

POLICY BRIEF

Bridge to Adulthood for Idaho Youth: Going Solo



Idaho KIDS COUNT



■ Comparisons to U.S. data show satisfactory rates of high school completion for Idaho youth (84.5 percent), but with only 18.8 percent focusing only on education after high school, compared to 23.6 percent nationally.

■ National data on educational attainment for 21-24 year olds show that twice as many have completed a BA degree (13.9 percent) when compared to the same age group in Idaho (7 percent).

■ Idaho's young adults struggle economically: 26.7 percent of Idahoans were in poverty in 2003, compared to 21 percent for young adults in the U.S.

If you have a young adult in your life, you may have noticed that the path to independence these days comes with twists and turns – even loops. Do the kids keep coming home after spurts of independence in the “real world?” Do they need financial support long after you thought they would be on their own? Are they living with their “significant other” without the commitment of marriage? Are the young marrieds you know taking forever to have children?

Welcome to the changing landscape of the transition to adulthood for young adults. The *Bridge to Adulthood* series is designed to explore the nature of those changes for Idaho's young people, comparing their experiences with trends at the national level.

We begin the series by looking at the process of becoming an adult – that is, *Going Solo*. We'll consider the importance of the 18-24 year old period in preparing young people for the independence of adulthood and look at how Idaho's young people are meeting those challenges. Future publications in the *Bridge to Adulthood* series will examine the sources of current trends for young adults and their implications at the family, community, state, and national levels.

WHAT'S AN ADULT, ANYWAY?

A central function of any society is to prepare their young people for future roles as adults. But just what is adulthood and how do you know when you get there?

Adulthood in the United States is distinguished by the ability to function independently – a state of being with several possible elements:

- Leaving home: Moving out of the parental home and setting up a household of one's own is a key sign of independence for young adults.
- Income: Adults need to be able to earn a living in order to support a household. This requires stable employment with sufficient income to be able to reliably pay bills and plan for future expenses .

- Education: Economic independence in today's working world requires an education – at least a GED or high school diploma, with additional schooling in technical school, community college, or university for many young adults. Other young people develop their work skills in the military or through workplace apprenticeships.
- Family commitment: Marriage and parenthood are adult roles that require emotional maturity as well as financial resources.

In 2002, sociologist Frank Furstenberg, Jr. and colleagues conducted a survey to find out what Americans 18 years and older thought were the central components to establishing oneself as an adult (Furstenberg et al., 2004). Results show the strongest consensus about educational and financial indicators: over 94 percent of respondents agreed that completing one's education, working full-time, being able to support a family, and attaining financial independence from one's parents were key to adult status. Agreement was also strong about leaving the parental home – 82 percent found this to be important to being considered an adult. However, consensus was lowest about the role of family commitment – only a slim majority thought getting married or having a child was important to establishing oneself as an adult (55 and 52 percent respectively).

The weak role of the family commitments of marriage and children in adult status is especially noteworthy considering the central role these two indicators played in the 50's and 60's. For example, a majority of Americans in a 1957 survey found people who did not want to get married to be selfish, immature, peculiar and morally flawed. By 1976, less than one third of respondents felt similarly. The 50's were a peak time for marital commitment in the 20th Century – a majority of women were married by age 21 and mothers by age 23. However, by the end of the century, the mean age for first marriage was 25 years for women and 26.8 for men.

There was a similarly strong mandate for parenthood at the same time period — 85 percent of American mothers in 1962 thought married couples should have children. The same question posed 20 years later found only 40 percent of the women with the same attitude, and by 1993 only 20 percent of women defined children as central to marriage.

BECOMING ADULTS

If these financial and family factors define the transition to adulthood, how are young people doing these days in attaining those goals? Furstenberg and colleagues (2004) analyzed U.S. census data from 1960 and 2000 to find individuals who had attained five defining features of adulthood: leaving home, finishing school, financial independence, getting married and having a child. In 1960, 65 percent of 30 year-old men had made the transition in all five areas, compared to only 31 percent in 2000. In the case of women, married mothers were counted as financially independent regardless of their own work status since few young mothers worked in 1960. With this adjustment, 77 percent of 30 year-old women had attained all of the indicators of adulthood in 1960, while just 46 percent did so in 2000.

