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Subjective Perceptions of Adulthood among Urban Youth:  
Are Demographic Transitions Still Relevant?

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## *ABSTRACT*

Using data from the Philadelphia Educational Longitudinal Study (PELS), this paper examines the relative effects of specific adult-like transitions and responsibilities on urban youth's self-perceived adulthood. First, we investigate young adult's subjective adulthood status in addition to adult-like transitions and responsibilities at approximately age 19 and then again at age 21. Second, we examine the extent to which changes in adult-like roles and responsibilities explain changes in one's subjective adulthood status over time. Although we find a significant increase in the percent of young adults both crossing demographic transitions and taking on individual responsibilities over the two-year period, only changes in socio-demographic transitions significantly predict changes in self-perceived adulthood. In particular, moving out on one's own and having a child significantly increase the odds of one perceiving herself as fully an adult. We also find that positive changes in labor market position significantly predict changes in adulthood status, but these effects are conditional on experiencing changes in other transitions as well.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since the 1950's, the variability in the timing and sequence of entry into adult-like roles, such as living on one's own, getting married and becoming a parent, has increased. Demographic transitions are not as tightly bound to strict timetables and expectations. Young people today tend to achieve transitions at varying rates, and many times attained adult-like statuses are not permanent in that young people tend to enter and exit transitions over time. As a result of these changes, researchers are beginning to question how central demographic markers are to self-perceived adulthood.

Some suggest individualistic criteria, such as feeling responsible and independent, are more central to young people's self-perceived adulthood than demographic transitions (Arnett 2000). Research on the relative effects of demographic transitions and individualistic criteria on subjective perceptions of adulthood is mixed. Some research finds that individual markers are better predictors of subjective adulthood than demographic markers (Cote 2000; Arnett 1997, 1998, 2000). Shanahan, Porfeli, and Mortimer (forthcoming), however, recently critiqued this body of research for failing to account for the age and experience of respondents. After controlling achieved transitions, they find that demographic markers are significant predictors of subjective perceptions of adulthood, and that the effects of individualistic criteria disappear.

In this paper, we will further test and refine Shanahan's challenge to Arnett's thesis that demographic transitions have become less relevant to the transition to adulthood. Using data from the Philadelphia Educational Longitudinal Study (PELS), we examine how the assumption of adult-like responsibilities and statuses alter urban youth's

subjective definition of adulthood. This paper contributes to existing literature in three ways. First, using longitudinal rather than cross-sectional data, we examine changes in subjective perceptions of adulthood over time. Second, this study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of a unique and under-studied population in the transition to adulthood literature: urban, predominantly minority, young adults. Third, we investigate the transition to adulthood at an early, critical point in the life course: as young people begin to move beyond the institutions of high school and family.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we review extant literature on subjective perceptions of adulthood. Second, we describe our data and methods. Third, we examine changes in young people's self-perceived adulthood and adult-like roles and responsibilities between the average ages of 19 and 21. Last, we test which type of indicator is a better predictor of changes in self-perceived adulthood: individual responsibilities or demographic changes.

## **BACKGROUND**

The study of the transition to adulthood has relied almost entirely on examining objective, demographic markers such as school completion, entry into the labor market, and birth of first child. Compared with fifty years ago, however, achieving these transitions is more variable, less stratified by age, and occurs over a longer period of time (Buchman 1989; Shanahan 2000). Using Census Data, Furstenberg et al. (forthcoming) show that only 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men age 30 in 2000 have completed the 5 transitions mentioned above, compared to 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men of the same age in 1960. Given the changes in the transition to adulthood in recent years, scholars are starting to question the validity of traditional demographic

markers of adulthood and beginning to examine new ways to measure and think about this period of the life course.

Given that young people move at different rates through the transition to adulthood, some argue that individualistic indicators of maturity, such as feeling responsible and independent, are more central to subjective perceptions of adulthood than demographic transitions (Arnett 2000). According to Arnett, young people in their late teens and early twenties are not adults but emerging adults. Emerging adults, unlike full adults, are undergoing a period of exploration where they can test out a “variety of possible life directions in love, work, and worldviews” because they have “not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood” (Arnett 2000: 470). It is because young adults are in this period of exploration, he argues, that their subjective sense of adulthood is based less on traditional socio-demographic markers and more on individualistic markers and attitudes (Arnett 1997, 1998).

