

# Coming of Age in Appalachia, Emerging or Expedited Adulthood?



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*We examine the transition to adulthood in a poor, white, rural community in Appalachia. Young adults come of age in a context of persistent poverty, economic decline, an ongoing opioid and addiction crisis, and strong community norms about family and work bolstered by religious institutions. For low-income young adults in this community, this stage in the life course is both expedited and emerging. Marriage and childbearing are expedited, frequently occurring in late teens or early twenties. However, other adult markers—such as stable employment, pursuing education, and leaving the parental home—are often slow to emerge and are usually only tentatively achieved. This pattern is in contrast to middle-class young adults in this community.*

**Keywords:** young adulthood, rural, poverty, addiction, life course

Young adulthood is a pivotal stage in an individual's life course where vital decisions are made that shape future opportunities. What used to be a straightforward, predictable, somewhat linear progression from adolescence to adulthood has morphed into a stage marked by variation and uncertainty (Shanahan 2000). Put another way, the young adulthood years are

a period of “demographic density,” a stage during which individuals experience transitions and embrace new roles in rapid succession (Rindfuss 1991; Manning 2020).

Scholars have delineated the Big 5 markers of adulthood that historically signaled adult status: leaving home, finishing school, finding work, getting married, and having children

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© 2022 Russell Sage Foundation. Miller, Emily E. N., and Kathryn Edin. 2022. “Coming of Age in Appalachia, Emerging or Expedited Adulthood?” *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(4): 50–67. DOI: 10.7758/RSF.2022.8.4.02. Data collection would not have been possible without our partners in the field: Olivia Mann and Lanora Johnson as well as co-PIs Luke Shaefer and Timothy Nelson. The authors would like to thank the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for funding this research. Research reported in this publication was in part supported by The Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development of the National Institutes of Health under Award Number P2CHD047879 and Award Number T32HD007163. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. We are also grateful to the people of Clay County who opened their lives, invited us into their homes, and shared their stories. Direct correspondence to: Emily Miller, at [eenm@princeton.edu](mailto:eenm@princeton.edu), 227 Wallace Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, United States; Kathryn Edin, at [kedin@princeton.edu](mailto:kedin@princeton.edu), 151 Wallace Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544, United States.

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(Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005; Settersten 2012; Settersten, Ottusch, and Schneider 2015). Classic demographic research has illustrated how the order, sequencing, and duration of these life course events as well as social norms about these events shape status attainment (Hogan 1978). Nevertheless, shifts in the sequence of the life course over the last century have been significant. The human development scholar Richard Settersten (2012) notes that in the first half of the twentieth century, young adults typically achieved these milestones in rapid succession. Yet more recently, both the ordering and the timing have shifted. For example, finishing school now typically includes postsecondary education, career entry is more protracted, and, consequently, both marriage and childbearing typically occur much later in the life course. Settersten notes, however, that “young adults often have starkly different sets of options and experiences depending on family backgrounds and resources” (9).

Identifying broad population trends, diverging patterns among demographic groups, and their implications for the well-being of American young adults are strengths of quantitative methods. However, these methods often fail to capture the subjective experiences of young adults as they manage the transition to adulthood within specific contexts. Qualitative methods provide researchers the opportunity to explore how young adults conceive of what constitutes adulthood, the strategies they use to navigate it, the barriers they face, and the meaning they attach to various markers of adult status. Yet qualitative research on young adulthood is contested terrain.

Analysis of in-depth interviews by the psychologists Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner (2006) portrays contemporary young adulthood as an elongated period—“emerging adulthood”—during which individuals focus on personal goals and desires rather than settling into traditional adult roles. Yet other qualitative researchers have sharply critiqued this portrayal, encouraging the field to acknowledge the sharp disparities by race-ethnicity and social class in the path toward adulthood, disparities that often exacerbate inequality in life chances (Booth et al. 2012; Settersten 2012; Sha-

nahan 2000). Because of these disparities, becoming an adult is more than just a “private trouble” that can be managed by individual effort. Instead, it is a “public issue” that requires collective thought and investment (Settersten 2012).

For example, the sociologist Stefanie DeLuca and her colleagues (2016) followed a sample of disadvantaged youth from Baltimore from middle childhood to young adulthood, interviewing and observing them at regular intervals. Their findings challenge whether the term “emerging adulthood” is appropriate for this group. Indeed, the 150 youth in their study described experiences more aptly described as “expedited adulthood” (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016). For example, although the aspirations of the Baltimore youth aligned with the ideal of a four-year college degree, structural challenges—specifically, the need to be self-supporting after high school because of limited family resources—often prevented the realization of this goal. In the face of these pressures, ambitions to pursue a career in nursing, for example, morphed into short-term training to become a nurse aide.

Coming of age in rural America might be distinct from doing so in urban America in several ways. Many rural counties experience population aging and population decline (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Johnson and Lichter 2019; Johnson 2011; Shiode et al. 2014; Thiede et al. 2017). Shrinking tax revenues, limited services, and school consolidation often follow (Johnson and Lichter 2019; Thiede et al. 2017; Tieken 2014). The rural labor market is less diverse and has been decimated in many rural places (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000; Glasmeier and Salant 2006; Niccolai, Damaske, and Park 2022, this issue). Available jobs may be low wage or far away. Furthermore, the lack of public transportation in most rural areas limits career opportunities for young adults. Other supports, such as social service-oriented nonprofits, may lack capacity to serve rural young adults (Heflinger and Christens 2006; Lewis, Scott, and Calfee 2013; Waters et al. 2011). The rural context might shape aspirations as well as opportunities. An early review suggested that rural young adults anticipated accelerated transitions to adult-

hood relative to their counterparts in urban areas in part due to structural constraints (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000).

