Tom was born and raised in a small town in Iowa. He married his high-school girlfriend at age 22 after they had been together five years. When asked why they decided to marry at that time, Tom said, “I was finishing school and had a job” (Carr & Kefalas, 2011, p. 52). In Minnesota, Jake followed a different pathway. Jake’s parents financed his prestigious undergraduate and law school educations. Now 29 and an attorney in a corporate law firm, he is looking to get married, although he is “in no rush to get married to the wrong person” (Swartz, Hartmann, & Mortimer, 2011, p. 88). And in New York, Francisco joined the U.S. Navy after high school in the hopes of getting his education paid for, but health problems prevented him from serving. Later he enrolled in a vocational program, but he did not finish because he had to work full time to support himself and pay his tuition, which left no time to study. Now 27, he is working as a truck driver. He wants to go back to school, but he has a family and “could not see his way to going back” (Holdaway, 2011, p. 110).

These three young men followed three different pathways to adulthood. Tom took a traditional route—early marriage to a high-school sweetheart. Although this has become less common than it was in the 1950s, it is not an unusual path in the rural Midwest and South, even today (Furstenberg, 2010). The low cost of living means that financial independence can be achieved relatively easily, and young people who stay in their hometowns settle down with marriage and childbearing in their early 20s. Young adults like Jake, whose parents provide significant financial and social support in the transition to adulthood, enter adulthood with a solid economic foundation and have a leg up on their less privileged peers. Like Tom, Jake followed a linear path, although Jake spent his 20s focusing on education and career and waited until he approached 30 to start thinking about marriage and children. For young people like Francisco, living in expensive urban areas and lacking family financial means, the pathway to adulthood was less predictable:

[T]hey worked while in high school and sometimes also cared for children, alone or with the help of parents or partners. In their late teens and early 20s some mixed work with
schooling, or went back and forth between the two. Others did not get to college until their late 20s and early 30s, after working or raising children. Many continued to live at home until well into their 20s, and some stayed even after having their own children. (Holdaway, 2011, pp. 110–111)

As these examples illustrate, the pathway to adulthood looks different for young people in different social locations. Race and class hierarchies shape the kinds of resources young people have access to during this transition, and these inequalities reverberate throughout the life course. Although this has always been the case, the complexity and unpredictability of the transition has increased in recent years, and the gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged is larger than it was for much of the 20th century. Economic uncertainty and the costs of higher education mean that many young adults are dependent on their parents well into their 20s. For more privileged young adults, this time offers a chance to go to college and explore careers, sexuality, and relationships with the strong scaffolding of family support around them. Those who are less privileged face more uncertainty, limiting their options and increasing their economic vulnerability. Changing expectations for higher education, marriage, and childbearing, along with the intergenerational transmission of privilege, creates the context for the transition to adulthood in the early 21st century.

**Defining the Transition to Adulthood**

Adulthood is not simply a matter of chronological age. Even in the legal realm, the age of adulthood varies. At age 18, one can vote, serve on juries, and serve in the armed forces. But it is not until reaching 21 years of age that one can legally purchase and consume alcohol. You have to be 25 years old to rent a car; yet teens as young as 13 can be tried as an adult in some states. Sociologists consider adulthood not a marker of chronological age but an achieved status, one that is reached only after certain milestones have been met. Traditionally, researchers have focused on the Big 5 indicators of adulthood (Settersten, 2012): finishing school, getting a full-time job, moving out of the parental home, getting married, and having children (Figure 4.1). Most Americans believe that completing one’s education, being employed full time, and being financially independent are the most important markers of being an adult (Smith, 2004). Less important is being married or having a child, with almost half of Americans stating that these transitions are “not at all important” or “not too important” for achieving adulthood. Young people tend to say the same thing—they felt like an adult once they became financially independent. For example, one young woman said,
Figure 4.1  How Important Are the Traditional Markers of Adulthood?


“I began to think of myself as an adult, probably at 21. . . . I finished school. Finally working. Taking care of myself. And no longer dependent on my parents” (Settersten, 2011, p. 170).

On average, Americans say that by age 21, young adults should be financially independent, living away from parents, and working full time; they should be done with their education by 22, ready to support a family by age 24 to 25, and married with children by age 26 (Smith, 2004). This represents a five-year transition period, starting with financial independence at 21 and ending with marriage and childbearing at 26. These age norms, however, vary by social class. In general, more educated and higher income Americans report that the transitions should happen later than less educated and lower income Americans find ideal.

