
Keynote Address: Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS: VULNERABLE YOUTH AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

*Frank F. Furstenberg**

During the last decade, scholars and policy makers have begun to acknowledge what young adults and their parents have been realizing for several decades: the transition to adulthood has increasingly become a protracted process, often extending into the third decade of life and even later. Sociological maturity, when the young achieve full-fledged adult status in society, requires more time and investment than it once did. The contrast is especially sharp compared with a half century ago, when individuals swiftly moved from adolescence into adulthood.

Why this change has occurred and its ramifications for family lives of Americans are the main topics of this lecture. I begin with a brief history of recent changes that have occurred and then turn to some of the public policy implications facing this country, especially concerning young adults coming from disadvantaged backgrounds or facing special obstacles that increase the risk for making a successful transition to adulthood.

My discussion draws heavily from the work of the MacArthur Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy ("The Network"), a team of scholars from varied disciplines who have been assembled by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation to examine what social science data tell us about the reasons for the demographic and about social change during this early part of the life course.¹ The Network also examines public policies that might address the problems faced by vulnerable youth, those young adults who enter early adulthood with limited resources, dysfunctional families, or special handicaps that compromise their chances of making a successful transition to adulthood. By a successful transition, I am referring to a young person's ability to become economically self-sufficient, become emotionally capable of investing in the next generation by having or supporting children, possess the physical and mental health to work and love, and have the capacity and willingness to give back to others whether it be kin, the community, or the larger society.

The Network's definition of a successful adult transition conforms closely to what young adults and their families, and indeed the general public, have to say about what it takes to be an adult in American society. First and foremost, most

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1. More information about The Network can be found at <http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu> (last visited Nov. 30, 2006).

Americans believe that financial and residential independence is an essential element of becoming an adult, although it is important to note that newer immigrant groups place higher priority on the ability to assume responsibility for other family members. In either case, being an adult involves acquiring the skills, capacity, and motivation to support oneself and assume responsibility for supporting dependents, whether they are children or the elderly.

THE CHANGING TIMETABLE OF ADULthood

Americans base their standards of when and how the transitions to adulthood should be accomplished partly on an image of the recent past: how people used to be reared or how they imagine that people used to be reared in previous generations. "When I was that age . . ." is a common conversation starter by the parents of the current generation who often feel most strongly about the age norms to which they adhered. Ironically, it seems that the 1950s family has become a gold standard for family life today. In that era, youth left home, went to school or work, landed a good job, married, and started a family, all by their early twenties, and typically in that order. This view of the 1950s family is ironic because in the 1950s, individuals looked to the beginning of the century as a standard for family life and fervently believed that the 1950s family was fundamentally flawed. Families had become more isolated, more prone to instability, and children, it was thought, grew up too fast.²

Indeed, the transition to adulthood was very swift after World War II, much more rapid than it had been at the turn of the twentieth century, when the timing of adulthood, much as it does today, generally occurred later and in a far less uniform fashion. Earlier in the last century, the timetable for growing up became more standardized as younger Americans began to spend more time in the public school system. The extension of education into the high school years created a common experience of growing up that had not existed in the nineteenth century. The country's war economy and continued postwar growth meant a ready job for most men that paid well enough to easily support a family.³ Moreover, programs aimed at helping veterans readjust to society after the war provided financial assistance for college and low-cost loans for housing, allowing servicemen to work and enter higher education, often at the same time. Accordingly, marriage age was extremely early by historical standards. Most

2. See generally STEPHANIE COONTZ, *THE WAY WE NEVER WERE: AMERICAN FAMILIES AND THE NOSTALGIA TRIP* (1992) (discussing portrayal of 1950s families as ideal family despite reality of hardships many families faced during this decade); EDGAR Z. FRIEDENBERG, *THE VANISHING ADOLESCENT* (1959) (discussing perspective that culture and society of the 1950s prevented adolescents from full social development); ELAINE TYLER MAY, *HOMEWARD BOUND: AMERICAN FAMILIES IN THE COLD WAR ERA* (1988) (attempting to determine the reason that people in the 1950s embraced traditional gender roles).

