Nuffield Foundation

Grown up?

Rethinking journeys to adulthood: An introduction

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Rethinking journeys to adulthood: An introduction

Focusing on 14–24-year-olds living in the UK today, the *Grown up? Journeys to adulthood* programme responds to the changing opportunities and challenges today's young people face on their pathways to independence.

Our starting point has been to ask: what socio-demographic data is collected to understand journeys to adulthood and are we focusing on the right things? We begin by exploring the five 'traditional' markers of adulthood[1]: finishing education, starting work, leaving the family home, getting married and having children.

We foreground these markers because they feature prominently in the official data used to measure journeys to adulthood[2]. They also help us understand how some aspects of young people's lives today are changing, and they continue to influence young people's and societal expectations. We find that in some cases these milestones remain relevant, while others are less so and there are better ones available – and some aspects of young people's transitions are not captured at all. We go on to explore the challenges that encourage us to rethink how we understand journeys to adulthood and the implications for social policy and service reform.

Drawing on research, our Expert Advisory Group and, importantly, young people themselves, we explore to what extent these markers illuminate contemporary journeys to adulthood. The issues that were identified with these markers include:

1. The diminished relevance of some markers
2. Limitations of the data
3. The need to account for the diversity and complexity in young people's lives
4. The importance of the psychological, personal and relational aspects of journeys to adulthood.

These insights shape the work of the *Grown up?* programme, focusing particularly on what matters most for today's young people. An up-to-date, youth-informed understanding of the markers is needed to ensure that policy and practice are effective in supporting young people to achieve positive outcomes. This reflects the Nuffield Foundation's long-standing interest in young people's development – funding more than 100 grants over the last 10 years in this area – and its focus on research and practice to improve lives[3].

Grown up? builds on this legacy, taking account of the new insecurities and opportunities faced by young people across different dimensions of their lives. Our specific focus is on three interlinked topics: education to work, digital lives and mental health.

The impetus for rethinking journeys to adulthood has stemmed from the research, but in particular from the youth engagement work that is a core part of *Grown up?* This introduction draws on the experiences and perspectives of the programme's Youth Insight Group (YIG) (see

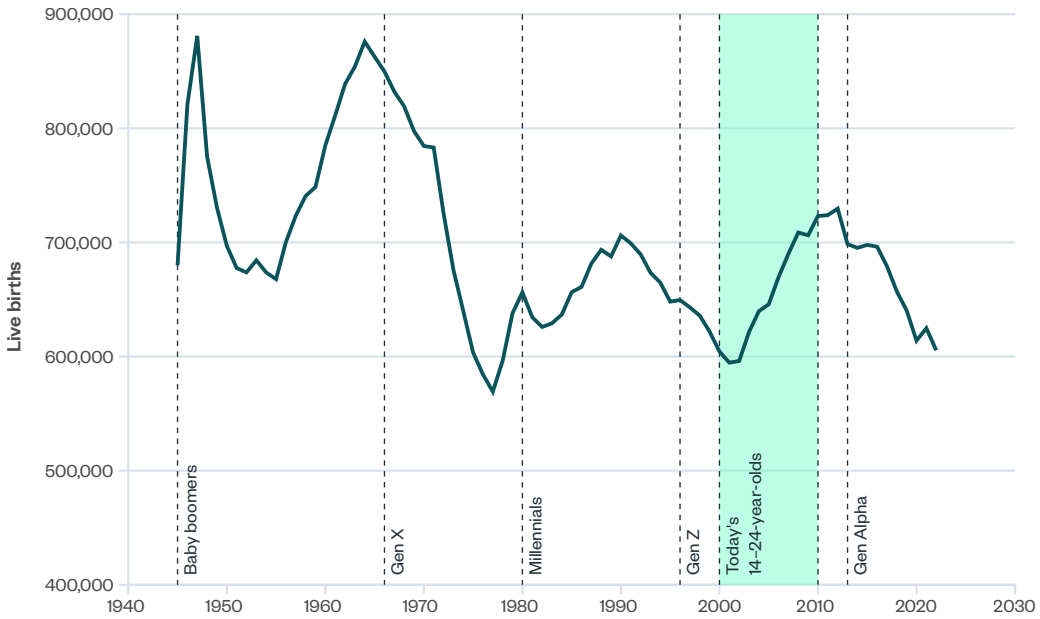
box). While the voices in this report are not intended to be representative, they illustrate many important aspects of 'growing up'[4].

Youth engagement forms a core element of the *Grown up?* programme. The Nuffield Foundation has commissioned Hopkins Van Mil to undertake a programme of youth engagement which includes two elements: the Youth Insight Group (YIG) and deep dive workshops. The YIG comprises 20 young people aged 14-24 from all four nations of the UK and from a diverse range of backgrounds. It meets nine times over the course of the project. The eight deep dives draw on different groups of young people across the UK to explore three topics: education to work, digital lives and mental health.

Who are today's 14–24-year-olds?

The 8.6 million[5] 14–24-year-olds living in the UK today are part of a larger generation sometimes referred to as Gen Z (Generation Z). Figure 1 shows where our cohort of 14–24-year-olds sits within the post-war generations in England and Wales.

Figure 1: Where today's 14–24-year-olds sit among the generations, by year of birth (Live births, England and Wales, 1945–2022)[6,7]



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Efforts to neatly define Gen Z's experiences, behaviours and values risk promoting lazy stereotypes or overlooking the complexity and diversity in young people's lives today.

Nevertheless, there are some compelling reasons to believe Gen Z's journeys to adulthood might be distinct from previous generations, including:

1. **Digital and online lives:** Gen Z is the first generation to be entirely born in the digital age[8], with 9 in 10 young people now owning a mobile phone by the age of 11[9] and almost all (98%) 16–24-year-olds owning a smartphone[10]. This aspect of the Gen Z experience and its effects on the cohort has prompted widespread social commentary and academic interest[11]. There has been considerable public concern about the potential impact of social media use on young people's mental health, but less focus on the opportunities offered by digital technology, for example, in relation to new learning tools and ways of generating income.
2. **Mental health and emotional well-being:** The number of young people reporting mental health difficulties has increased significantly in recent years[12]. For example, the number of young people aged 17–19 who have had problems with their mental health to such an extent that it impacted their daily lives more than doubled between 2017 and 2023 so that more than 1 in 7 (15.4%) now have what is defined as a 'probable' mental disorder[13].
3. **COVID-19:** While all of us have been affected by COVID-19, the cohort that is the focus of *Grown up?* was aged between 10 and 20 at the height of the pandemic, and so experienced significant disruptions during their transitions through education, into work and to greater independence. There is growing evidence of detrimental impacts on children's social and emotional development[14], lost learning[15], young people's mental health[16] and high levels of school absence[17]. There are fears the pandemic has led to the long-term 'scarring' of young people and that they may become a 'lost' generation[18,19].
4. **Smoking, drinking, teenage pregnancies and youth crime are on the decline[20]:** Between 2000 and 2021, the proportion of 16–24-year-olds who smoked declined from 32% to 13%, and the number who drank more than three units of alcohol fell from 41% to 22%. Rates of conception in women under 18 have also plummeted from 44 per 1,000 in 2000 to 13 per 1,000 in 2021[21]. Finally, though hard to measure precisely, multiple data sources point to a substantive decrease in youth crime rates between 2000 and 2019[22 23]. This is positive progress, but new potential sources of harm are also emerging – for example, the prevalence of vaping[24] and sexting[25].

How are the socio-demographic markers of adulthood changing?

