movement upwards in the percentage of young adults who have cohabited at least once before marriage (Figure 13). I suspect if one could project forward 10 years, 65% would grow to 80%. Cohabitation has become, as shown in Figure 14, an increasingly important part of the phenomenon of births to unmarried women, moving in less than 20 years from 29% to 53% of that group.

The question that now arises is: is cohabitation the functional or emotional equivalent of marriage? Obviously, that is a very complicated question but Figure 15 casts some light on it. This figure addresses the query: if a baby is born to a cohabiting couple or alternatively, to a married couple, what is the outcome likely to be two years later? A lot of people—and I suspect a lot of young women in particular—in cohabiting relationships hope that a birth of a child will trigger marriage. In fact, however, the birth of the child is almost twice as likely to trigger the dissolution of the relationship, and the rate of dissolution during this period is five times as high among cohabiting couples as it is among married parents.

Figure 16: Men with First Child, by Age and Cohort, UK (%)¹²

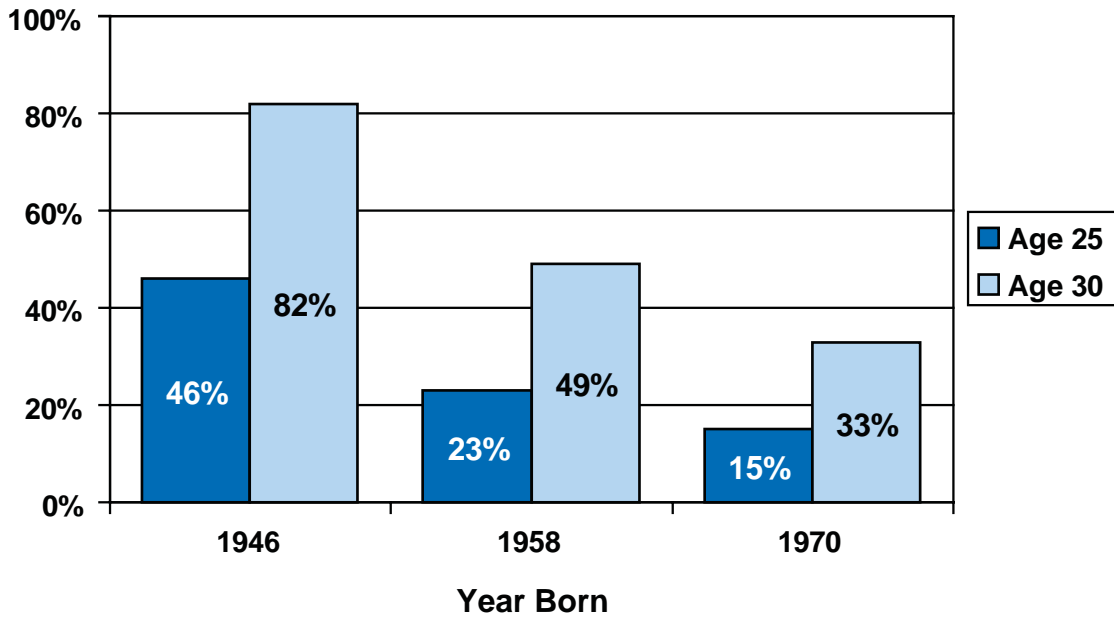
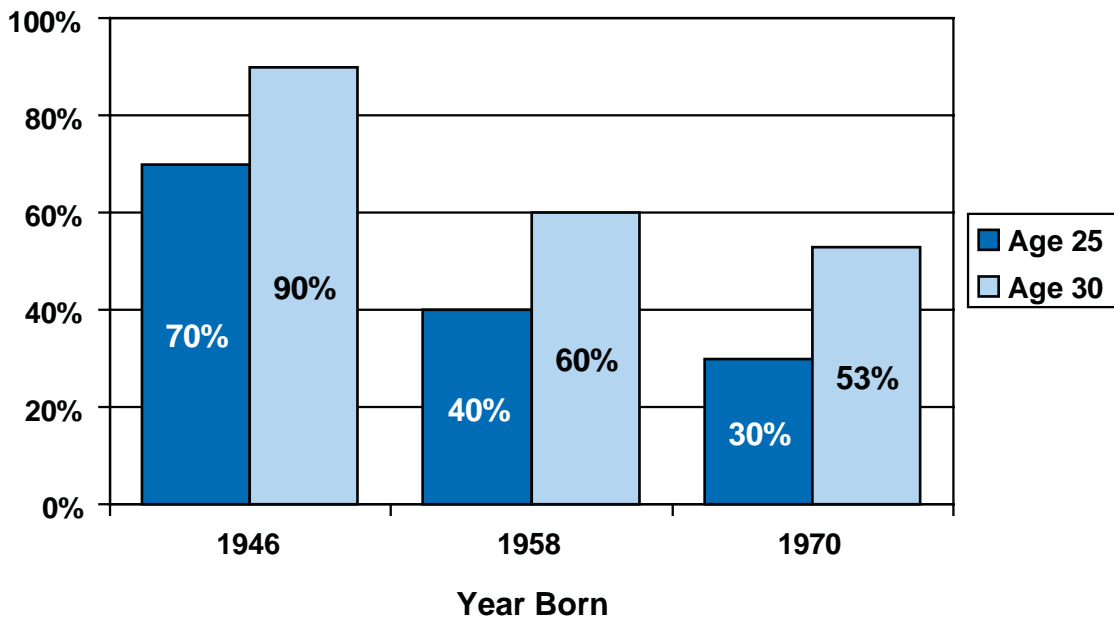