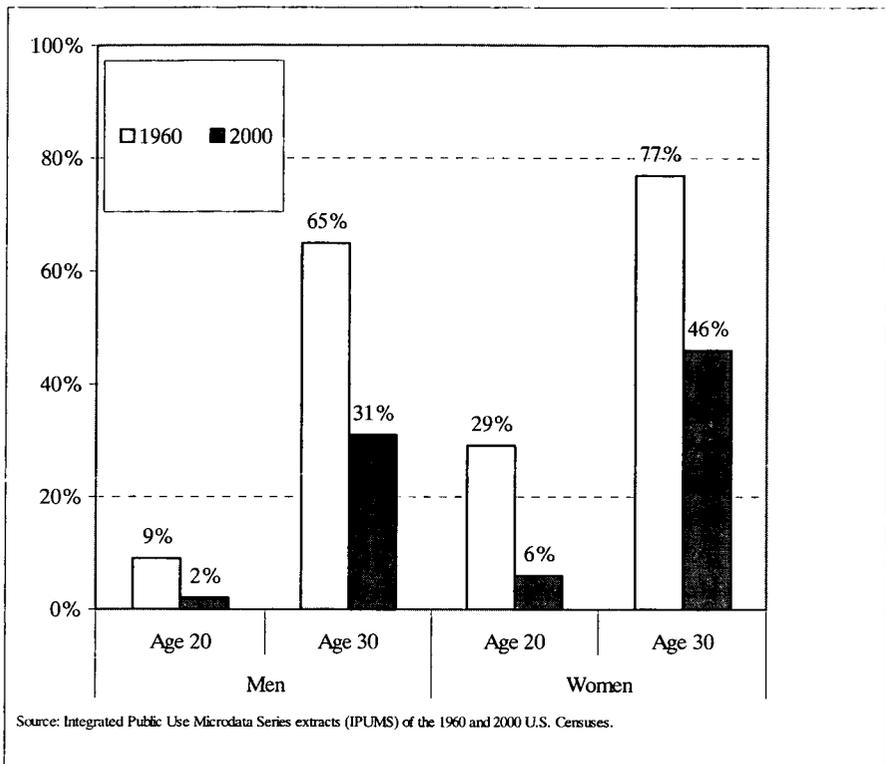
3. See generally Elizabeth Fussell & Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., *The Transition to Adulthood During the Twentieth Century: Race, Nativity, and Gender*, in *ON THE FRONTIER OF ADULthood: THEORY, RESEARCH, AND PUBLIC POLICY* 29, 48-50 (Richard A. Settersten, Jr. et al. eds., 2005) (discussing increase in educational opportunities for young men after World War II, as well as booming economy and significant job opportunities).

men married in their early twenties and women wed even earlier, often by their late teens. Frequently, couples who hardly knew each other married and started families at ages that would be frowned on today. Marriages were often precipitated by pregnancy, and in any event, childbearing and marriage typically occurred simultaneously. Marriage became commonly regarded as the capstone event of attaining independent status for both men and women who literally rushed to begin families in the baby-boom era. This very early pattern of family formation contributed to the very high rate of marital instability. Probably for the first time in our history, there was some concern that youth were being encouraged to grow up too quickly.

By the mid-1960s, this pattern of a very early and rapid transition to adulthood began to reverse as more youth went to college or sought more work experience before entering marriage. The completion of education, departure from the natal home, full-time employment, marriage (or cohabitation), and parenthood—all common demographic markers of adulthood—have steadily inched well into the late twenties and even early thirties, driven largely by the increasing importance of postsecondary education to financial stability. For example, in 1960, just over a third of the population of youth ages eighteen to nineteen were enrolled in school; that figure in 2004 rose to sixty-four percent. Age of first marriage for women has risen from just over twenty in 1963 to almost twenty-six today. For men, it has risen from twenty-three in 1960 to over twenty-seven today.⁴ The beginning of full-time employment and departure from the natal household is more difficult to establish because these status transitions are not necessarily permanent; however, they now occur from three to five years later than they did in the postwar period. Figure 1 shows the proportion of young people who have managed to achieve the full set of adulthood markers (leaving home, gaining an education, finding a job, marrying, and having children) by age twenty and by age thirty in 1960 and 2000. Clearly, the pace has slowed down considerably. Less evident in the Figure is the fact that men and women are now entering adulthood, as defined by those markers, at about the same age.

4. For information on the data gathered in each U.S. Census and the data used to compile these statistics, see generally U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov> (last visited Dec. 15, 2006). More detailed data and surveys are available at http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en (last visited Dec. 15, 2006).

