
THE
CLARK
UNIVERSITY

Poll

of Established Adults
Ages 25-39



**BECOMING ESTABLISHED ADULTS:
Busy, Joyful, Stressed — and Still Dreaming Big**

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Ph.D. • Joseph Schwab • Clark University • Worcester, Massachusetts • clarku.edu/clarkpoll

October 2014

Preface

By now there is widespread awareness that it takes longer to reach adulthood today than it did a few decades ago. Within the social sciences, the theory of “emerging adulthood” as a new life stage lasting from the late teens through the twenties has been widely embraced as a way of understanding this new and prolonged transition to adulthood. However, for the general public, the longer road to adulthood has more often been regarded with concern, or even derision. *Won't they ever grow up? What's the matter with them, anyway?*

The previous two Clark polls helped to dispel the negative stereotypes and misunderstandings of the emerging adult years. In 2012, the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults surveyed 1,029 Americans ages 18 to 29, including a broad range of variation in ethnicity, social class background, educational attainment, and geographical region. Contrary to the stereotype that they are selfish and do not care about their community or society, the 2012 Clark Poll found that 86% of 18- to 29-year-olds agreed that “It is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world.” Contrary to the claim that they have lost faith in the future and are resigned to having a life that is worse than their parents’ generation experienced, 77% agreed that “overall, my life will be better than my parents’ lives have been,” and a remarkable 89% agreed that “I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life.”

There were also many refreshing surprises in the 2013 survey, the Clark University Poll of Parents of Emerging Adults. In this survey of a diverse sample of 1,006 parents of 18- to 29-year-olds nationwide, we found that they were highly positive about their relationships with their emerging adult children. More than half of parents (56%) reported being in contact with their emerging adults every day or almost every day, either in person or via technology. A large majority of parents (86%) rated “relationships with my 18- to 29-year-old” as a current source of enjoyment in their lives. In contrast to the negative stereotype that parents can’t wait for their kids to leave home and groan when they return, the 2013 Clark Poll found that 66% of parents with an 18- to 29-year-old living at home were “mostly positive” about having them at home; only 6% responded “mostly negative” (with the rest a mix of positive and negative). Although conflicts over money were common, and parents sometimes worried that their emerging adults were not making enough progress toward becoming self-sufficient adults, overall the poll’s conclusions about relations between parents and emerging adults were strongly favorable.

So what happens after emerging adulthood? Many emerging adults feel like they are not entirely adult. So when does the feeling of reaching adulthood

**“WE FOUND ESTABLISHED
ADULTS TO BE MORE SIMILAR
THAN DIFFERENT, REGARDLESS
OF BACKGROUND.”**

become firmly established? Emerging adults are highly optimistic and hopeful about the shape their adult lives will take. So how do they feel about their lives once they have chosen a career path and a marriage partner? At ages 18-29 they enjoy the freedom and the sense of wide-open possibilities that come with being an emerging adult, even as they also experience a substantial amount of anxiety. Do they lament the loss of freedom once they reach their thirties and make commitments to others? Does their anxiety wane once they are more securely established in a career path?

These were the kinds of questions we sought to answer in the 2014 Clark University Poll of Established Adults, ages 25-39. We chose the 25-39 age range rather than 30-39 because people make the transition to an established adulthood at different points. There is nothing magical about age 30 that inducts people into adulthood; some people feel adult and have made adult commitments already in their late twenties, whereas others do not establish the stable structure of an adult life until their thirties. In this report, sometimes we describe the responses for the entire 25-39 age range, and sometimes we compare the 25- to 29-year-olds to the 30- to 39-year-olds, depending on the question of interest.

The Clark University Poll of Established Adults is a national survey, and we sought to represent the diversity of American 25- to 39-year-olds in ethnicity, region, and social class. We highlight some of the variation in this report. Overall, however, we found established adults to be more similar than different, regardless of background. Most of them have entered adulthood smoothly, and are content with the lives they have built for themselves. They have found work they enjoy, and most have found a “soul mate” with whom to share their lives. Those who have become parents revel in the role, even as they also acknowledge the sacrifices it requires. However, many established adults are not wholly satisfied with the progress they have made in their careers, and a high proportion wish they had obtained more education. Nevertheless, the overall results show that most of them are thriving and happy as established adults.

