

Delayed transitions of young adults

by Warren Clark

The transition to adulthood is often viewed as a period where young people move by stages into adult roles. The years after age 18 offer an opportunity for young people to become increasingly independent from their parents. During this period of transition, young people make a wide range of choices about where and with whom they live, how they will pursue their studies, what type of work they are interested in and whether or not they will get married and have children.

In recent years, social scientists have found that the transition to adulthood is taking longer to complete. Young people are living with their parents longer,¹ are more highly educated and attend school for more years than their parents did. The age at marriage has been rising, fertility rates have been falling and the age at which women have their first child has been increasing.²

This article explores the transitions that young people make on their way to adulthood. Using census data from 1971 to 2001, it documents how the timing of transitions has changed and been delayed. It profiles the young adult population aged 18 to 34 and examines the five transitions that many young people make on their way to adulthood: leaving school, leaving their parents' home, having full-year full-time work, entering conjugal relationships and having children.

Briefly: The young adult population

According to the 2001 Census, there were approximately 6.7 million young adults between the ages of 18 and 34

in private households. About 41% of them were under 25, which is that year, when transitions to adulthood often occur most quickly. Young adults are also a highly heterogeneous group, reflecting the rapidly growing ethnic diversity of the Canadian population over the last 30 years: almost one in 5 is foreign-born, one in 6 is a member of a visible minority group (Table 1).

They are the most mobile group in the population -- about one in four had moved in the year prior to the 2001 Census -- as they actively seek out new education and employment opportunities and form their own households. They are also more likely to live in one of Canada's largest cities where education and job opportunities tend to be more abundant.

GST Table 1 Today's young adults aged 18 to 34 differ substantially from those 30 years ago

	1971	1981	1991	2001
Number of young adults aged 18 to 34 living in private households (000s)	5,398	7,366	7,447	6,685
	percentage			
Age				
18 to 24	48	44	36	41
25 to 29	29	29	31	28
30 to 34	24	27	33	31
Years in Canada since immigrating				
Canadian-born	84	86	85	82
5 years or less	6	3	4	6
Over 5 years	10	11	9	11
Non-permanent resident	2	1
Visible minority	...	5	11	16
Highest level of schooling				
Less than high school graduation	33	31	24	18
High school diploma or some postsecondary	42 ¹	33	35	34
Trades or college certificate or diploma	16 ²	24	27	28
University degree, certificate or diploma	9	12	14	20
Ever-married or currently common-law union	61	59	54	45
Has children in same household	44	39	35	29
Lives in one of the 3 largest census metropolitan areas	32	30	34	36
Montréal	14	12	12	12
Toronto	13	13	16	17
Vancouver	5	5	6	7

... not applicable

1. Includes people who had college certificate or diplomas other than trades or vocational programs as they were not identified in the 1971 Census.
2. Includes only apprenticeship, trades and other vocational certificates, diplomas and completions.

Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

The pace of each transition is slower than in 1971

Age 18 is often viewed as one of the milestones passed on the way to adulthood. In Canada, eighteen is the legal age for voting. It is the age at which many young adults prepare to leave high school and explore other educational or work opportunities. At age 18, few have crossed any of the five traditional bridges to adulthood: leaving school, leaving home, steady full-time work, conjugal union and parenting.

The number of transitions that a young adult has made is a rough indicator of their progress toward adulthood between ages 18 and 34. Using the markers set out in this article, that number can range from zero to five. Not surprisingly, on average, 18-year-olds have made fewer transitions to adulthood than

34-year-olds (Chart 1). But more importantly, young adults in 2001 had gone through fewer transitions than the 1971 cohort had when it was the same age.