In a study of 21- to 28-year-old middle class, young adults, Arnett (1998) finds that 75% of young adults view themselves as an adult without achieving any traditional demographic transitions (Arnett 1998). When asked what makes one an adult, demographic transitions were rarely mentioned. In contrast, respondents were much likely to use individualistic criteria, such as accepting responsibility for one’s self and independent decision-making, to define what it means to be an adult. A recent ethnographic study also finds that subjective perceptions of adulthood are not necessarily dependent upon achieving demographic transitions (Aronson 1998).

On the other hand, other studies suggest that traditional demographic markers continue to be just as if not more important than markers of individual responsibility.

Sheer and Palkovitz (1994), in a study of 15 to 28 year old youth, find that young people base their subjective perceptions on both achieved demographic statuses and personal qualities. On the other hand, Shanahan, Porfeli, and Mortimer (*forthcoming*), in a recent study of the relative importance of transition markers and personal qualities (what Arnett refers to as individualistic markers) on self-defined adulthood status, do not find personal qualities to be important after taking into account demographic transitions. They critique Arnett for not taking into account age and whether an individual had experienced a transition, and argue that the subjective perceptions of those experiencing socio-demographic transitions are likely to be different from those who have not. As expected, they find that experiencing transitions does impact a young person's self-perceived adult status. Moreover, they show that those completing all three "familial transitions, establishing an independent household, living with or married to a partner, having a child, are twice as likely to report being an adult than those who have not experienced all three transitions.

Although they find no support for Arnett's argument, Shanahan et al. acknowledge that their data are limited in several ways. The data have few personal and subjective measures, and the available indicators, measures of personal and financial responsibility, show little variability and are highly skewed. In addition, individual responsibility data are only collected at one point in time, limiting the ability to examine changes over time and to test causal explanations. Thus, additional research is needed to determine the relative effects of demographic and personal factors on subjective perceptions of adulthood.

The relative effects of these factors may also depend on social background characteristics, such as race, sex, socioeconomic status, and age. It is argued that the relative salience of demographic and individualistic markers depends on one's place in the life course (Shanahan et al. *forthcoming*). Evidence suggests that life course timetables and experiences vary by social position. Thus, one would expect that the subjective perceptions of adulthood vary by social background characteristics.

Several studies find that the timing of demographic transitions varies by socioeconomic position. Furstenberg et al. (*forthcoming*) find that those who did not attend college and are from the bottom third of the socio-economic distribution are more likely to have an earlier timetable for moving through the socio-demographic transitions to adulthood than others. They also find that those from working-class backgrounds believe that getting married and having a child will occur at an earlier age than their middle- and upper-class counterparts. Hogue (1985) also finds that the timing of socio-demographic transitions, school completion, labor force entry, living on one's own, marriage, and parenthood, vary by socioeconomic status with those from lower- and working-class families moving through the transitions earlier than those from more advantaged backgrounds.

Osgood, Ruth, Eccles, Jacobs, and Barber (*forthcoming*) also find social class differences in the types of paths young adults take into adulthood. They find that whites from advantaged families are more likely than other whites to embody Arnett's emerging adulthood model. Those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to delay taking on full responsibilities of marriage and family in favor of exploration and educational preparation. Thus, one might expect that Arnett's model might not apply equally as well

to all groups of young people. Given that those from more advantaged backgrounds have more resources, we would expect them to take longer on average to assume adult-like roles and responsibilities.