These different age norms reflect the diverse experiences of Americans in different social locations. Young people who grow up in more financially
privileged families tend to experience a more prolonged and less uncertain transition. Most will graduate from high school, attend a four-year college, perhaps attend graduate school, and get settled into a career in the mid-to-late 20s. They may cohabit with a partner or two, but few will marry or have children until getting established in their career. Their parents will make significant financial contributions to the transition, including paying for their education.

Young people from less advantaged families experience the transition differently. Some will attend college, but they will do so while working full time and living with their parents. Many will have children in their early 20s. The competing demands on their time and energy—school, work, and parenting—means that many will not finish college or will cycle in and out of school and work over several years. Those who can will live with their parents to save up money and to try to achieve some level of economic stability.

The variability in the transition to adulthood—both between and within social classes—suggests that the pathway is uncertain. In some periods, like the post–World War II era in the mid-20th century United States, the Big 5 adult milestones were met easily and in quick succession by most young people. This was facilitated by a healthy economy and government supports for higher education and home ownership for young men who had served in World War II. In other periods, achieving adulthood has been more difficult. In fact, today's prolonged period of uncertainty and semidependence in young adulthood has some commonalities with what was typical in the 18th and 19th centuries, reflecting the relative social and economic uncertainty of both eras.

**Transition to Adulthood in Historical Context**

The transition to adulthood in the pre-industrial United States was “a long and difficult process. . . . Adulthood was not a status that was routine and automatic. It was one that had to be achieved, sometimes at a great personal cost” (Farrell, 1999, p. 68). In an agrarian economy, economic independence required access to land. Young White men often had to wait until their mid-to-late 20s to inherit land, marry, and set up their household. In 1890, the median age at marriage for men was 26. Women tended to marry at younger ages—the median age for women in 1890 was 22—although even here there are variations. For example, youngest daughters were often expected to remain at home to care for their parents as they aged (Farrell, 1999). A woman in this position postponed marriage until her parents died or did not marry at all. This meant that many
In the 1920s, adolescence was redefined as a time for carefree fun.

women also postponed childbearing: In Massachusetts, 30 percent of married women born between 1856 and 1865 were childless in their 20s, and in several New York counties in 1865, almost one in three married women in their early 20s had never had children (Carter et al., 2006).

Although achieving full adult status did not occur until one's 20s, the transition to adulthood tended to start much earlier than it does today, creating a prolonged period of semidependence between young adults and their parents. Once children were old enough to contribute to the family economy, they were expected to do so. Few young people were enrolled in school. Even as late as 1900, a 16-year-old White male was as likely to be in the labor force as he was to be in school and a 16-year-old Black male was twice as likely to be working than in school (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005). This semidependent relationship between young adults and their parents could last a decade or more (Farrell, 1999), starting in the early teens and lasting into the 20s.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the relationship between children and parents during the teen years became more dependent than semidependent. Increasingly, middle-class young people were expected to be in school rather than to work, and the dependency of childhood was extended into the adolescent years. The expansion of public high schools meant that more teens were staying in school for longer periods, and the percentage of the population
with a high-school degree increased (Figure 4.2), starting with the middle class and eventually spreading throughout the population. By the 1940s, wider access to schooling and a growing youth-oriented consumer culture changed the way that adolescence was understood; it came to be seen as a unique and universal life stage characterized by the physical and emotional challenges of puberty rather than as simply a younger version of adulthood. An adolescent identity, distinct from both childhood and adulthood, was created. The creation of adolescence as a unique stage of life delayed the beginning of the transition to adulthood by several years as those aged 12 to 18 became fully dependent on their parents and were not expected to begin the transition to adulthood until graduating high school around age 18.

Because of the economic stability of the postwar years, the transition to adulthood in the middle of the 20th century was “more orderly, predictable, and condensed” (Farrell, 1999, p. 68) than it was in prior years. In 1960, most young people were done with school, living on their own, married, and raising children by the time they were 25 years old (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005), a stark difference from the patterns 100 years earlier and the patterns today. When we use the mid-20th century as our point of comparison, today’s patterns seem

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**Figure 4.2** Educational Attainment for the Population Aged 25 and Older, 1910–2014

![Graph showing educational attainment from 1910 to 2014.](image)

unusual (and, to some, problematic). But, as you will see, today’s young adult is not so different from the young adults of the pre-industrial era—remaining semidependent on one’s parents for several years as one builds a stable enough financial foundation to go out on one’s own. Figure 4.3 summarizes these historical shifts.