JEFFREY JENSEN ARNETT, Ph.D.

Research Professor of Psychology and Director
of the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults

JOSEPH SCHWAB

Graduate Research Assistant

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Methodology of the Report	4
I. Reaching Established Adulthood.	5
II. Becoming a Parent: Joy, Fun—and Stress	8
III. Finding a Soul Mate: Mostly Roses, So Far	10
IV. Work: High Aspirations, Mixed Reality	11
V. Education: Important but Elusive	12
VI. Still Hopeful	14
Conclusion: Giving the Thirties Their Due	16
Sources and Suggestions for Further Reading	17

METHODOLOGY OF THE REPORT

Questions and requests for further information should be directed to Dr. Arnett, jarnett@clarku.edu.

The Clark University Poll of Established Adults entailed interviews with 1,011 people ages 25-39. The data collection was conducted by Purple Strategies, a professional survey research firm, from April 12 to May 12, 2014. Participants were contacted via three methods: cell phones (107), landlines (140), and the Internet (764). The three methods were used in order to obtain a diverse sample that would reflect the population of 25- to 39-year-olds in the United States. Using landlines alone is no longer viable for survey research on this population, as many of them use cell phones only. Survey sampling of cell phones via random-digit dialing is restricted by federal law in the United States, so the Internet sample was necessary to reach segments of the population who would not be accessible via either landlines or cell phones. The Internet sample has been developed by Purple Strategies for their survey research, to represent a broad cross-section of the American population.

The director of the poll, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, Ph.D., developed the questions in consultation with administrators at Clark and advisers at Steinreich Communications, a public relations firm. At Clark, the contributors were Vice President of Marketing and Communications Paula David and her team. At Steinreich, the contributors were Vice President Andrea Pass and her team.

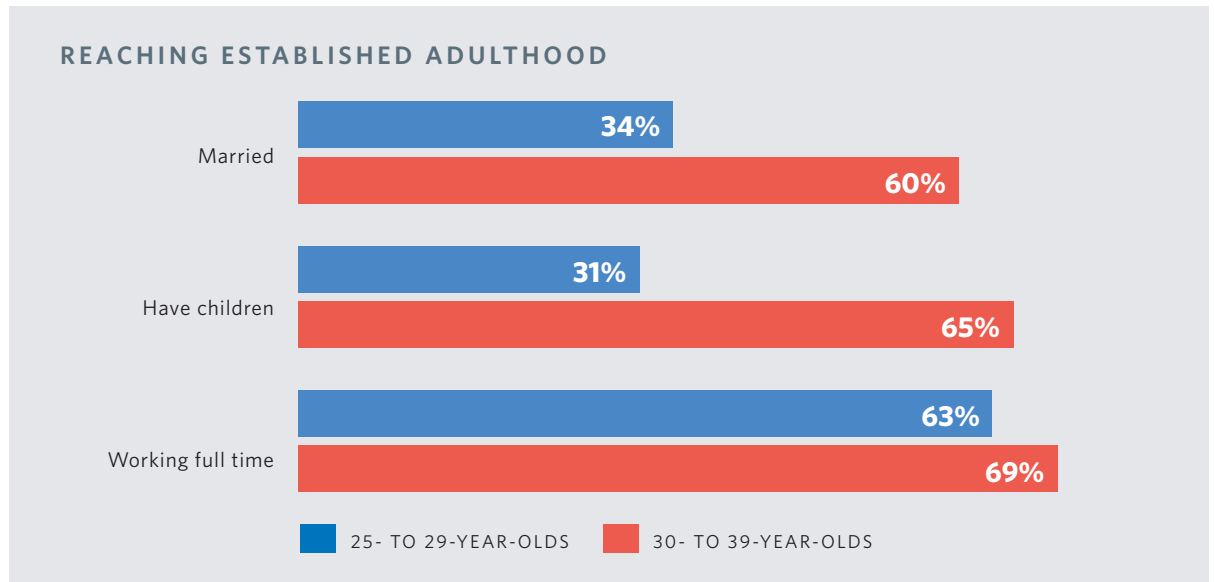
The total sample was generally representative of the American population of 25- to 39-year-olds. Half the sample was male (49%) and half female (51%). In their ethnicity, 55% were White, 20% Latina/Latino, 13% African American, 8% Asian American, and 4% Other. About half (51%) were currently married, 12% were cohabiting, 10% had a close boyfriend or girlfriend, and the rest had no current partnership. About half (53%) had one or more children. They were sampled from all regions of the country. They were from diverse social classes, as represented by their educational attainment: 35% high school diploma or less; 30% some college or vocational school; 35% four-year college degree or more. Two-thirds (67%) were employed full-time, and 13% part-time; of the rest, 10% were unemployed but looking for work, and 10% were stay-at-home moms or dads.