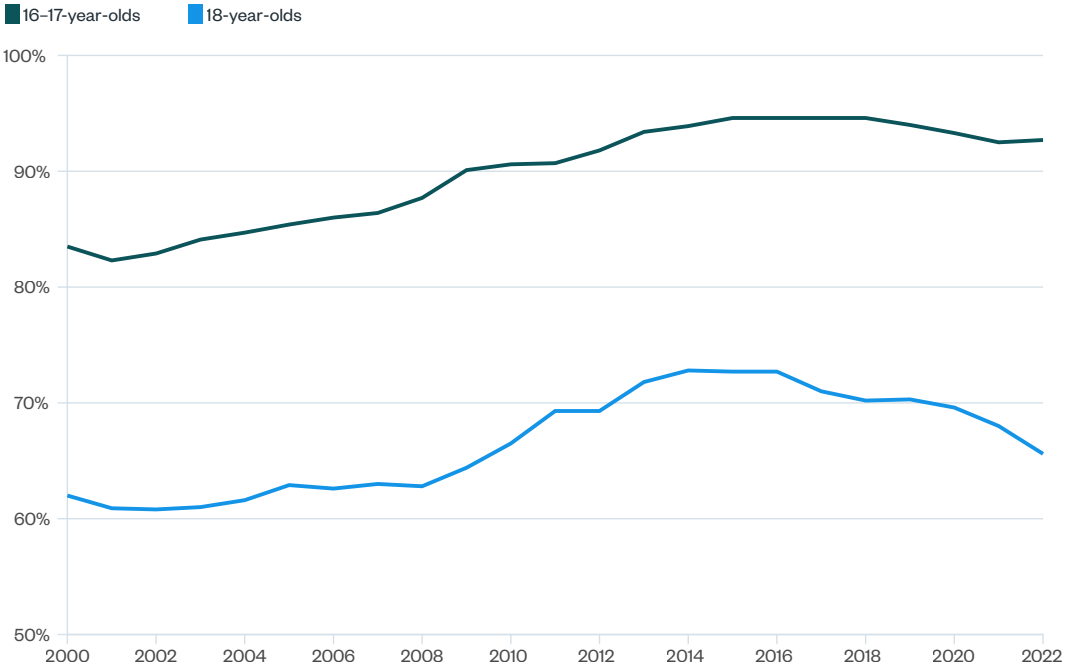
Looking at long-standing trends, young people as a whole are reaching the five markers at later ages than previous generations[26]. However, transitions are highly differentiated by group (e.g. social class, ethnicity, gender, disability, care experience) and place and the intersections between them.

These changes in the timing and patterns of journeys to adulthood to some extent reflect the lengthening of the overall adult lifespan and are shaped by a combination of wider economic and social changes, public policy and changes in norms. Here the focus is on the transition points themselves, rather than interrogating what is driving these changes.

Young people are:

Staying in education or training for longer: Levels of post-16 participation are high across all four nations, with over 92% of 16–17-year-olds continuing in some form of education and training in 2022[27]. In England, the education and training participation rate of 16–17-year-olds increased by nine percentage points to 92.7% between 2000 and 2022 (see Figure 2)[28]. This trend pre-dates the two-stage extension of the requirement to participate in some form of education and training from the age of 16 to 18 in England between 2013 and 2015. For 18-year-olds, the participation rate in England has increased by close to four percentage points between 2000 and 2022.

Figure 2: Participation in education and training, for 16–17- and 18-year-olds, 2000–2022 (England)[29]



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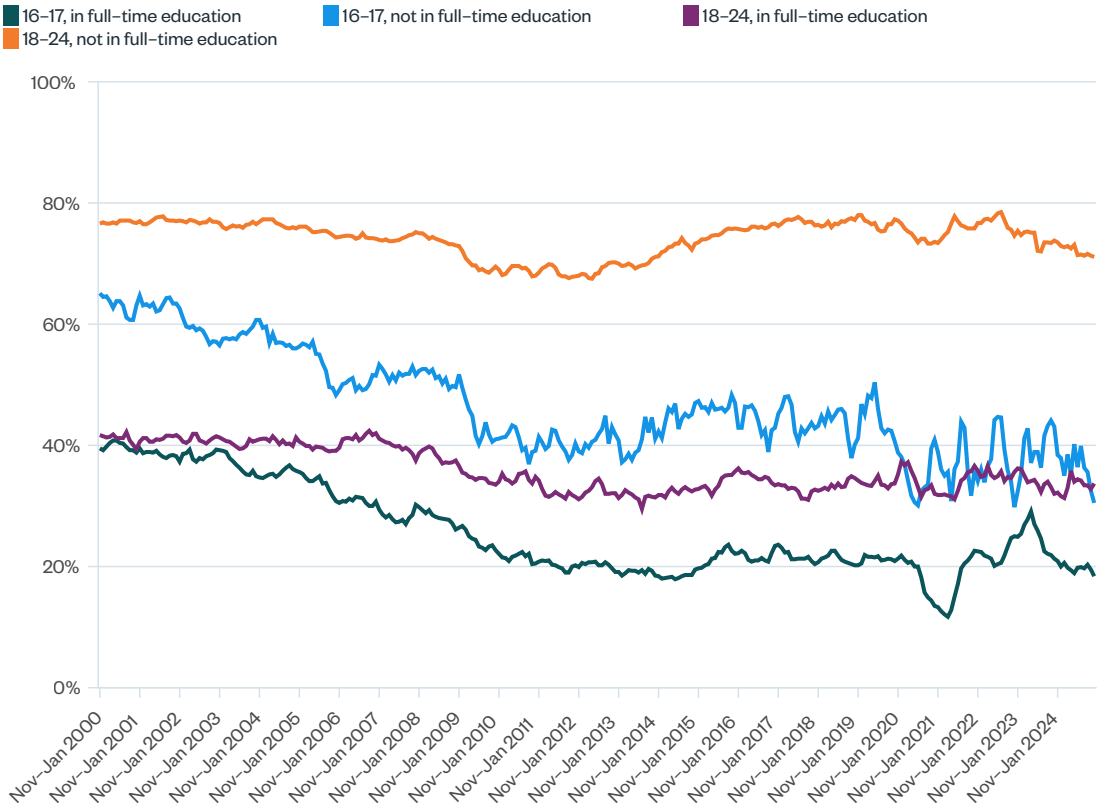
Starting work later: As seen in Figure 3, the employment rate, which includes those in full and part-time work and apprenticeships for 16–17-year-olds in the UK, has fallen significantly between 2000 and 2024 regardless of education status – from 40% to 20% for those in full-time education, and from 63% to 36% for those not in full-time education. For 18–24-year-olds, employment has fallen from 41% in 2000 to 33% in 2024 for those in full-time education, and from 77% in 2000 to 72% in 2024 for those not in full-time education[30]. (See Figure 7 for data on young people not in education, employment or training, and Section 2 for a discussion of the reliability of the Labour Force Survey data.)

Figure 3: Employment rate for 16–17- and 18–24-year-olds, by full-time education status (UK, seasonally adjusted)[31]



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Staying in the family home for longer: In 2023, the age at which most young people moved out of their family home in the UK was 24[32]. In 2000, this occurred at 21. For the oldest section of this study's cohort of 14–24-year-olds – aged 23 at the time of the latest data release in 2023 – half were still living with their parents, representing a 13-percentage-point increase since 2000[33].

Getting married later, if at all: Data shows dramatic reductions in the number of young people getting married over time in England and Wales. The number of individuals getting married below the age of 20 fell by over 85% between 2002 and 2022, and by 70% among 20–24-year-olds. The total number of marriages for those aged 34 or younger fell by 18% between 2002 and 2022[34]. However, the proportion of younger adults living as a couple has remained stable

– only changing from 29% to 28% between 2002 and 2022 for those aged 16–29 – due to increasing rates of cohabitation (see Figure 6)[35].

Having children later: The age at which women have their first child has been increasing for more than 40 years and has continued in recent times. In 2022, the average age of first-time mothers in England and Wales was 29.2 – two and a half years older than it was in 2000. While comparable figures for men having their first child are not available, the mean age of fathers has also risen by two years over the past two decades. At younger ages, the fall in the fertility rate has been particularly large, with live births per 1,000 women aged 15–19 three times lower in 2022 than the rate in 2000 (to 9 per 1,000 from 29 per 1,000)[36].