### Figure 4.3  Adolescence and Young Adulthood in Historical Context

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<td><strong>Young Adulthood</strong></td>
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Transition to Adulthood in the Early 21st Century

In the 1990s and 2000s, scholars and journalists started to notice that young people were not settling down into steady jobs, marriage, childrearing, and home ownership the way their parents and grandparents had. These changes were met with some dismay and were referred to with phrases like “prolonged adolescence,” “delayed adulthood,” and “failure to launch.” In Japan, the less-than-flattering term to describe young adults who continue to live with their parents is “parasite singles.”

The negative connotations of these phrases suggest that the lengthening of the transition to adulthood has not been viewed favorably. This disfavor, however, misses two important facts. First, although the transition to adulthood today is different from the patterns of the mid-20th century, they are not nearly so unusual when viewed from a broader historical viewpoint. As you learned earlier, until the 1940s and 1950s, it was not uncommon for young adults to remain semidependent on parents well into their 20s. Thus, it was the mid-20th century that was unusual, not what is going on today. Second, concern about the lengthening transition tends to individualize the young adults’ behaviors as “the personal decisions of each adolescent” rather than viewing them as “the collective consequences of family and community demands” (Farrell, 1999, p. 68).
That these patterns are happening throughout much of the industrialized world also suggests that a broader perspective is warranted. To use the language of sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) that we discussed in Chapter 1, rather than being a private trouble reflecting an individual’s laziness, lack of ambition, or immaturity, the expansion of young adulthood is a public issue that results from a changing economy, changing family patterns of family formation, and changing relationships between parents and children.

**Economic Uncertainty and Higher Education**

Today’s young adults face very different economic prospects than their parents and grandparents did. High rates of unemployment for workers in their 20s, the shrinking middle class, and stagnant wages for all but the most privileged mean that economic uncertainty is high. Only about half of Americans believe that today’s youth are likely to have a better life than their parents, the lowest proportion in more than 15 years (Saad, 2013). This uncharacteristic pessimism reflects public fear about the changes they see going on around them. The American dream ideology that was epitomized in the 1950s, which included idealized images of family stability, certain economic prospects, and homeownership, is increasingly out of reach. Most of today’s young people want
the stable families and financial well-being of earlier generations. Structural shifts, however, mean this stability is not as easy to achieve.

Young people have gotten the message that the main way to secure a well-paying job is to get a college degree. And they have responded by attending college at unprecedented rates. The percentage of Americans with a college degree has tripled since 1970, reaching 30 percent in 2014 (Figure 4.2). When we look specifically at younger Americans aged 25 to 29, 34 percent had a college degree in 2014. The rate is highest among Asians and Pacific Islanders, followed by Whites and people who identify as multiracial, and lowest for African Americans, Hispanics, and American Indians (Figure 4.4). As you will learn in later chapters, this racial disparity in education has important implications for family patterns.

Although these figures show an impressive growth in college completion, they mask another trend: the number of people who attend college but do not finish. Forty percent of first-year students at four-year colleges do not earn a degree.

![Figure 4.4 Percentage of 25- to 29-Year-Olds With a College Degree by Race, 1920–2014](source: National Center for Education Statistics, 2015)
within six years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014a). Graduation rates at community and vocational colleges are even lower. Young people who take on educational debt to attend college for a year or two but do not earn a degree are especially economically vulnerable. They have taken on the costs of higher education without receiving the financial benefits.

And the financial benefits of a college degree are clear. On average, college graduates earn twice as much as high-school graduates (Leonhardt, 2014), a difference that adds up to more than $1 million over a lifetime (Carnevale, Rose, & Cheah, 2014). But even college graduates can have a hard time achieving financial stability (Settersten, 2012), especially those who graduated in the middle of the 2007–2009 Great Recession. A tough labor market, stagnant wages, and college loan debt mean that it can take several years after finishing college to feel economically secure. Things are even more insecure for the two thirds of young people who do not graduate from college. Almost one in five high-school graduates in their early 20s is unemployed. The rate is almost one in three for African Americans and Native Americans (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014b).

**Changing Patterns of Family Formation**

One of the most talked about features of the transition to adulthood in the 21st century is the low rates of marriage and childbearing among 20-somethings. Only about one in ten 20- to 24-year-olds are married (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014), and the median age at marriage is higher than it has ever been—29 for men and 27 for women. However, although only half of young people are marrying by their late 20s, this does not mean that they are staying single. Most young people have cohabited with a romantic partner, and they tend to do so at relatively young ages—22 for women and 23.5 for men. In fact, Wendy Manning, Susan Brown, and Krista Payne (2014) found that between 1984 and 2010, the age at first union—whether marriage or cohabitation—remained steady at 22 to 23 years old. Thus, young people are partnering at about the same time that their parents did; they are just doing it as cohabitators rather than as spouses.