To prepare the report presented here, we conducted statistical analyses for all items by gender, age group (25-29 and 30-39), ethnic group, and social class background (i.e., mother's educational attainment). When there were notable differences in these analyses, we included them in the report. Questions and requests for further information should be directed to Dr. Arnett, jarnett@clarku.edu.

CHAPTER ONEReaching
Established
Adulthood

When do people reach adulthood in today's United States? In the past two Clark polls, we found that both emerging adults (ages 18-29) and their parents recognize that it takes longer to "grow up" today than it did in the past. Many emerging adults feel that they are on the way to adulthood, but not there yet. This prolonged transition to adulthood has caused some Americans to fear that today's young people will never grow up and be willing to take on the responsibilities of adulthood. However, the 2014 Clark Poll of Established Adults should help to ease this fear. Sixty percent of 25- to 29-year-olds and 77% of 30- to 39-year-olds answered an unambiguous "yes" to the question "Do you feel that you have reached adulthood?" The proportion answering "in some ways yes, in some ways no" dropped from 35% at ages 25-29 to 20% at ages 30-39. Of course, some observers may believe that even 20% is far too many thirtysomethings who still don't feel fully grown up. But at least there is progress, and a strong majority by their thirties feel they have definitely reached adulthood.

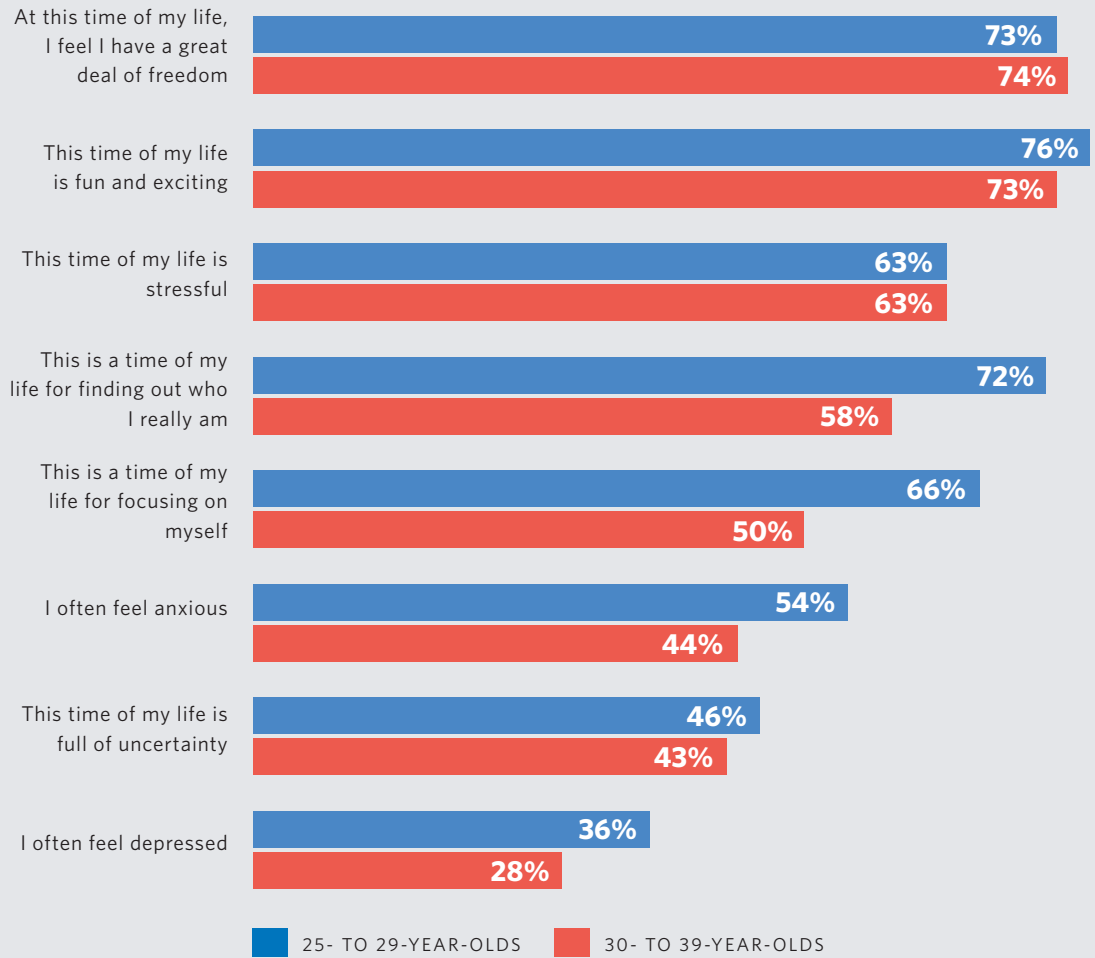
Greater likelihood of reaching adulthood in the thirties is also reflected in the fact that those in their thirties are more likely than the 25- to 29-year-olds to have taken on traditional adult roles. Compared to 25-29s, 30-39s are more likely to be married (60% to 34%), more likely to have a child (65% to 31%), and more likely to be working full time (69% to 63%).



