



## Without the ties that bind: U.S. young adults who lack active parental relationships



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Transition to adulthood  
Emerging adulthood  
Intergenerational relations  
Parent-child relationships

### ABSTRACT

Parents are an important source of affection and support for young adults in the U.S., so those who lack parental relationships are a potentially vulnerable group. This study outlines how common it is for young adults to report lacking an active parental tie and provides a portrait of these young adults. Analysis of the 2008–2009 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health ( $N = 5090$ ) reveals that the vast majority of young adults ages 25–32 in the U.S. – 97.6% – have an active relationship with at least one parent figure. Only a small share of young adults lack a relationship with a mother figure (6%), due primarily to early maternal death. A larger share of young adults lack a relationship with a father figure (20%), usually because their father figure is deceased or they never had a father figure (rather than having become estranged over time). Young adults who are Black or from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to lack parental ties in young adulthood. In addition, prior events such as parental separation or incarceration are associated with an elevated likelihood of being estranged in early adulthood (though these events are rarely followed by estrangement with an existing parent figure).

### 1. Introduction

As early adulthood has become more challenging, parents increasingly provide financial and instrumental assistance, as well as advice and emotional support. Recent research has highlighted the increased reliance of young adults on their parents and the positive characteristics of these ties (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann et al., 2012; Wightman, Patrick, Schoeni, & Schulenberg, 2013). However, not all young adults have relationships with their parents. Long-term changes in family structure have meant that children are less likely to reach adulthood having lived continuously with both parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). They are more likely to experience the stressors that accompany divorce, and are more likely to have relationships with other types of parent figures, such as step-parents (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). Because of these shifts in family dynamics – as well as situations like parental death and incarceration – we might expect that many young adults lack access to parental (particularly father) relationships and the affection and support that often accompany them. However, little is known about the group of young adults who lack active parental ties.

Here we use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to estimate how common it is for young adults to

lack relationships with a mother or father figure in the U.S. – either because they never had the parent figure in their lives, because he or she has died, or because they no longer have contact with the parent figure. We also identify the characteristics associated with absent ties. This research contributes to our understanding of contemporary early adulthood by providing a rich portrait of a potentially vulnerable group of young adults.

#### 1.1. The importance of parents and changes in family relationships

For most individuals, parent-child relationships are positive and beneficial throughout the life course. These relationships often involve the sharing of tangible resources, emotional support, and frequent contact (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009). Parents and adult children tend to name one another as among their most important social ties and, in most cases, both parties appear to benefit from these relationships (Antonucci & Akiyama, 1987; Hartnett, Furstenberg, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2013; Van Gaalen & Dykstra, 2006). In particular, parents and adult children who report more positive relationships have higher levels of well-being and lower levels of depression (Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992; Ward, 2008).

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The dynamics of contemporary young adulthood make relationships with parents especially important. The process of transitioning to adult roles – including finishing school, entering the workforce, leaving the parental home, marrying, and having children – is more protracted and the chronology is more varied compared to prior periods (Arnett, 2000; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005; Isen & Stevenson, 2011; Vespa, 2017). As a result, the parent-child tie has become increasingly consequential well beyond the age of 18, a fact that is now widely recognized both normatively and institutionally (for example, the Affordable Care Act mandates that parents' health insurance covers children through age 26). Research has shown that these changes are reflected in transfer patterns: the amount of financial support young adults receive from parents is higher now compared to previous cohorts (Wightman et al., 2013).

Although parent-child relationships tend to be helpful and positive on average, they are not universally positive or present. Due to long-term changes in family structure, in particular, we might expect that a substantial number of young adults lack relationships with at least one parent. In particular, the rise in divorce and non-marital childbearing has loosened the bonds between some parent-child pairs. Fathers increasingly live apart from their young children, which often results in lower levels of closeness, contact, and resource transfers (Cheadle, Amato, & King, 2010; Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). In addition, a variety of other factors may lead to lacking parental ties in young adulthood, including disagreements or misaligned values, parental death or incarceration, or histories of abuse or neglect (Agllias, 2015b; Gilligan, Sutor, & Pillemer, 2015). What remains unclear from the literature is how common this situation is in young adulthood and who these young adults are.

### 1.2. Demographic factors associated with lacking parent figure ties

Young adults may lack active relationships with parent figures through three pathways: because they never had a mother/father figure relationship (i.e. there was no woman/man who raised them), because their mother/father figure has died, or because they do not communicate with a mother/father figure who was previously in their lives. We anticipate that certain demographic factors will put young adults at greater risk for lacking parental relationships through each of these pathways.