The delay in marriage has also meant a delay in childbearing for most, but not all, young people. Three in ten 20- to 24-year-old women have children; this rises to about half for 25- to 29-year-olds (Monte & Ellis, 2014). As you will read about in the next chapter, rates of marital and nonmarital childbearing vary significantly by education level. Most young women who go to a four-year college will postpone childbearing until they are done with their education. Young women who do not attend college are more likely to have a child in their
early 20s; 80 percent of these young women are single or cohabiting rather than married (Monte & Ellis, 2013).

**Changing Relationships With Parents**

Parents play an important role in young people’s transition to adulthood. Young people who have healthy relationships with parents and who have access to parental resources benefit from this interpersonal and financial support. Parents are involved in their young adult children’s lives in many ways, and for most, these involvements “foster (rather than hinder) a successful transition into adulthood” (Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012, p. 79).

Because of low wages, the uncertain economy, and the expansion of higher education, many young people remain financially dependent on their parents into their 20s. Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross (2005) estimate that “on average parents provide roughly $38,000 in material assistance—housing, food, educational expenses, or direct cash assistance—through the transition to adulthood” (p. 414). This is a significant amount, but there is “substantial variation among youth in the amount of assistance they receive, with some youth receiving many tens of thousands of dollars, while others receive very little or no support” (p. 414). One place where we see this gap in family assistance is in paying for college. On average, parents contributed about $7,700 in 2014–2015 to their children’s undergraduate education, not counting parent borrowing (Sallie Mae, 2015). However, this varies widely by socioeconomic status: Low-income parents contribute approximately $4,300, middle-income parents contribute $6,000, and high-income parents contribute more than $15,000. This discrepancy gives children from wealthier families a significant advantage over their peers; they can transition into adulthood with lower debt and a more stable economic foundation for work and family that will reverberate throughout their lives (Shapiro, 2004).

In addition to helping pay for college, parents also support their young adult children by allowing them to live in the parents’ home while paying little or no rent. Figure 4.5 shows young adults’ living arrangements in 2012. Most 18- to 24-year-old men and women are living with a parent (this includes students who are living at a residential college). These patterns have been fairly consistent over the past 25 years with a slight increase of young people living with parents during the recent economic downturn (Fingerman et al., 2012).

When we look at slightly older adults, aged 25 to 34, we can see that their living arrangements are different than those of their younger peers. Most are living with a spouse or romantic partner, and only 10 percent of women and 16 percent of men are living with parents. Although significantly lower than
the rates for younger adults, some critics find these rates alarmingly high, particularly in comparison with the mid-20th century. But if we look at them in historical context, these 21st century patterns are not that unique. In 1900, 32 percent of 25-year-old White men and 14 percent of 30-year-old White men were unmarried, childless, and living with their parents (Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005), not too different from the patterns today.

Notions of American individualism and the idealization of 1950s family patterns reinforce the idea that shared living between young adults and their parents is a problematic indicator of young adults’ ongoing dependence on their parents. Yet other interpretations are possible. For example, more than one third of single mothers live with their parents at some point after the birth of their child (Bumpass & Raley, 1995), and in 2011, 17 percent of children living with a single parent also lived with a grandparent (Williams, 2014). This co-residence can
provide important financial, familial, and social stability for unmarried mothers and their young children, which has a positive effect on family well-being. Parents can also serve as a safety net to counter the uncertainty in other aspects of young adults’ lives. For example, many of the 30-something adults who are living with parents have not been doing so continuously. More likely, they lived independently for a while and returned to the parental home due to job loss, returning to school, or the breakup of a romantic relationship; Katherine Newman (2012) refers to these as “boomerang kids.” In addition, adult children who live with their parents contribute economically and instrumentally to the household and value being able to care for parents as they age (Foner & Dreby, 2011), which we will discuss in more detail in Chapter 9. Thus, far from a “prolonged adolescence” or “failure to launch,” let alone Japan’s “parasites,” co-residence between young adults and their parents can be understood as a positive sign of family solidarity and support, which is a healthy interdependence between the generations.

Norms about the appropriateness of young adults living with their parents also vary across social groups. In some immigrant families living in the United States, adult children are expected to live with parents until, and sometimes even after, marriage. Eduardo is a U.S.-born son of Columbian parents. He is a 33-year-old college-educated professional who, along with his spouse and child, live with his parents. He contrasts Columbian cultural expectations with the typical American ones: “A lot of South American families live together until whenever you decide to leave—it’s not like here in America. In America, when you’re 18, get out. Get out, you know what I mean?” (Holdaway, 2011, p. 117). Similarly, a 28-year-old West Indian women lived with her daughter, her mother, and her sister. She said, “It’s not... in my culture to push, to get away from my mother and push her away for my own life and my own family. I think that you can maintain both” (Holdaway, 2011, p. 116).