Figure 1. Percentage Completing Transition to Adulthood in 1960 and 2000 Using Traditional Markers



Thus, having come full circle from the concerns in the 1950s of a too-fast transition, today's critics now complain that youth do not grow up quickly enough. The concern is widespread that the family nest has become too comfortable for the good of young adults.

In popular discourse, there is a tendency to resort to psychological explanations for these trends. Americans are also inclined to believe that the changing social timetable for becoming an adult is peculiar to our culture. This prolongation is common to virtually all Western nations and throughout most industrialized nations of the world, however. This commonality suggests that the economic and structural changes, reflected in the growth of higher education and growing difficulty of gaining a secure foothold in the labor market, are likely key to understanding the changes that have taken place in the lengthening transition to adulthood.

We also should not ignore in this equation our growing longevity, which has extended the life span, on average, by nearly a decade in the past half century. A longer lifespan suggests that it makes more sense today to invest heavily in the early part of the life course. It makes more sense to educate the young for twelve, sixteen, or even twenty years when the length of one's life is nearly eighty than when it is only sixty.

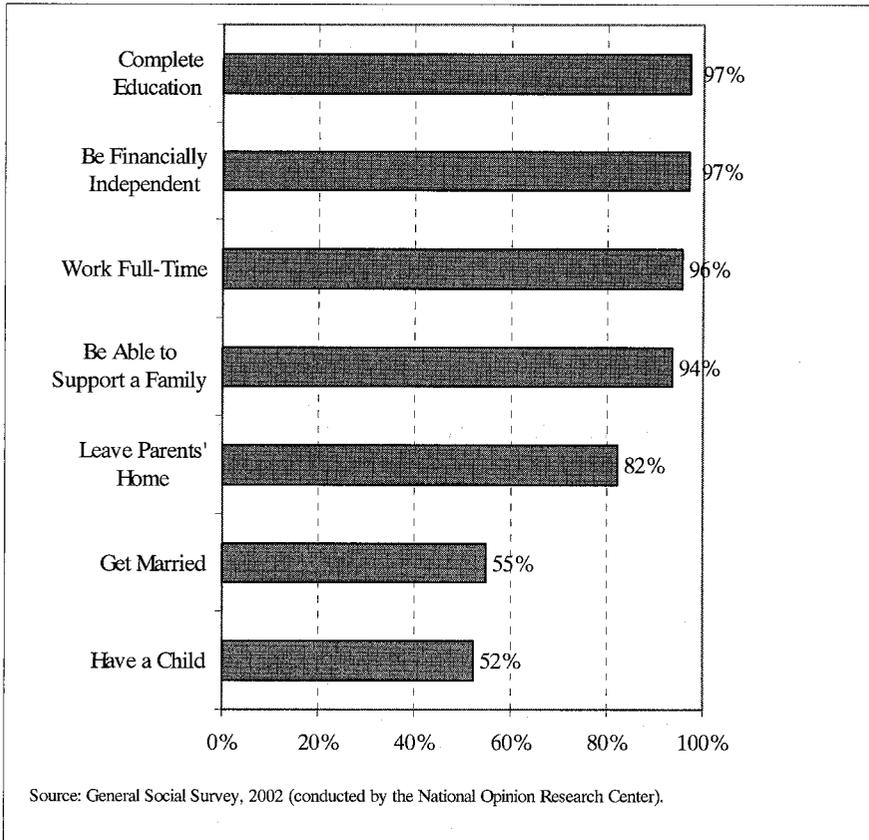
Although the general reasons for these changes in the timing of maturity are seldom in dispute, scholars debate whether the demographic events outlined above continue to be important markers of adulthood. Some argue that young adults define maturity in new ways than they did in earlier times.⁵ Whether or not this is the case, it is clear that financial independence and the ability to care for others are still critical ingredients for individuals, their families, and the larger society. As shown in Figure 2, however, for nearly half of Americans, marrying and having children no longer resonate as being part of the adult transition.⁶

The extended timing of social adulthood poses a set of dilemmas for young adults growing up in a legal system that is poorly aligned with the realities of gaining economic and social independence. A set of legal markers involving driving age, age of legal responsibility for consent, age of becoming eligible to vote, and drinking age provide clues to how the legal system defines adult rights and responsibilities, but they match poorly the capabilities or required skills required to become a full-fledged adult in contemporary society. This problem has important ramifications for the availability of social and economic support provided to young adults. If the period of investment in youth has been extended, the period of support by society has not.