On average, a 25-year-old in 2001 had gone through the same number of transitions as a 22-year-old in 1971 and a 30-year-old in 2001 had made the same number of transitions as a 25-year-old in 1971. This suggests that the path to adulthood is no longer as straight as it was back in 1971. In fact, you could say that the transitions of today's young adults are both delayed and elongated: delayed, because young adults take more time to complete their first major transition (leaving school), thus postponing all subsequent transitions; and elongated, because each subsequent transition takes longer to complete and stretches

the process from their late teens to their early 30s (as shown by the much gentler slope of the line for the 2001 cohort in Chart 1). In contrast, the 1971 cohort packs more transitions into the years from their late teens to their mid-20s and fewer into their early 30s.

Women make transitions earlier than men

Women generally go through the major transitions to adulthood at a younger age than men. They are more likely to leave home, marry and have children at a younger age; on the other hand, men leave school earlier and have full-year full-time employment at a younger age. In 2001, at age 18, there is no difference in the average number of transitions that young women and men have made (each report 0.4). However, because women go through

GST What you should know about this study

Typically the analysis of life course transitions uses longitudinal data where the same individuals are followed over a period of time. This article focuses on a comparative cohort analysis looking at four cohorts of young people aged 18 to 34 in private households from the 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001 Censuses of Population. Five markers of the transition to adulthood are examined: leaving school, leaving home, working full-year full-time, finding a conjugal partner and having children.

These markers of adulthood are snapshots taken on the Census reference dates and do not represent completed or irreversible social changes: they simply record the state of transition young adults were in on those dates. If these young adults were questioned on other dates, they may have reversed direction in their transition to adulthood. For example, young adults who leave home at one point in time may return to live with their parents at a later date; those who no longer attend school may subsequently return; those who hold a full-time job may lose it or leave it. Some young people may combine school and work; others may test the labour market and then return to school. Some may begin their families before leaving school and entering the labour

market, while others may wait to marry and have children until after they have established a career.¹ Nevertheless, these indicators reflect key entry points to adult status and are therefore still useful in understanding the transition to adulthood.

The five markers of adult transition are:

Left school – has not attended school, college or university either full-time or part-time during the nine-month period between September and May.

Left parental home – is not a child in an economic family or a never-married child in a census family.

Full-time full-year work – has worked full-time for at least 49 weeks during the last year.

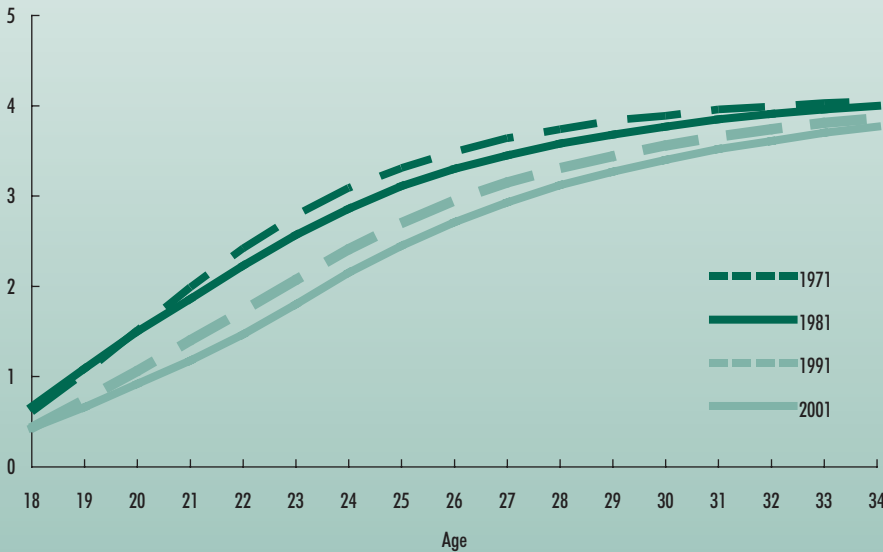
Ever in a conjugal union – is married, widowed, separated or divorced (i.e., ever married) or is currently in a common-law relationship. In the text, this concept is referred to as "ever in a conjugal union".

Has children – has never-married children living in the same household.

