Young adulthood—spanning approximately ages 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 many are parents who will play an important role in the healthy development of the next generation.

Today, as in the past, the transition to adulthood reflects the end of trial periods and the beginning of more consequential actions. Yet today’s world is more global and networked than it was in previous decades, and it is marked by increased knowledge and information transfer, heightened risks, fairly low social mobility, and greater economic inequality. In previous generations, the general path for most young adults was 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, presenting more choice and opportunity for some young adults—and more barriers to others.

Although young adults are less likely to be parents today than in the past, many young adults do become parents. Moreover, young people in this age range are more likely to become parents than people in any other age group; indeed, approximately half of all first births are to women aged 26 or younger. While some young parents thrive personally and are able to parent their children effectively, the challenges facing young parents are often great, and the stakes during these years are high, both for them and their young children.

The 2014 Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC) report Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults explores today’s landscape for young adults and offers guidance in developing and enhancing policies and programs to improve this population’s health, safety, and well-being. The report highlights that investing in young adults has potential benefits for their young children and therefore can complement efforts to support the health, safety, and well-being of the youngest members of society. This brief outlines the report’s findings and recommendations related to young adult parents.
TODAY'S YOUNG ADULTS AS PARENTS

Young adulthood is a critical period for the formation of romantic relationships that can have emotional, physical, and mental implications throughout the life course, and it is a time when many young adults become parents and forge relationships with their own children. Compared to previous generations, partnership and parenting patterns have shifted substantially for young adults.

Since the 1970s, the age at first childbearing has increased, and although most women have children in their 20s, these rates have declined slightly while the rates for women over age 30 have increased. Educated young adults often live together for many years before marrying and having children, while young adults with less education often have children outside of marriage before gaining skills and income to support them. In addition, rapidly changing laws on same-sex marriage are providing new opportunities for family formation among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young adults.

The report finds that childbearing among young adults occurs mostly outside of marriage, and young adult parents face a number of challenges. Young adults who bear children outside of marriage often are more disadvantaged, both before and after birth, compared with married young adults who have children. The balance of research finds that having children is more costly than rewarding for young adults in terms of economic security, daily stress, social relationships, and psychological well-being. However, this general finding is dependent on the gender and marital status of the young adult.

In particular, women and those who are not married tend to experience greater risks of low family income and poverty, and as a result, they experience greater distress and lower psychological well-being relative to men or married young adults. Unmarried young adult women living alone and raising young children may lack economic, social, and emotional resources and face the challenges of providing for their family and parenting young children alone.

Evidence suggests that the disadvantaged outcomes experienced by young adult parents are due more to their disadvantaged backgrounds in childhood and adolescence than to the process of becoming a parent in young adulthood. Therefore, the committee that authored the report found that social stratification in the United States tends to reinforce disadvantaged pathways by which young adults enter parenthood, cope with the stressors of work and family, and parent the next generation of children. Early exposure to adversities among the children of these disadvantaged young parents disrupts brain development; impedes learning; and increases the likelihood of low academic performance, repeated grades, school disengagement, and early dropout from school—a cycle that is repeated as those who experience these adversities have children.

A TWO-GENERATION APPROACH

The committee found that a promising policy trend involves investing in both parents and their young children at the same time. These programs aim to move parents onto a pathway that leads to self-sufficiency and economic independence and to support human capital development and physical and behavioral health among both parents and children, as well as to provide parenting support. Investing in parents is also likely an investment in the long-term developmental trajectories and well-being of children.

Many current two-generation programs provide not only adult basic education but also postsecondary education and certification, thus responding to the rising need for credentials and skills in a service-oriented and technological workplace and preparing parents for jobs that will lead to family-supporting wages. In addition, programs focusing on the early health and education of young children provide an as-yet underused opportunity to reach these children’s parents, many of whom are young adults.

The report emphasizes that in addition to the vital role the programs play for children, it is important for two-generation programs to value parents as individuals. The report recommends that in funding the implementation and evaluation of two-generation programs, philanthropic funders and federal government agencies should actively monitor the outcomes of the young parent participants in addition to early childhood outcomes. Doing so would be valuable for programs that target primarily health and well-being (such as home visiting programs), as well as those that target primarily human capital development.
PROGRAMS SERVING YOUNG PARENTS

The committee reviewed three federally supported programs that, while not targeting young adults specifically, nevertheless serve a large number of low-income young parents who are young adults. They are the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); and Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The report also considers the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) as it relates to young adults.

