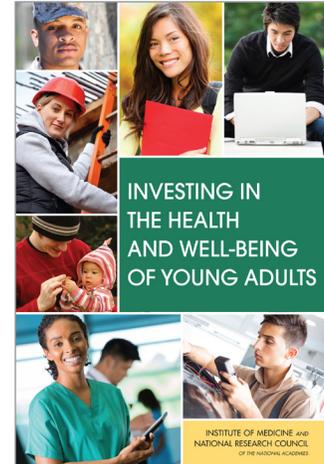


# Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults



**Young adulthood—ages approximately 18 to 26—**is a critical period of development with long-lasting implications for a person’s economic security, health, and well-being. Young adults are key contributors to the nation’s workforce and military services and, since many are parents, to the healthy development of the next generation. Although “millennials” have received attention in the popular media in recent years, young adults are too rarely treated as a distinct population in policy, programs, and research. Instead, they are often grouped with adolescents or, more often, with all adults.

Mindful of the need for a special focus on young adulthood, the Health Resources and Services Administration and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the Department of Health and Human Services, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Department of Defense commissioned the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) to convene a committee of experts to review what is known about the health, safety, and well-being of young adults and to offer recommendations for policy and research.

The resulting report, *Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults*, offers federal, state, and local policy makers and program leaders, as well as employers, nonprofit organizations, and other community partners guidance in developing and enhancing policies and programs to improve young adults’ health, safety, and well-being. In addition, the report suggests priorities for research to inform policies and programs for young adults.

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## **A Changed World, Different Pathways**

Both today and in the past, the transition to adulthood has reflected the end of trial periods and the beginning of more consequential actions. But today's world is more global and networked than in previous decades, and it is marked by increased knowledge and information transfer, heightened risks, fairly low social mobility, and greater economic inequality. These changes have placed greater demands on young adults while also providing less latitude for failure.

In previous generations, the path for most young adults was, generally speaking, to graduate from high school, enter college or the workforce, leave home, find a spouse, and start a family. Today, those pathways are considerably less predictable, often extended, and sometimes significantly more challenging. This presents more choice and opportunity for some young adults and more barriers to others.

The cost of college has grown substantially, and entry-level jobs are becoming more difficult to find. A 2012 study by Belfield and Levin estimates that 17 percent of youth and young adults between ages 16 and 24 are neither in school nor working. And the high cost of living independently has led many young adults to move back into their parents' homes. In addition, partnership and parenting patterns have shifted greatly: many more educated couples live together for several years before getting married and having children, while less-educated young adults often have children outside of marriage and before gaining professional skills and income to support those children.

Marginalized young adults—such as those aging out of foster care, in the justice system, with disabilities or responsible for young children—are much less likely than other young adults to transition to adulthood successfully. Meeting the needs of marginalized young adults not only improves their lives but also has the potential to help them be fully contributing members of society. “No longer depending on welfare, finding a job, and breaking through the system and living above it is what I define as success,” said one member of the young adult advisory group that worked with the committee.

## **Surprisingly Unhealthy**

Contrary to general perception, the report finds that young adults show a worse health profile than both adolescents and adults in their late twenties and thirties. Young adults are currently at the forefront of the obesity epidemic, and this age is also a time of heightened psychological vulnerability and onset of serious mental health disorders. A 2014 study from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration showed that almost one-fifth of young adults aged 18–25 had a mental illness in the past year, yet two-thirds of those did not receive treatment.

Rapid technological changes, economic challenges, and a prolonged transition to adulthood appear to be contributing to the health problems of young adults by increasing their stress and sedentary habits while making them less likely to participate in work and family roles that tend to decrease risk taking. However, the majority of these health problems are preventable, meaning there are opportunities to intervene and promote lifelong health.

## **Differentiating Young Adults from Adolescents and Older Adults**

Three themes emerged from the committee's review of public and private policies and programs pertaining to young adults in the areas of relationships, education and employment, civic engagement and national services, public health, health care systems, and government programs for marginalized young adults:

1. Current policies and programs addressing young adults too often are fragmented and uncoordinated.
2. These policies and programs often are inadequately focused on the specific developmental needs of this population.
3. The evidence base on interventions, policies, programs, and service designs that are effective for young adults is limited in most areas.

In response, the report calls for a coordinated effort by the public and private sectors to raise

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public awareness of the need to improve policies and programs that address the needs of young adults. In addition, it is important to engage young adults themselves in developing policies and programs that affect them.

The report recommends that federal, state, and local governments and nongovernmental entities that fund programs serving young adults or research affecting the health, safety, or well-being of this population should differentiate young adults from adolescents and older adults whenever permitted by law and programmatically appropriate. This recommendation is not intended to imply the creation of an extensive set of new programs targeted only at young adults. Instead, the committee suggested the adaptation or creation of new policies, programs, and practices only when the evidence indicates that young adults’ specific needs are not being met.

### **Supporting Health and Well-Being**

More specific recommendations in the report relate to education and employment, civic engagement and national service, public health, the health care system, marginalized young adults, and young adults who are parents.

To raise completion rates in high school for those who enroll in postsecondary institutions, the report calls for state governments, with support from the U.S. Department of Education, to experiment with and evaluate a range of interventions designed to improve graduation rates in high school and college and enrollment rates in college and job training programs. In addition, state governments should implement and evaluate educa-

tion and workforce development approaches that are more closely tied to high-demand sectors to ensure that skills and credentials attained are ones the labor market actually rewards.

Civic engagement and national service, including military service, can be beneficial during the transition to adulthood by providing young adults with opportunities to contribute to society, form their identities, and explore the larger world. The committee therefore recommends that entities that fund service programs, including the Corporation for National and Community Service and the U.S. Department of Labor, expand and improve opportunities for all young adults.

As young adults face more challenges to their health and safety than is commonly assumed, public health programs and clinical preventive services for this population should be high priorities. The report says that state and local public health departments should establish an office to coordinate programs and services for young adults or assign these responsibilities to an office that focuses on adolescents. Health care delivery systems and provider organizations serving young adults should improve the transition process for young adults moving from pediatric care to adult care, as this can be confusing and difficult, particularly for those with behavioral health problems or a chronic condition. The report also includes recommendations on improving clinical preventive services—such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications—for young adults.

The report finds that programs that reach marginalized young adults currently lack a comprehensive view and recommends that federal and



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state government agencies—including the departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Justice, Housing and Urban Development, and Education—incorporate greater attention to marginalized young adults in ongoing and new population studies. Congress and the executive branch at the federal level, state legislatures and governors, and philanthropic funders should work to improve coordination, flexibility, and collective accountability across the multiple programs that serve these young adults. And the committee says that two-generation programs—which invest simultaneously in young children and their parents—are promising, and it will be important to monitor the outcomes of the young parents that participate in these programs, in addition to early childhood outcomes.

**Conclusion**

Currently, the nation is experiencing economic restructuring, widening inequality, a rapidly rising ratio of older adults, and an increasingly diverse population. The possible transformative effects of these features make focus on young adults especially important. Healthy, productive, and skilled young adults are critical to the nation's workforce, global competitiveness, public safety, and national security. The IOM/NRC report's recommendations can lead to better support for this population and will enable them to successfully parent the nation's next generation.

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