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Chart 1 Young adults have made fewer transitions

Average number of transitions



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

more changes earlier than men, the gender gap increases in the early to mid-20s. By the time they reach their 30s, the gap has closed (Chart 2).

This is quite different from the situation in 1971, when young women had made more transitions than men by age 18 and the gender gap had closed at age 27. This was a time before it was common for young women to receive a postsecondary education, and many women got a job, and most married and had children after leaving high school. Similarly, men of that era were more likely to be in a conjugal relationship and to have children, explaining why they matured faster than the 2001 cohort.

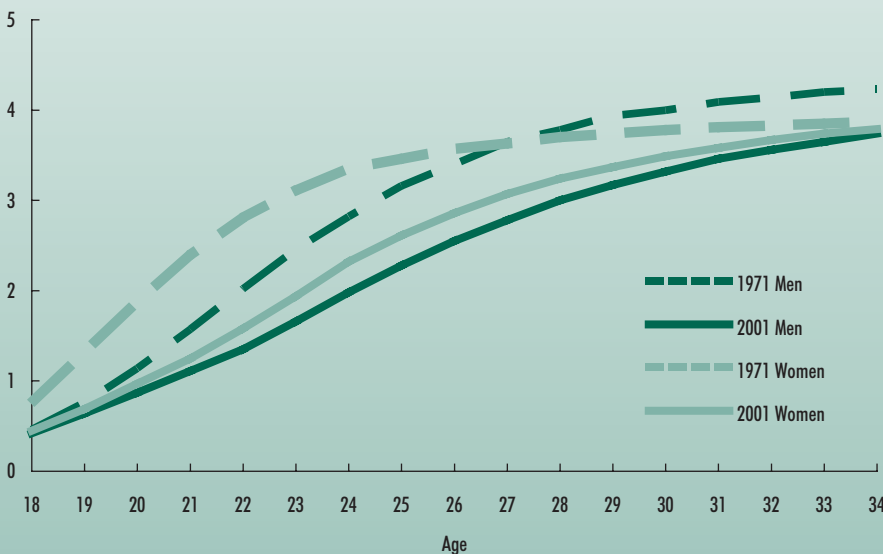
Staying in school delays most transitions

The changing role of women in society has contributed to the remarkable progress women have made in their educational attainment over the last 30 years (Chart 3). No longer are they relegated to a narrow set of educational opportunities and career possibilities. The percentage of young women aged 30 to 34 who are university-educated has increased fourfold from 7% in 1971 to 29% in 2001. The proportion nearly doubled from 13% to 25% for young men over the same period. On many university campuses, women now outnumber men (although men still remain in the majority at the doctoral level).³

The result of these shifts in expectations and opportunities is that both women and men are finishing their education at later and later ages. In 1971, three-quarters of young adults had left school by age 22 whereas only half had left by that age in 2001. Today's bachelor's recipients graduate at age 23, but they are much more likely than the previous generation to go on to a master's or doctoral program where the median age of graduation is 29 and 33, respectively.⁴ Since most young people defer marriage and parenthood until they have completed their education, the extended period

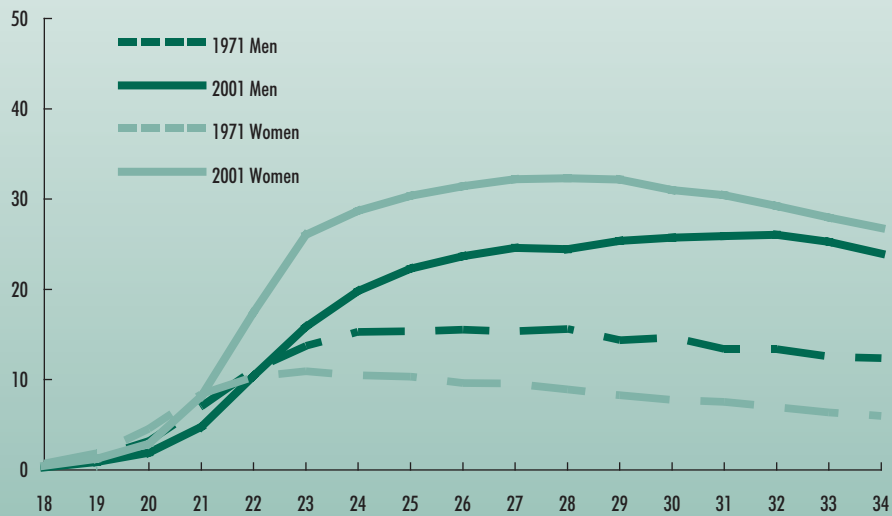
Chart 2 Today's young women have made more transitions than men by their mid-20s