In addition to feeling more adult and taking on traditional adult roles, those in their thirties have a more established and settled adult life than those in their late twenties in other ways as well. Compared to 25-29s, 30-39s are less likely to see themselves as being at a time of life for “focusing on myself” (50% to 66%) and less likely to still be “finding out who I really am” (58% to 72%). Perhaps because their lives are more established, 30-39s are less likely than 25-29s to feel anxious (44% to 54%) or depressed (28% to 36%).

However, in other ways, there are more similarities than differences between 25-29s and 30-39s. Strong majorities in both the late twenties and the thirties see their current lives as “fun and exciting” and a time of “freedom.” So, established adults do not lose the sense of fun and freedom that is typical of emerging adulthood, even as their lives become less self-focused and they have a better sense of who they are.

A MORE ESTABLISHED & SETTLED ADULT LIFE



CHAPTER TWO

Becoming a
Parent: Joy, Fun —
and Stress

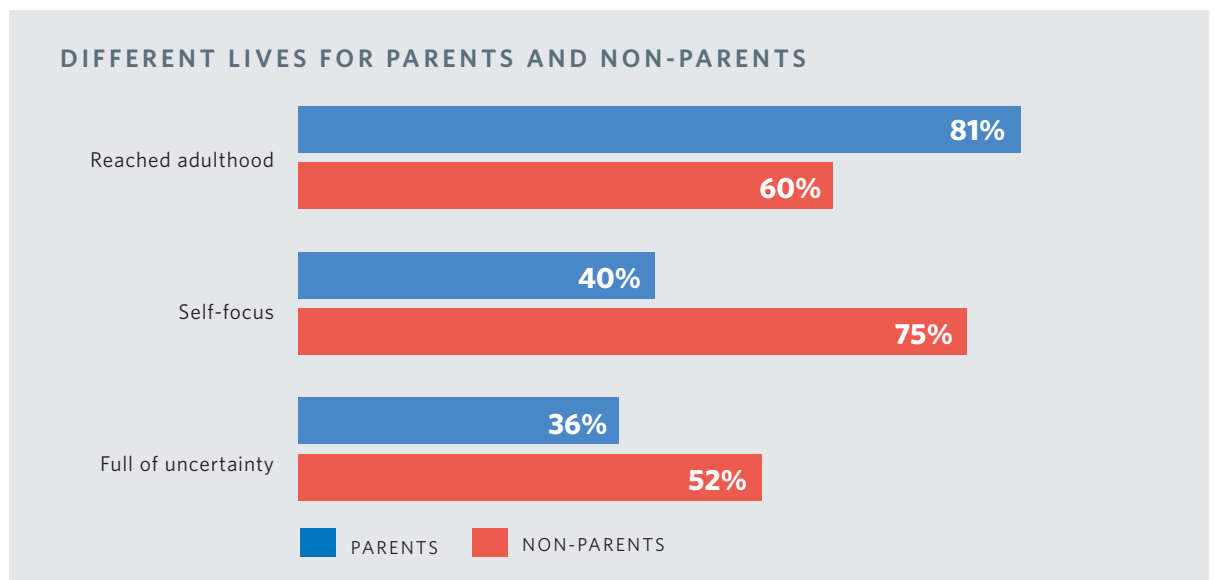
Much has been written in recent decades about the stresses of modern parenting, with one book even claiming that being a parent means experiencing “all joy and no fun.” But, according to our 2014 poll, being a parent entails lots of joy AND lots of fun. Parents ages 25-39 reported far more positive consequences and far fewer negative consequences than we anticipated. A remarkable 90% of parents said they consider “more joy” a consequence, and only 15% named “less fun.” Additionally, many other positive consequences are reported by parents, including “more meaning to life” (89%) and “greater intensity to life” (77%).

Babies have relentless needs, and becoming a parent means, inevitably, having less time and energy to devote to life as a couple. Nevertheless, having children seems to strengthen rather than undermine couples’ relationships, in most cases. Parents are far more likely to report that being a parent results in a “stronger relationship with my spouse or partner” (68%) than to say it means being “not as close to my spouse or partner” (22%).

POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF PARENTHOOD	%
More joy	90
More meaning	89
Greater intensity to life	77
Stronger spouse/partner relationship	68
Not as close to spouse/partner	22
Less fun	15

However, it is also important to acknowledge that the picture is not entirely rosy. Two-thirds of parents (66%) consider “more financial stress” a consequence of parenting, and half (51%) report “less frequent sex with my spouse or partner.” In sum, it seems that, overall, parenting is an amazingly positive experience, even though there are some negative consequences.

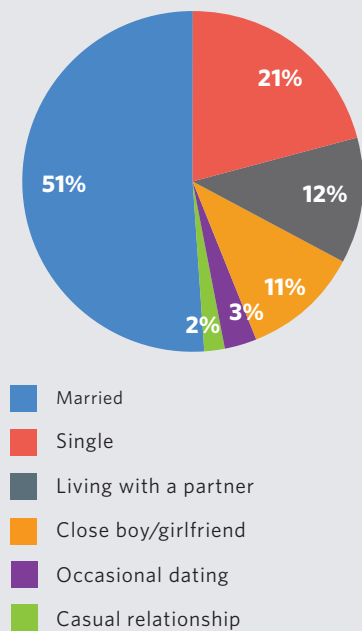
Becoming a parent has other important consequences for how young people feel about their lives and their relations to others. Eighty-one percent of poll respondents who are parents felt that they had reached adulthood, compared to just 60% of nonparents. Similarly, only 40% of parents described their current lives as self-focused, compared to a whopping 75% of nonparents. Only 36% of parents agreed that their current lives are “full of uncertainty,” compared to 52% of nonparents.



CHAPTER THREE

Finding a Soul Mate: Mostly Roses, So Far

RELATIONSHIP STATUS:
ESTABLISHED ADULTS
AGES 25-39



For a generation that has grown up amidst a parental divorce rate of 50%, most of today's established adults ages 25-39 are succeeding remarkably well in their love lives — so far. At ages 25-39, three-fourths (74%) are in a close relationship: 51% are married, 12% cohabit with a partner, and 11% have a close boyfriend or girlfriend; the other 26% are single. African Americans are less likely to be married (28%) and more likely to be single (33%) than established adults in other ethnic groups, a finding that is consistent with other national data.