5. See JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT, *EMERGING ADULTHOOD: THE WINDING ROAD FROM THE LATE TEENS THROUGH THE TWENTIES* 207-28 (2004) (arguing that people once considered marriage the marker of adulthood, but people now consider self-sufficiency as the marker of adulthood).

6. See Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. et al., *Growing Up Is Harder To Do*, *CONTEXTS*, Summer 2004, at 35-37 (finding that forty-five percent of Americans did not categorize getting married as being "somewhat important to being considered an adult" and forty-eight percent of Americans did not categorize having a child as being "somewhat important to being considered an adult").

Figure 2. Percentage of Americans Who Say That a Following Transition is at Least Somewhat Important to be Considered an Adult



INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORTS IN EARLY ADULTHOOD

This significant transformation in the early part of the life course has left many societies, our own in particular, without an institutional undergirding for individuals who are neither adolescents nor full-fledged adults. True, some institutions are uniquely crafted for young adults, such as colleges and universities, and especially four-year residential colleges and universities with extensive graduate programs. In many respects, these colleges and universities represent extremely well-designed institutions for young adults, providing space for autonomy and at the same time offering an array of supports, such as counseling centers, health clinics, and residential and faculty advisors.

Similarly, the military provides a well-crafted structure for fostering development among young adults while also offering vocational training, life skills development, and a similar set of supportive services for young men and women. Some of the civilian service programs such as AmeriCorps, City Year, and the Conservation Corps also provide a setting in which young adults can

develop skills; formulate educational goals; and receive mentoring, health care, and counseling as required.

Beyond this handful of institutions, however, few institutions are tailored to the specific needs of this set of young adults. We lack a precise count of how young adults actually spend their time between ages eighteen and twenty-four; that is, the social settings in which they reside and the activities that they are doing. Nonetheless, it is clear that many youth do not spend time either in residential colleges, the armed forces, or the civilian service corps. Although about sixty percent of youth enter postsecondary education, the great majority cannot afford to attend a private or even public residential college or university. The most common starting point for most young adults is a community college or other two-year institution, which only rarely affords the range of services that are routinely available at four-year residential colleges.

Most young adults who are not married or cohabiting generally reside with their parents; they simply cannot afford to live on their own, even working full time. This means that the job description for parents of young adults has changed considerably during the past half century. It seems that parents are generally responsible (though not legally so in most localities) for supporting their children in their early adult years. Although this is not necessarily problematic, it becomes so for families lacking the resources to provide much in the way of assistance. Some families lack necessary material support; others can provide only limited help and assistance because they lack the knowledge or the necessary cultural capital to advise young people how to attain the necessary education and work experience to enter the labor force on a solid footing. In either case, youth from highly disadvantaged families are often poorly equipped to manage the period of early adulthood when their children are neither dependents nor full-fledged adults. There is reason to suspect that floundering during this period of life could have more deleterious consequences than it did in earlier times.⁷

This period of semiautonomy is especially difficult for those youth with physical and mental disabilities, those lacking family support such as youth who are exiting from foster care, those leaving protective institutions and the criminal justice system, and those leaving school with inadequate skills. Often, these disadvantages overlap, creating a bundle of barriers for young adults. The Network has devoted considerable attention to the plight of these vulnerable youth.⁸ Many of the youth lack strong family support, health insurance,

7. See Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Rubén G. Rumbaut & Richard A. Settersten, Jr., *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Emerging Themes and New Directions*, in *ON THE FRONTIER OF ADULTHOOD*, *supra* note 3, at 3, 17-20 (discussing financial effects of achieving adulthood at a later age, including that these floundering people can only gain financial independence by receiving postsecondary education and cannot achieve financial independence at all if they become parents at a young age, and because parents of these floundering people must continue to support their children, they are overburdened).

8. See D. Wayne Osgood et al., *Introduction: Why Focus on the Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations?*, in *ON YOUR OWN WITHOUT A NET: THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD FOR VULNERABLE POPULATIONS* 1, 1-3 (D. Wayne Osgood et al. eds., 2005) (describing The Network's

education and training, and the emotional maturity to function well on their own. They also lack a sensible, easily accessed, and continuous safety net to support them after age eighteen, when most services and supports they received as youth abruptly end or are folded into other existing, often less comprehensive, services.