Average number of transitions



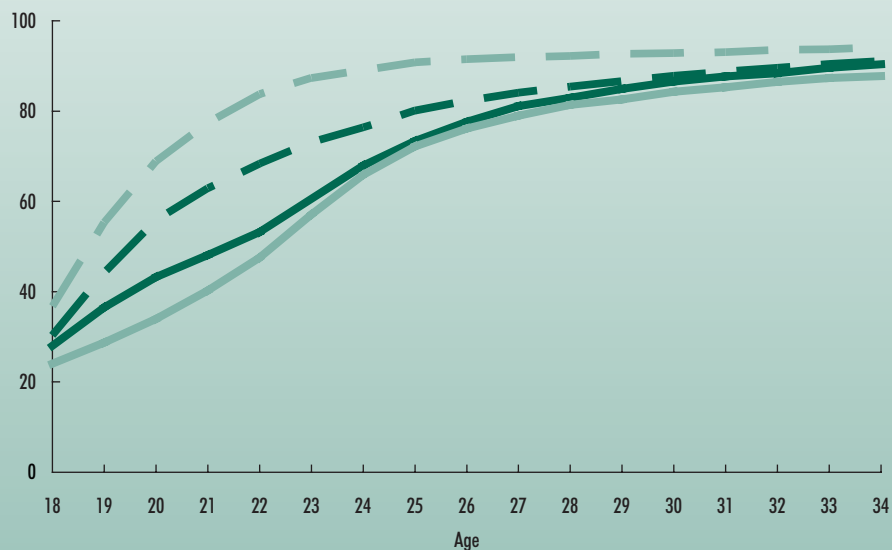
Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

% university educated



... means leaving school at older ages

% not attending school



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

of schooling undertaken by today's young adults puts almost all other transitions to adulthood on "hold."

Women still leave home at a younger age than men

For many parents, an adult child leaving home is viewed as an indicator of successful transition to adulthood.

However, it is taking longer to reach that stage; in 2001, for example, 60% of men and 73% of women aged 25 were no longer living with their parents, compared with 78% of men and 89% of women aged 25 in 1971 (Chart 4). But most parents would also agree that living at home while attending school can make it

easier and less expensive for young people to complete their education and obtain employment.⁵ So more children delay their exit from the parental home until they complete their studies and are able to be financially independent. However, not only are today's young adults leaving home at later ages than their parents' generation, but they are also more likely to be returning.⁶

In each generation, though, young women tend to leave home sooner than men. This gender difference reflects the fact that women enter into conjugal relationships at younger ages than men.