Research also suggests that the timing and order of demographic transitions varies by racial group. Shanahan (2000), in a review of the literature on the transition to adulthood, concluded that racial and ethnic minorities are more likely than whites to experience a transition to adulthood that “cast a long shadow over their adult lives, including diminished prospects for socioeconomic achievement” (686). Fussell and Furstenberg (forthcoming) find that the transition to adulthood has become more varied and prolonged for all racial and ethnic groups, but African Americans continue to be in a disadvantaged position entering into adulthood. As compared to African Americans, whites, especially white men, have a privileged position in negotiating institutions that structure the life course, including schools and the labor market (Fussell and Furstenberg). African Americans tend to live in racially segregated neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, and as result, they more likely to attend lower quality schools and have fewer social networks to facilitate entry into the labor market than whites. Moreover, although Americans in general are having children out of marriage at increasing rates, African American women are more likely than all other groups to do so (Fussell and Furstenberg). Moreover, Sandefur et al. (forthcoming) find that Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and those from lower- and working-class backgrounds are more likely than whites, Asians, and those from middle-class backgrounds to have a child out of wedlock and to have not obtained post-secondary



education. Both of these factors, they argue, reduce the chances of young people to move smoothly through the other transitions and become economically self-sufficient.

A recent study by Kmec and Furstenberg (2002) suggests that the effect of race on the transition to adulthood interacts with gender. They find that Black men have more difficulties in the transition to adulthood than black women and whites. Black men are much less likely than Black women and whites to be employed and more likely to be off-track. Kmec and Furstenberg argue that young black men tend to have more difficulties than other groups in translating their early educational attainment into further schooling or labor market experiences. African Americans are structurally disadvantaged in the transition to adulthood, and this body of research suggests that early disadvantage, such as living in communities and attending schools with fewer resources, tends to accumulate over time creating the long shadow that Shanahan (2000) describes.

These studies raise questions about how appropriate Arnett's model is for populations other than middle-class whites, such as working, class and/or minority young adults. As Furstenberg et al. argue, social class differences in expectations and experiences in the transition to adulthood are the result of different opportunity structures. Those from working-class families do not have the financial safety net or support to experiment with different types of jobs or attend college, especially for an extended amount of time. Thus, one would expect that the factors affecting subjective perceptions of adulthood might vary by social class, race, and sex.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The data for this paper come from the Philadelphia Education Longitudinal Study (PELS), which has followed the high school careers of a sample of approximately 10

percent of those students who were eighth graders in the Philadelphia public schools during the 1995-96 school year (n=1500). Students were selected using a cluster sampling technique. First, 45 schools serving 8th graders were randomly selected, and students were selected from within those schools. Students in schools with 250 or fewer eighth graders had a 26% chance of being selected, and those in schools with more than 250 eighth graders had a 16% chance of being selected. All analyses in this paper are weighted to take into account the differential probabilities of being part of the sample. Students have been interviewed by telephone during the summer after each school year from eighth grade on, regardless of whether they remained in the Philadelphia system or even stayed in school at all.

The PELS is just completing its seventh Wave of survey data collection. At this time, the young people in the study are on average 21 years of age and most have completed or left high school, and many are or have been in the labor market and/or enrolled in college. This paper uses data from two different Waves of the study: the 6<sup>th</sup> Wave collected in 2000-01 when the participants were approximately 19 years old and the 7<sup>th</sup> Wave collected in 2003 as discussed above. We selected these two Waves because they are the only Waves of the study that ask questions directly about subjective perceptions of adulthood. We include those interviewed in both Wave 6 and Wave 7 in the sample (n=746)<sup>1</sup>. Over sixty-five percent of those interviewed in Wave 6 are re-interviewed in Wave 7.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Because the number of Asians is quite small (n=10), we dropped them from the analyses.

<sup>2</sup> This is approximately 50 percent of those in the original sample. Although the response rate is admittedly quite low, it is still quite respectable given the study population and study length.

The dependent variable in this paper is change in subjective perception of adulthood over time. Since we do not have data on subjective adulthood status prior to Wave 6, we specifically examine the positive change in self-perceived adulthood status. Positive change refers to those who perceive themselves as fully adult in Wave 7, but who did not perceive themselves as an adult in Wave 6. To examine positive change in subjective adulthood, we restrict the sample to only those who were interviewed at both points in time and defined themselves as not an adult in Wave 6 (n=466). By restricting our sample to only those who were not adults in Wave 6, we can be more confident that changes in subjective adulthood status are the result of changes in other factors.<sup>3</sup> We are assuming, however, that everyone who reports not being an adult in Wave 6 has never felt like an adult.