TANF is intended to help needy families achieve economic self-sufficiency. The TANF block grant provides states funding with which to design and operate programs with the following purposes: (1) provide assistance to needy families so children can be cared for in their own homes; (2) reduce the reliance of needy parents on public aid by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage; (3) prevent and reduce nonmarital pregnancies; and (4) encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. The committee found that nearly all studies of the employment and antipoverty effects of TANF are quite dated. Although those studies help inform debates over the wisdom of the fundamental change in the social safety net occasioned by welfare reform, they provide little or no information about whether the current TANF program helps the families it serves to gain employment or otherwise improve their well-being. In addition, research has shed little light on whether the TANF program improves the employment and economic well-being of young parents, but its impact is likely minimal.

SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp program, is an entitlement program administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), although benefits are distributed by state government agencies. SNAP is the nation’s largest nutrition assistance program. In their review of studies of SNAP, the committee found that program participation generally reduces food insecurity among the adults and children served.

Like SNAP, WIC is administered by USDA, although unlike SNAP, it is not an entitlement program. WIC provides benefits to eligible pregnant, breastfeeding, and postpartum women; infants; and children up to age 5 and is intended to improve fetal development and reduce the incidence of low birth weight, short gestation, and anemia during the prenatal period for pregnant women and their unborn children. It also is intended to provide nutritious foods during critical times of growth and development for infants and young children to improve their health and prevent health problems. WIC is intended primarily to help low-income children and not their parents, although young parents arguably benefit from improvements in the well-being of their children. Although the range of estimated benefits is large, the committee found research on the effects of WIC participation generally to show that the program improves low-income children’s health at birth.

Despite the fact that a large proportion of the populations served by these programs are young adults, the committee found that little attention has been paid to the impact of these programs on the well-being of young adults or to tailoring these programs to meet their needs.

The report also says that the EITC has been shown to dramatically increase the labor market participation of single women while having a modestly negative effect on married taxpayers’ employment. It also is associated with reduced reliance on cash assistance and reduced poverty among families with children. Furthermore, through its impact on family income, the EITC has been shown to improve educational outcomes for young children. However, its effects on young parents have not been directly examined, and its benefit for taxpayers without children is not currently available to young adults under age 25.
IMPROVING POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

The committee stressed that the risks faced by young adult parents and their children require policy attention and program intervention. Policies and programs aimed at supporting marginalized young adults—including those that support young parents—are fragmented and have narrow and idiosyncratic eligibility criteria that pose obstacles to young adults getting the help they need, frequently create lapses in the help that is provided, and too often are stigmatizing.

The report recommends that Congress and the executive branch at the federal level, state legislatures and governors, and philanthropic funders should work to improve coordination, flexibility, and evaluation across the multiple programs that serve marginalized young adults. The report also recommends the amendment of laws and regulations to create accountability for achieving improvement on a limited set of key outcomes for marginalized young adults, including young parents. Outcomes could include employment, education, housing stability, safety, health, connections to responsible adults, and effective parenting.

The report also highlights the need for further research to understand the different paths taken by young adults as they relate to their health, safety, and well-being, including romantic relationships, family formation, childbearing and parenting, effective parenting of young adults, intergenerational patterns, peer relations, access to and use of behavioral and medical health care, involvement with social service and justice systems, and neurobiological processes. It will also be important to examine the impact of the recent dramatic shift in union formation and childbearing on the health and well-being of young adults and their children.

CONCLUSION

Young adults are key contributors to the nation’s workforce and military services and, as parents, to the healthy development and well-being of the next generation. However, the demands of education, workforce entry, and parenting faced by young adults today tend to magnify the effects of preexisting inequality. Thus, from a policy standpoint, the report emphasizes the need to provide the resources and supports that will enable the least-advantaged young adults to accomplish successful transitions to independent and productive adult lives. The ultimate goal is preserving opportunity for all young adults.

Learn more about the report at www.iom.edu/youngadults.