

No time for youth: The transition to adulthood in Mexico, 1970-2000

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Abstract:

In the past forty years Mexico went from being a leader in the Latin American “economic miracle” to the first Latin America country to default on its foreign loans and inaugurate “the lost decade” in which governments rolled back social programs that were critical to the nation’s collective investments in youth. Any progress toward prolonging the period of the life course in which youth received these investments has stagnated. Using Mexican census data for 1970 and 2000 I investigate the transition to adulthood at these two points in time. Although young people spend slightly more time in school, schooling does not extend much beyond the late teens. Furthermore, the age of first marriage and childbearing has not been delayed significantly. Consequently, with few exceptions, the lives of young people in 2000 do not look too different from those of their parent’s generation who came of age thirty years before in 1970.

Life course scholars in the United States have benefitted from abundant data resources to describe the process of becoming adult in the last third of the 21st century. These scholars have found that becoming adult during this period is a radical departure from what it had been as more youth-specific social institutions and norms have emerged and become widespread during this time period. Families and educational institutions structure the early part of this period of the life course, gradually giving way to labor markets, housing markets, and new social norms governing how, when and whether young people eventually marry and/or have children. As a result of the prolongation of the process of becoming adult in the United States in the 21st century, there is increasing variation in the pathways taken on the way there.

The prolonged life stage of young adulthood is a fairly unique outcome of the economic growth and development of the U.S. in the post-World War II era. One approach to describing the resulting changes in the young adult life course has been to measure the timing and level of status changes using very basic cross-sectional data, often from U.S. censuses (Modell, Furstenberg, and Herschberg 1976; Winsborough 1978; Uhlenberg 1980; Stevens 1990; Fussell and Furstenberg forthcoming). This research describes the observable changes in statuses associated with childhood or adulthood, including co-residence with parents, attending school, employment, independent residence, marriage, and childbearing. This approach to measuring the transition to adulthood has been fairly dormant in the past decade, neither elaborating the type of measures or the application of measures to new data. In this article I do both by applying a new measure for quantifying not just single transitions but the combination of status transitions to census data for Mexico, a developing country where the life stage of adolescence and young adulthood are still emerging and limited to certain segments of the population.

Youth in Mexico

In the past forty years, Mexico's population has undergone a radical transformation from a young population experiencing relatively high fertility and mortality to an aging population as fertility and mortality have declined and the median age of the population has risen accordingly. But this is only one of the notable changes that has occurred during this time span. Additionally, Mexico went from being a leader in the Latin American "economic miracle" of the 1950s and 1960s to the first Latin America country to default on its foreign loans in 1982 and inaugurate "the lost decade" in which governments rolled back social programs that were critical to the nation's collective investments in youth. The result has been that any progress toward prolonging the period of the life course in which youth received these investments has been halted. The lives of young people in 2000 may not look too different from those of their parent's generation who came of age thirty years before in 1970.

Trends that would lead us to expect change: growing education and women's employment. Trends that would lead us to expect little change: stagnant age at first marriage and childbirth. Urban and rural differences: most social change occurring in urban areas, urbanization is associated with change.

In this paper I use Mexican census data to describe the transition to adulthood in terms of their age-specific statuses as students, workers, household members, and marital and parental statuses. I find that although education is more widespread in 2000 than in 1970, it is not so prevalent in the late teens and early twenties that it is impacting the timing of family formation. Instead, in urban areas in particular, it appears that the economic crisis has taken its toll by drawing more adolescents and women into the labor force and delaying the transition into independent household formation. In rural areas, the young adult life course is not much different for youth in 2000 than it was for their parents in 1970.

Data and Methods

The Mexican census data used for this analysis come from the IPUMS International Database website managed by the Minnesota Population Center at the University of Minnesota (Sobek, Ruggles, McCaa, King and Levinson 2002). The censuses have been harmonized to facilitate analysis. The 1970 and 2000 censuses were selected for analysis since they have the variables used in this analysis: school attendance, employment status, relationship to household head, marital status and number of children ever born for women, as well as gender and urban and rural residence, the covariates of interest. Furthermore, they represent two cohorts born nearly a generation apart from one another. This comparison allows us to view how different the life course of the contemporary generation of youth is from that of its parents thirty years before.