By making this restriction, however, we are not including those who already view themselves as an adult at age nineteen. As expected, these youth are somewhat different from the youth included in our restricted sample. They are more likely to be from single parent and less advantaged households. In addition, they have acquired more adult-like roles and responsibilities than their non-adult counterparts by age 19.

Our key explanatory variables are changes in demographic transitions and personal responsibilities. We examine five types of demographic transitions: moving on one's own, having a child, living with a partner, obtaining a full-time job, and becoming a full-time college student. Changes in demographic transitions are measured as positive changes. That is, changes in transitions are coded one if the transition is achieved

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<sup>3</sup> Although this restriction improves our method, measurement error is always an issue when using data only collected at two points in time to examine change (Singer and Willett 2003).

between the first interview in Wave 6 and the second interview in Wave 7. No change in status is coded as zero. We include a variable for reversals in transitions coded as one if the respondent has experienced a reversal in any of the transitions. By reversal, we mean that the respondent had achieved the status in Wave 6 (age 19) but had exited it by Wave 7 (age 21).

Unlike the data Shanahan et al. (*forthcoming*) use, our data allow us to measure three different types of personal responsibilities: household, financial and subjective responsibility<sup>4</sup>. Household and financial responsibilities are measured using an index of several types of household and financial responsibilities. Subjective responsibility is measured using a scale of personal responsibilities (Cronbach's Alpha=0.73).

Because evidence suggests that subjective perceptions may vary by social background characteristics, we control for race, sex, age, family socioeconomic status, and family structure in our multivariate models. See Appendix A for a full descriptive of these variables. We also adjust for involvement in the College Access Program during high school. In Wave 3 of the study, a sub-sample of students in the College Access program was added to the sample with a sampling probability of one. Because students in this sub-sample have a different sampling probability than those in the original sample, we control for participation in the program.

Our analytic strategy is comprised of two main parts. First, we use descriptive statistics to answer the question to what extent young people have experienced changes in adult-like roles and responsibilities during this two-year period. Second, we focus on

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<sup>4</sup>Appendix A contains a full list and description of variables used in my analyses as well as their weighted means and standard deviations.

understanding changes in subjective perceptions of adulthood between Wave 6 and Wave 7 when the young people in our sample are on average 19 and 21 years of age respectively. We use descriptive statistics to investigate the degree to which changes in subjective perceptions of adulthood are associated with changes in demographic transitions and individual responsibilities. Then, we use logistic regression models to test the relative effects of changes in demographic transitions and individual responsibilities on changes in subjective perceptions of adulthood over time.

## **RESULTS**

As Table 1 shows, young people's adult-like roles and responsibilities as well as conceptions of adulthood have changed considerably over the 2-year period of time since they were on average 19 years old. We find significant changes in subjective perceptions of adulthood. A greater proportion of young people report feeling fully adult in Wave 7 (48%) than in Wave 6 (36%). In addition, a significantly greater proportion has moved through each socio-demographic transition and taken on household and financial responsibilities in Wave 7 than in Wave 6. In Wave 6, very few had a full-time job (7%) or lived independently (6%). In the two-year period, approximately four times as many young people report achieving each of these transitions. Also, the proportion of young adults with children and living with a partner approximately doubled during this time. We also find young people experience a significant increase in financial and subjective responsibilities during this time. No changes in household responsibilities, however, are found.

In addition, Table 1 shows that the ideas young people hold about what it takes to become an adult changed. We find a significant increase in the proportion of young people that believe having a full-time job is important to becoming an adult. On the other hand, we find a significant decrease in the proportion that feels living on one's own, having a child, and getting married are important to becoming an adult. These findings suggest that with increased life experience the notions of what it means to be an adult shifts from idealized toward more realistic. Although some might argue given the young age of youth in our sample that these young people are just entering the transition to adulthood, these results suggest that they have already experienced a great deal of change in both their adult-like roles and responsibilities as well as their subjective perceptions of adulthood.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Next, we investigate change in subjective perceptions over time. To do so, we restrict the sample to those who did not view themselves as an adult at age nineteen (Wave 6). Table 2 shows the proportion of young people who had a positive change in their subjective adult status. That is, the proportion who did not consider themselves adults at age nineteen but now consider themselves adults at age twenty-one (Wave 7). Thirty-six percent experience a change in their self-perceived adulthood status between Waves. This table also shows that change in adulthood status varies by parent education and family structure. Young people whose parent(s) never went to college and who live with only one biological parent are more likely than others to experience a positive change in their adulthood status. Change in adult status also varies significantly by

changes in socio-demographic transitions. Those who moved out of their parents' house between age nineteen and twenty-one and those who had a child during this time are more likely than others to perceive themselves as an adult in Wave 7. We do not find, however, that changes in adult status vary by changes in cohabiting-status. These results suggest that not all demographic markers are as important to changes in one's subjective perception of adulthood.