**Young Adult Sexuality and Romantic Partnerships**

The relationship between young adults and their families has moved from semidependence in the 18th and 19th centuries to independence in the 20th century and back to semidependence today (Figure 4.3). Yet, even as young people remain economically and educationally semidependent on their parents into their 20s, they have also become increasingly independent in the realm of sexuality and romantic relationships (Rosenfeld, 2007). Although most young people delay marriage, cohabitation, and childbearing until their 20s, they begin to explore romantic and sexual relationships far earlier. A decade-long gap between first sexual experiences in the teen years and first cohabitation and
marriage experiences in the 20s (Finer & Philbin, 2014) creates a context for both exploration and ambiguity, and unlike in earlier generations, most American young people navigate these experiences with minimal input from parents.

**Dating in Historical Context**

As historian Beth Bailey (1988) describes in her book *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, the decades immediately before and after the turn of the 20th century saw rapid change in how young people experienced their romantic and sexual lives. The processes of urbanization and industrialization moved many Americans from farms to cities and changed how young people socialized. Middle-class teens and young adults had disposable income, which they spent in the urban environments of dance halls, movies, clubs, and amusement parks. The anonymity of the city protected young people from the watchful eyes of community mores that characterized small rural towns. It became common and accepted for young people to spend time together in mixed-gender pairs or groups without chaperones. The parent-controlled system of **calling**, in which a young man was invited to call on a woman in her home to visit with both the young woman and her mother, transitioned to dating, which was entirely in the hands of young people.
Dating emerged first among youth in the lower classes, from which it spread to young people in other class locations. Unlike more privileged young women who entertained male suitors in the family home, young women who lived with large families in small apartments did not have the luxury to invite men to visit. There just wasn’t the room. So, instead, they went out on dates, seeking entertainment not in the privacy of home but in the dance halls and movie theaters in the public sphere. What was a necessity for poor and working-class youth was viewed with envy by youth in the upper classes as dating gave young people much more independence than the calling system allowed. By providing young people more freedom, dating shifted the balance of power in courtship from parents to youth. Young people were less dependent on parental approval of their dates and were able to spend time with each other away from parental control.

Dating represented not only a generational shift in who controlled the process but a gender shift as well. Calling was firmly the purview of women. Calling took place in the domestic sphere—women’s realm of influence—and men could not show up at a woman’s home without an invitation. This gave women the initiative to decide whom to invite and when to invite him. Dating changed all this. Because dating took place in the public sphere, men were in charge. A man who invited women on dates was taking them into the masculine sphere, where he planned and paid for their activities. In essence, under the calling system, women were the hosts. With dating, that role shifted to men.

Dating emerged in a broader social context of growing sexual freedoms. The turn of the 20th century saw a retreat from Victorian ideals emphasizing sexual control and regulation to an “emphasis on using sex to achieve personal satisfaction, self-expression, and erotic pleasure” (Farrell, 1999, p. 71). Margaret Sanger and other activists crusaded for women’s sexual autonomy by making contraception more readily available. Gay subcultures formed in urban centers, allowing gay men and lesbians a place to explore this emerging identity. Hollywood films and popular books and magazines portrayed sex and sexuality as a natural and healthy component of romantic attraction. Although the term sexual revolution is usually applied to the youth culture of the 1960s, the 1920s were equally revolutionary:

By the 1920s, Americans were clearly entering a new sexual era . . . The new positive value attributed to the erotic, the growing autonomy of youth, the association of sex with commercialized leisure and self-expression, the pursuit of love, the visibility of the erotic in popular culture, the social interaction of men and women in public, the legitimation of female interest in the sexual: all of these were to be seen in America in the twenties. (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988, p. 233)
Although these trends were not as pervasive nor as explicit as they would become 40 years later (D’Emilio & Freedman, 1988), the seeds of sexual liberation were planted in the 1920s. This was the context in which dating emerged.

Dating was a perfect fit for the newly emerging focus on commercialized leisure in early 20th-century America. Leisure became an arena for carefree fun, self-expression, and freedom from work and family responsibilities. Dating, with its focus on commercialized fun and consumption in the public sphere, was a natural part of this new leisure environment. As Bailey (1988) explains, “All the polls and columns and books on dating . . . made abundantly clear that American youth did not consider spending time with a member of the opposite sex the same as dating. In almost all instances, a date centered around an act of consumption” (p. 58).