The analysis of the data proceeds in two steps. In the first section I replicate the analysis by Modell, et al (1976) showing the prevalence, timing and spread of the individual statuses. Since the census data is cross-sectional, these measures are synthetic cohort measures based on the experience of 5 through 45 year olds in the two census years. These measures are separated for men and women and rural and urban residents.

In the second step of the analysis I examine the age-specific combination of statuses as a measure of the heterogeneity of the status combinations of youth using an entropy index. To capture the status combinations of youth, I adapt a technique used in sequence analysis. Techniques measuring the sequence and timing of events have been used in life course analysis of longitudinal data to describe changes in the combinations of statuses over the life course (Marini, 1984, 1987; Rindfuss, Swicegood and Rosenfeld 1987; Rindfuss 1991; Billari 2001). While these cannot be applied to cross-sectional data since there is no explicit information on timing, they are useful for developing measures of combinations of statuses at specific ages. The basic measure I use is a measure of the combinations of current statuses for each individual in my sample (Appendix A). Each respondent receives a five-digit code that describes their statuses as student, worker, their marital status, their parental status, and their relationship to the head of household. This measure describes the combination of statuses held by people at a particular age in a given census year. I use this measure of status combinations to investigate the most common status combinations observed at different points in time. (Table to be constructed). Next, using an entropy index, I describe trends which examine the theses of the standardization and individualization of the life course.

The extent to which the early life course has become more heterogeneous in terms of demographic status combinations can be measured with the entropy index. For a life

course application, an entropy measure considers the number of different status combinations observed in a population and weights them according to the number of people in those status combinations. A common entropy index, developed by Theil (1972) is calculated as:

$$E = \left| \sum_{s=1}^S p_s \log(p_s) \right|$$

where S is the number of states and p_s is the proportion of the population in state s. This measure has been used by Billari (2001) to show the heterogeneity of state distributions by age for longitudinal life course data. Here it is applied to synthetic cohort data to show the heterogeneity of status combinations at given ages. The value of E ranges from 0 when 100 percent of those in a particular age are in a single status combination to 2.11 in the case of men when their numbers are evenly distributed throughout the 128 possible status combinations and 2.41 in the case of women when their numbers are evenly distributed throughout the 256 possible status combinations.¹

The degree of heterogeneity of status combinations is expected to change as the organization of the life course becomes more complex. The heterogeneity index captures the timing of these changes and encapsulates the degree to which young people depart from what may be considered the traditional pathway from childhood to adulthood. By comparing the age-specific entropy measure over the two census years I show the direction of that change and assess whether there is increasing or decreasing variability in the combinations of statuses held by young people.

Results and Conclusions (to be written)

¹ Men only have half the status combinations of women since the census does not record whether they have ever had children.

Table 1a. Prevalence, Spread, Timing of First and Third Quartiles and Population Median for Timing of Men's Transitions, 1970 and 2000

Men	Student		Worker		Child in parent's HH		Household head or spouse		Ever-married		Parent	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
1970												
Prevalence (%)	72.3	85.4	89.3	90.5	98.4	98.6	95.1	93.9	95.7	92.4		
Spread (years)	3.3	7.0	4.3	6.2	7.5	7.5	6.3	6.0	6.3	5.5	-	-
First Quartile (age)	13.2	14.5	13.2	14.8	19.5	19.5	19.5	20.5	20.5	19.5	-	-
Third Quartile (age)	16.5	21.5	17.5	21.0	26.0	26.0	25.8	26.5	26.8	25.0	-	-
Median (age)	14.5	16.8	15.0	17.2	22.5	22.5	22.5	23.0	23.2	22.5	-	-
2000												
Prevalence (%)	95.5	97.1	87.3	94.2	90.4	91.8	91.2	91.6	93.0	93.9	-	-
Spread (years)	3.3	6.7	4.3	6.2	9.0	7.0	7.5	8.5	6.3	7.3	-	-
First Quartile (age)	13.7	15.0	13.5	14.8	21.2	21.2	21.0	21.5	19.5	20.2	-	-
Third Quartile (age)	17.0	21.7	17.8	21.0	30.2	28.2	28.5	29.0	25.8	27.5	-	-
Median (age)	15.3	17.5	15.5	17.2	24.5	23.8	24.0	24.8	22.2	23.2	-	-

