



PRI “Investing in Youth” Thematic Paper Series

The majority of young adults in Canada are delaying the transition to adulthood by postponing major markers of independence – living on their own, completing education, achieving economic independence, choosing a life partner and having children. Added to this is the fact that their trajectories have become increasingly complex as they carve out new and varied ways of learning, working, and living. These changes in transition patterns have important implications for current and future generations of youth, their parents and children, as well as institutions and policies, often based on outdated understandings of youth and young adulthood. This note presents highlights from two discussion papers commissioned by the PRI’s Investing in Youth Project: Evidence from Policy, Practice and Research.

Who are “Youth”?

There is little, if any, widespread, agreement on how to define “youth”. In Stéphanie Gaudet’s discussion paper, “Emerging Adulthood: A New Stage in the Life Course”, she notes the downside of defining youth by their age alone (and the related assumption that all youth within this age range are largely alike) or by the problems they face (and the related assumption that youth policy must focus on pathology). To overcome these limitations, Gaudet suggests a definition based on a life-course perspective, which sees youth as a dynamic period characterized by a transition of social and normative roles. A period that is experienced in a dramatically different way today than it was for the baby-boomer generation.

A New Stage in the Life Course?

In the article “Emerging Youth Transition Patterns in Canada: Opportunities and Risks”, Beaujot and Kerr describe key considerations associated with delayed transitions to adulthood. As Canadian youth invest more heavily in higher education, they are living at home and relying for longer periods on financial transfers from their family. Delays are also evident in union formation and reproduction.

At the same time, a smaller, second group of youth in Canada are pursuing a ‘fast-track’ route to adulthood, taking on adult roles and responsibilities much earlier than the rest of their peers. These youth leave home earlier, enter the workforce at a younger age and have children earlier. Among youth in Canada, those who are foreign-born are most likely to extend education and postpone home-leaving, while Aboriginal youth are more likely to pursue the ‘fast-track’ (Beaujot and Kerr, 2007).

In 1961, only eight percent of 20-24 year olds attended a post-secondary educational institution. This increased to 41.6 percent by 1991 and to 48.5 percent by 2001.

Young people in Canada are living with their parents for longer periods: 50 percent of 24 year old men and 22.5 year old women still lived with their parents in 2001. Roughly 1/3 returned home at least once after an initial departure.

The median age of the first marriage rose from 21 years for women and 23 years for men in the early 1970s, to median ages of 28.2 and 30.2 respectively for those marrying in 2001. The average age of women at first birth increased from about 23 in 1976 to 28 by 2003.

According to Gaudet, what looks at first as a relative delay in youth transitions, is actually better understood as a new life course stage in and of itself. Instead, Gaudet argues that a new and distinct stage in the life-course has developed over the past three decades in response to labor market, and socio-cultural changes. Sometimes referred to as “emerging adulthood” (ages 17-25) this is a period between adolescence and full adulthood, characterized by desire for independence and an exploration of identity and life choices. These youth are both too old to be teenagers and too young to be

fully independent adults. While previous generations gained structure and guidance from social and formal institutions (such as traditional marriage, standard employment and places of worship), youth today evolve in a very different normative environment. The result is that they experiment longer and in more diverse ways to determine their adult identities and affiliations. This is manifest in their relationship to money and to political and civic forms engagement. Today's youth pathways are more individualized, influenced by factors such as cultural background, gender and particularly access to family resources and support. This time of semi-autonomy can be a rich period of cultural and social capital development. But handling the risks associated with less predictable pathways – going back and forth between education and work, changing training paths, studying and working at the same time, leaving and returning to the parental home – may be more difficult to achieve without the availability of those important resources.

Does it Matter for Policy Purposes?

While on the one hand, extended education and delayed home leaving allow individuals to invest more in their own human capital, there is some risk that this may reduce the financial capital available to parents nearing retirement. Delays may also mean less time for younger workers to reap the benefits of their accumulated human capital. Delayed childbearing also means lower birthrates nationally. "Fast-track" youth may be at risk of life-long consequences for lower education, lower skill and lower earnings. Over the long-term, what risks does this pose for Canada's cohesion, productivity and prosperity? What role can policy play in improving life chances for youth who have less access to family support?

Future Considerations

For policy-makers, together these papers suggest:

- A need for a better understanding of the role of policy in the transitions of young adulthood and to identify young adults at greatest risk of poorer outcomes.
- A need to revisit programs and policies constructed on previous and sometimes outdated definitions of youth and to structure youth policies and programs in ways that are more flexible, more elastic and more responsive to individual need and circumstances.
- A need to fill a vacuum in the institutional supports and networks available to young adults (age 17-25) and their families.
- Emerging adulthood requires attention to the role of institutions in their function regarding orientation, socioeconomic support and social integration.
- Investments in human capital and education may yield the greatest returns across and throughout individual's lives while investments in young families may support more young people in meeting both their work and family goals.
- Special attention should be paid to youth in care and others with limited or no family support.
- In addressing policy matters related to identity and inclusion, emerging adulthood may represent a window of opportunity as a unique period of more open possibility and potential.
- A need to re-examine the balance in investments at different stages in the life course, recognizing that earlier investments provide a solid basis for long-term security.