We also find that those experiencing any "reversals" or negative changes in any socio-demographic transitions are significantly less likely than others to feel like an adult in Wave 7. In contrast, we do not find that changes in subjective perceptions vary by changes in financial, household, or subjective responsibilities.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Next, we examine the relative effect of each of these changes on changes in one's subjective perception of adulthood between Wave 6 and Wave 7. Table 3 shows logistic regression coefficients that are weighted to adjust for sampling probability. Model 1 shows that moving out of one's parental household and having a child between Wave 6 and Wave 7 significantly increase the odds of one becoming an adult during this time controlling for demographic and family background characteristics.

As expected, we also find experiencing a reversal in any demographic transition to moderately reduce the odds of one changing his or her adult status. This pattern also emerges in qualitative interviews with young adults from the PELS study. Those who

lose a job and/or have to move back in with their parents report that they no longer feel like an adult because they have returned to being dependent on others (Benson 2003).

Like Shanahan et al. (*forthcoming*), we do not find evidence that individual responsibilities are central to subjective perceptions of adulthood. After taking into account demographic transitions and individual background characteristics, none of responsibility measures has a significant impact on the odds of changing one's adulthood status. The effects of moving out and having a child, however, remain robust and significant even after controlling for responsibility measures.

The story becomes more nuanced once interactions are added to the model. As Model 3 shows, we find that the effect of having a baby on change in adulthood status depends of the sex of the respondent. Women who have a child have over four times the odds of other women to perceive herself as an adult. On the other hand, having a child slightly reduces men's odds. Although it is expected that women experience more direct changes when having a baby than men, it is quite striking that having a child has such drastically different effect on women's and men's self-perceived adulthood status. This finding may reflect life course position. Youth in this sample are on average only 21 years old, and most have not established a career, an independent household or stable unions. It may be that for men having a child is not central unless one has moved through other transitions and become independent. Since women generally are the caregivers and take on more responsibility for the child, having a child is much more salient for them than it is for men.



In addition, we find that the effect of improving one's labor market position on the odds of becoming an adult is conditional of changes in other transitions. As model 4 shows, improving one's job status significantly increases one's odds on average of becoming an adult if one has also moved out. On the other hand, for those who have not moved out of the house, we find no effect of improved labor market status on change in self-perceived adulthood. Thus, having a full-time job in itself is not enough to change one's self-concept.

In addition, we also find that the effect of having a full-time job is also conditional of one's college status. That is, for those with a positive change in college status, improving one's labor market position actually decreases one's odds of becoming an adult. On the other hand, if one doesn't experience any change in education status, improving one's job status does not affect one's odds of becoming an adult.

Overall, we see that improving one's educational status or labor market position alone do not affect the odds of becoming an adult. When a young person experiences both a positive change in employment status and a positive change in educational status, the odds of becoming an adult are decreased. One possible explanation is that the type of full-time job one has in college is different from the job one is aspiring to get after completing education. As a result, it may be viewed as something to help pay the bills rather than a step toward becoming an independent adult. One may expect that once one completes college, getting a full-time job may have more of an effect on self-perceived adulthood. At this point in time, however, very few young people in this study have completed a college degree.

Last, we find that family structure affects self-perceived adulthood. Young people who live with both biological parents in high school are half as likely as those who do not to feel like adults. Those living in single-parent households tend to have more responsibilities than those living with both parents (Cherlin 1992). As a result, they may move through the transition to adulthood at a faster rate than others. Although we do not find evidence that subjective perceptions vary by any other social background characteristics, this finding does provide some evidence social background shapes one's subjective place in the life course.