Gender is one such factor: we expect that both sons and fathers may be more likely to lack relationships than daughters and mothers, due to the gendered nature of “kin keeping,” whereby women have closer and more active familial relationships than males (Rossi & Rossi, 1990; Troll, Miller, & Atchley, 1979; Willson, Shuey, & Elder, 2003). In addition, young adults may be more likely to lack father figures due to early death compared to mother figures because of higher male mortality and the fact that fathers tend to be older than mothers (Landry & Forrest, 1995).

We also consider socioeconomic position and race-ethnicity. Individuals coming from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds may be at higher risk for lacking parent figures in young adulthood. Because lower SES mothers are more likely to have a child outside of marriage (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Offutt, 1996), some of these parents – particularly fathers – may have never been in their children's lives. Others may have been active parents previously but no longer maintain ties by the time the children are young adults, due to factors such as drug or alcohol addiction, mental health issues, difficulty paying child support, or because they have moved on to other families (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Tach, Edin, & Mincy, 2010). Those who come from low SES backgrounds may also be more likely to lack a parent figure due to early death, compared to their high SES counterparts (Olshansky et al., 2012).

The likelihood of lacking active parental relationships may also vary by race-ethnicity due to differences in family structure patterns and intergenerational relationships (Hogan, Eggebeen, & Clogg, 1993;

Umberson, 1992). Black young adults may be especially likely to lack relationships with fathers, compared to Whites and Hispanics, because they are less likely to grow up with married parents (Cherlin, 2010; Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Umberson, 1992). Nevertheless, Black individuals may retain strong ties to mothers in young adulthood (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Sutor, Sechrist, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2011; Umberson, 1992). Finally, because of mortality differentials by race, individuals who are Black may also be more likely to lack a parent figure due to early death, compared to those who are White (Olshansky et al., 2012; Umberson et al., 2017).

### 1.3. Relationship characteristics predicting estrangement

Some individuals may have had a mother/father figure relationship earlier in life, but have little or no contact with the parent figure in young adulthood. We refer to this situation as “estrangement.” Whether parents and children become estranged may depend, in part, on dynamics that were present early in the relationship, such as whether parents stayed together or separated, whether the parent and child lived in the same house, whether the parent was ever incarcerated, and whether the parent figure was a biological parent or a different type of parent figure.

First, the “type” of relationship may be important in determining whether young adults maintain an active tie with a parent figure into adulthood. In particular, ties to biological parents may remain stronger in adulthood, compared with other types of relationships, such as step-parents, or aunts and uncles who raised the child. Scholars have argued that biological parent-child relationships are normative and considered non-voluntary, so individuals expect these ties to be stronger and more difficult to sever than when the parent figure is a step-parent or another type of friend or relative (Crabb & Augoustinos, 2008).

Further, nonresident parents have been shown to have weakened ties to their children (Amato, 2000; Amato & Booth, 1996; Aquilino, 2006), and may therefore be prone to eventual loss of contact. When a parent lives apart from his or her child following a separation, it could be due to choice, or to factors such as custody and visitation judgments. This is consistent with the solidarity model, which argues that the associational solidarity generated from shared experiences is necessary for affection and cohesion (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991).

We also expect that young adults who have experienced the divorce or separation of their biological (or adoptive) parents will be more likely to lack contact later. Family Stress Theory says that family discord and estrangement are more likely to happen in the context of stressors, such as union disruption (Agllias, 2015a; Galvin, Braithwaite, Bylund, & Braithwaite, 2016; McKenry & Price, 2000). Research in the field of social work has supported this contention, finding that estrangement is often caused when major disruptive events lead to interpersonal conflict (Agllias, 2015a; Carr, Holman, Abetz, Kellas, & Vagnoni, 2015). A common pattern found in qualitative research is that adult children report cutting off contact with a parent whom they believe reacted poorly to a divorce (Agllias, 2015b).

Finally, young adults may be estranged from parents who have been incarcerated. Incarceration tends to reduce parental involvement and has been associated with weaker parental ties (Swisher & Waller, 2008; Western, Lopoo, & McLanahan, 2004).

### 1.4. The present study

This study addresses three research questions that provide a descriptive portrait of young adults who lack active relationships with parent figures. Most prior research on the relationship between parents and young adult children in the U.S. has focused on what is average or typical – average frequency of financial transfers, average level of contact, etc. – or has explored how parent-child relationships differ across groups (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Fingerman, Cheng, Tighe, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012). This study uses nationally representative U.S.

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