Young people are reaching these markers later – and some markers not at all. This raises the question of how far the five markers provide insights into contemporary journeys to adulthood. Their relevance, desirability, attainability, reliability and sufficiency have been questioned in our conversations with young people in our Youth Insight Group to date as well as in existing research[37],[38].

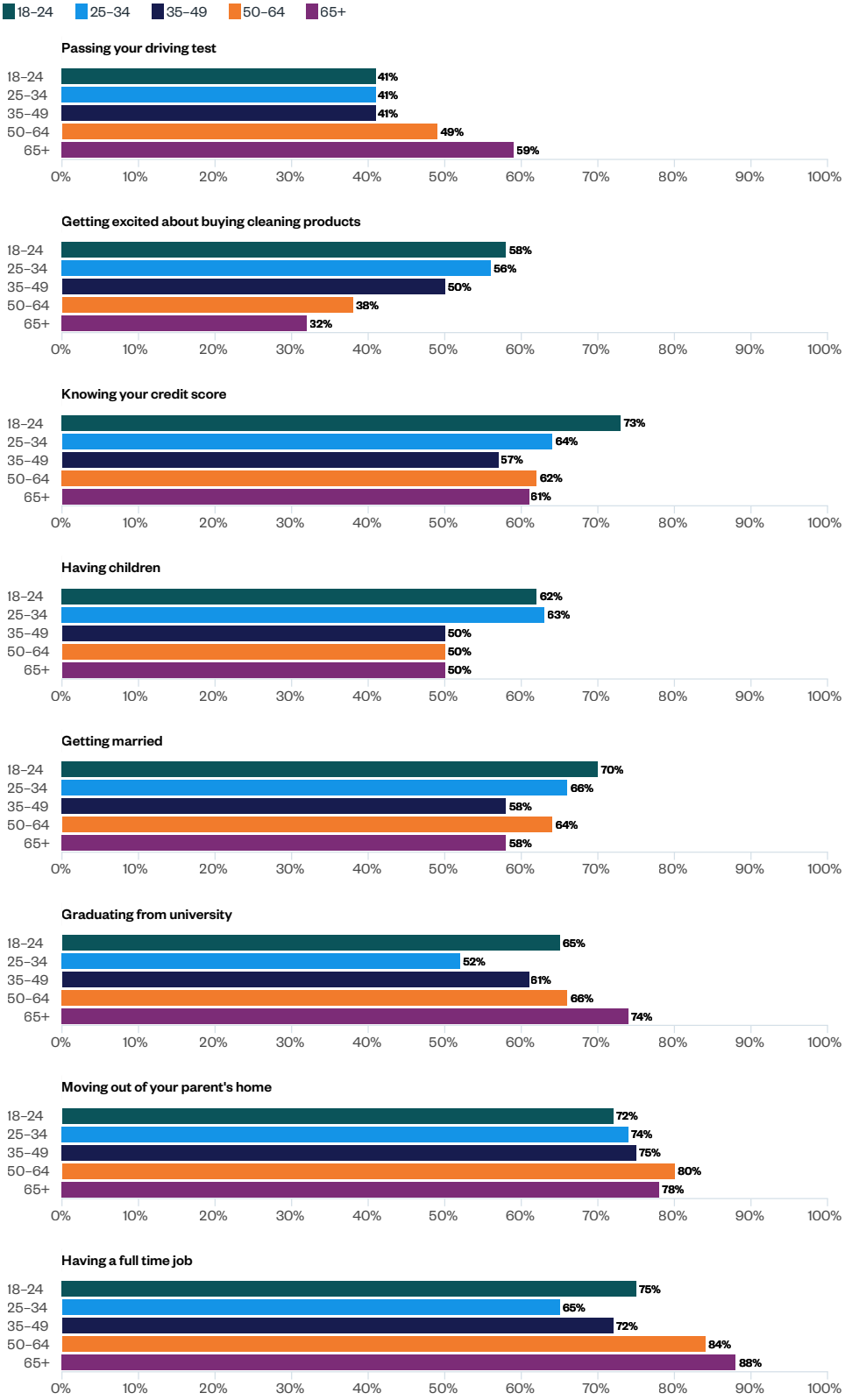
The challenges to traditional understandings of journeys to adulthood

1 The relevance of the five markers

Evidence of how people perceive the five markers is mixed. A 2024 study in the *Journal of Adult Development* by Megan Wright and Sophie von Stumm found that less than half of the participants – adults aged 18–77 living in the UK – endorsed these markers as adulthood-defining characteristics. Full-time employment was endorsed by 28%, parenthood by 26% and marriage by 22% (see Figure 10)[39].

But there is also evidence of the enduring presence of the five markers in contemporary imaginings of adulthood. In a 2021 YouGov survey of the UK public, a majority of respondents included having a full-time job, moving out of your parent's home, getting married, and having children as being either 'very good' or 'fairly good' markers of being 'grown up' (see Figure 4)[40].

Figure 4: How good an indicator, if at all, do you think each of the following are in meaning someone is a grown up? (% who said 'very good' or 'fairly good' indicator) (2021)[41]



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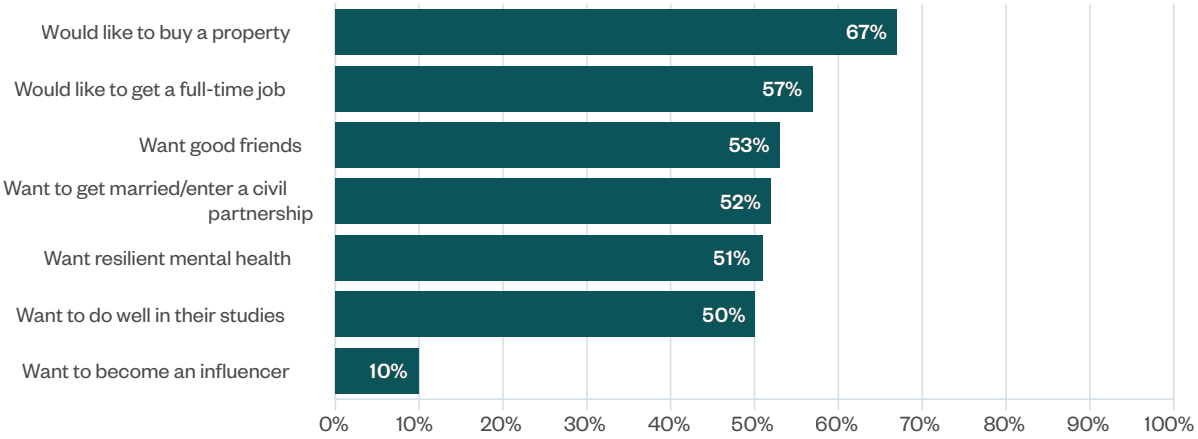
Surveys also provide evidence that Gen Z-ers continue to aspire to many of the five markers, with a majority wanting a property, full-time employment and marriage (or civil partnership) (see Figure 5). A more recent survey of Gen Z found that 81% would buy a home if they could[42].