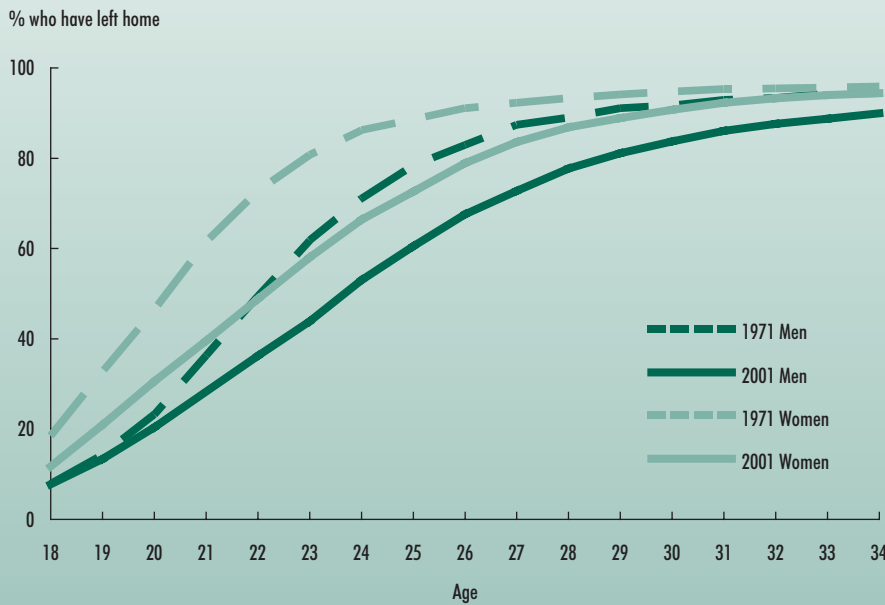
Once today's young adults do leave home, they are more likely to live alone. This is especially true for those with university education. Young men are also more likely than young women to live by themselves: the rate peaks at age 28 (13%) and remains fairly close to that peak until age 34. In contrast, the rate for women is highest at age 27 (9%) and then trails off. This suggests that, compared with the past, more young men have developed a bachelor lifestyle that lasts well into their thirties.

More women but fewer men make a transition to full-year full-time work

Compared with their counterparts in 1971, young men are less likely to be working full-time full-year while young women aged 24 and older are more likely to do so (Chart 5). This pattern clearly indicates that women today tend to stay in the labour market even after transitions such as having children.

Back in 1971, few mothers of pre-school children had full-year full-time work (9%), but by 2001, this proportion had tripled to 27%. Likewise mothers with older children also experienced increases in full-year full-time employment.⁷ On the other hand, women without children reported little change over the period, with about one-third holding full-year full-time work in both years.

Chart 4 Young adults left home at a younger age in 1971 than in 2001



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

Conjugal unions delayed

Dramatic changes have occurred in the living arrangements of young adults over the last 30 years. First, getting married and having children has become less common (Chart 6). Second, cohabitation and having children within a common-law union have become more popular, suggesting that for some, cohabitation may be a substitute marriage-like relationship where two partners share parenting, household chores, and resources. The third key trend is the increased popularity of remaining in the parental home (discussed earlier) and possibly leaving and returning to it several times.

The age at which people first marry has been edging up for both brides and grooms since the mid-1960s.⁸ Just as they have taken longer to leave school, leave home and find permanent jobs, today's young adults have delayed entering into married or common-law relationships (Chart 7). In 1971, 65% of men and 80% of women were in or had been in a conjugal relationship by age 25; by 2001, these percentages had dropped by almost half to 34% and 49%, respectively.

Although the paths to adulthood have become more diverse over the last generation, the most common trajectory still seems to be from school completion, to work, to home-leaving and then to marriage or cohabitation.⁹ With rising educational attainment extending the time needed to complete this first hurdle, it is not surprising that the formation of conjugal unions is delayed.