At a community level, rural places might be distinctive in their sense of shared values, strong ties, and social capital, which, according to the sociologist Robert Wuthnow (2019), turns small towns into moral communities. Thus, in rural places, strong shared notions of morality may uniquely shape youths' aspirations and their sense of what constitutes adult status. In rural areas, strong community and family ties, as well as religious institutions, might function protectively during the transition to adulthood (Crockett, Shanahan, and Jackson-Newsom 2000; Elder and Conger 2000). However, the protectiveness of rural communities is hardly a guarantee. Based on extensive qualitative interviews in several disadvantaged rural regions, including Appalachia, the sociologist Cynthia Duncan (2014) observes sharp class cleavages, so much so that family reputation can be difficult, if not impossible, to shake and may limit life chances for those on the other side of the community divide. Jennifer Sherman (2009), also a sociologist, echoes the notion that family reputation may play a role in shaping life chances. In her rural research site, what she calls moral capital, derived from family reputation and work ethic, is used to foster success and gain community support. However, those who lack moral capital are typically unable to access community resources.

In this article, we draw on in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations of one high-poverty, white, rural community—Clay County in eastern Kentucky. Prior research on rural youth and the transition to adulthood frequently focuses on one or two markers of adulthood such as the economic opportunities (Duncan 2014; Niccolai, Damaske, and Park 2022, this issue), the role of family processes (Burton et al. 2013; Garrett-Peters and Burton 2016), or leaving home and school (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Parsons 2022). Here we examine the dynamics of all of the Big 5 markers of adulthood as they are experienced (or not) by low-income young adults. We explore whether these young people conform to Arnett and Tanner's "emerging adulthood," DeLuca and colleagues' "expedited adulthood," or some

other distinct pattern. Following Wuthnow, Duncan, and Sherman, we also examine whether any features of the rural context—especially class cleavages or strong moral norms—shape young people's experiences as they come of age.

In keeping with Duncan and Sherman, we find that in Clay County, young adult outcomes are sharply delineated along class lines. The "moral community" promotes the importance of work and marriage. These norms shape the aspirations of the relatively affluent and poor alike, but paths to adulthood are nonetheless starkly different by social class. For many in the latter group, pathways are disrupted by addiction.

Interviews with community leaders, who are among the more affluent in the county, indicate that young people from the middle class are following the Big 5 sequence as it plays out for most Americans, where marriage and children come last. However, interviews with low-income respondents reveal that those from less advantaged backgrounds pursue a sequence that differs dramatically from their middle-class counterparts. For low-income respondents, some markers of adulthood—marriage and childbearing—are expedited; they frequently put marriage and childbearing (usually in close succession) first. Yet, other adult markers—completing schooling, leaving home, and finding employment—are at best slow to emerge, especially in the face of a faltering economy and a raging opioid and addiction epidemic. There are many starts and stops as young adults seek financial and residential stability. Low-SES young adults age out of this period of the life course with these markers only tentatively achieved. Families fall apart under these pressures, leaving many low-income residents living outside of the dictates of what Wuthnow calls the moral community, and thus largely excluded from the key social institutions, including religious congregations where generations of Appalachians have gleaned meaning, dignity, and social support.

## METHODS

Clay County is one of the poorest predominantly white counties in the United States, 36.2 percent of the working-age population and 47.2

percent of its children living below the official poverty line as of 2019 (Census Bureau 2020). Other forms of disadvantage in Clay County include a high rate of low-birth weight babies (strongly associated with other child health challenges), obesity, and premature death (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2019). Correspondingly, the percentage of those receiving disability benefits is exceptionally high (Flippen 2014). These challenges, along with high incidence of addiction, were salient to local leaders. “If you want to study poverty, you have come to right place,” a volunteer at the local historical society told us early on in our fieldwork.

What is it like navigating the transition to adulthood in such a place? To provide a preliminary answer to this question, we conducted in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations during the summer of 2019. One of us (Miller) and another field researcher lived in the area during this period, conducting forty-seven in-depth interviews (with twenty-two low-income families and twenty-five middle-class community leaders) and more than fifty hours of participant observation over an eleven-week period. We attended local worship services and other church-sponsored activities, volunteered with service providers, observed local meetings, and engaged in festivals and other local pastimes within the community.<sup>1</sup> Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, and observations were documented in extensive fieldnotes.