For the established adults in a close relationship (married, cohabiting, or close boy/girlfriend), a remarkable 87% are so content as to agree that they have found their “soul mate.” The American romantic ideal seems to be alive and well.

Of course, human relationships are always more complicated than simply “happily ever after.” Although 92% of established adults in a close relationship say their relationship with their partner is a current source of joy, 32% say it is a source of stress. In addition, 29% say they have had to “give up some of my career progress for the sake of my relationship,” and 28% admit that “I sometimes wish I were single again.”

Nevertheless, the sacrifices established adults make for their relationships are outweighed by the gains, for most. Among those who are currently in a close relationship, a strong majority (78%) rely on their partner the most for emotional support. In contrast, those who are single rely most on friends (50%) or moms (41%). Being single has some advantages, at ages 25-39, but that does not mean that established adults who are single want to stay that way. Among singles, more than half (58%) say they prefer the freedom of being single over the benefits of being in a relationship at this time in their lives, but 79% would like to be married “eventually.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Work: High Aspirations, Mixed Reality

Most established adults enjoy far more stability in their work lives than they did as emerging adults. Nearly half (48%) have been in their current job for five years or more; only 23% have been in their job for a year or less.

However, seven years beyond the nadir of the Great Recession, 10% are unemployed, with unemployment highest among African Americans (13%) and lowest among Asian Americans (6%).

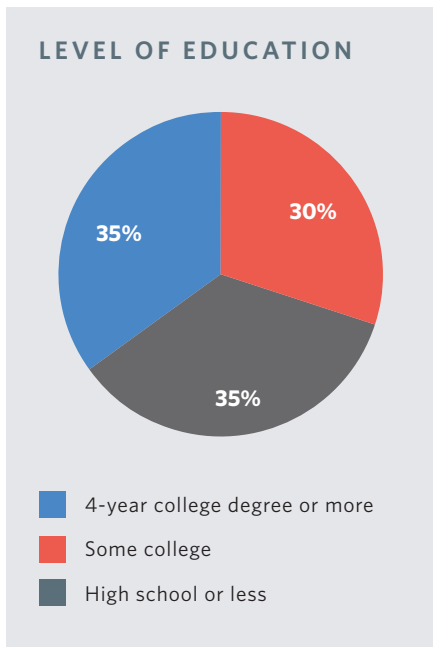
We know from our 2012 poll that emerging adults have exceptionally high expectations for work. How do those high hopes work out by ages 25-39? Not great, but for them the story's not yet over. Half (50%) have not been able to find the kind of job that they really want, and more than half (56%) have not made as much progress in their career as they would have hoped by now. Forty-eight percent see work as a source of stress, and 26% view it as a source of stress that they have been "unable to find an adequate job." Only 46% report that work is a current source of enjoyment.

Yet a strong majority remain very idealistic. More than three-fourths (82%) say it is important to them to have a job that does some good in the world, and 78% say it is more important to them to enjoy their job than to make a lot of money. All these findings are consistent across social class background, educational attainment, gender, and ethnic group.

JOB SATISFACTION	%
It is important to me to have a career that does some good in the world	82
It is more important to me to enjoy my job than to make a lot of money	78
My current job does some good in the world	73
My current job makes the most of my talents and abilities	62
I have not made as much progress in my career as I would have hoped by now	56
I have not been able to find the kind of job I really want	50