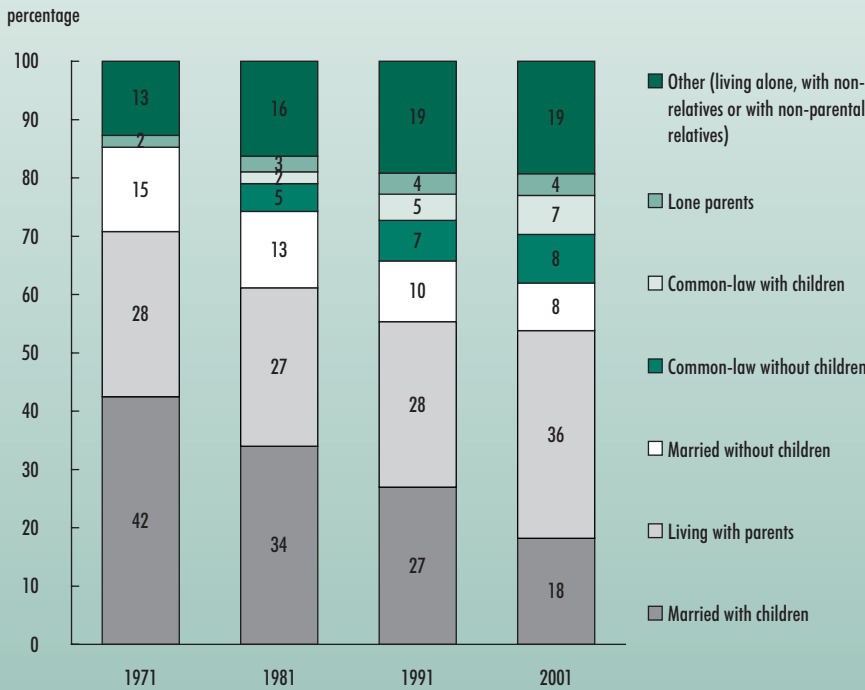
Census data show that young adults who leave school earlier are more likely to have a conjugal relationship at a younger age. In 2001, nearly half (49%) of 25-year-olds without a high school diploma had married or entered a common-law union compared with 32% of their university-educated peers. But even for people with similar levels of education, young adults today are less likely to be in a couple than they were over 30 years ago.

Chart 5 Young women are much more likely to have full-year full-time work now



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

Chart 6 Living arrangements of young adults have changed considerably



Note: Common-law unions were not identified in the 1971 Census.
Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.

More often than not, first unions are now cohabitations rather than marriages. According to the 2001 General Social Survey, in 2001, 63% of women aged 20 to 29 in their first union lived common-law.¹⁰ Data from the Census show that common-law unions were most likely among young adults in their mid-20s (about 20%), but by age 34 only about 16% were cohabiting. The lower proportion of cohabitators in their early 30s may be because some people previously living together are now married or, given the greater instability of common-law relationships, more couples have separated.¹¹

Most young adults now postpone parenthood

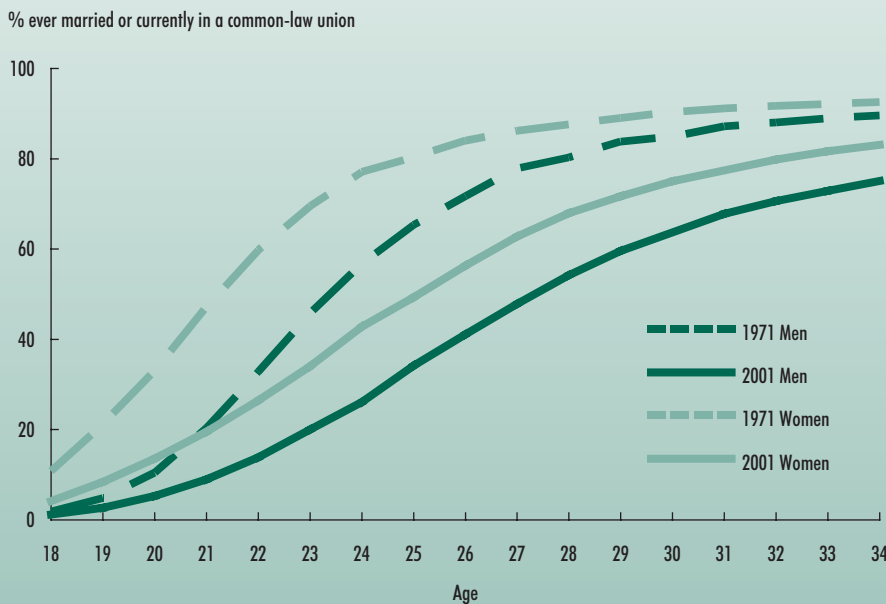
While the overall fertility rates in Canada for women under age 30 have dropped since the early 1970s, rates for women in their 30s have increased.¹² This delayed fertility is generally linked to women's increased education and labour force participation. Research has shown that women with high social status are more likely to complete their postsecondary education before motherhood, whereas women with lower social status tend to become mothers at younger ages and bypass postsecondary education, regular work and marriage.¹³ The pursuit of higher education, career aspirations and the elusiveness of work-life balance may inhibit many women today from having children at the same age that their mothers did. (Chart 8).