Table 1b. Prevalence, Spread, Timing of First and Third Quartiles and Population Median for Timing of Women's Transitions, 1970 and 2000

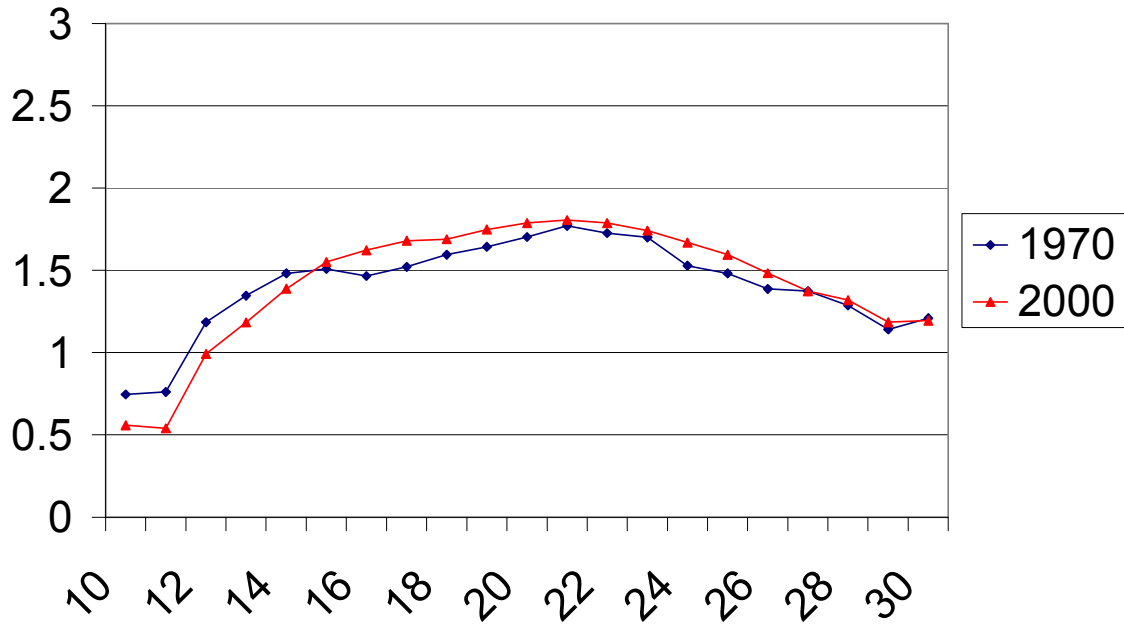
Women	Student		Worker		Child in parent's HH		Household head or spouse		Ever-married		Parent	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
1970												
Prevalence (%)	69.8	85.0	16.9	33.2	98.2	97.9	94.5	91.8	95.6	92.7	91.2	89.2
Spread (years)	3.0	4.3	2.7	3.0	8.0	7.2	6.2	6.0	7.0	5.3	5.0	7.3
First Quartile (age)	12.5	13.5	11.8	13.5	16.5	16.8	16.8	18.0	17.8	16.5	17.5	18.5
Third Quartile (age)	15.5	17.8	14.5	16.5	22.5	24.0	22.0	24.0	24.8	21.8	22.5	25.8
Median (age)	13.5	15.2	13.2	15.2	18.5	19.8	18.8	20.8	18.8	18.5	19.5	21.5
2000												
Prevalence (%)	95.4	97.3	24.2	48.5	90.1	88.8	90.4	89.5	94.9	92.1	94.3	93.5
Spread (years)	3.5	7.4	2.6	5.2	9.0	10.6	6.7	8.7	6.0	7.6	4.4	7.8
First Quartile (age)	13.5	14.8	13.2	14.8	17.0	18.2	19.8	19.8	17.2	18.2	17.8	19.0
Third Quartile (age)	17.0	21.2	15.8	19.0	26.5	28.8	26.5	28.5	23.2	25.8	24.2	26.8
Median (age)	15.0	17.2	14.5	16.5	21.2	22.8	22.2	23.8	19.5	21.5	20.5	22.2

