

Early Independence . . . A Look
at the Erosion of Traditional Family
Attitudes Among Young Adults . . .

A Summary of
Research Results

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EARLY INDEPENDENCE . . . A LOOK AT THE EROSION OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY ATTITUDES AMONG YOUNG ADULTS . . .

Whether they are working or going to school, young people today are leaving home earlier than before and living on their own longer. Young women are more likely than before to plan for an extended period of employment and expect to have fewer children, according to a RAND study published in the August 1986 *American Sociological Review* (reprinted as RAND N-2528-NICHD, *Nonfamily Living and the Erosion of Traditional Family Orientations Among Young Adults*). Also, they more readily accept the idea that, as young mothers, they can and should work. Their counterparts who remain with their parents or who marry straight from high school are less disposed to early independence.

The experience of early independence is evident in the more liberal attitudes these days toward sex roles, the report says. Young residentially independent women are more apt to believe that modern conveniences permit a wife to work without neglecting her family, or that a man needn't be the only achiever outside the home, or that men should share the work around the house—doing dishes, cleaning, and handling other chores ordinarily associated with keeping house.

The most formative years, the study says, are the late teens—ages 17 to 20—when the independent living arrangements of these “nestleavers” tend to reinforce certain nontraditional attitudes about family behavior.

As the report notes, “When the trend toward earlier nestleaving began, it was associated with declining marriage age. However, it now is increasingly combined with delays in marriage, with the result that more and more young people are spending an important part of early adulthood in a context in which family roles may be less salient, developing tastes and skills likely to reduce their orientation to family roles.”

The RAND study was based on data derived from the National Longitudinal Surveys of Young Women and Young Men, which include information over a

15 year period on more than 10,000 young people. The actual study sample was restricted to those 14 to 17 years old in the first year of the survey to allow the researchers to observe and measure a complex history of nonfamily living prior to marriage.

The key indicator of nonfamily living studied was the proportion of years that a young person lived outside the parental family between age 17 and the time when he or she married (or reached the terminal date of the analysis). Such nonfamily living here includes years spent in a college dorm, in the military, or living with roommates of either sex, as well as living alone.

According to the report, nonfamily living has had a profound impact on women's work plans. Questioned at age 20, 22, and 24, the nestleavers' responses were compared with answers obtained when they were 17 (that is, some three to seven years earlier). The results reveal that a hypothetical young woman who lived away from home completely between 17 and 20 (or until she married) was 10 percent more likely to prefer to hold a job than to be a housewife at age 35 than a woman who lived at home during this period. Statistically, the former is a little less likely to plan for a lengthy employment at ages 22 and 24 than at age 20, but she is still more oriented toward work than young women who have lived at home or have spent proportionately less time away from home.

Similarly, young women's attitudes toward working while married and a mother were reflected in the degree of early independence they experienced. Those who lived away from home between 17 and 20 (or until marriage) were more likely to accept the employment of married mothers with young children as a reasonable response to changing social and economic conditions.

Living away from home also lowered women's sights about how large a family they expected to have. The study reveals a decline for nestleavers of about .25 children. Put another way, 100 women who lived away from home, working or going to school for several years, would tend to have 25 fewer children among them than another 100 women who lived

with their parents or went straight from home to husband.

The authors also found that college education and independent living tend to reinforce each other. "Young women who live away from home while going to college," they write, "are more likely to change their work plans (to embrace longer careers) than those who attend college while living at home, who in turn are significantly more likely to change their work plans toward employment than those who remain at home and do not go to college." And those who live at home while in college, but who live independently at some other time, also exhibit an increased preference for working at age 35.

According to the study, the effects of nonfamily living held true whatever respondents thought about work and family life before turning 17. What this means is that a period of independent living is just as likely to broaden the attitudes of someone who held more traditional views beforehand as it is to broaden the attitudes of someone who was already a nontraditionalist.

Altogether, the study provides strong new evidence that living away from home before marriage alters young adults' attitudes, expectations, and plans, shifting them from the more family-centered variety toward the more individualistic. In seeking an explanation, the authors speculate that living away from home lessens parental control over their children's activities and may weaken the link between parents' values, attitudes, and behavior and those of their children. Young adults in their own apartment are free of parental curfews and supervision, can manage their own household the way they want to, and have a degree of sexual freedom that is denied to them in their parents' house.

Early independence also equips nestleavers with new social and domestic skills, such as housekeeping or financing a car, giving them the self-confidence they need in creating a life without a family for an indefinite period.

Finally, the experience surely broadens young persons' range of experiences and influences—

altering their plans and expectations for themselves and their views of what is and is not appropriate adult behavior. These findings cast new light on the transition to adulthood and open up new avenues for further research.

Journal reprints of **N-2528-NICHD, *Nonfamily Living and the Erosion of Traditional Family Orientations Among Young Adults***, are available directly from the Population Research Center and may be obtained by writing to: Peter A. Morrison, Director, Population Research Center, The RAND Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, California 90406-2138. Telephone: (213) 393-0411, Extension 6362.

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