Figure 17: Women with First Child, by Age and Cohort, UK (%)¹²

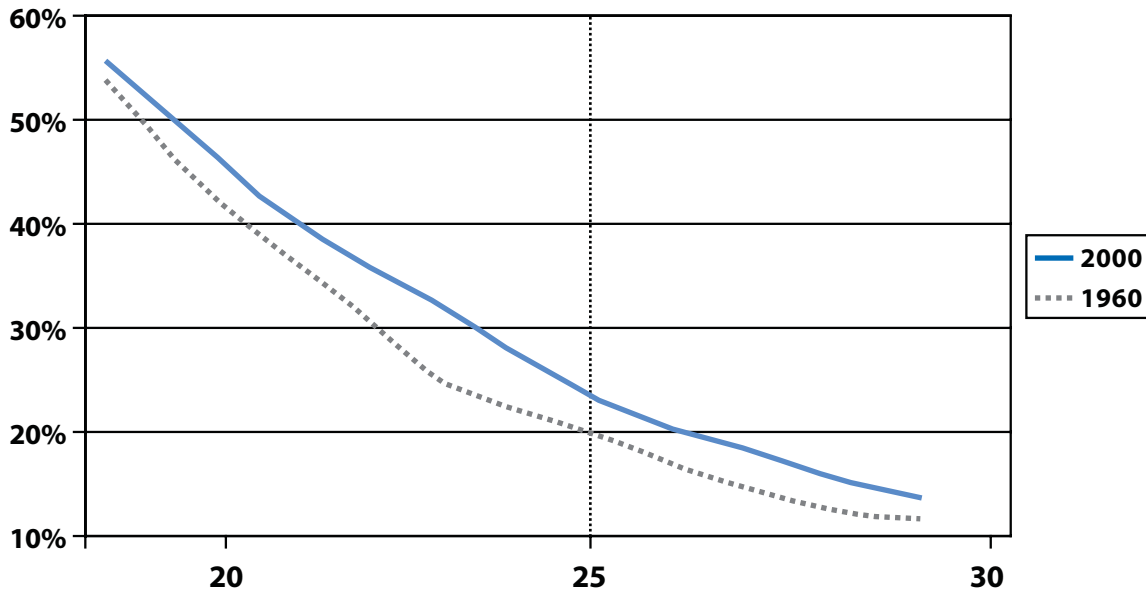


Comment

I am also interested in the question of when first children arrive. Unfortunately, American statistics on this question are hard to come by so, as a substitute, I present data from the United Kingdom. Roughly 82% of men born in 1946 had at least their first child by age 30. For men born in 1970—who are now roughly 35 years old—that figure had dropped to 33% (Figure 16).