Table 2a. Change in men's status combinations between 1970-2000

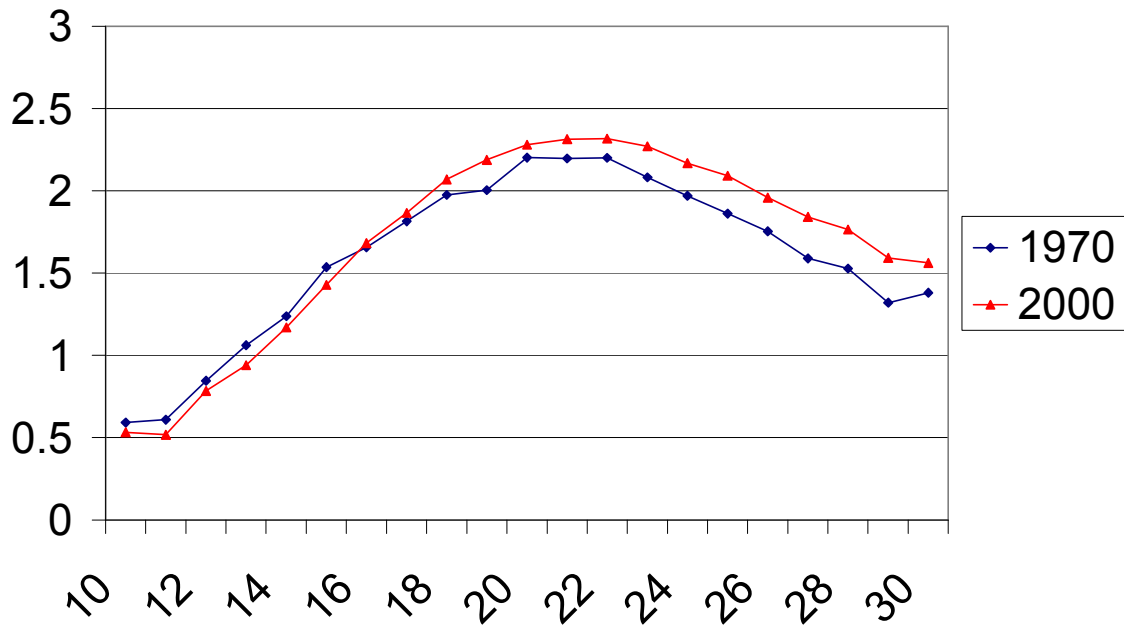
	Mean in status combination (ages 10-30)		S. D. of status combination (ages 10-30)		Average change in status combination between 1970-2000	Average change in status combination between 1970-2000 for ages 10-18	Average change in status combination between 1970-2000 for ages 19-30
	1970	2000	1970	2000			
Rural Men							
Student living in parent's household (single, not working)							
Worker living in parent's household (single, not in school)							
Living in parent's household (single, not in school, not working)							
Married household head or spouse of head, employed (not in school)							
Other combinations							
Urban Men							
Student living in parent's household (single, not working)							
Worker living in parent's household (single, not in school)							
Living in parent's household (single, not in school, not working)							
Married household head or spouse of head, employed (not in school)							
Other combinations							