Figure 5: Aspirations of Gen Z[43]



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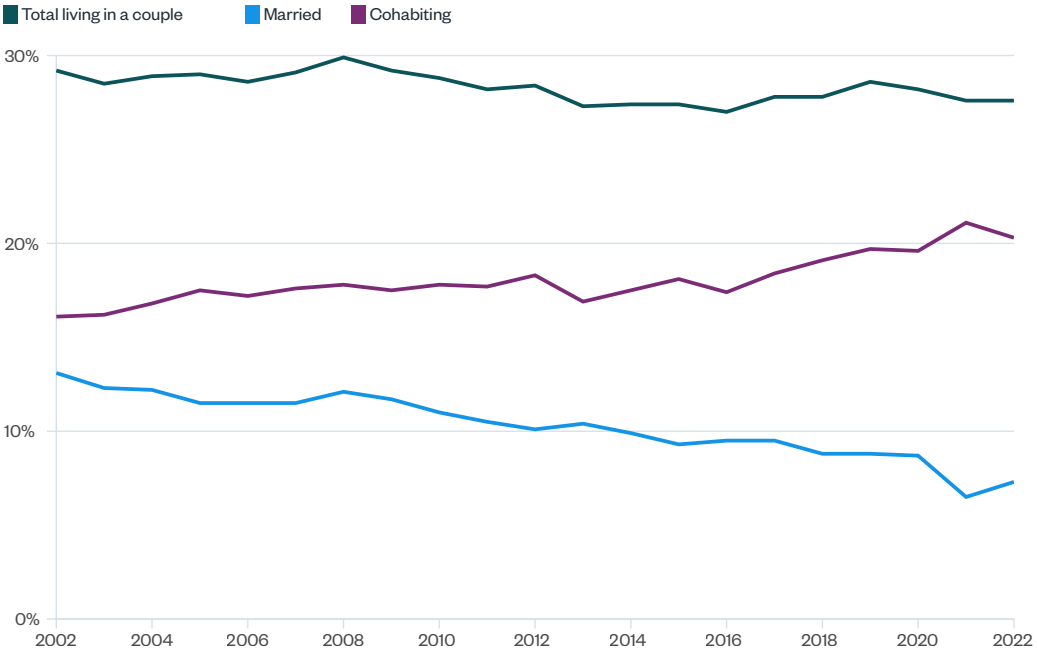
The attainability of these aspirations has been a recurring feature of our discussions with young people to date, serving as a warning about placing too much weight on particular socio-demographic markers in a context of perceived unobtainability. The continuation of these norms was described as creating pressures in young people's lives as well a sense of failure and frustration if markers prove out of reach.

Suggestions for boosting the relevance of the socio-demographic markers from the Youth Insight Group and wider research include:

Cohabitation: Given marriage is happening later, if at all, for today's young people, but acknowledging the importance of partnering in many people's journeys, cohabitation can be seen as an alternative, intermediary, marker despite limitations in the data. As Figure 6 highlights, in England and Wales the proportion of 16–29-year-olds who are living together as a couple, whether married or cohabiting, has remained broadly stable since 2002, but the split between the two has shifted significantly. In 2002, 13% of all 16–29-year-olds were married and 16% cohabiting, while in 2022, only 7% were married and 20% were cohabiting[44]. This marker is supported by data that shows more people are choosing to live together before marriage, and for a longer time[45]. While detailed data on relationship dynamics is lacking, it is likely that increasing rates of cohabitation have changed patterns of relationship stability and churn for today's 16–29-year-olds.

Figure 6: Proportion of those aged 16–29 living as couple, showing split between marriage and cohabitation (England and Wales)[46]



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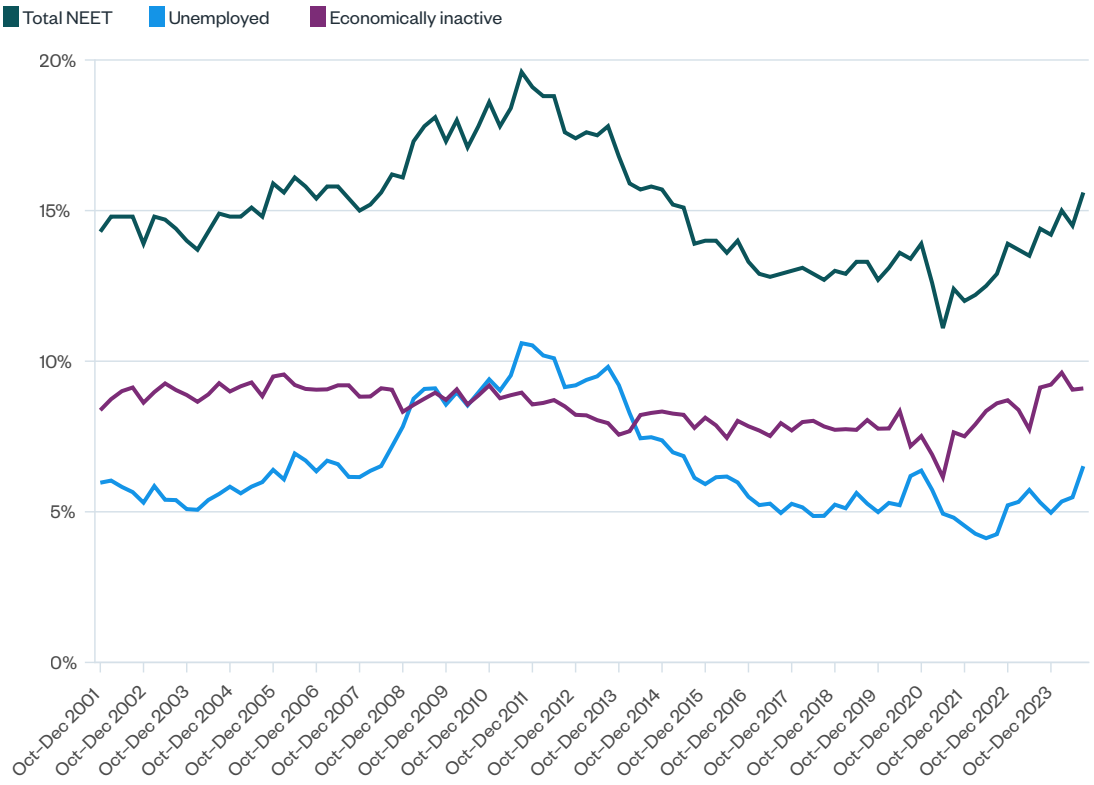
Inactivity, unemployment and 'quality' employment: The 'starting work' marker was described as being particularly unilluminating, given it doesn't differentiate between those who are starting work later due to further studies and those who become unemployed or economically inactive, nor does it capture new working patterns among young people, such as combining part-time work with longer-term study.

Young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), as well as the subsets of NEET young people (unemployed and economically inactive), represent widely used alternatives. Figure 7 shows that in the UK, as of July to September 2024, 15.6% of 18–24-year-olds were NEET, comprising 6.5% unemployment and 9% economic inactivity[47]. Between 2001 and 2024, the NEET rate for 18–24-year-olds has ranged from 1 in 9 people to close to 1 in 5 – nearly 1 million people. The Learning and Work Institute found that 58% of young people aged 16-24 in the UK who are NEET have never had a paid job, with worrying implications for their long-term opportunities[48]. Recent research by the Resolution Foundation has found a strong association between mental health problems and employment outcomes: between 2018–2022, 1 in 5 (21%) of 18–24-year-olds with mental health problems were not in work, compared to 13% of those without them[49].

Figure 7: 18–24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET), showing split into unemployment and economic inactivity (UK, 2001–24, seasonally adjusted)[50,51]



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There is a risk that any measure remains overly blunt: young people have been keen to stress that 'good' employment is what matters, with many young people facing a labour market defined by precarious, zero-hour contracts, limited prospects, and wages that don't cover the cost of living.

Financial independence: Across different ages and stages, YIG members described their financial situation as shaping – often constraining – the opportunities available to them. While home ownership remains an aspiration for young people, it is now unobtainable for many through their 20s and beyond.

> *"The expectation when people used to get married younger is that they'd have a family home and they could afford that. But now it's very rare you can ever afford a home. I just think that with the cost-of-living crisis it's just not feasible and also with the gig economy zero-hour contracts, how are you supposed to actually look after a child with that?"*
>
> **Member of the Youth Insight Group**

Discussions raised a need to better conceptualise and measure what financial independence from parents or carers looks like for today's young people, in a context where many young people may remain in the family home for longer.

Wider financial pressures, such as coping with debt, are frequently mentioned. It is telling that 73% of 18–24-year-olds viewed "knowing your credit score" as a good indicator of adulthood[52] – a higher proportion than for all but one (having a full-time job) of the five markers (see Figure 4).