We see a similar pattern for women. Among those born in 1946, 70% had a first child by age 25, and 90% had a first child by age 30. By the time we get to the 1970 cohort, these figures fall to 30% and 53% respectively (Figure 17).

Figure 18: Young Men Ages 19 to 29 Living with at Least One Parent, 1960 vs. 2000 (%)¹³

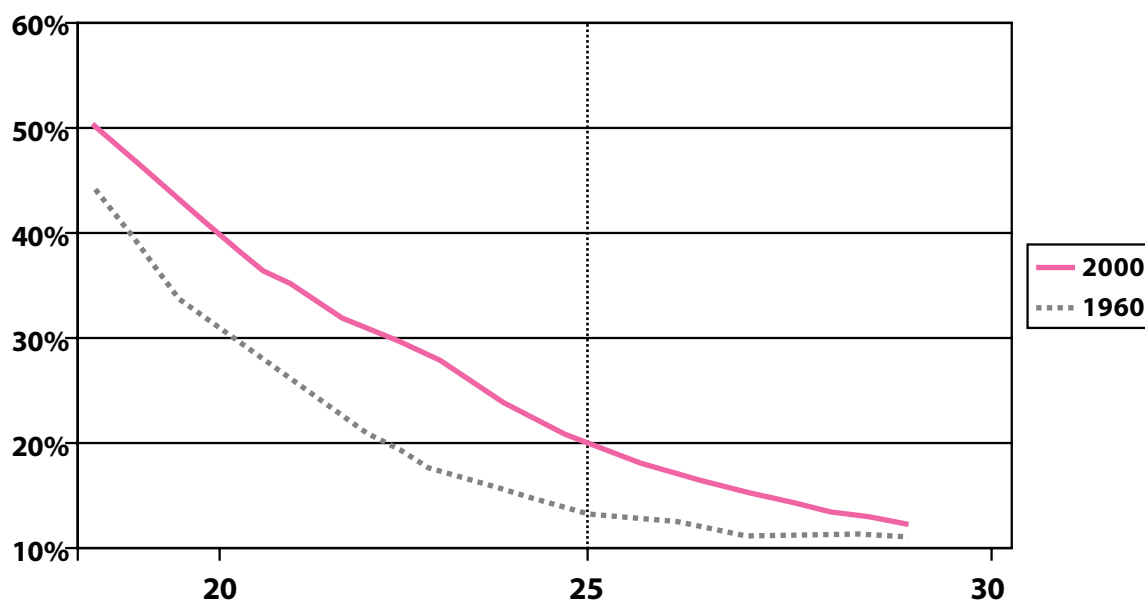


Comment

The changing relationships between young adults and their parents is my third category of exploration. There is a lot to say about this, but here I present just the bare bones.

There has been a lot written in the popular press about young adults being more likely to live at home with their parents than they used to be. Those anecdotes rest on a solid empirical basis. The dotted line at the bottom of Figure 18 represents the percentage of young adult men, of various ages from 18-30, who lived with their parents over a four decade span. In 2000, that line is substantially higher for every single year during that period.