Low-income families were recruited through local social service providers, including a faith-based food pantry and clothing closet where we volunteered nearly every week. Most respondents resided in the county seat of Manchester, a city of about 1,800 people, but several lived in the more remote areas of the county; the county population numbered roughly twenty thousand (Census Bureau 2020). Interviews with household heads included life histories,

questions about health and well-being, views of and experiences of community institutions, and a detailed accounting of how families were making ends meet economically. All but three of these interviews were with women. In addition, we spoke with community leaders, professionals and volunteers in service agencies, heads of nonprofits, local government officials, educators, health professionals, and religious leaders about their perceptions of the strengths and challenges of the community as well as their day-to-day experiences in their professional roles. Our sample consists of individuals who stayed or returned to the county. For this analysis, although we draw on interviews with community leaders, we focus primarily on how low-income participants described their young adulthood years, starting at age sixteen and extending through their early thirties. About half of our low-income respondents were still in this stage, but older respondents were asked to recount their experiences as young adults as well.

## FINDINGS

We start at respondents’ family conditions at age sixteen. We then focus on how young adults navigate childbearing and marriage, employment, and school and leaving home.

### At Age Sixteen

Near the beginning of each interview, we asked low-income participants to describe their circumstances at age sixteen (Schwarz 1994), when low-income Appalachian youth are still in adolescence but often on the cusp of making crucial decisions that will profoundly affect their young adult years, especially family formation.<sup>2</sup> We use these descriptions as a starting point in our discussion of how Clay County youth experience the transition to adulthood. From these, we can derive a sense of the family context for each respondent at an age where adolescents begin thinking about and preparing for their

1. The county is overwhelmingly evangelical Christian and includes numerous Southern Baptist, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches as well as some Protestant institutions, notably the Methodist Red Bird Mission, and a small Catholic presence. The county is even more exclusively Christian than other parts of eastern Kentucky. The American Communities Project classifies the county as an “Evangelical Hub” (2021).

2. No youth in our sample had transitioned to marriage or childbearing before age sixteen, but several did so while still in their teenage years.

adult lives. Family context plays an important role in shaping aspirations and opportunities by providing material and emotional support and normative benchmarks as young people begin on the path to adulthood (DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2016; Fergusson, Horwood, and Boden 2008; Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005; Settersten 2012).

Nearly two-thirds of respondents described their family's income as "below the community average" as they were growing up; only two reported it as above average. Six said they lived with both parents; two others reported living with their mother and stepfather. Nearly half said they lived with a single parent at sixteen: eight with their mother and two with their father. One participant reported living on her own. Three lived with grandparents. In the Appalachian region, where three-quarters of our respondents grew up, living with grandparents has become a more common living arrangement in the wake of the opioid and addiction crisis (Brant 2022; Hansen et al. 2020).

Respondents were asked to describe their parents' educational attainment and employment at age sixteen. One had a mother with a college degree, but most mothers had less than a high school degree (eleven respondents). Six of these reported their mothers had less than a middle school (eighth grade) education. Seven had mothers who worked at age sixteen, most often as home health aides or in manufacturing. A handful reported that their mother was a homemaker. Several reported that their mother received Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Disability Income, both being forms of government disability insurance.

Fewer respondents were able to report on their father's education, but among those who could, none said that he had more than a high school education. Most had fathers who had failed to earn a high school diploma. Those whose fathers were employed usually worked in extractive industries such as coal mining (the most common response, five respondents reporting this occupation) or logging. One respondent reported that her father received disability after an injury. Other occupations

included cable installer, or welder, mechanic, state trooper, and truck driver.

In short, the family contexts of respondents at age sixteen were challenging. Very low levels of parental education translated to very limited employment opportunities for the mothers of our respondents at age sixteen, but somewhat less so for the fathers, some of whom were employed in extractive industries (coal and timber), jobs that have since become rare in the county. Despite strong moral norms about the importance of marriage and a traditional family (one mother, one father), which we discuss next, the majority were living outside the sanctioned family structure at age sixteen.

### CHILDBEARING AND MARRIAGE

Our in-depth conversations with community residents made clear that, for young women in our sample, becoming a parent is a marker of adulthood. First births nearly always occurred within, or shortly before, marriage, another adult marker. However, among low-income respondents, a flagging economy offering little job stability or pay, a high incidence of addiction, and an elevated rate of intimate partner violence (usually associated with addiction) often frayed marital relationships, distorting one of the key entry points to adult status and making it challenging to achieve others. At the same time, moral norms strongly supported childbearing and rearing within heterosexual marriage as a proper course. These norms were repeatedly voiced both by low-income families and community leaders, particularly clergy. When relationships soured, low-income parents frequently put their role of a parent over being a partner, leaving them outside the community's moral code.

Marie, age twenty, a high school dropout, had been married nearly a year and was pregnant with her third child when we spoke with her. Angel had three children by the time she reached eighteen. She tried to return to school after giving birth to her third child, but dropped out again, noting that it was difficult because having children made her feel so much older than the other students.<sup>3</sup> Like them, most of the low-income respondents we interviewed

3. Angel eventually got her GED and completed some college.

had their first birth in their teens and several subsequently dropped out of high school. In many cases, the pattern of early family formation and interrupted schooling was intergenerational; when asked to recount their life stories, many participants told us their parents had shared these struggles. Reports of early childbearing mirrors administrative data. For the United States, the median age at first birth is younger in rural than urban areas and the gap has been widening (Ely 2018).<sup>4</sup> But in Clay County, the teen childbearing rate is three times higher than the national average (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2019).