POLICIES AND PRACTICES FOR ASSISTING VULNERABLE YOUTH

The relatively early legal age of adulthood (typically age eighteen or twenty-one) poses problems for vulnerable youth who are neither dependents nor adults capable of supporting themselves. The publicly funded supports they received as children, such as special education, foster care, disability services, and others, often end at age eighteen or twenty-one. Rather than remaining too long in a comfortable nest—a problem associated primarily with affluent youth—these young adults are being shoved out of the nest when they cannot yet fly or build their own nest.

Foster care is a perfect example of youth propelled into adulthood before they are prepared to support themselves. The current system of foster care in this country ends typically at age eighteen. Youth, whose family bonds have been severely strained and who may be carrying the emotional scars of their early abuse or neglect, are essentially cut loose with a small stipend to cover living expenses in the short term. Those funds are often inadequate, however. Even if states used all of the housing funds available for foster youth, for example, they could only spend about seven hundred dollars per youth per year.⁹ Many of these youth are not equipped to operate on their own even at age twenty-one, much less age eighteen. A recent study by Mark Courtney, for example, found that thirty-seven percent of foster youth age seventeen to twenty had not completed high school or received a GED.¹⁰ They more often suffered from mental health problems, they more often became involved in crime or were victims of crime, and they were more frequently homeless. Helping youth to plan for autonomy is a good thing, but autonomy—the cutoff of government support—occurs too early for youth to receive the necessary training to attain economic self-sufficiency. The same may be true for other categories of youth with special problems or disabilities. The articulation between children's services

research on adolescence and highlighting The Network's role in producing this work, which studies adolescence in context of youth in mental health system, foster care system, and juvenile justice system and other vulnerable youth).

9. See Mark E. Courtney & Darcy Hughes Heuring, *The Transition to Adulthood for Youth "Aging Out" of the Foster Care System*, in ON YOUR OWN WITHOUT A NET, *supra* note 8, at 27, 39 ("The research consistently shows former foster youth fare poorly in terms of economic self-sufficiency outcomes during the transition to adulthood. They are less likely to be employed than their peers, more likely to rely on public assistance, and earn on average too little to escape poverty."); Osgood et al., *supra* note 8, at 7 (noting that between ages of eighteen and thirty-four, general population receives approximately \$2,200 per year in monetary support from parents).

10. Courtney & Heuring, *supra* note 9, at 34 (citing M.E. Courtney et al., *Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood: A Longitudinal View of Youth Leaving Care*, 6 CHILD WELFARE 685 (2001)).

and adults' services is often quite poor, and administrative barriers prevent the seamless move from a system designed for children and adolescents to one designed for adults. Different standards and requirements in the adult system often mean that youth with special problems must satisfy new eligibility criteria, which they may not, at least not automatically, meet.

Another good example is the problem posed by youth exiting juvenile justice in their late teens. They, too, face a host of problems that public policy has not adequately addressed. Few state and local systems address the manifold problems that teenagers may face when they leave juvenile systems. Although there are national data on juvenile recidivism rates, several state reports show that approximately half of juvenile offenders are rearrested within a year of their release, often because they lack the skills and support to remain outside protective institutions. The training and remediation that exist for children and adolescents are often in short supply.

This problem is only aggravated by placing adolescents in adult systems where they are given little, if any, remedial services and often do not make productive use of the time that they are incarcerated. It would seem that the criminal justice system needs to invent a layer of supportive services that would equip troubled youth to remain outside of the adult system when juvenile offenders become young adults. It makes no more sense to surround most young adult offenders with hardened criminals than it does for adolescents. They need training, psychological counseling, and help in planning their futures if they are to escape a life of crime.

Much the same could be said about other categories of vulnerable youth who face severe difficulties in making a successful transition to adulthood. Whether it makes sense to develop a free-standing system of services designed to help at-risk youth or to augment services offered by public systems—health clinics, community colleges, the welfare system—is open for debate, but it is clear that many youth are being asked to function on their own or at best with limited assistance from their already overburdened families. Asking families to take on the responsibilities of supporting young adults for five years or more without a system in place to assist them is making the job of being a parent in the United States more difficult. Parents must often now find the support for their struggling youth as they struggle to save for their own support later in life. We have to worry that many low- and moderate-income families simply will buckle under the increased burden of trying to help their semiautonomous children.

Unless we begin to build better supports for families, many may be incapable of assuming the added responsibilities of a slower timetable for reaching adulthood. This incapability could have dire consequences for the larger society, not just for young adults. Indeed, if we continue to ask parents to shoulder this added responsibility without providing more aid, it is highly likely that more young couples may opt to have fewer children or to remain childless. We may thus begin to see a rise in childlessness over time that could threaten the very nature of generational stability.