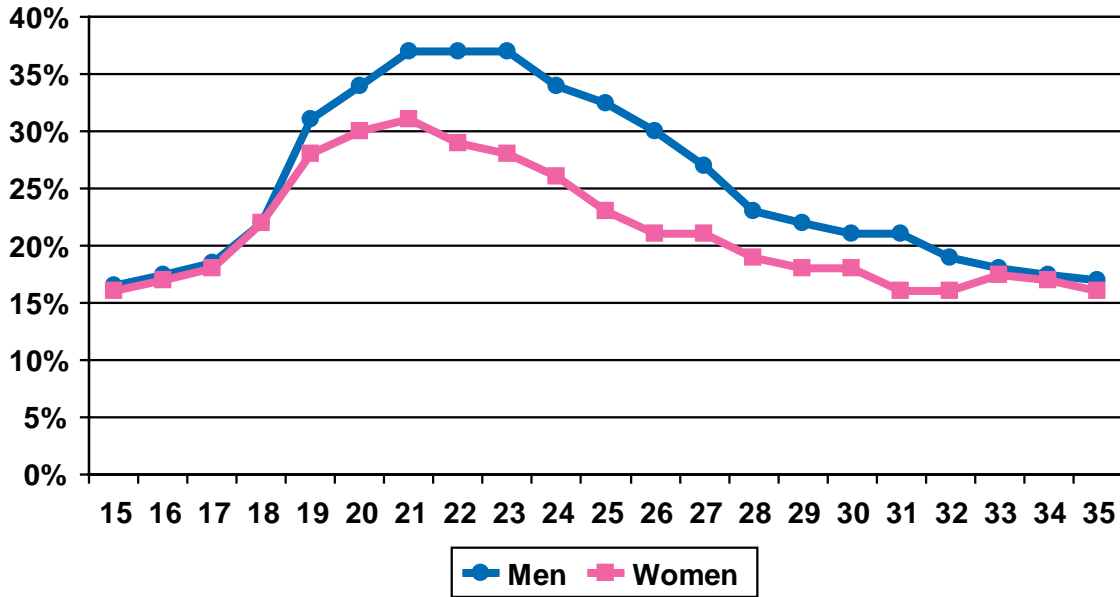
Figure 19: Young Women Ages 19 to 29 Living with at Least One Parent, 1960 vs. 2000 (%)¹³



Comment

Lest you think that this is a phenomenon restricted to “slacker” men, the increase for young women between 1960 and 2000 has been even greater (Figure 19). I was speculating with a friend about the source of this. One hypothesis is, of course, economic. That is, with the ratio of rents to earnings in one’s 20s going up, especially in big cities, there are economic motives for living with one’s parents. There is also a sociological point that needs to be taken into account. The gap in attitudes on hot button issues between today’s young adults and their parents is much smaller than was the gap between my generation and our parents (data not shown). So it’s easier to live at home because there is more commonality of views—including attitudes towards gender roles, sexuality, and many other potentially conflictual issues.

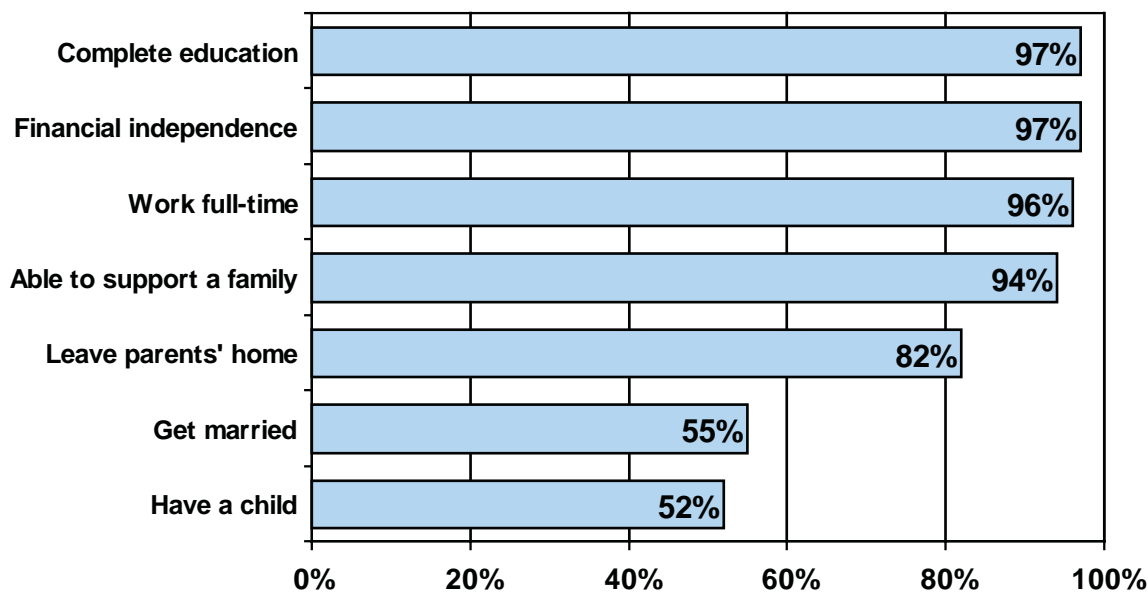
Figure 20: Probability of No Health Insurance, by Age and Gender (%)¹⁴