However, although marrying and having children later allows many young people to pursue post-secondary education and to gain employment experience and security in a highly competitive labour market,¹⁴ even those who have not gone beyond high school graduation have delayed childrearing.

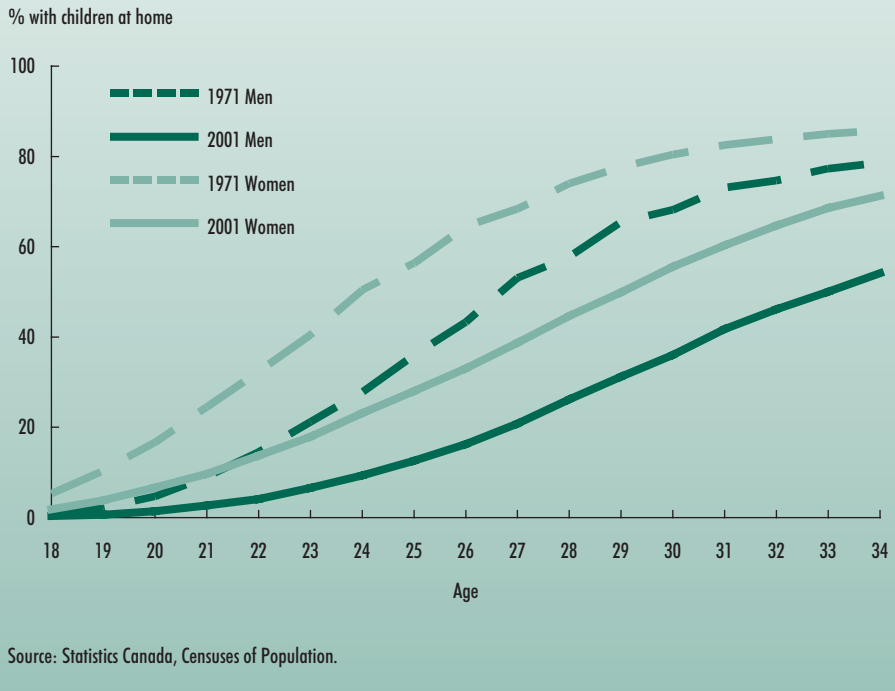
Why are transitions delayed?

Many social and economic factors have contributed to the delay in transitions to adulthood. Young adults

Chart 7 Conjugal unions are delayed for both women and men



Source: Statistics Canada, Censuses of Population.



today have a big incentive to continue their schooling beyond secondary completion for economic reasons. People with university degrees have significantly higher earnings and considerably lower unemployment rates than high school graduates. For example, since 1990, the number of jobs requiring a degree has doubled, while the number demanding high school education or less has shrunk.¹⁵ Today, prolonged schooling is necessary to gain the skills and education needed in a technical and information-based economy.