Figures 1a-b. Men's entropy index for rural and urban Mexico, 1970 and 2000

Rural men's entropy index

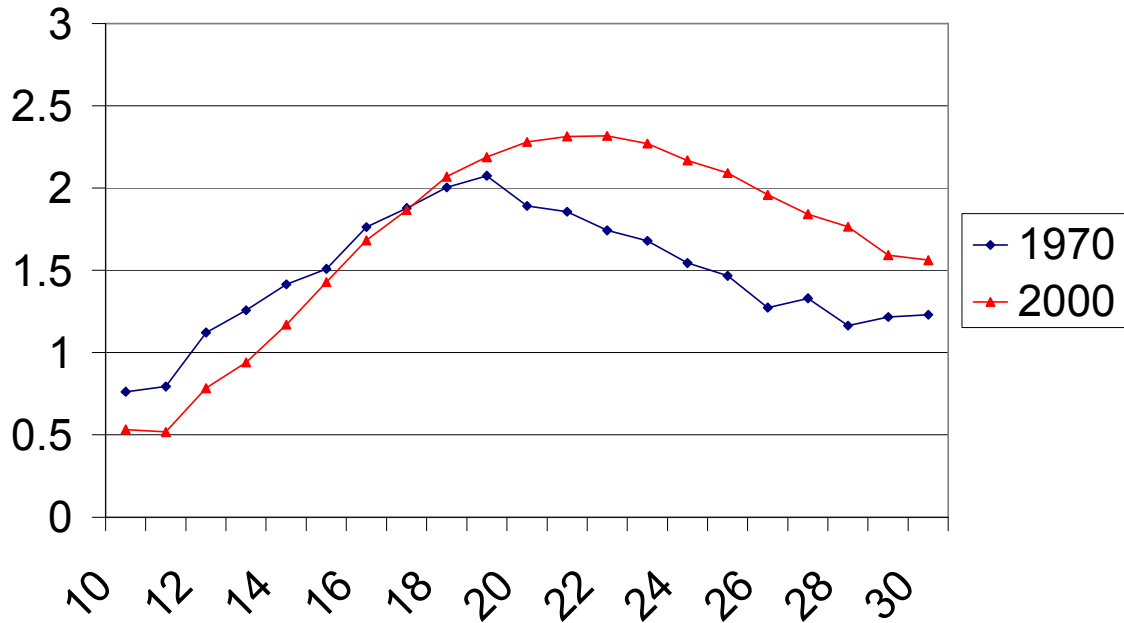


Urban men's entropy index

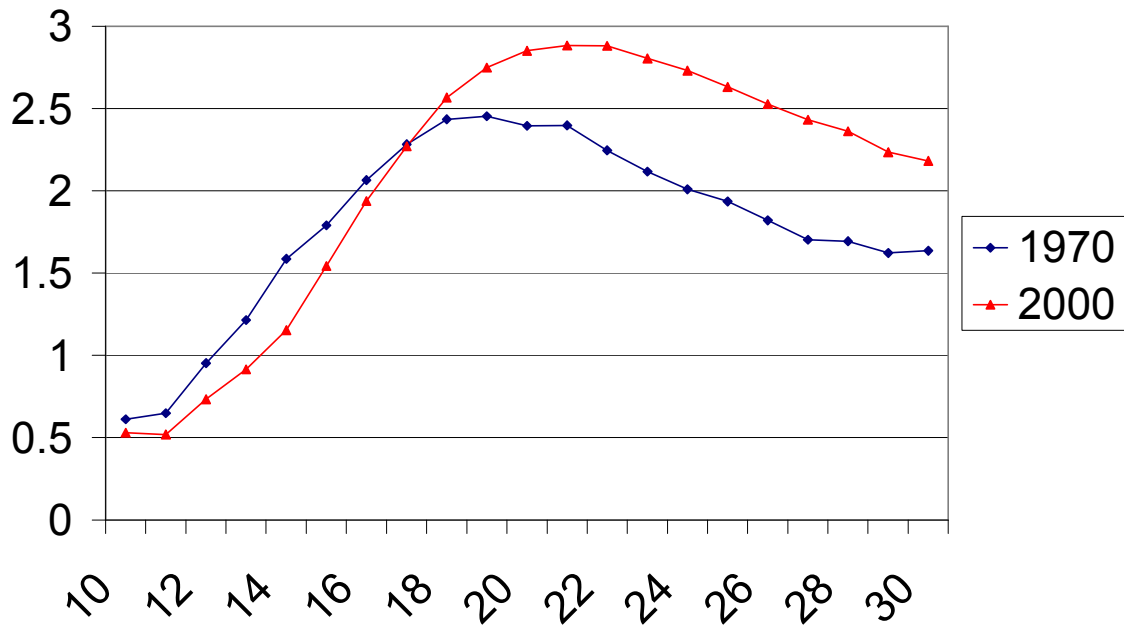


Figures 2a-b. Women's entropy index for rural and urban Mexico, 1970 and 2000

Rural women's entropy index



Urban women's entropy index



Bibliography

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