This data shows a prolonged period of development in attaining adult independence for today's young Americans. In the current knowledge-based economy, it takes a great deal of knowledge to qualify for living-wage work. A mid-1990's study of American males aged 24-28 showed that just 70 percent earned enough to support themselves, and fewer than half could support a family of three. Preparing for financial independence involves extended schooling for many young adults: between 1960 and 2000, the percentage of American adults ages 20-30 enrolled in school more than doubled (Furstenberg et al., 2004).

This period of extended education and workforce preparation means delayed independence for many young adults as they lay the economic foundation for stable family life. The educational expenses and loss of income during the years of higher education often require more support from mom and dad at home. A recent analysis showed that nearly two-thirds of American young adults in their early 20's receive economic support from parents, and 40 percent still get financial help from home while in their late 20's (Furstenberg et al., 2004).

These trends at the national level show significant changes in the timing and patterns of young adulthood, with extended educational preparation for the workforce, continued financial assistance from parents, and delayed marriage and parenthood while young people establish themselves economically.

However, these patterns of extended preparation for adulthood are not shared by all in our society. The long route to financial independence is only possible when parents have enough income to help with the transition. Lower income families are less able to offer their young adults the help with educational and other expenses that higher income young people enjoy. Families with limited resources may be relying on their adult children to help them in meeting expenses rather than vice versa. This pattern is especially common in many immigrant groups.

MEET IDAHO'S YOUNG ADULTS

National trends show a new norm of extended dependence for American young adults as they take the long route in preparing for the adult roles ahead as worker, spouse, parent, and citizen. How do these national patterns compare with the lives of Idaho's young adults?

Our discussion focuses on the 18-24 year age span, including nearly 140,000 young Idahoans emerging from the dependence of youth and into the independence of adulthood (American Community Survey, 2003). Young adults in Idaho make up 10.5 percent of the state's population, (9.1 percent for the US). As shown in Table 1 (see below), 85.3 percent of Idaho's young adults are white, with Hispanics as the largest minority group (10.2 percent). Only 6.1 percent of Idaho's young adults are foreign born.

Table 1

Race/Ethnicity, 18-24 years	ID	US
White	85.3%	61.7%
Hispanic	10.2%	17.3%
American Indian	1.3%	0.9%
Black/NonHispanic	0.3%	13.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.9%	4.2%
Foreign Born	6.1%	13.1%

Source: Census 2000 (Jekielek and Brown, 2005)

Idaho’s young adults are generally engaged in work and/or education, with only 12.5 percent disconnected from these activities – see Table 2 (see below). The data further shows a strong connection to the workforce for Idaho young adults, with nearly half engaged only in work. However, school involvement is more limited for Idaho’s young people. Comparisons to US data show satisfactory rates of high school completion (84.5 percent), but only 18.8 percent focusing only on education after high school, compared to 23.6 percent nationally. Idaho is somewhat below the national level in those combining school and work (26.2 percent ID, 28.1 percent U.S.). The impact of these trends is evident in educational attainment among 21-24 year olds, with young adults nationally twice as likely as Idaho young people to have completed a BA degree (13.9 percent versus 7 percent).

Table 2

Work and Education	ID	US
Disconnected young adults, 18-24 years*	12.5%	14.2%
Activities of connected youth, 18-24 years		
School only	18.8%	23.6%
Work only	49.7%	42.8%
Work and school	26.2%	28.1%
Military	0.6%	1.7%
Other	4.7%	3.8%
Education 21-24 year olds		
High school degree or more	84.5%	81.2%
BA degree or higher	7.0%	13.9%

Source: Census 2000 (Jekielek and Brown, 2005)

**Disconnected young adults are not enrolled in school, not working, and don't have a degree beyond a high school diploma or GED*

Statistics show Idaho’s young adults struggling economically compared to their peers in other states, with 26.7 percent of Idahoans in poverty in 2003, compared to 21 percent for the U.S. Poverty for Idaho’s young people was even higher in 2002 at 29 percent, the highest poverty level of all of the states for 18-24 year olds. Poverty is notably higher for females than for males at both the state (29 percent vs. 24.19 percent) and national level (24.4 percent vs. 17.6 percent). Poverty for young people who are in school may be a temporary state as they live lean now in anticipation of later economic rewards. While many poor young adults are students, the majority (54 percent) of young adults in poverty are not enrolled in school.