CHAPTER FIVE

Education:
Important but
Elusive

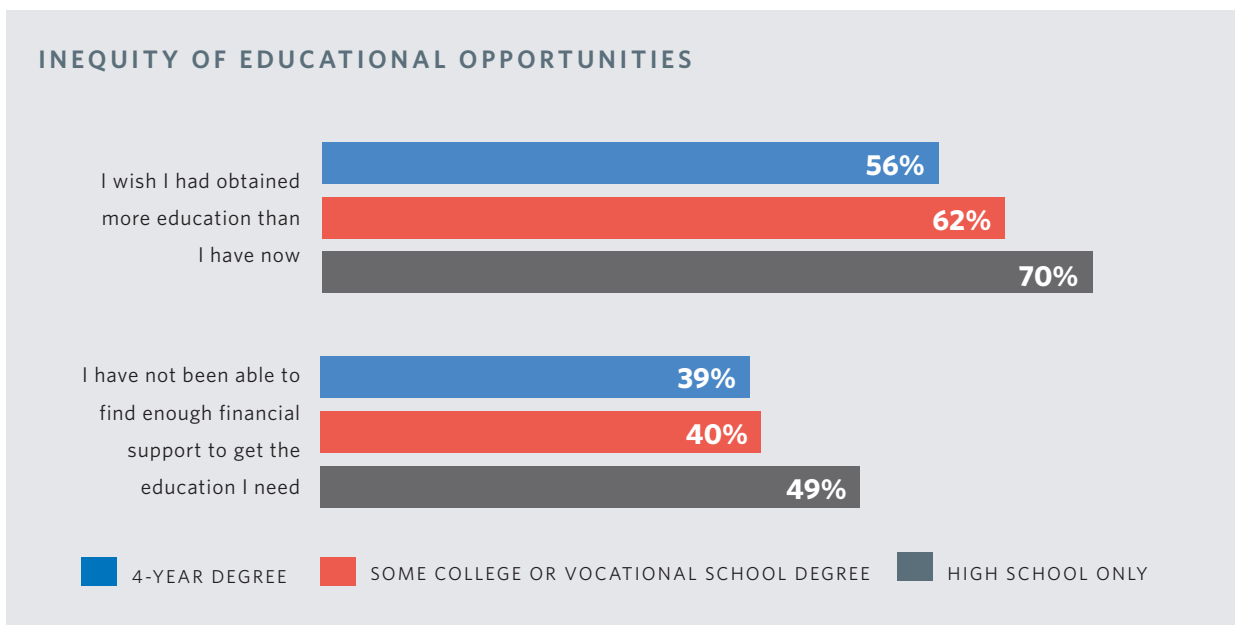


In an economy shifting rapidly toward information and technology, obtaining education and training beyond high school is more important than ever before. Established adults are aware of the shifting economic landscape, as two-thirds believe that “One of the most important keys to success in life is a college education.” But so far, many young people are not succeeding in getting the education they need to prepare themselves for the new economy. Only one-third (35%) of established adults have a four-year degree or more, and another one-third (35%) have obtained only a high school diploma or less.

A disturbing finding in this area is that a substantial majority of established adults believe they have not obtained enough education to prepare themselves for the world of work. Nearly two-thirds (61%) wish they had obtained more education than they have now, with rates especially high among Latinos (81%) and African Americans (70%). Financial reasons seem to be the main obstacle: 43% say they have not been able to find enough financial support to get the education they need, with rates again highest among Latinos (56%) and African Americans (48%). But they haven’t given up: 70% of established adults expect to get additional education or training at some point.

PROSPECTS FOR EDUCATION	%
I expect to get additional education or training at some point	70
One of the most important keys to success in life is a college education	64
I wish I had obtained more education than I have now	61
I have not been able to find enough financial support to get the education I need	43

This is one of the few areas in the 2014 Clark Poll for which there were distinct differences based on social class background (as represented by mother's educational attainment). Established adults whose mothers had attained only a high school education were more likely to say, "I have not been able to find enough financial support to get the education I need" and to "wish I had obtained more education than I have now."



Clearly there is inequality of opportunity for education in American society, based on social class background. However, it is striking that even among established adults with the highest social class background (mothers with a four-year degree), 39% lament that they have not had enough financial support to get the education they need; and, across social class backgrounds, a majority wishes they had "obtained more education than I have now." This suggests that a major reconsideration may be in order on the part of American society regarding the necessity of making a larger investment in the education and training of young Americans for the information-based economy.

CHAPTER SIX

Still Hopeful

Despite entering adult life during the worst recession in decades, today's established adults are remarkably contented and optimistic. A full 86% agree that "I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life," and 77% agree that "at this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible." Despite many forecasts that they face a future that is worse than what their parents experienced, more than two-thirds (69%) believe that "overall, my life will be better than my parents' lives have been."