As noted earlier, young adults moved from marriage and to childbearing, or vice versa, in rapid succession. Almost all low-income parents we spoke with had been married, some more than once. However, none of the marriages of respondents older than twenty-five had lasted.<sup>5</sup> In Clay County, 11.5 percent of the population is divorced, only slightly higher than the U.S. average of 10.9 percent, whereas the 4.9 percent separated is more than double the national average of 1.9 percent (Census Bureau 2020). Yet these data likely mask substantial variation in the rate of divorce by socioeconomic status (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014; McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Percheski 2008).

Family formation and dissolution yielded complex family relationships. At time of interview, the vast majority of those in our low-income sample were raising their children apart from their child's other parent. The difficulty of negotiating parent and partner roles across multiple households characterized the young adult years for many participants. Stevie, age twenty-seven, is a mother of three, who, while still in her early twenties, divorced after three years of marriage. She recently became involved with a man who also has three children from a prior relationship. She described how difficult it was to negotiate organizing the

family's daily routine or plan trips to visit kin. Family complexity also created difficulties in families' economic lives. Among the low-income mothers we spoke with, child support from past partners was rarely regular. New partners similarly struggled to meet their current obligations to the household plus obligations to children from past partners (child support), often because of a lack of stable employment.

Marital quality was typically low. When marriages failed, both parties were usually hesitant to commit to marriage again. Regrets about early marriage shaped the young adult years of many among our low-income participants. Angel, who had three children prior in high school and married at about age twenty, told us, "I did get married at a point. I did. It was horrible. That's the worst nine years of my life. Don't do it. It's a trap!" Formerly married mother Loretta, who had been with her current partner for six years after divorcing in her mid-twenties, shared her view on the subject: "I just don't want to jump into a marriage and it be another divorce."

Many low-income participants, nine of twenty-two, described marital breakups due to domestic abuse. Abuse ranged from verbal to physical, including one case where a man shot and killed his pregnant girlfriend after holding other family members, including a toddler, hostage at gunpoint for several hours. Although rates are not available by county, in Kentucky, the lifetime prevalence of physical violence by an intimate partner is 42.1 percent, the highest in the nation (national average, 32.4). For men, the rate, 32.1 percent, is among the highest in the nation (national average, 28.3 percent) (Smith et al. 2017). A family court judge confirmed that our respondents' accounts were not unusual. When describing his work, he told us, "I do wife beaters, husband beaters, about 50/50. I do grandma beaters, grandchild beaters. . . . It's a terrible job. I only see people at their worst."

4. When talking about national level rural-urban differences, *rural* is used interchangeably with the nonmetropolitan definitions used by government agencies like the census. Separately, fewer women were childless and more had had an unintended pregnancy resulting in childbirth in rural areas than their urban counterparts (Hamilton 2016; Sutton, Lichter, and Sassler 2019)

5. Relative to urban areas, rural areas have higher percentages of divorced women (Hamilton 2016; Sutton, Lichter, and Sassler 2019).

Experiences of domestic abuse in their family of origin sometimes solidified young respondents' resolve to end their marriages when confronted with the same circumstances. Loretta, for example, left her husband of eight years when their son was six and she was in her mid-twenties because "[My son] sort of caught us in this fight a couple times and I didn't want him growing up like I did [witnessing fights]. And so I decided to leave, and finally got out of there." Loretta told us it was difficult to leave because she "really loved this man, but I knew I couldn't be with him. That wasn't right for the kids."

Addiction intensified violence and added to the instability in the family lives of our low-income participants. Clay County was at the epicenter of the opioid crisis in the early 2000s and strong remnants remain. From 2006 to 2014, 133.5 pills were prescribed per person per year in Clay County, one of the highest rates in the nation (*Washington Post* 2020). During our fieldwork, thirteen pharmacies were operating in the tiny town of Manchester, nearly one for every 140 residents. Both low-income and community leaders reported high rates of concurrent substance use (such as opioids and methamphetamines), and that methadone and Suboxone are increasingly used recreationally as well as for treatment. Several community leaders estimated half of the county had been or currently were abusing substances. Although middle-class families were not shielded from addiction, addiction was especially consequential for those with fewer resources, especially with regard to marital stability and child well-being.

Crystal, who, after several years of dating, married the father of her youngest child at age twenty-five, divorced a year later because "He got on drugs and got . . . It's just drugs took over, and I'm not like that. I don't do that." Lulu described how her husband, whom she had been with for fifteen years (since age fourteen), had become addicted to drugs and started stealing from her. Around age twenty-eight, she left behind a house she purchased with a down payment from a student loan to flee to Clay County, where she had kin. In her words, "Money started disappearing. He was staying out, staying out all night, getting high and stuff

like that. His priorities just weren't with me and the girls, so I caught him one day gone [out of the house]. I left. Got my car. I left everything there. Didn't [take anything with me]. Took off."