But another important reason is that young people are increasingly expected to continue their schooling. For instance, 95% of parents with children under age 19 believe that education after high school is important or very important.¹⁶ And over two-thirds of 15-year-olds intend to go on to university after completing their secondary studies, with many (39%) aspiring to more than one degree.¹⁷

Of course, a delayed exit from school has an impact on other transitions to adulthood. Although higher education enhances the chances of marriage, school enrolment impedes the first union formation, since most young people wait until they have finished university or college before they start thinking about marriage and parenthood. Tuition fees have been increasing more quickly than inflation since the early 1990s¹⁸ and the amount students owe to government student loan programs has also been escalating.¹⁹ The high cost of post-secondary education in many cases involves their continued reliance on their parents, so that young adults may not feel that they are sufficiently ready for marriage.²⁰

Studies of labour market conditions of younger men in Canada show that their earnings have declined while the education premium that they had over their older counterparts has disappeared.²¹ However, the decline in full-year full-time work for young

men may equally reflect lower job quality as young men report having less pension plan coverage, lower unionization rates and increased earnings instability while pension coverage for young women has improved slightly.^{22,23}

Today's young people face a labour market that earlier cohorts did not have to contend with: an increasing wage gap between newly hired employees and those with more experience; more temporary jobs for newly hired workers; and fewer male employees covered by registered pension plans, meaning that new hires are entirely responsible for saving for their own retirement without the backup of an employer sponsored pension plan.²⁴

Instability in employment is reflected in the much faster growth in part-time employment. The shift from full-time lifetime employment that many young adults entered 30 years ago to a work environment offering more part-time work with fewer benefits has contributed to insecurity, especially among young men, and is a contributing factor to delays in family formation.²⁵ Other researchers have found that union formation increasingly requires the earning power of both partners, so the labour market problems experienced by young men may reduce or delay the formation of unions.²⁶

In addition, housing prices have risen more quickly than the income of young men and despite declines in mortgage interest rates, young men would still have to spend more of their income on mortgage payments in 2001 than they did in 1971.²⁷ This reinforces the increased need for two incomes in order to own a home, adding to the economic insecurity young adults may feel.

Many young adults continue to live with their parents not just because of the financial burden of paying for their postsecondary education, but also because they may be unemployed or working in a low-paying precarious job. On the other hand, cultural factors may

encourage continued co-residence with parents as generation gaps narrow and parents have developed more egalitarian relationships with their children.²⁸

While the labour market has changed and the duration and cost of postsecondary education have increased, other social factors have also contributed to delayed transitions. Gender roles within marriage changed. As women became more educated, their earnings increased and they began to rely on their own earning capacity and less on their partner's to determine whether they should remain in the labour market after marrying and having children. In fact, with higher earnings, the care of children presented high opportunity costs to families, providing large incentives for women to return to the labour market after childbirth; consequently, women have seen strong increases in full-year full-time employment as their educational attainment rose. Back in 1971, women commonly entered the labour market after high school while remaining in their parents' home until a suitable marriage partner was found. By their mid-20s, many had married, had children and left the labour market to care for them.

Summary

In 1971, three-quarters of 22-year-olds had left school, nearly half were married and one in four had children. In contrast, in 2001, half of 22-year-olds were still in school, only one in five was in a conjugal union (usually common-law), and one in eleven had children. In 2001, young women led men in educational attainment and many more women had full-year full-time jobs than young women 30 years earlier.

Overall, the transition to adulthood is now delayed and elongated. It takes today's young adults longer to achieve their independence: they are leaving school later, staying longer in their parents' home, entering the labour market later, and postponing conjugal unions and childbearing.

Most 18- to 34-year-olds have passed through fewer adult transitions than people of the same age 30 years earlier. By age 34, however, today's women have made just as many transitions as 34-year-old women in 1971, although they are more likely to include full-year full-time work and less likely to include marriage and childbearing.

In contrast, men at age 34 have made fewer transitions than 30 years ago. This may be in part due to the economic changes that have made the labour market more dynamic. As a consequence, young men are less likely to have full-year full-time work than their fathers did 30 years earlier. Both men and women have upgraded their level of education in an effort to take advantage of the premium that university graduates enjoy in the labour market and this, by itself, has delayed other transitions to adulthood.



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