PUTTING NEW POLICIES IN PLACE

I have outlined a set of problems that are associated with the contemporary timetable for growing up. Could we solve the dilemma that many youth are facing by speeding up the process of social maturity much as we did in the middle of the last century? If the manufacturing-based economy were much as it was in the last half century, then perhaps the answer would be yes. But as is quite evident today, that economy no longer exists. The types of well-paying jobs that support a family are no longer available for those without a college education. Without the financial wherewithal, it is hard to become independent. Of course, it might be possible to provide a greater system of support for all workers by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit,¹¹ providing the benefits often lacking in the low-wage workplace, such as health care, child care, and the like. But this would require a sharp about-face in the political culture of American society. Northern European countries offer income supplements and assistance to young adults that frequently enable them to achieve early autonomy when they are not working full time. This course is an unlikely course for the United States, however.

A more modest and perhaps realistic proposal is to strengthen parents' ability to provide support without jeopardizing their own future security. The rising cost of postsecondary education is pricing many youth out of the market because their families cannot help out. College attendance has grown modestly in the last two decades, but college completion has decreased. The United States is falling behind Europe in the production of college graduates, a fact that barely registers with Americans. As the cost of education rises, college completion will no doubt further decline unless there is greater assistance for families, especially low- and moderate-income families.

Families need low-cost health insurance plans to cover their children until they are capable of self-support. Augmenting our fractured and inadequate social welfare programs for families of modest means would also help families with young adults. This change might require adjusting the presumed age of dependency for children, an adjustment that takes into account the realities of growing up in postindustrial society.

Clearly, we also need to rethink the institutional arrangements that support youth. Our community colleges might be an appropriate site for extending services to young adults while they receive education and training. Helping needy students pay for college tuition is essential, but it is equally essential to provide them with the services needed to maintain physical and emotional health while they receive education and training. At present, community colleges frequently operate on a shoestring and cannot build a system of services that are typically offered by four-year residential institutions. Government, whether it is federal, state, or local, must contribute more if we are to avoid a sharp decline in human capital among our youth.

11. See 26 U.S.C.A. § 32 (2005) (providing earned income tax credit to qualified individuals).

We must also begin to think more boldly about how to help the special populations of vulnerable youth who need more than financial aid. Youth who have been inadequately schooled, youth who have disabilities, and youth who have had problems staying out of trouble need support if they are not to falter and become unproductive and costly charges of the government. Unless we are prepared to invest more in youth who are struggling to enter adulthood while they are still relatively pliable and capable of further development, we are likely to pay the price later on. This increased investment means extending services beyond the adolescent years into the third decade of life for youth who are not faring well as they reach the early adult years. Greater emphasis on attaining full literacy, gaining life skills, learning to manage relationships, and acquiring the willingness to give to others greatly increases the likelihood that individuals will be productive and contributing citizens in their adult years. This means designing transitional programs for young adults that must include training, independent living, and associated health and social services.

Finally, it is clear that we need to make professionals and practitioners more aware of the special needs of young adults who may not be fully mature except by legal standards. We are learning that young adults may have particular problems that differentiate them from more mature adults. For example, a recent study shows that young adults are generally more prone to risky behaviors, such as substance abuse or reckless driving, as well as to mental health problems, than older adults, and even more than adolescents.¹² This evidence suggests that we may need to refocus our outreach programs to youth in their late teens and early twenties.

Health and social service professionals need a better understanding of the needs, capacities, and desires of young adults if we are to develop successful programs to address their plight. In a very real way, much as we discovered adolescence in the beginning of the twentieth century, we are recognizing at the beginning of this century that when adolescence ends, adulthood does not necessarily begin.

12. See Frank F. Furstenberg, *Growing Up Healthy: Are Adolescents the Right Target Group?*, 39 J. ADOLESCENT HEALTH 303, 303 (2006) ("Young adults face higher risks of mortality from suicide, homicide, and accidents, health-compromising behaviors such as smoking and substance abuse, reproductive health problems, and a range of mental disorders than do youth in their early teens."); M. Jane Park et al., *The Health Status of Young Adults in the United States*, 39 J. ADOLESCENT HEALTH 305, 309-14 (finding that overall mortality rate for young adults was more than double that of adolescents and concluding that young adults have higher rates of health problems associated with risky behavior than any other age group).