Mirroring other qualitative work among low-income urban mothers (Edin and Kefalas 2005), children were a key source of meaning and identity for the low-income rural mothers we interviewed. Especially poignant were those parents who cited their own addiction as a reason they had lost custody of their children. At the same time, the need to be present for their children provided a reason to fight addiction. Four respondents had gotten sober, each citing their children as their major motivation to stop using drugs, stay in rehab, and stay clean. Loretta, a mother of two, told us, "I just knew that if I got out there on drugs [again] that I wouldn't get to keep my kids, or I wouldn't have a life for them. And it was either my kids or the drugs. I picked my kids, of course. Went to rehab for six months." When Helena learned that her teenage daughter had tried methamphetamines, it was a wakeup call to get clean: "I mean . . . , I know [my daughter] has smoked pot and she has drank, but I never thought she would do [meth] . . . I guess that was another kind of eye opener for me." Helena, who told us she had been sober for six months, reobtained custody of her daughter during our fieldwork. Paige, age thirty-five, whose mother held temporary custody of her youngest son because of her own drug use, managed to quit without attending a rehabilitation program. She told us, "So, I'm staying clean and trying to do the right thing for my kids."

Despite the frequency of nontraditional family structures within the low-income community, divorce and cohabitation were harshly judged, especially by religious leaders. Several clergy were among the community leaders who cited cohabitation as one of the community's biggest challenges and claimed that cohabitation as well as divorce and single parenthood were the cause of the high poverty rates in the county. One told us, "We're trying to encourage kids to get married because the outcomes of families and children are so much better when there's a mom and dad involved."

Several others identified "fatherlessness" as

the chief social problem county wide. Although not all could articulate the rationale behind their views, some linked the high poverty rates in the county to the lack of a “male breadwinner” in the home; others cited the deleterious effects (for both the families and society at large) of increased dependency of single mothers on government programs such as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP). A founder of a faith-based nonprofit described the ideal family as “a married father and mother that train their children and don’t think that they just have to have a handout.”

As noted, our low-income respondents were similarly very critical of divorce and cohabitation, but ultimately decided that living outside these norms was the best course for them because of their concern for their children’s well-being. Scarlet explained: “So I ended up getting pregnant. You know, it was one of those things that was like oop, oops, oops. But God played a big play in that because I was scared to death to be a single momma. Which [my husband] tried to, he wanted to [keep me from leaving him]. He’s like, ‘Oh, we can work this out.’ . . . [But] he was just a big ho because he had another girl pregnant, [I] didn’t know it.”

The salience of traditional family values permeated the lives of the low-income participants we interviewed. Several described a large church in the county seat, Manchester, advertising a “wedding ministry.” Interested couples could receive the services of the officiating minister for free, and church members provided a reception in the church basement. Both the bride’s wedding dress and the wedding cake were also provided free of charge, reinforcing the message that young adults were supposed to marry. One respondent recounted that she had been convinced to marry for a second time through the wedding ministry, only discover that her groom had a “pill problem.” He started stealing from her soon after they had wed.

The shadow of the church and its traditional norms was virtually impossible to avoid given that nongovernmental sources of material and service provision (from food to addiction recovery) were nearly all faith based. One community leader claimed that “Without faith-based services in our rural communities there would be a lot of lacking. I mean, I think that they are

the bulk, they fill in [for what the government doesn’t do].”

As indicated earlier, research suggests that class origins and a family’s reputation and moral capital within the community can be consequential across a variety of domains (Duncan 2014; Sherman 2009). In Jennifer Sherman’s (2009) study of a predominately white, low-income northern California timber town, an individual’s perceived moral standing, based on the perception of whether an individual was a “hard worker” or came from a “traditional” household with “family values,” was a vital component of who received help in hard times. In Clay County, respondents reported similar judgments being rendered, along with the importance of religiously and church attendance. Yet we did not observe any faith-based entity refusing service to a needy family. Indeed, the Baptist minister who administered the soup kitchen, food bank, clothing closet, and homeless shelter, and gave rides to those requiring medical treatment in Lexington (two hours away) was among the most beloved figures in the community, especially among the low-income families who had sought aid.

However, few among our less advantaged respondents became incorporated into the local congregations who provided such assistance, or any local congregation at all, though most were nonetheless eager to profess their Christian faith. Many, especially those still in young adulthood, said they were not interested in participating in church. In the context of Clay County, isolation from religious institutions, especially in the young adult years, can be highly consequential because these institutions are very nearly the only venue where one can generate social capital and cultivate a feeling of belonging in the community. As one indication of the hegemony of religious institutions within the community, we counted more than sixty churches in the tiny city of Manchester and the surrounding area alone. Social capital helps young adults navigate personal relationships and gain opportunities, including schooling and employment (Byun et al. 2012; Coleman 1988; Kane et al. 2018; Settersten 2012). A lack of social capital further isolates young people from resources.

Marie, age twenty, told us that although God

played a big role in her life, church did not. When asked why she did not attend church she said, “I just don’t go to church because, a lot of churches are hypocrites. . . . Most of the churches I’ve went to they’ve always talked about me, or my makeup, or pants, so I just don’t go.” Twenty-seven-year-old Stevie offered a similar claim. Emphasizing that “If it wasn’t for God, I wouldn’t be anywhere near where I’m at now,” she asserted that nonetheless she could not find a church that made her feel comfortable. Throughout our interview, Miranda, age thirty-one, emphasized that she strove to put God in the center of her life and hoped her children would as well. But when it came to church, she said, “Problem is with church, there are people that look down on people. If there weren’t people like them, there’d be more people in the church. I’m not judging those people because that’s their business. That’s between them and God. But if weren’t for people like that I think a lot of people would go to church. I know I would.”