[Insert Table 3 here]

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:**

Although we find that not all demographic markers are as important to one's subjective perception of adulthood, the results suggest that demographic transitions are important indicators of adulthood for urban youth. Like Shanahan et al., we find the having a child and moving out on one's own significantly affects self-perceived adulthood. Those making both transitions are significantly more likely to feel like an adult. Having a child, however, only impacts women's not men's subjective perceptions of adulthood.

We also find that the combination of transitions is important. This is especially the case for changes in labor market position. Getting a full-time job alone is not enough to change one's self-concept. When accompanied by moving out of the parental household, however, getting a full-time job increases the odds one will feel fully like an

adult. A similar pattern emerges in the qualitative interviews with PELS students. Those working full-time are more likely to report being an adult if they are living on their own rather than with their parents. Those living with their parents report having trouble feeling independent even with a full-time job because parents and family members continue to treat them like a child and restrict their freedoms.

We also find that the effect of having a full-time job on one's self-perceived adulthood status is conditional on being in college. Obtaining a full-time job during college reduces the odds of feeling like an adult. Being in college almost necessarily means that one is not yet completely financially independent. Thus, it may be difficult for young people to feel like an adult when they are still depending on others. Also, as discussed earlier, the full-time job college students have is not likely to be the type of job they are hoping to get after college but rather just a job to help pay the bills.

In addition to achieving demographic transitions, we also find that transition reversals impact subjective perceptions of adulthood. As previous research shows, transitions are often times ephemeral with young people entering and exiting them over time (Goldscheider and Goldscheider 1999). For example, one may move back in with one's parents after losing a job or deciding to pursue additional education. We find that those who experience at least one type of demographic reversal are less likely to feel like an adult. Evidence from qualitative interviews with PELS students also shows that experiencing reversals negatively influences one's subjective sense of adulthood. Many experiencing a backward shift, such as moving back in with one's parents or losing a job, report that they are not fully able to support themselves and their families, and because of this, they no longer feel like an independent adult (Benson 2003).

Unlike other studies, we did not find cohabiting and getting married to change one's subjective perceptions of adulthood. Although over a quarter have lived with a partner at some point in time, many of these housing arrangements do not appear to be stable. Approximately 10 percent of those reporting living with a partner in Wave 6 are no longer living in cohabiting unions. In addition, few have married by this point in time.

We do not find that personal indicators significantly influence changes in subjective perceptions of adulthood. It may be that the young people in this study take on many of these responsibilities at an earlier point in time. As suggested by Furstenberg et al (*forthcoming*), those from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to go through adult transitions at earlier ages than those from more advantaged backgrounds. Thus, it is not that these young people do not have responsibilities, but rather that they experienced fewer changes in responsibilities during this in the period than demographic changes. Because they were familiar with taking on adult-like responsibilities from an early age, changes in responsibilities are less central than changes in adult-like roles to their subjective sense of adulthood.

These findings show that demographic transitions, not personal responsibilities are central to urban youth's subjective perceptions of adulthood. Both moving through transitions and moving backward out of transitions impacts one's self-concept. At the same time, however, we find that the effects of achieving transitions on one's self-defined adulthood status are not all the same and depend on the order and timing of other transitions as well.

These results suggest that the relative salience of demographic and individual markers on subjective perceptions of adulthood depend on one's life course position

(Shanahan et al. *forthcoming*). Even though the youth in this study are relatively young, the number of adult-like roles and responsibilities they have acquired over the two-year period increased significantly. It appears that our sample of urban, predominantly working-class, minority youth may have distinctly different experiences in the transition to adulthood from their middle-class, white counterparts. As past research shows, those from less advantaged and/or minority backgrounds tend to move through the transition to adulthood at a faster rate and with fewer resources than their white, middle-class peers (Furstenberg et al. *forthcoming*, Furstenberg and Fussell *forthcoming*). Unlike the period of exploration and experimentation Arnett (2000) describes, the late teens and early twenties for these youth appear to be marked by taking on rather permanent adult-like roles and responsibilities. As a result, demographic transitions play both a salient and central role in the subjective perceptions of adulthood for these youth.

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