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D. Nicole Farris

Boomerang Kids: The Demography of Previously Launched Adults

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ISSN 2211-3215 ISSN 2211-3223 (electronic)
SpringerBriefs in Population Studies
ISBN 978-3-319-31225-5 ISBN 978-3-319-31227-9 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-31227-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016938692

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Printed on acid-free paper

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Boomerang Children: Prevalence and Potential Questions

Abstract Young adults are moving back into their family homes and are now living with their parents. Common terms for the adult children include “previously launched adult” and “incompletely launched adult.” According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census, in 1970 12.5 million 18–34 year olds lived at home, whereas in 2000 17.8 million 18–34 year olds lived at home (Furman, *Boomerang nation: How to survive living with your parents... The second time around*. Fireside, New York, 2005). A recent profile of the U.S. based on 2000 census data described our country as having about 67 million young adults aged 18–34. If 17.8 million of these young adults are living back at home, this is not an insignificant percentage. This chapter introduces the reader to the social phenomenon of the previously launched adult and provides an in depth description of these young adults. This chapter also details why these young adults are sociologically significant while providing information about young and emerging adulthood.

Keywords Family • Children • Parents • Adults • Demography • Statistics • Qualitative

College graduates and other young adults are moving with increased frequency back into their family homes and are living with their parents. According to data from the 2000 U.S. Census, in 1970 12.5 million 18–34 year olds lived at home, whereas in 2000 17.8 million 18–34 year olds lived at home (Furman 2005). A profile of the U.S. based on 2000 census data described our country as having about 67 million young adults aged 18–34. If 17.8 million of these young adults are living back at home, this is not an insignificant percentage. Indeed, as of 2013, 30%, or just under one-third of all young adults are living at home with their parents (US Bureau of the Census 2014). Attributable factors include financial problems such as credit card and student loan debt, dismal job opportunities and a tight job market, economic downturn, low salaries for entry-level jobs and high housing costs (Furman 2005). Some more traditional demographic factors include factors such as a delay in the average age of marriage for both men and women, multiculturalism, and the emphasis on intergenerational living. With multiculturalism, some traditional ethnic groups are still morally opposed to cohabitation and delayed home leaving has become increasingly common and is more likely among traditional ethnic groups due to cultural traditions (Landale and Oropesa 2007; Mitchell 2009). In

addition to the more traditional leanings of particular ethnic groups, other groups may find that changing economic opportunities make living at home a preferred lifestyle.

In the past, during periods in the family life cycle known as the “launching” and “empty nest” periods, social norms dictated that adult children in the United States were expected to move out on their own, get married, and start a family (Clemens and Axelson 1985). Now, with such a large number of young adults still living at home, common terms have developed for these adult children such as “previously launched adult” and “incompletely launched adult” (Schnaiberg and Goldenberg 1989). A recent article in *The New York Times Magazine* discussed the issue of the “failure to launch” and “boomerang kids” (Henig 2010: 30). Television shows and other media sources are featuring grown children moving back in with their parents. For example, a cover of “The New Yorker” from last spring prominently depicted this trend. A young man hangs up his new Ph.D. in his childhood bedroom and has a cardboard box at his feet. This appears to be happening in many different kinds of families. Not only is the trend of adult children moving back home becoming more common, but young people also seem to be taking longer to reach adulthood. Whereas during the middle of the twentieth century young adulthood consisted of the transitions of completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying, and having a child, these days many young adults are completing these transitions later in life or not completing them at all. Jeffrey Arnett, a psychologist from Clark University has suggested that society “views the 20s as a distinct life stage, call[ed] “emerging adulthood” (2010: 30). This stage of “emerging adulthood” contains aspects such as identity exploration, instability, and self-focus.

In most industrialized countries, the time period from the late teens through the twenties are years of profound change and importance (Arnett 2000). In the early part of their twenties, young people are obtaining the education and work training that will provide the foundation for the rest of their adult lives. Also occurring during this time are fluctuations in residence, employment and relationships. Presently, young adults seem to be caught in a sort of limbo between childhood and adulthood. For example, at age 18 people can vote and join the military, but they cannot drink until age 21. People who are full time students are considered “dependents” by the Internal Revenue Service and can continue to stay on their parents’ health insurance plans until age 26. It seems that society is unable to agree upon when it is that someone is old enough to take on full adult responsibilities. Although many believe that there is a definite timeline, it does not appear to simply be a matter of age. Some scholars (see Rosenfeld 2007) have argued that the notion of a “boomerang effect” is fictional. Rosenfeld believes that young adults are living on their own and that this trend has been increasing for young adults since the 1950s. While this may be true, the large percentage of adult children moving back in with their parents is a clear indication that the phenomenon of previously launched adults is something that deserves further attention, as there are statistics to show that adult children, are in fact, moving back in with their parents. Certainly, 26% of a particular sub-population is not something that is merely fiction. It is a truth of the contemporary