Family and household data in Table 3 (next page) show that Idaho’s young adults are less likely to live with their parents and more likely to have established an independent household than their peers nationally. In addition, Idaho’s young adults are considerably more likely to be married and to be parenting children in their home than national trends show. In this age group, rates for females are higher than those for males in household independence, marriage and child rearing.

Table 3**Family Connections, 18-24 Years**

	Males		Females	
	ID	US	ID	US
Household				
Living with parents	36.8%	44.5%	27.7%	37.9%
Living with relatives	7.2%	8.7%	3.9%	6.8%
Head of household (or spouse)	31.3%	22.2%	44.6%	32.8%
Nonfamily household	24.7%	24.6%	23.8%	22.5%
Marriage and Family				
Married	21.3%	15.3%	33.2%	21.8%
Living with own children	11.4%	7.0%	24.9%	19.8%

Source: Census 2000 (Jekielek and Brown, 2005)

In summary, a look across recent decades shows today's American young adults delaying the responsibilities of adulthood while they prepare themselves for the demands of today's working world. However, the present data show that Idaho's young adults preserve the patterns of the past in taking on the independence of adulthood at an earlier age. Data show that young adults in Idaho are early in taking on adult roles in marriage and residential independence. They are also less likely than their peers nationally to be enrolled in school and more likely to be engaged only in work. In fact, only one state was higher in work commitment for young adults: Nevada has 55.5 percent of 18-24 year olds engaged in work only. Nevada is also the only state with fewer 21-24 year olds with a BA degree or higher in education (6.2 percent; Jekielek and Brown, 2005).

Early independence would be no problem in an economy with living wage work for those with limited higher education. However, the data shows that this is not the case in Idaho, where young adults have considerably higher poverty rates than their peers nationally. In fact, Idaho topped the nation in poverty for young adults in 2002. This evidence may suggest that too many Idaho young people are taking on responsibilities of adulthood before they are sufficiently prepared. Further analysis of these trends will await a future issue of the *Bridge to Adulthood* series.

BRIDGE TO ADULTHOOD

As we have seen, recent decades have brought considerable change in the foundation young people need to establish as they approach adulthood. These shifts follow a century of change in how Americans defined the previous stage of development – i.e. adolescence. In 1900, few American teenagers attended high school and only six percent received a high school diploma. Most were employed in mines, factories, or on the family farm.

However, the urban migration of the early 1900's and the workforce demands of the industrial revolution required a more educated workforce. To meet these needs, the nation expanded the public school system, established school attendance requirements, passed child labor laws to free children's time for school, and established youth organizations and extracurricular activities to train youth in life skills. Americans were serious about a having prepared workforce and made substantial changes in institutions, policies and programs at the national, state, local and family level to attain that goal.

In many ways, the current delay of independence for young adults in America is an extension of the changing lives of adolescents in the last century. Our current information age requires further education for employees to contribute effectively in the working world. Young adults may have to accommodate their lives to meet these demands, relying more on mom and dad for financial support or a place to live, delaying commitment to marriage and parenthood, and taking on student loans and credit card debt to manage the economics of higher education.

Those who are unable to meet these challenges are likely to be underprepared for work and channeled into low income, unstable employment. Groups of special concern include those from low income families, where parents lack resources to help with their children's transition to adulthood. Also of concern are those without access to family support, such as children of divorce whose child support ends at age 18, or youth aging out of foster care. As requirements for successful adulthood increase, Americans will be challenged to develop systems of support that ensure that all young people can get the preparation they need for the adult roles ahead.

Future issues of *Bridge to Adulthood for Idaho Youth* will further explore these trends for Idaho's young adults, including analyses of possible sources of the patterns, as well as the implications of those trends for the ability of young adults to adequately support themselves and the families they'll be establishing. In addition, we will consider the implications of these issues for Idaho's ability at the community and state level to compete effectively in today's national and global economy.

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