Dating’s consumerist orientation also encouraged peer competition. Popularity for young people was measured by the number and variety of dates they had. The most popular men were those with material resources that they could use to date several different women. The most popular women were those who dated several popular men. As a result, men cultivated the appearance of affluence, and women cultivated an appearance of having a busy schedule of dates, to increase their popularity relative to their peers. Willard Waller’s 1937 article in American Sociological Review describes this competitive process on a college campus as the rating and dating complex:

[C]ompetition for dates among both men and women is extremely keen . . . In order to have [a high] rating [young men] must belong to one of the better fraternities, be prominent in activities, have a copious supply of spending money, be well-dressed, “smooth” in manners and appearance, have a “good line,” dance well, and have access to an automobile . . . The factors which appear to be important for girls are good clothes, a smooth line, ability to dance well, and popularity as a date. The most important of these factors is the last, for the girl’s prestige depends upon dating more than anything else; here as nowhere else nothing succeeds

By the 1950s, the most popular youth were those who had a steady boyfriend or girlfriend.
like success. Therefore the clever coed contrives to give the impression of being much sought after even if she is not. It has been reported by many observers that a girl who is called to the telephone in the dormitories will often allow herself to be called several times, in order to give all the other girls ample opportunity to hear her paged. Coeds who wish campus prestige must never be available for last minute dates; they must avoid being seen too often with the same boy, in order that others may not be frightened away or discouraged; they must be seen when they go out, and therefore must go to the popular (and expensive) meeting places; they must have many partners at the dances. (p. 730)

One consequence of this competitive rating and dating complex was the way it enforced conformity to peer norms. Dating may have freed adolescents and young adults from parental control, but that parental control was quickly replaced by pressures to conform to peer expectations for popularity and status.

Popularity in the 1920s was based on how many different people one dated. By the 1940s, however, the criteria for popularity had shifted. With so many young men in the armed forces during World War II, eligible men were a scarce commodity. The dating economy had shifted so that the most popular women were now those who could secure one of those available men as a “steady.” Instead of cultivating an active social life with a variety of dates, the young people who had a steady boyfriend or girlfriend were the most popular with their peers. This was a far cry from the situation 20 years earlier when going steady was stigmatized as it implied that you weren’t good enough to attract attention from more than one person.

**Decline of Dating and the Rise of Hookup Culture**

The dating scripts that were dominant in the 20th century have given way to new forms of romantic and sexual behaviors for teens and young adults. The traditional heterosexual date, where a boy asks a girl out, picks her up, treats her to a movie or dinner, and takes her home at the end of the evening is no longer common. When these kinds of exchanges do occur, it is usually in the context of an already established romantic relationship rather than something you do to get to know someone new. Romantic relationships among teens and young adults often start more casually—hanging out, hooking up, and then sometimes becoming a couple. Although described as dating, it looks different from a 20th century date.
One of the defining features of contemporary romantic and sexual relationships for young adults is their ambiguity, which makes them difficult for social scientists to study. Some datasets have defined the relationships broadly (e.g., “when you like a guy [girl] and he [she] like you back”) and others have defined them more narrowly (e.g., whether one currently has a special romantic relationship; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2006). Giordano et al. (2006) argue that a broader definition is most useful because it captures the full range of both informal and formal romantic experiences that are meaningful for young people; the downside of this inclusivity is that it also means combining a variety of different experiences into a single category. When using a broad definition of romantic involvement, Giordano et al. found that 32 percent of 7th graders, 41 percent of 9th graders, and 59 percent of 11th graders in their sample were currently romantically involved. In comparison, the proportions of those who have a “special romantic relationship” are 17 percent, 32 percent, and 44 percent, respectively; these lower numbers reflect a narrower definition of romantic involvement. By the time they are 18 years old, almost 70 percent of boys and 76 percent of girls have had a recent romantic relationship (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003).

Most young Americans have romantic and sexual relationships in high school. This can be more complicated, however, for young adults in immigrant families, particularly those whose parents are from cultures that do not practice dating. These youth often experience a clash between the American culture in which they were raised and the culture of origin for their families. These young adults report that their parents discourage or forbid dating, particularly outside of their ethnic or religious groups, and especially for daughters. Sons are given a bit more freedom as are younger siblings who come of age after parents have had more time to assimilate to American culture (Nesteruk & Gramescu, 2012). Yuying Tong (2013) found that more assimilated Asian American teens, as measured by household language use and generation status, were more likely to be sexually active than those who are less assimilated to American culture.

