

Becoming Adults: Life Course Transitions in Mexican Young People

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In recent times, Mexico has experienced important socioeconomic and demographic changes. Fertility decline, sustained elevation of life expectancy, women's labor force participation, advance in schooling levels, are among the changes that have occurred. Nevertheless, these transformations have not been accompanied by significant changes in the nuptiality patterns, specially the onset of marriage or consensual unions. To date, there has not been sufficient research in the impact of those changes in the life of adolescents and young adults, even more, in the context of recurrent economic crisis in the last twenty years. Studies in others countries, mainly in developed ones, had established that demographic developments during the last decades have considerably changed the transition to adulthood.

This paper explores the transition into adulthood in recent generations of Mexican young people. Comparing rural and urban context by gender, our aim is to analyze the occurrence and the timing of five events: school leaving, entry into labor force, parental home leaving, first union, and the birth of a first child. We also search for inter-relationships among these life course transitions and focus on the factors that bring forward or delay its occurrence.

Whit data from the 2000 National Youth Survey we found that, entry into first work appears to be the most important life course transition, in terms of prevalence, followed by school leaving. In Mexico, entry into first work does not seem to constitute a pathway into adulthood nor a choice for most young people. Adverse economic settings and recurrent crisis have forced households to insert more and more members into labor market, including younger ones. Parental home leaving is highly associated with first union, in rural and urban areas, both for males and females. For urban females, entry into motherhood is also related with paternal home leaving. Nevertheless, home leaving coincident with first work is more common in rural areas than in urban ones, and is much more important for rural females. For urban males, school and home leaving coincidence is becoming more important.

young persons with a restrictive context in the paternal home, and a better economic position are much more likely to experience the entry into a first job. A paternal home with shared activities and good parental communication inhibits school leaving. A sound economic basis, as well as a good parental communication seems to be a prerequisite for paternal home leaving, entry into union and into fatherhood or motherhood.

From the multivariate analysis of the timing of the transitions, it arises that parental communication is associated with an early school and home leaving, first union and first child, as well as with delaying the age at first work, possibly showing the effects of parental support and respect for young people's decisions. A restrictive context accelerates the occurrence of all five transitions, while the opposite is associated with parental communication and a good economic situation.

Our findings differ from those in the literature in a number of aspects, it seems that the transition into adulthood in Mexico does not follow the same scheme, nor responds to the same factors, of the industrialized countries. An important aspect is that the sequence of the events does not adhere to the normative pathways, and that there is a conflict between the value given to family and procreation and the social concern for individual autonomy.

Another important element refers to choice, which is implicitly considered in the literature as a given aspect of the transition; it seems that Mexican youth has little control over their lives, and that in the occurrence and timing of the transitions familial and societal elements are playing a key determinant role. Specifically, the entry into the labor force does not seem to be a personal choice, but rather a household response to the economic constraints and the lack of opportunities for young people.

Finally, we found sexuality as a very important aspect of the transition into adulthood. The onset of sexual activity is nearly followed by the family transitions, specially for women. The sexual revolution does not seem to be occurring in Mexico, since those young persons who want to exercise their sexuality without social reprobation would be driving to conjugal unions.