A deeper analysis of these views indicate that the rejection many felt was rooted in the fact that they didn’t have the resources to “dress the part.” More fundamentally, however, many felt judged because they were not living in accordance with community norms regarding marriage. Churchgoing among the less educated has long been lower than among those with a college degree, though the gap is closing due to a sharp falloff in attendance among recent cohorts of the college educated (Edin et al. 2019).

In sum, marriage and childbearing were core components of adulthood for Clay County residents and a point of entry into the pathway to adulthood for those from low-income backgrounds, who typically transitioned to these adult roles while still in their teens or early twenties.<sup>6</sup> However, many marital relationships were marred by poverty, addiction, and violence. When trouble struck, many parents, especially mothers, chose being a parent over be-

ing a partner. Several mothers too struggled with addiction, and their children were sometimes removed from their care. Low marital quality led to separation and hesitancy to remarry. Deviating from the norm of a two-parent, biological family form often alienated young parents from a key institution of material and social support—the church.

### EMPLOYMENT

Desire for better employment opportunities in Clay County was widespread, most keenly felt as young adults graduated from high school, started a family, or separated from a marriage—events that often took place over the course of just a few, demographically dense, years. Moral norms about the value of work were repeatedly espoused in interviews with low-income respondents and community leaders alike, and efforts were made to conform to these ideals. While some low-income participants’ fathers may have been able to claim work in blue-collar jobs, this generation of young people were not. Throughout their young adult years, constrained employment opportunities prevent participants finding stable economic footing. Their aspirations were dashed by a low-end service sector, fast food, and Walmart, all of which offered low pay, uncertain hours, and frequent layoffs.

Because of the decline of extractive industries in the region, no industry is present to anchor the economy in Clay County today. The county’s official labor-force participation rate in 2019 was only 36.8 percent, substantially lower than the national average of 63.4 percent (Census Bureau 2020). As noted earlier, the population relies heavily on federal disability benefits. Among the working-age population (age eighteen to sixty-four), 9.8 percent receive disability payments, relative to 7.8 percent for the state and 4.5 percent for the nation (Social Security Administration 2019b, 2019a). This is not necessarily an indication of fraud; it is primarily rural locations such as Clay County that

6. The majority of our interviews were with women, but the three men in the sample also reported early marriages, childbearing, and divorce. James got married when he was seventeen on his wife’s sixteenth birthday, but separated later in life. Jake married the mother of two of his children at about twenty-five and was going through a divorce at the time of the interview at age thirty-three. Travis, who did not have children, recalled getting married through the wedding ministry in his early twenties but was divorced by twenty-six.

have living costs low enough to live on the meager benefits of these government programs, making them “sticky” for beneficiaries. Real differences in morbidity are also a likely cause. The economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton (2020) and others find that reports of pain are elevated in rural areas, including the Appalachian region, possibly as a result of the physically demanding work many have been subject to (Case and Deaton 2020, 2017; Copeland et al. 2020; Dwyer-Lindgren et al. 2018; Erwin 2017).

The entry-level job openings that do promise stability, benefits, and better pay—usually in education, the health sector, or at the federal prison at the edge of town, were few and subject to strong competition. In keeping with other studies (Duncan 2014; Maril 1989), several low-income respondents emphasized that you needed to have connections—especially family ties—to get one of the better jobs in town. Paige put it this way: “It’s just a small-knit community. . . . It’s all about who you know.” Other low-income participants described Manchester, the county seat, as a “family-run town.”

Despite these challenges, low-income respondents exerted considerable effort to find and keep a job. Many mothers of young children were not employed at time of the interview but could recount their time in the labor force and the barriers to employment they had encountered. Some, like Miranda, now thirty-one, had worked for years. She took pride in her prior management position but had been unable to continue due to lack of childcare options. Forty-year-old Scarlet had also wanted to work when she was a young mother but couldn’t find childcare, “A lot of my life has been hard because of childcare. . . . we have [only] two childcares [in the county]. A lot of people, their family babysits. But now if your family works [like mine does], you’re screwed.” She went on to describe a time she had to pay sixty dollars in late fees because she got a flat tire while traveling from work to pick up her children at daycare. Stevie, who had enrolled in a training program in hopes of scoring a higher paying job, ended up taking a part-

time minimum-wage job instead because she had to care for her children after school hours.

A lack of transportation was another barrier to employment among low-income young adults. Helena, now thirty-two, described in her twenties walking more than a mile to her fast-food restaurant job while eight months pregnant. She could not afford a car and the county has no adequate public transportation system. Stevie described walking to work when she was sixteen years old and pregnant “in the rain, in the snow. The police picked me up a couple of times and asked me what I was doing out because it was storming.” Other respondents reported looking for work in London, a city in a neighboring county, or even cities farther away like Bowling Green or Glasgow (both more than a two-hour drive, one way), but this strategy was tenuous. Marie, age twenty, described her family’s situation: “[My husband] currently can’t work because we don’t have a car. [M]y mom’s car. . . . we kind of use hers. But she don’t really like people driving her car far out and . . . the jobs are mostly in London because you can’t find nothing down here. So it’s hard for us to go back and forth. So, the only thing we’re pretty much [relying on] is just my child support from [my daughter’s] dad, which is not guaranteed.”