Digital markers: YIG members raised markers that would not have been features of previous generations journeys to adulthood, such as making your first social media account.

Understanding access and use of digital technologies is a further area for exploration and refinement, with young people's digital lives a key theme of the *Grown up?* programme.

2 Limitations of the data

Three particular issues with the data underpinning the five traditional markers are worth highlighting:

Comparability of data across the four nations of the UK and understanding the role of place: Official statistics provide limited disaggregation by location, limiting our ability to explore how place may be mediating young people's journeys. This is particularly important in relation to the four nations, where increasing policy differences have meant there is greater potential to understand how policy shapes journeys. For example, the aims, approaches, structures, pathways, funding, qualifications and regulations in post-16 education and training have all diverged across the four nations[53]. However, a recent study has noted how difficult it is to compare data across the four nations, with analysis hampered by different definitions or incomplete data, or cases where data is split across government departments[54].

Reliability of youth employment data: Concerns about the reliability of the Labour Force Survey limit our ability to identify and interpret recent trends in youth employment. As shown in Figure 3, there has been increased volatility in the reported employment rate for young people in recent years.

The pandemic is associated with a dramatic reduction in employment rates among 16–17-year-olds for both those in full-time education and not (see Figure 3). However, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) advises caution when interpreting the estimates of proportions of young people in employment[55], in large part due to falling response rates[56]. Analysis by the Resolution Foundation suggests estimates have increasingly diverged from other administrative data sources, with a risk that employment rates are being underestimated and inactivity rates materially overestimated[57].

Strengthening the reliability of data relating to youth employment will be central to policymakers' efforts to better support young people's journeys into employment[58]. *Grown up?* will explore the particular challenges and opportunities young people face when moving from education to work in a rapidly changing labour market, with major policy changes in train,

such as the rise in the National Living Wage for young people, at the same time as employers experience substantial increases in National Insurance[59].

Social categorisation of Generation Z: While available statistics permit some disaggregation by socio-economic status and class, gender, and ethnicity, there are important disconnects between how different social categories are defined and measured, and the social identities and positions recognised and held by members of Gen Z. This can be seen most clearly in relation to gender. While official statistics often measure gender as binary, we know a higher proportion of Gen Z identify as trans and gender non-conforming[60] than previous generations.

The grouping of young people in datasets can also overlook important differences between people within a particular category. The recent review of available data by Administrative Data Research UK identified the need to avoid higher/broader aggregations – particularly concerning ethnicity[61].

3 Accounting for the diversity and complexity in young people's lives

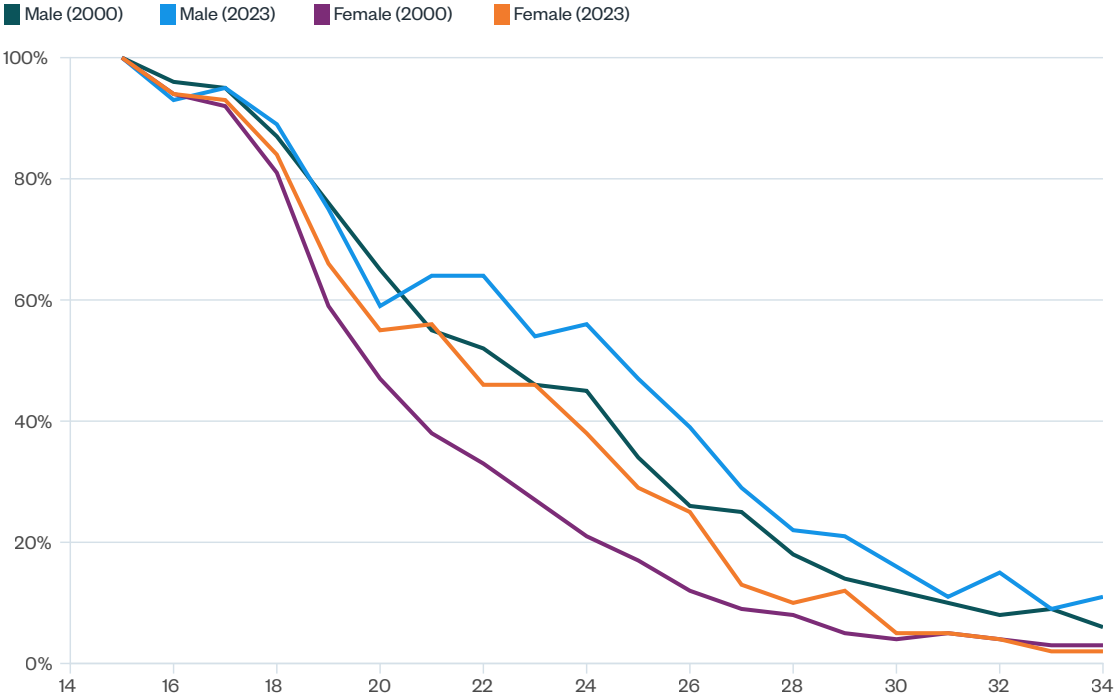
Cohort-wide trends in the five markers overlook profound differences and inequalities.

Data on when young people leave the family home helps illustrate how young people's material resources, social position and where they live are all associated with diverging trajectories.

Gender: For example, there are stark and persistent differences in the age at which men and women leave the family home in the UK, with men living with parents to an older age. In 2023, there was a nine-percentage-point difference in the proportion of males and females aged 15–34 living with parents (46% of males compared with 37% of females[62]). In 2000, it was 11 percentage points (41% of males compared with 30% of females).

This disparity between males and females grows starker into people's 20s before reducing to a lesser but still significant difference by the mid-30s (see Figure 8). For example, while 38% of females live with their parents at 24, the figure rises to 56% for males[63].

Figure 8: Proportion of young people living with parents* in the UK, 2000 and 2023 (by age and sex)[64]



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* 'Parents' is inclusive of grandparents/step-parents, but excludes 'communal establishment' populations, such as children's care homes.

Ethnicity: Markers of growing up are also differentiated by ethnicity and not captured by the five traditional markers of adulthood. A recent analysis identified substantial variations in the prevalence of young people living with their parents according to ethnicity[65]. It found that rates of co-residence are highest among UK-born 25-34 year-olds of Bangladeshi (62%) and Indian (50%) heritage.

When controlling for a range of variables such as marital status, region of residence and economic activity, the factors do not explain the higher rates of co-residence for those from Black, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian backgrounds/groups, pointing "to important differences in family support across ethnic groups"[66], and/or access to resources[67].