**Sexual Debut** Romantic relationships provide the context for most teens’ first sexual experiences, which researchers refer to as sexual debut. About half of teenagers have sex during the high-school years (the median age for first intercourse is 18), and 75 percent of these teens have sex for the first time in the context of a dating relationship (Guttmacher Institute, 2014; Manning et al., 2006). Compared with teens in the 1990s, more of today’s teens are older when they have sex for the first time; fewer have sex before age 15; more use contraception; and fewer teen girls become pregnant. Although the teen pregnancy rate is half of what it was at its peak in 1990, the United States still has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the developed world.
These data focus on sexual intercourse, but sexual activity can be defined more broadly. A significant proportion of teens have engaged in genital touching and/or oral sex with a partner (Rapsey & Murachver, 2006). For some teens, these activities are a substitute for vaginal intercourse; for most, it is a precursor or complement to intercourse. Although many youth are engaging in these sexual behaviors, they don’t necessarily define them as having sex. In one survey of college students, more than 90 percent report having given or received oral sex, but only about one in five defined this behavior as having sex, about half as many young people who classified this as sex in 1991 (Hans, Gillen, & Akande, 2010).

Researchers are also starting to learn more about same-sex attraction and gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) identities among adolescents. One challenge in studying these groups in the teen years is the fluidity of early sexual development. Some youth identify as GLBT from a young age, but for others, it is an identity that emerges later; evidence from one survey shows that the median age that GLBT adults first thought they were something other than straight is 12 years old (Pew Research Center, 2013b). There is also the question of how to define sexual minority status—should it be based on attraction, identity, and/or behavior? Youth may experience same-sex attraction or engage in sexual behavior with someone of the same sex but not identify as GLBT. Others may experience same-sex attraction or identify as GLBT but not have same-sex sexual experience. Because teens are still developing sexually, the lines between attraction, identity, and behavior are not always clear. Research has shown that most youth who identify as GLBT have experienced sexual activity with someone of the same sex; yet most, especially boys, also report sexual activity with members of the other sex (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

Some evidence also suggests that gays and lesbians are coming out—being open about their sexual identity with family and friends—at younger ages than in the past. In a national survey of gay and lesbian adults, 43 percent were age 20 or older when they first came out, but for the adults younger than 30, two thirds had shared their sexual orientation before they were 20 years old (Pew Research Center, 2013b). Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000)
found that, on average, young people came out around 18 years old. Although same-sex attraction and identity is becoming more visible in American culture, not all GLBT youth are safe or welcomed in their families and communities. For example, same-sex dating during adolescence is less common in areas where fewer gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth are out (Collins et al., 2009). In addition, sexual minority youth are at risk of bullying, harassment, and violence (Biblarz & Savci, 2010), and 40 percent of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered, far higher than their proportion in the general population (Durso & Gates, 2012).

**Hooking Up** Although most teens’ first sexual encounters take place in the context of a romantic relationship, it is also true that three out of five teens who are sexually active have also had sex with partners whom they are not dating (Manning et al., 2006). This is common in college, too, with 71 percent of men and 70 percent of college women reporting that they have hooked up at least once by their senior year (Ford, England, & Bearak, 2015).

The term *hooking up* refers to sexual encounters that take place outside of, and with no expectation for, an exclusive or committed relationship. The phrase captures a range of sexual behaviors, from kissing to oral sex to intercourse. The ambiguity of the phrase is part of the appeal as it allows young people to share their experiences with friends without being too explicit (Bogle, 2008). The ambiguity is also a useful gender strategy to deal with the sexual double standard. Men can use the phrase to imply that they have had sex with their hookup partner, enhancing their reputation, whereas women can use the phrase to protect their sexual reputation as it could mean that she simply kissed her partner and did nothing more. In his survey of college students on two campuses, Jesse Owen, Galena Rhoades, Scott Stanley, and Frank Fincham (2010) found that hooking up was more common among White students, students who drink, and students who are from families with higher incomes, suggesting that hooking up is more common among more privileged students.