Even though paid work was hard to come by, we witnessed considerable unpaid labor in the form of volunteer work among young adults. Kentucky’s version of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the cash welfare program known locally as the Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (KTAP), along with SNAP, have work requirements for many beneficiaries (Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services n.d.). In lieu of available paid employment, several low-income families relied on KTAP and volunteered to meet work requirements. At maximum, KTAP offered at \$262 a month for a family of three in 2019 plus money for transportation to and from workfare assignments (Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services 2017).<sup>7</sup> Key volunteer venues were at the soup kitchen and clothing pantry, but oth-

7. Unemployed parents were also eligible for a \$200 per month for transportation support payments if they participated in more KTAP activities each month (Potter 2020). Most of our respondents also claimed this credit bringing the monthly total to \$462 for a family of three.

ers volunteered at the Manchester visitor center or other faith-based organizations.

The lack of formal employment opportunities affected other institutions, including child support and drug court, that influenced the lives and trajectories of young adults. Two respondents still in their young adult years described how they had been arrested for missing child support payments. Lacking stable employment, both were unsure how they were going to be able to pay. Some noncustodial mothers shared this dilemma. Helena, age thirty-two, explained: "If I had a job I would [pay child support]. But I've made one payment [because] I've not had no job, [so] I've not been able to make no payments. And that's when last time I went to jail, I was able to get out because I signed a plea agreement. But I've not been able to keep my end of the deal on the plea agreement because I've not been able to find a job yet."

Drug court, an alternative to prison, also required participants to be employed. Paige, a thirty-four-year-old respondent enrolled in the program, told us that although she appreciated her job at a fast-food restaurant, getting rides to and from work was a challenge. She asked us to give her a ride to work several times during our fieldwork. Without a car, she worried about whether she could stay in the program and avoid additional incarceration. The lack of jobs compounded challenges that young adults faced, especially when trying to avoid the penal system and provide for a partner or a child.

As in other rural communities (Sherman 2009), labor-market opportunities for some respondents were limited by a gendered labor market. When describing the labor opportunities in the county, Stevie, age twenty-seven, told us, "It's easier for men to do stuff than it is for women around here." Paige, age thirty-four, echoed this sentiment: "I feel like if we had more jobs, especially for mothers, females, not just that, but I feel like if they had more jobs besides just restaurant work, or something like that, it would help a lot of households." Male jobs, according to Paige, were in manual labor or the trades.

Somewhat in keeping with these characterizations, several low-income male respondents reported working short-term construction gigs for money. Others turned to crime. Travis, age

thirty-nine, who took to selling drugs in his young adult years, told us, "I tried working and they don't really pay enough to actually survive down here. So I do a lot of little side hustles, I guess." Later in the interview, he discussed his calculus in more detail: "Most of the places around Manchester you're lucky to get maybe thirty hours a week. They pay you \$7.25 an hour, by the time you're done, you're lucky to pay your rent and electric, you know? That ain't even counting car insurance and getting a car."

Travis highlights a key tension in the experiences of low-income respondents who worked: even when they were able to find a job, their pay was seldom enough to get by, especially when factoring in transportation costs. Formal employment might not be worth it, some concluded.

Community leaders also reflected on this dilemma. Acknowledging that government programs were clearly needed to ensure family well-being, many community leaders favored work requirements. At the same time, the community elite understood that most local wages were not enough to lift families out of poverty. One respondent, a stably employed professional explained: "It's a broken system. It is. These minimum-wage jobs were meant for high school kids [or] college kids to make a little money while they're going to school, and in this area, it's become families having to depend on that to live. So [it has become I can go] and bring home \$50 a week, or I can stay home and receive my health and insurance, food stamps, money and all this kind of stuff. . . . Why should I go to work for that?"

In short, jobs designed as a starting point for young adults entering the workforce had become a permanent and unsatisfactory feature of their adult lives.

Despite these realities, some community leaders decried what they called "dependency mentality" created by so-called dependence on government assistance and saw jobs as a way to provide "independence" and change people's lives, creating a pathway to prosperity. One pastor opined that "Job [opportunities] out in rural communities can change families and can cause them to become prosperous and change their vision, the way of thinking. They're not dependent. They become independen-

dent. That's one of the things that I'd like to see is helping people become independent, changing their lives."

At the same time, he acknowledged the barriers to employment in the region, such as transportation. Given his concern about the corrosive influence of government dependence, he had founded a small pallet factory and had employed a dozen or so people for several years. However, he could keep the business afloat only through donations. When the facility caught fire and burned down, he was unable to replace it.

In sum, stable employment was lauded as a key marker of adulthood and a source of dignity and pride. However, low-income respondents faced numerous challenges given structural constraints and expedited entry into marriage and childbearing to achieve this milestone. Participants took steps, such as enrolling in training programs, searching for child-care, and commuting long distances, but finding stable economic footing rarely materialized, extending a tentative transition to adulthood. When asked about what could be done to improve the county, well-paying jobs were at the top of the list. As one community leader said, "Feed us. Help us. But don't give it to us. We're a proud country. We're a very proud country. When you take someone's pride from them, you've stripped them of their dignity. Feed us, but feed us with jobs. Feed us with hope. Feed us with a life to look forward to, to get up and go to work. To make something. To be productive in your community."