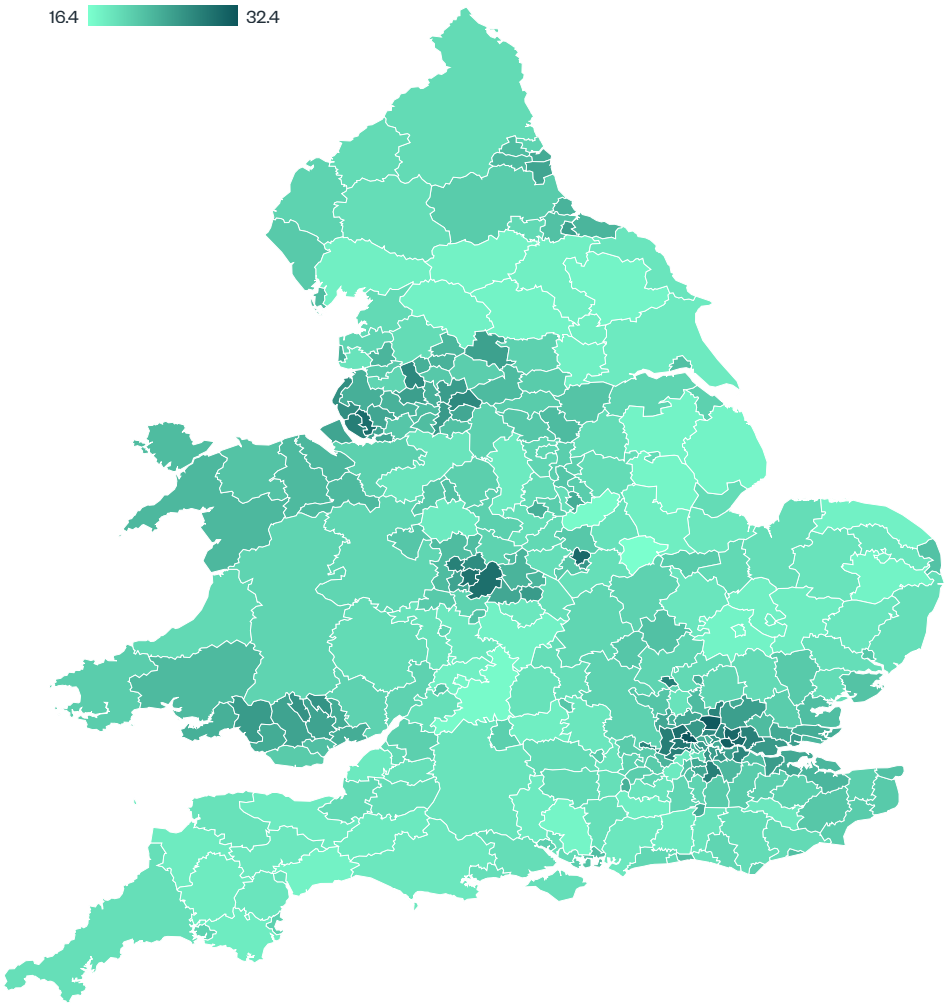
Income: The study also found a close association between income and co-residing with parents. Near half of 25–34-year-olds in the bottom quintile by income are living at a parental home, compared to 2% of those in the top quintile[68].

The financial drivers of co-residence are also clear, with those living with parents likely to be better able to reduce debts and increase savings or spending relative to those in private rented accommodation[69].

Place: Census data reveals substantial geographic inequalities in the proportion of young people who remain in the family home[70].

As Figure 9 shows, families in urban areas are more likely to have an 'adult child' (see endnote for definition) living with them. This is particularly true of London – with six of the ten local authorities having the highest proportion of 'adult children' residing with their families in England and Wales, in part reflecting higher housing costs. While almost 1 in 3 families in Brent had 'adult children' living with them, this figure is around 1 in 6 in the rural local authorities of Rutland and Cotswold.

Figure 9: Proportion of families living with 'adult children' by local authority, 2021 (England and Wales)[71]



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The data highlights not just inequalities but also how an individual's circumstances come together to shape their journey, requiring an intersectional approach if we are to understand what underpins different trajectories into adulthood.

For example, in relation to young carers (children and young people under 18 who provide care to a friend or family member due to disability, illness, mental health problems, old age or an addiction[72]), we know that:

- Young people in single-parent households are twice as likely to be young carers than those in two-parent homes.
- Young people from homes with parents who are not working are four times more likely to be young carers than those with parents in managerial positions.
- Young people living in the most deprived areas are two times more likely to be young carers than those living in the least deprived areas.
- The prevalence of young carers rose with the COVID-19 pandemic, rising from 8% to 9.8–11.9% among 16–18-year-olds living in the UK[73].

Young carers and care-experienced young people (young people who are or have been in the care of a local authority, such as those living in residential care, foster care, kinship care) are examples of groups whose trajectories may look quite distinct from the broader cohort, in that both have a sense of being thrust into adulthood at an earlier age and, often, with less support, see *Generation abandoned?* (Harker)[74].

Young people with care responsibilities may take on more responsibilities and greater independence from an earlier age but may leave the family home later in life. Conversely, only 20% of care leavers aged 19–21 live with relatives or their former foster carers[75]. At least 30% of 16- and 17-year-olds in care in England currently live in supported accommodation[76], in which they are often expected to manage their own finances and shop, cook and clean for themselves[77].

The complexity of young people's needs and circumstances requires us to better see young people in the round, with greater sensitivity to individual circumstances.

It is often the combined impact of multiple, intersecting needs and circumstances – rather than any individual risk factor – that increases a young person's vulnerability and that services struggle to respond to effectively[78].

While there are diverse subgroups of young people that experience quite distinct trajectories into adulthood, efforts are also needed to better understand the common threads of inequality – such as poverty, poor mental health and school absences – shared by groups at the sharp end of inequalities.

4 Valuing the psychological, personal and relational aspects of journeys to adulthood

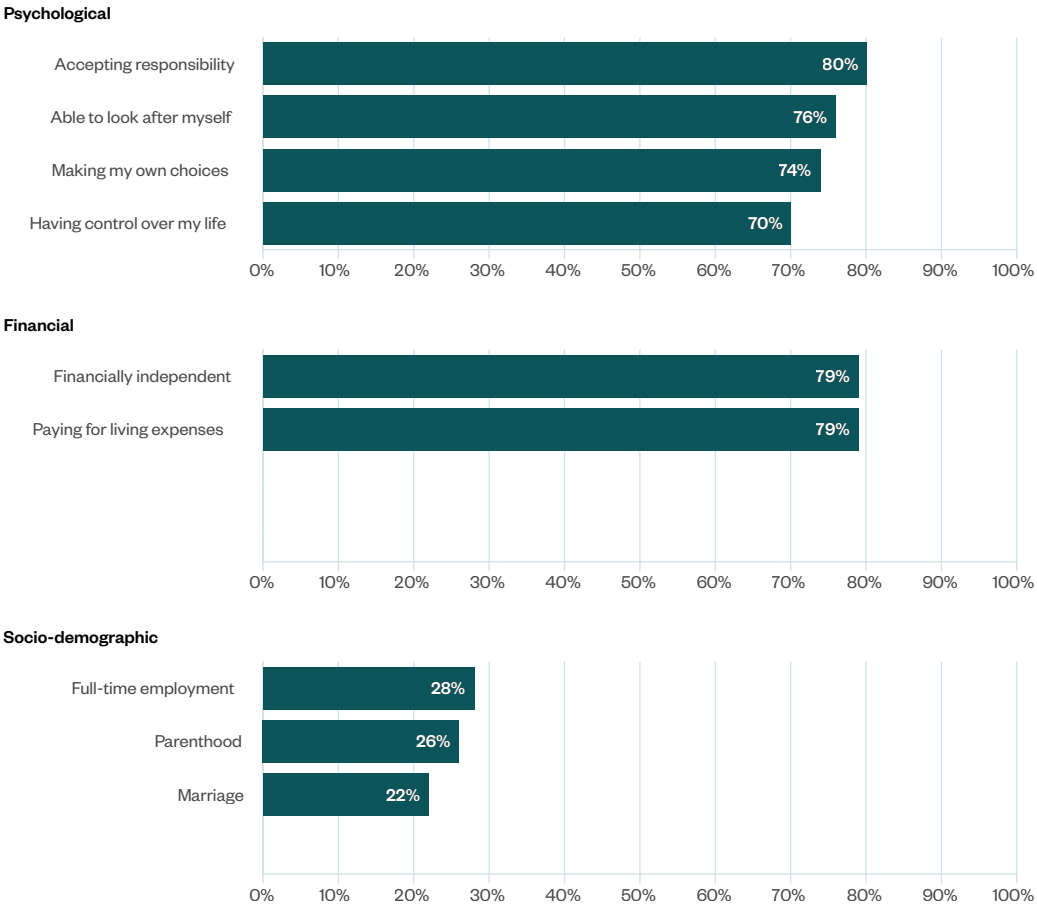
In his foundational work on 'emerging adulthood', Professor Jeffrey Arnett tells us that the markers of adulthood that young people view as most important are not socio-demographic. What's important is said to be more personal, psychological and individualistic[79]. Arnett says becoming an adult today means becoming 'self-sufficient', with three criteria at the heart of it:

1. Accepting responsibility for yourself
2. Making independent decisions

3. Becoming financially independent.

Rather than focusing on the traditional socio-demographic markers, a 2024 UK study of 18–77-year-olds found the most frequently endorsed characteristics of adulthood were: "accepting responsibility for the consequences of my actions", endorsed by 80% of participants, and "being financially independent from my parents", endorsed by 79%[80].