OPTIMISTIC AND HOPEFUL	%
I am confident that eventually I will get what I want out of life	86
At this time of my life, it still seems like anything is possible	77
Overall, my life will be better than my parents' lives have been	69

Reaching age 30 doesn't faze them either, despite some popular claims that many young people regard turning "dirty thirty" as a cause for mourning their youth. A majority responded to age 30 with feeling hopeful (74%), happy (72%), and excited (59%), whereas smaller proportions viewed this transition as a cause to feel disappointed (24%) or depressed (22%).

Participants ages 30-39 were asked how it felt to turn 30 with respect to these feelings; those 25-29 were asked how they anticipated it would feel when they reach 30.

FEELINGS TOWARDS TURNING 30	%
Hopeful	74
Happy	72
Excited	59
Disappointed	24
Depressed	22

Nevertheless, the lives of established adults are busy, and often stressful. Their number one source of stress is “Too much to do and not enough time to do it all” (64%). Financial stress is also common (60%). Although much of the aging process is still ahead for most of them, even at ages 25-39, 36% name their physical health as a source of stress, and 23% cite mental health concerns.

SOURCES OF STRESS	%
Too much to do and not enough time to do it all	61
Financial issues	60
My physical health	36
My mental health	23

Sources of enjoyment are significantly more abundant than sources of stress. Strong majorities enjoy hobbies, friends, travel, watching TV, and using social media. Relationships with parents and siblings are still highly valued. Sports and pets also bring gratification. But the number one source of enjoyment, above all? “Having time to myself”—perhaps because it is increasingly rare!

SOURCES OF ENJOYMENT	%
Having time to myself	91
Hobbies or leisure activities	86
Relationships with friends	83
Travel or holidays	82
Watching television	79
Relationships with parents	77
Using social media	76
Exercise or playing sports	66
Relationships with siblings	65
Pets	55

CONCLUSION:

Giving the Thirties Their Due

In the past decade, research on emerging adulthood (ages 18-29) has boomed, and there is now a well-established field of emerging adult studies, complete with a Society for the Study of Emerging Adulthood (www.ssea.org). More research exists today on midlife (ages 40-60) and later adulthood than on the thirties — yet, in many ways the thirties are a dramatic and important stage of life, when most people develop commitments to family and work, and also try to juggle the considerable challenges of caring for young children and making progress in a career.

The 2014 Clark Poll of Established Adults provides many new insights into the lives of 25- to 39-year-olds and shows that most established adults are handling the challenges of adult life quite well. Most have succeeded in finding a partner and a stable job. They have many sources of enjoyment in their lives, from their relationships to their leisure activities to their pets. Yet they have multiple sources of stress as well, and in the workplace, most have not found the kind of career path they would regard as truly satisfying.

This report offers an abundance of new information about ages 25-39, but it raises many fresh questions as well. What keeps 20% of 30- to 39-year-olds from feeling that they have not yet entirely reached adulthood? How can it be that so many established adults still believe that “anything is possible,” even after they have made commitments in love and work that clearly narrow the range of their possibilities and choices? Perhaps most importantly, what do we need to do, as a society, to ensure that all Americans have access to the education and training they need to prepare themselves for the information-and-technology economy of the present and the future? We hope the 2014 Clark Poll will inspire new research on these important questions.

SOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Arnett, J.J. (2015). *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties (2nd edition)*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cherlin, A.J. (2009). *The marriage-go-round: The stage of marriage and the family in America today*. New York: Knopf.

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2014). *The condition of education, 2014*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from www.nces.gov.

Taylor, P. (2014). *The next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the looming generational showdown*. New York: PublicAffairs.

Also see Dr. Arnett's website, jeffreyarnett.com, and the website of the Clark University Polls, clarku.edu/clarkpolls, which contains the reports from the Clark University Poll of Emerging Adults and the Clark University Poll of Parents of Emerging Adults.

THE
CLARK
UNIVERSITY
Poll
of
Established Adults
Ages 25-39



950 Main Street
Worcester, MA 01610-1477
clarku.edu