Comment

One issue that has been much debated, of course, is the relationship between all these economic and sociologic patterns and health insurance. As shown in Figure 20, very high percentages of both young men and young women go without health insurance during young adulthood, either because they can't afford it or because they think they don't need it. I suspect there is a substantial element of the latter, as revealed by the comparison between young men and young women. The best explanation that I've been able to come up with, consistent with anecdotal data, is that while young men believe that they are immortal, young women believe that it is at least important to tend to their reproductive health in their 20s if they are hoping to have children in their 30s.

Figure 21: Americans Who Say That an Event is At Least Somewhat Important to Being Considered an Adult (%)¹⁵



Comment

Final category: becoming an adult. Figure 21 represents what Americans across the age spectrum have to say about what it takes to be an adult. There is near unanimity that you have to complete your education, achieve financial independence, work full-time, and be able to support a family. A substantial majority thinks that, to be an adult, you have to have left your parents' home. But barely half of Americans as a whole think that getting married or having a child is an important indicator of having achieved adult status. If these same questions had been asked in 1960, the answers would have been very different.

Figure 22: Necessary for Adulthood?⁹

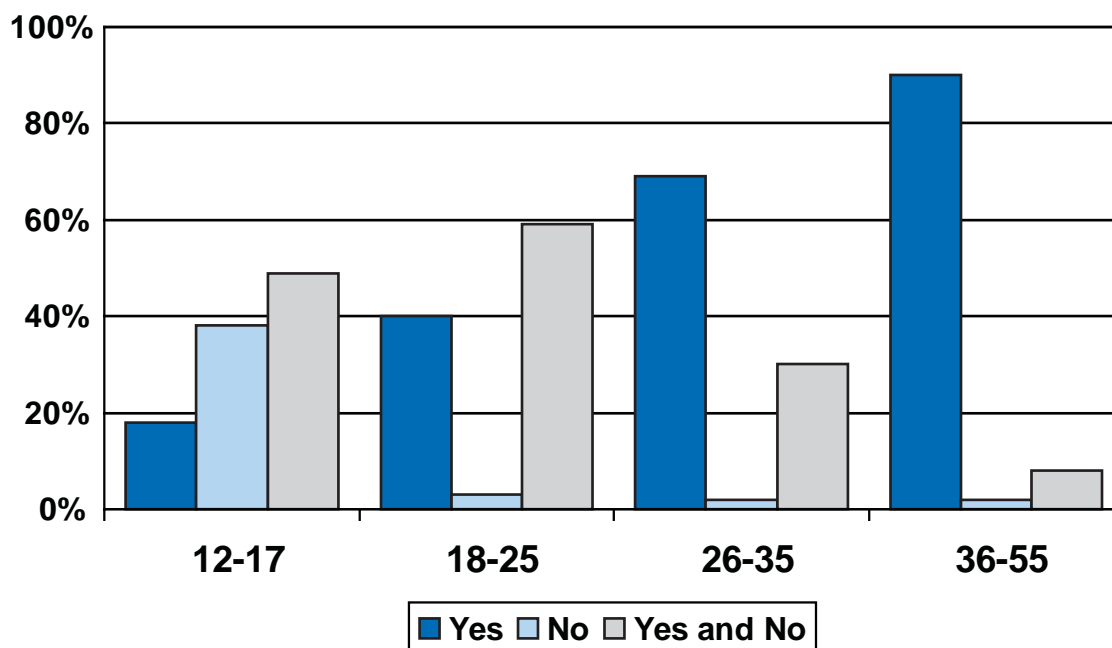
<i>TOP FOUR ITEMS</i>	<i>% Indicating "Yes"</i>
Accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions	93%
Decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents or other influences	81%
Become less self-oriented, develop greater consideration for others	81%
Become financially independent from parents	74%
<i>BOTTOM FOUR ITEMS</i>	<i>% Indicating "Yes"</i>
Become employed full-time	26%
Get Married	15%
Finish with education	15%
Have at least one child	14%

Note: The questionnaire asked participants to "Indicate whether you think each of the following must be achieved before a person can be considered an adult."