Figure 10: Endorsement of defining characteristics of adulthood by 18–77-year-olds (percentage of respondents)[81]



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Psychological, personal and relational aspects of journeys to adulthood have been recurring themes in what young people have told us about what matters most to them.

Psychological: While YIG members did speak of their journeys as periods of increasing responsibility and independence, some characterised the journey in ways that might be called 'self-dependence' instead of 'self-sufficiency'. Rather than the positive framing of 'self-sufficiency', some YIG members spoke about *having to* stand on their own, rather than *being able to*.

They spoke of adulthood as a time when still-needed supports may be removed, when there would be "no more second chances" and feelings of pressure to, for example, move out of the family home, regardless of whether they were ready to or not.

Similarly, while Figure 10 frames a characteristic as "accepting responsibility" for one's actions, YIG members spoke of being "held responsible".

Developing a sense of identity and belonging was considered a core aspect of their journeys by some. They spoke of developing their own style, coming to appreciate their own uniqueness and caring less about what others think of them.

> *"Once you kind of like stop caring what other people think you start to realise a bit more of what you think about yourself... I think it's just letting yourself find that out rather than letting other people decide."*
>
> **Member of the Youth Insight Group**

YIG members linked the new and heightened pressures and expectations as they grow up with effects on their mental health. A broad range of mental health pressures were identified: financial, familial expectations, lack of support, peer pressure and uncertainty about what comes next.

While some of these pressures are long-standing, such as those caused by examinations, they pinpointed more recent ones, such as social media and being subject to images and constructions of 'perfection'.

Personal: When discussing the important milestones in contemporary journeys to adulthood, many YIG members raised markers that were specific to their own experiences and ambitions. These included 'coming out', leaving care and advocating for yourself with a medical professional.

> *"I didn't come out until I was about 20. So that was like a massive step, kind of fell into my skin a bit more and had the confidence to put myself out there and sort of crack on with life, I suppose."*
>
> **Member of the Youth Insight Group**

For one aspiring footballer within the YIG, a first appearance for the senior team was the milestone that mattered most in her own journey.

They also raised various, smaller steps such as "walking to school on my own" and "paying my first bill" as important markers in their journeys. These examples are important reminders that, rather than 'big ticket' milestones, it is often the smaller 'inchstones' that are more meaningful to individuals.

> *"Mine is doing an activity without supervision, so that's like without school, without family, just because my family is really strict. So the first time I could even go to like the cinema with my friends was quite late, like 16. So it was a big deal for me just to have that bit of independence."*
>
> **Member of the Youth Insight Group**

Relational: Throughout discussions of markers, the crucial roles of family, friends, teachers, support groups and networks, and other trusted adults were stressed.

For some, this relational dimension was particularly acute. For example, for one care-experienced young person, navigating the journey to adulthood was about "working out the trusted adults that are still going to be there"[82].

For many, the journey to adulthood seems more firmly rooted in continuing dependence on parents and family than ever before. There is a widespread view that the state has stepped back from providing vital forms of support to young people, creating a vacuum that families are expected to fill. This 'Bank of Mum and Dad' is much more than just financial; it includes emotional support and guidance, and backstop support like a bed they could use at any time – and it is not something that all can expect.

Parental expectations were also felt to constrain choices and journeys, with members feeling pressures to conform to traditional and cultural expectations around marriage and having children, for example.

Relatedly, YIG members spoke of the importance of parental and familial acceptance as young people express their identities. Friends were described as helping them to make the journey to adulthood easier, reflecting the fact that a slightly higher proportion of Gen Z has been found to aspire to have good friends than marriage (see Figure 5).

The emphasis young people placed on their relationships, social networks and trusted adults provides a vital challenge to the data we collect and the ways we conceptualise journeys to adulthood, often focusing on the individual and overlooking the relational aspects of young people's journeys. This also has implications for developing effective policy responses which take into account the relational dimensions of young people's lives.

Mapping new pathways to adulthood

What adulthood 'is' is not fixed and will change over time in relation to shifting contexts and the experiences of young people.

The five 'traditional' socio-demographic markers continue to feature in young people's imaginings of adulthood, particularly in relation to financial independence, work and moving out, even if these goals are less obtainable.

But they remain crude measures. They don't capture the realities and 'yo-yoing'[83] of many young people's lives as they move in and out of education and training, employment, and the family home through this period of life.

The five markers overlook inequalities and the greater heterogeneity that comes with the diversity of this cohort. This could be about, for example, patterns of multi-generational living arrangements. They also don't capture many of the things that matter most in young people's lives, such as the psychological and relational aspects of growing up.

And while measures such as staying at home for longer may reflect a new context for today's young people, they tell us very little about how young people are adapting and – in many cases – thriving under these new realities. They also don't tell us of the new possibilities for today's young people, such as those presented by digital technology.

> *"Maybe some acknowledgment from media or other generations that it is, in fact, more difficult to get into work and keep work because I think a lot of the time, young people are villainised or made to seem as lazy, even though there's statistics that show that it is more difficult than it maybe ever has been to have savings or buy a house or anything like that"*
>
> **Member of the Youth Insight Group**

The *Grown up?* programme will explore the implications of later transitions to adulthood and how they interact to inform policy and practice. For example, staying in education and training for longer and starting work later boosts skill levels, job opportunities and wage levels on average, but not for all (see recent research on the impact of the Education Maintenance Allowance on disadvantaged young people, discouraging potentially valuable experience of working alongside study)[84]. Postponing parenthood has enabled many women to stay in jobs and build their careers for longer before taking maternity/parental leave, though for some, this may be the result of a lack of choices over employment and housing. Leaving the family home later (where it's possible to do so) may help to reduce housing costs and help a young person get a foothold in a job or provide the support needed to overcome a difficult phase – but it could also be detrimental, preventing a wider job search or the establishment of an intimate relationship.

As a society, we have not kept pace with the changes in young people's lives. In a context of constrained public spending and cost-of-living pressures, policies and services have struggled to respond, families have been asked to do more, and young people feel as if the stakes are higher than ever.

Many services on offer for young people assume a linear journey to a particular destination and so are ill-equipped to provide support for young people who don't meet interim milestones, such as education and training qualifications, work experience or stable employment.

And some young people face cliff edges in services, such as care leavers or those transitioning to adult health services. Levels of support may reduce or disappear entirely, or established relationships may be lost at critical points in young people's lives.

There is a need to better appreciate and respond to the interrelatedness of aspects of young people's lives, such as the relationship between mental health difficulties and economic inactivity[85], considering the combination of support needed to meet the financial, educational, psychological and relational needs of young people.

If we are to continue to ask more of families, greater consideration needs to be given to the help families need as a whole, and to meeting the needs of young people who do not have strong networks.

This programme provides a vital and timely opportunity to listen to young people, explore available data, and commission thought-provoking pieces that challenge our perspectives on issues affecting young people today. Combining this work with the findings from the rest of our funded research, we aim to contribute to a research, policy and service environment that better understands and responds to young people's experiences today.

Endnotes

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4 The voices we draw upon in this report are not intended to be representative. The youth engagement work is distinct from qualitative research with young people, where attitudes, views and experiences are gathered and analysed through a range of robust methodological approaches.

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Appendix: Figure full descriptions

Figure 1

Overview

The chart gives details of the birth years and birth rates of generational cohorts, from Baby boomers to Gen Alpha. This Introduction's cohort are from the latter two-thirds of Gen Z.

