

Young adults ages 18 to 26 should be viewed as separate subpopulation in policy and research

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Young adults ages 18-26 should be viewed as a separate subpopulation in policy and research, because they are in a critical period of development when successes or failures could strongly affect the trajectories of their lives, says a new report from the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council. The committee that wrote the report found that young adults' brains and behaviors continue maturing into their 20s, and they face greater challenges achieving independence than their predecessors did, have lengthened pathways into adulthood, and are surprisingly unhealthy. The report calls for an improved understanding and response to the circumstances and needs of today's young adults.

"Early childhood is widely viewed as a critical window of development, and [young adulthood](#) should also be seen in the same light," said committee chair Richard J. Bonnie, Harrison Foundation Professor of Medicine and Law and director of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

"Adolescents do not suddenly stop developing when they turn 18; their brains are still maturing. Also, during this critical period, young adults face great challenges that provide less latitude for failure. Essentially, young adults who are not keeping up will have a harder time catching up."

Biologically and psychologically, young adulthood is a period of maturation and change. Compared with older adults, young adults have

adolescent tendencies, including preferring short-term rewards and responding to peer approval. Compared with adolescents, however, young adults take longer to consider difficult problems before deciding on a course of action and have better-developed impulse control.

In addition, many of today's young adults confront challenges in making a successful transition to adult roles. Economic and social forces—including the restructuring of the economy, widening inequality, the increasing diversity of the population, and advances in technologies—have altered the landscape of risk and opportunity. In previous generations, the path for most young adults was predictable: graduate from [high school](#), enter college or the workforce, leave home, find a spouse, and start a family. Today's pathways are often less predictable and extended due to the increasing cost of college and the burden of college debt; a deficiency of well-compensated entry-level jobs; and the high cost of living independently. An estimated 17 percent of young adults ages 16 to 24 are neither attending school nor working. Many of these idle young adults are not just unemployed but have dropped out of the labor force altogether in response to the lower wages and fewer benefits available to those with high school or less education.

Furthermore, inequality can be magnified during young adulthood. Marginalized young adults, such as those aging out of foster care or born to low-income immigrants, are much less likely to transition successfully to adulthood. Earnings gap between those with a bachelor's degree and those with only a [high school diploma](#) have roughly doubled since 1980.

The transition into adulthood is also a critical period in health, and the dominant pattern among young adults is declining health, the committee found. As adolescents age into their early and mid-20s, they are less likely to eat breakfast, exercise, and get regular physical and dental checkups, and more likely to eat fast food, contract sexually transmitted diseases, smoke cigarettes, use marijuana and other drugs, and binge

drink. The current generation of young adults is at the forefront of the obesity epidemic and more vulnerable to obesity-related health consequences in later years. Rapid technological changes, economic challenges, and a prolonged transition to adulthood appear to be contributing to the health problems of young adults by increasing their stress and sedentary habits. Mental health among young adults also is cause for concern, the committee said. Along with substance use, [mental health](#) disorders are the greatest source of disability among young adults in the U.S.

Providing more educational, economic, social, and health supports needed by all young adults—especially those who are at risk of experiencing the greatest struggles—could promote equal opportunities, reduce disparities, and enable them to embrace adult roles as healthy workers, parents, and citizens, the committee said. Focusing on the health and well-being of the current cohort of young adults is especially important because of the rapidly increasing ratio of individuals in the population ages 65 and older to the working-age population. This ratio has been increasing in all advanced industrial countries while the fertility rate has been declining, leaving working-age adults to support increasing numbers of retiring elders. In the United States, this ratio increased from about 1 elder to 10 workers in 1950 to 2 elders per 10 workers in 2000, and is expected to increase to almost 4 elders per 10 workers by 2050.

The committee called for the public and private sectors to improve policies and programs that address the needs of young adults. It recommended raising completion rates for those in high school and postsecondary institutions, and ensuring that the skills and credentials attained are ones the labor market rewards. To accomplish these goals, better integration is needed among secondary and higher education with workforce agencies. In particular, state government, with support from the U.S. Department of Education, should experiment with and evaluate a range of interventions that improve graduation rates in high schools

and colleges, as well as the rates at which high school dropouts receive their General Education Development (GED) credential and enroll in college or job training.

"It is often said that [young people](#) are the future, but the rapidly changing world has made it harder for those young people to transition to adulthood," said Victor Dzau, president of the Institute of Medicine. "They are often getting lost in the shuffle. This report can help policymakers, employers, and other community leaders develop and enhance policies and programs that improve the lives of [young adults](#)."

More information: www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=18869

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