Comment

What is even more intriguing is what you get when you ask young adults, rather than the population as a whole, what is necessary in order to be an adult (Figure 22). I've picked the top four and the bottom four items out of the list of 16. Young adults say overwhelmingly that to be an adult you must: accept responsibility for the consequences of your actions; decide on personal beliefs and values independently of parents and other influences; become less self-oriented and develop a greater consideration for others; and achieve financial independence from your parents. But now look at the bottom. Only 26% think that being an adult requires full-time employment. (As an aside, why financial independence and full-time employment are seen as independent propositions is anybody's guess.) Only 15% think that being married is essential to adulthood. Only 15% think that finishing education is essential to adulthood and only 14% believe that having at least one child helps to define adulthood. One researcher has argued that in the past 30 or 40 years, adulthood as an objective status has been supplanted by adulthood as a subjective status. It is not the relationships you have, but rather how you think of yourself, that now principally defines adulthood. If this result holds up, the consequences will be momentous.

Figure 23: Do you feel that you have reached adulthood? (%)⁹



Comment

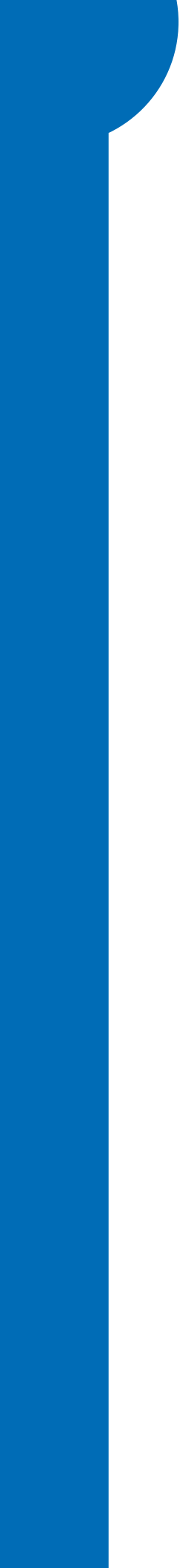
Do young people feel that they have reached adulthood? The answer is: yes and no (Figure 23). Fully 60% of 18-25 year-olds are ambivalent about having achieved adulthood. When you look at 26-35 year-olds, more than one-third are still ambivalent. I think that this ambivalence has something to do with the in-between, the de-institutionalized, making-it-up-as-we-go-along sentiments that I have tried to illuminate through these statistics.

Closing Comments

There you have it—a brisk statistical canter through major social changes that the worlds of scholarship and popular culture are only beginning to explore. I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that the period of young adulthood is to the 21st century what adolescence was to the 20th century, namely, a distinctive new stage of life that both reflects and reshapes long-cycle changes in the economy, society, and demography of our country and it would appear other post-industrial nations as well. We don't yet know what this all means, but there is one thing we can already say with confidence: this new stage of life is a lived reality for the majority of today's young adults. And, therefore, it is within this new context that the National Campaign and others in the field must frame our efforts if we hope to be effective.

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About the Author

William A. Galston is a Senior Fellow in the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies Program and College Park Professor at the University of Maryland. Prior to January 2006 he was Saul Stern Professor at the School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, director of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy, and founding director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE).

From 1993 until 1995 Galston served as Deputy Assistant for Domestic Policy to President Clinton, where he had principal responsibility for education policy, among other assignments. His political activities include service as issues director for Walter Mondale's presidential campaign (1982-1984), as a senior advisor to Albert Gore, Jr.'s run for the Democratic presidential nomination (1988), and again as a senior advisor to Gore's presidential campaign (1999-2000).

Galston is the author of eight books and more than 100 articles in the fields of political theory, public policy, and American politics. His most recent books are *Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge, 2002), *The Practice of Liberal Pluralism* (Cambridge, 2004), and *Public Matters* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). He is a member the Editorial Board of the recently founded quarterly journal, *Democracy*. In 2004 he was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Galston serves on the boards of numerous organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy, the Council for Excellence in Government, and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.





The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.