Most hookups, for both teens and young adults, take place with a friend, a former girlfriend or boyfriend, or someone they know pretty well, not with someone they have just met. Almost half of Manning et al.’s (2006) high-school sample hooked up with a friend, and another 14 percent hooked up with an ex-romantic partner. Less than a third hooked up with an acquaintance or someone they didn’t know. Similarly, the Online College Social Life Survey (OCSLS) found that 46 percent of college students knew their most recent hookup partner moderately or very well and only 13 percent reported not knowing their partner at all (Ford et al., 2015).
The OCSLS, collected by sociologist Paula England and her colleagues, is a rich source of data on the sexual experiences of college students. England et al. collected data from more than 20,000 students at 21 colleges and universities to learn more about their sexual and romantic histories. These data show that even though hooking up is widespread, so are committed relationships: 66 percent of men and 74 percent of women have had a romantic relationship lasting at least six months by their senior year of college. In addition, most men and women are interested in pursuing a romantic relationship with their most recent hookup partner, although women are more likely than men to express this interest. Men, however, are more likely to initiate the DTR—the conversation to “define the relationship” and to transition to an exclusive dating partnership.

Hookup culture is gendered in another way. Heterosexual hookups tend to be more focused on men’s sexual pleasure than on women’s: Men are almost three times as likely as women to have an orgasm in a hookup with a new partner (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012). In contrast, sex that takes place in the context of a heterosexual romantic relationship tends to include a wider variety of sexual behaviors, and as a result, women are more likely to have an orgasm in relationship sex than they are in hookups. Same-sex hookups, for both men and women, are the most reciprocal with both partners equally likely to have an orgasm (Ford et al., 2015).

Hookup culture is not only gendered, but it is shaped by social class as well. Laura Hamilton and Elizabeth Armstrong (2009) applied a class lens to the study of women’s sexuality on college campuses. They found that women from privileged backgrounds were more interested in and involved with hookup culture, whereas women from working-class backgrounds were uninterested and excluded. By using what Hamilton and Armstrong describe as a “self-development logic,” privileged women saw college as a time to focus on themselves—to meet new people, focus on their studies and career goals, and have fun. Romantic relationships were viewed as greedy—demanding a lot of time and energy—and were thus incompatible with this focus on self. Hooking up allowed women to enjoy sexual activity without the burdens of a romantic relationship.
Working-class students, in contrast, did not see romantic relationships and self-development as incompatible. Many expressed interest in marrying and having children during or immediately after college. The college years were a time to grow up and settle down, not to postpone the responsibilities of adulthood by “sleeping around,” as one respondent put it (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009, p. 607). Because “college culture reflects the beliefs of the more privileged classes” (p. 606), working-class students were alienated from the self-development logic and hookup culture that surrounded them. Instead, they were pulled toward high-school friends and boyfriends, who were ready to settle down, and pulled away from college life. Less privileged women in Hamilton and Armstrong’s sample were eight times more likely than more privileged women to drop out of college, and the mismatch between their own sexual and romantic goals and that of the college culture was one influential factor in their decision to leave.

Change, Continuity, and Diversity in the Transition to Adulthood

Like other family patterns, today’s transition to adulthood is characterized by many changes. But there are also linkages between today’s patterns and those of the past. For example, the semidependent economic relationship between young adults and parents during the transition is similar to what was common prior to the 20th century. Although the transition today starts later than it did then, for example, after one graduates from high school rather than in the early teens, its length and purpose (to gain financial stability) would have been familiar to those living more than 100 years ago. One contextual factor that shapes this continuity is the expansion of education. In the 1900s, adolescents started to become more dependent on parents because more of them attended high school. Similarly, today’s 18- to 22-year-olds are more dependent on parents because more of them attend college. And early marriage and childrearing has not completely disappeared; in some rural towns, this is still the most typical transition to adulthood. This emphasizes the fact that young adults in different social locations experience the transition differently.

Where we see the biggest change is in youth’s growing sexual and romantic independence. Parents in nonimmigrant families have little explicit influence on who young people date or become romantically involved with. As the stigma around nonmarital sexual activity has declined, youth have more sexual experience and are more likely to cohabit than marry when they are ready to form a co-residential union. More privileged youth start thinking about
marriage and childbearing in the late 20s after they have gotten established in their careers. Less privileged youth are more likely to have children with their cohabiting partners in their early 20s. The next chapter explores these patterns in more detail.

**MAIN IDEAS**

- The transition to adulthood is a prolonged and uncertain time of life and varies by young people’s social location.
- Before the 20th century, the transition to adulthood started in the early teens and lasted up to 10 years. In the 20th century, adolescents became dependent on their parents, and the transition to adulthood did not begin until one graduated from high school and tended to last only a few years.
- Today, the transition to adulthood is shaped by economic uncertainty; expansion of higher education; delayed marriage; and semidependent relationships with parents into the mid-20s.
- Young adults are increasingly independent in their sexual and romantic relationships, starting with the shift from calling to dating and continuing today with hookup culture.