Presentation

The chart presents a single line travelling left to right from 1945 to 2022. The line rises and falls to give the birth rate in each year. Generation groups are indicated by vertical markers, with the generation names and birth year ranges labelled. The years in which this Introduction's cohort are born are marked with dashed lines.

Values

A summary of the values presented in this figure:

Generation	Birth year range	Generation birth rate trend	Number of births at start	Number of births at end	Notes
Baby Boomers	1945–1965	Rising	680,000	860,000	Immediate rise to 880,000 in first two years, then falling to baseline, followed by a gradual rise.
Gen X	1966–1979	Falling	850,000	640,000	Final two years are a rise from a low point of 570,000.
Millennials	1980–1995	Stable	655,000	650,000	Low point 625,000; high point 705,000.

Generation	Birth year range	Generation birth rate trend	Number of births at start	Number of births at end	Notes
Gen Z	1996–2012	Rising	650,000	730,000	Initial 7-year fall to 595,000, then rise.
Today's 14–24-year-ols	2000–2010	Rising	605,000	705,000	This Introduction's cohort
Gen Alpha	2013 onwards	Falling	700,000	600,000	at 2022.

Full dataset available here.

Figure 2

Overview

The line graph shows participation rates in education and training, for 16–17- and 18-year-olds, 2000–2022. It shows that 16–17-year-olds have higher presentation rates, with both groups showing an increase from 2000 to roughly 2014, with a decline in recent years.

Presentation

The chart gives two lines travelling left to right, from 2000 to 2022. The height of the line shows the percentage participation rates.

Values

A summary of the values presented in this figure:

Age	2000 rate	High point	High point year	2022 rate	Notes
16–17	84%	95%	2015	93%	Slight increase in final year
18	62%	73%	2014	65%	Decline appears to be accelerating.

Full dataset available here.

Figure 3

Overview

The line graph shows trends in employment rates, 2000–2024. All lines show decline by around 2014 but start recovering from that point. There is a fall again around 2020. 2021 onward are more stable for those in full-time education, with those not in full-time education showing more decline. Overall 16–17-year-olds show a roughly 50% decline, with greater decline for those not in full-time employment. 18–24-year-olds show a lesser decline, 10–20%, but conversely with a greater decline for those in full-time education.

Presentation

The chart gives four lines travelling left to right to indicate the different dates. The height of the line shows the percentage employment rates.

Values

A summary of the values presented in this figure:

Age	Education status	2000 rate	2024 rate
16–17	Full time	40%	18%
16–17	Not full time	65%	31%
18–24	Full time	42%	34%
18–24	Not full time	77%	71%

Full dataset available here.

Figure 4

Overview

The bar graph shows response rates for eight indicators, indicating what percentage of respondents felt an indicator was a "fairly good" or "very good" indicator of being grown up. The responses are also separated into age groups. All indicators have different mixes of being more popular among different age groups.

Presentation

Each indicator has five horizontal bars, with the length of each bar showing the response rate from age groups, the top bar being the oldest group.

Values

The values presented in this figure. All values are percentages.

Indicator	Age 65+	Age 50–64	Age 35–49	Age 25–34	Age 18–24
Having a full-time job	88	84	72	65	75
Moving out of your parent's home	78	80	75	74	72
Graduating from university	74	66	61	52	65
Getting married	58	64	58	66	70
Having children	50	50	50	63	62
Knowing your credit score	61	62	57	64	73
Getting excited about buying cleaning products	32	38	50	56	58
Passing your driving test	59	49	41	41	41

Full dataset available here.

Figure 5

Overview

The bar chart shows how many positive responses different aspirations received by Gen Z respondents. One bar is much shorter at 10%, with the others gradually increasing from 50% to 67%.

Presentation

The bar chart lists seven aspirations, each with a horizontal bar, its length indicating percentage of positive responses.

Values

The values presented in this figure:

Aspiration	Percentage of positive responses
Want to become an influencer	10
Want to do well in their studies	50
Want resilient mental health	51
Want to get married or enter a civil partnership	52
Want good friends	53

Aspiration	Percentage of positive responses
Would like to get a full-time job	57
Would like to buy a property	67

The full dataset repeats this data and includes the source details. It is available here.

Figure 6

Overview

This line chart shows the proportion of 16–29-year-olds living as couples in England Wales from 2002 to 2022. It also shows how these values subdivide into those married and those cohabiting. Total couples living together remains stable. Proportion cohabiting rises over this time, while proportion married falls.

Presentation

The chart gives three lines travelling left to right, from 2002 to 2022. The height of the line shows the percentage of people living as couples.

Values

A summary of the values presented in this figure:

Group	2002	2022
Total living as a couple	29%	28%
Cohabiting	16%	20%
Married	13%	7%

Full dataset available here.

Figure 7

Overview

This line graph shows the percentage of 18–24-year-olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) from 2001 to 2024. It also shows the split into the two subsets of NEET: unemployment and economic inactivity. Total NEET and unemployment both rise and fall in similar amounts. Economic inactivity changes less. All finish a little higher than they started.

Presentation

The chart gives three lines travelling left to right, from 2001 to 2024. The height of the lines show the percentage of young people who are NEET and in which subset of NEET.

Values

A summary of the values presented in this figure, with 2011 and 2021 included to give examples of the variability:

Group	2001	2011	2021	2024
Not in education, employment or training	13%	19%	11%	16%
Economically inactive	8%	9%	6%	9%
Unemployed	6%	11%	5%	7%

Full dataset available here.

Figure 8

Overview

The line graph shows the proportion of young people living with parents in the UK in both 2000 and 2023. The term 'Parents' is inclusive of grandparents/step-parents, but excludes 'communal establishment' populations, such as children's care homes. Ages shown are from 15 to 34. Each age's proportion is shown separately for male and female. Overall there is a broad fall in young people living with parents: from 100% age 15 to 2-11% age 34. The curve is steepest between ages 17 and 28. The male proportion is generally higher than female. The 2023 values are generally higher than the 2000 values.

Presentation

The chart gives four lines travelling left to right, from age 15 to age 34. The height of the lines show the percentage of young people who are living with parents.

Values

A summary of the values presented in this figure:

Group	Year	Age 15	Age 20	Age 25	Age 30	Age 34
Female	2000	100	47	17	4	3
Female	2023	100	55	29	5	2
Male	2000	100	65	34	12	6
Male	2023	100	59	47	16	11

Full dataset available here.

Figure 9

Overview

The figure shows a map of England and Wales showing relative proportions of families with 'adult children'. The proportions shown vary between 16% and 32%. The trend is for higher proportions in cities such as London, Birmingham and Manchester. Medium proportions are shown in the corridor between these cities, as well as North and South Wales, and the north of England. More rural areas in general show lower proportions.

Presentation

A map of England and Wales is shown, divided into local authority areas. Three cities are labelled (London, Birmingham and Manchester). Light shading indicates lower proportions. Dark shading indicates higher.

Values

Full dataset available here.

Figure 10

Overview

The bar chart shows the proportion of adult respondents endorsing characteristics as being defining of adulthood. The characteristics are grouped into socio-demographic, financial and psychological. The socio-demographic group has the lowest rates (12-18%). The financial group has the highest rates (79% for both). The psychological group is a little lower than financial (70-80%).

Presentation

The chart list nine characteristics, each with a horizontal bar, its length indicating percentage of positive responses.

Values

The values presented in this figure:

Group	Characteristic	Percentage of positive responses
Socio-demographic	Marriage	22

Group	Characteristic	Percentage of positive responses
Socio-demographic	Parenthood	26
Socio-demographic	Full-time employment	28
Financial	Paying for living expenses	79
Financial	Financially independent	79
Psychological	Having control over my life	70
Psychological	Making my own choices	74
Psychological	Able to look after myself	76
Psychological	Accepting responsibility	80

The full dataset repeats this data and includes the source details. It is available here.