### SCHOOL AND LEAVING HOME

Like marriage and childbearing, completing school and leaving home were starkly divided along class lines in Clay County. As indicated earlier, middle income youth in the county frequently follow the Big 5 sequence as it plays out for the average American. Community leaders and their children pursued education and had the means to leave the county, though some returned because of family obligations. Those who did return found stable employment in health care, education, or social services. For these young people, marriage and children came last. But, for less advantaged youth, pursuing higher education as a path to adulthood

was often untenable because of expedited transitions into marriage and childbearing. Furthermore, establishing an independent household, or maintaining one, was challenging in the face of poverty as well as the need to contribute financially to one's family of origin and other kin.

Class divides in educational experiences and trajectories appeared in conversations about the local high school. Schools are one of the only institutions in Clay County where low-income and middle-class young people interact. We interviewed a handful of community members from stable middle-class and working-class backgrounds who had recently graduated. Graduates of the system, as well as some staff members from the school, claimed that it was understood from an early age that there were those who were going to "make it" and those who were not. The two recent graduates described one group of students whose parents provided the material resources and encouragement that allowed them to do well and the students' whose parents were in the "jail section" of the newspaper. Sometimes, they told us, you could tell who was who because of "the way they look." This class divide was less evident in elementary school, they noted, when it was not uncommon to have friends that came from "dysfunctional homes." But friendships were increasingly sorted by social class in high school.

Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that respondents from low-income backgrounds described their time in high school as a difficult period. Carrie, age twenty-three, told us, "I hated high school, really." Stevie echoed the sentiment, "I hated school. I was learning. I made straight As. I hated going. Hated it, so I quit." After probing these respondents' views, participants shared that it was mainly their middle-class peers that made school so difficult. Carrie said it was "because you always had different sorts of groups. I hated it." For twenty-year-old Marie, it was a move to the local high school when she turned sixteen that left her alienated. It derailed higher education plans: "I was wanting to complete college, but when we moved down here, I didn't want to go to school [because of the cliques]."

Nonetheless, low-income respondents we

spoke with did recognize the importance of higher education and wanted to achieve this marker of adulthood, some struggling to do so even later in their twenties and thirties, though none had yet earned a bachelor's degree. Barriers of degree completion included the cost and the challenges of balancing schooling and family responsibilities. Forty-year-old Scarlett, a mother of four, had been working toward her bachelor's degree throughout her young adulthood years. Her plans had been repeatedly derailed by juggling being a single mother, work, and school. Angel, age forty-five, after receiving her GED after having children, turned her sights toward a college degree. She reported similar challenges, "No, I didn't keep going [to complete the degree] 'cause it was so hard to juggle school and work, and to raise kids, you have to have money, you know." Fewer than 10 percent of county residents held a bachelor's degree in 2019 relative to 24.2 percent nationally (Census Bureau 2020). Other respondents, such as Carrie, age twenty-three, and Miranda, age thirty-one, aspired to get certifications, most often as nurses' aides, but were unable to do so because of childcare needs.

According to community leaders, it was exceedingly rare for a student with a family history of poverty, family complexity, and drug use to make it to college, much less leave the county permanently. It was not unheard of, but such students were described as beating long odds and spoken of with reverence. As noted elsewhere in the companion volume to this issue (Parsons 2022), low-income youth with educational aspirations frequently failed to consider academic options farther away in response to family expectations of staying locally.

In contrast to the lives of the low-income respondents, community leaders and their children were able to pursue higher education somewhat farther afield. Clay County, like many rural places, has experienced a brain drain (Carr and Kefalas 2009; Sherman and Schafft 2022; Bernsen et al. 2022). Many community leaders expressed concern about this. Those they referred to as the best and brightest were often their own children. Young adults who wanted to return seldom did so because there were "no jobs" for young people with col-

lege credentials. A retired high school teacher described the school district's dilemma in this way: "It's a big problem [that] there's not any work here to amount to anything. . . . Most of the people who are willing to leave have already left. The others are seeking ways to be able to live here and still survive [financially]. We don't want to stress too much the welfare segment, because you also have that segment of people who want their children to be educated. . . . But in a way, we are raising [those] children to leave, to be able to leave this county."

Some community leaders were raised locally by middle-class parents and had left, but had subsequently returned. All, however, reported that moving back took an emotional toll. Much of the sparse in-migration to the county was due to grown children (and their spouses and children) returning to be close to family. Returning home had meant compromising on lifestyle and career opportunities. One social service provider we spoke with described the trade-off as follows: "My husband wanted to come back here. He wanted to live here. I think he maybe regrets that now. . . . We just kind of settled." Some community leaders had family members who chose not to move back because of lack of amenities or health services. One young professional who returned to care for an ill family member told us that her sister had not moved back because support for her disabled daughter would be difficult at best. When reflecting on her choices, she said, "I always question, should I have left here? I don't know. I ran into an old friend and he's actually been a missionary and I went, 'I'm a missionary too. I stayed in Manchester.' And one of my older sisters told my mom, 'You can move to Lexington now. You've put your time in here.' Should I have stayed here? Sometimes I want to go to a restaurant that doesn't look terrible."

For many low-income young people, leaving the parental household is not uncommon, but few stray far beyond the family compound, the collection of trailer homes and small wood-framed houses where they were raised. Extended family and kin are of utmost importance, and relying on family was a key survival strategy to combat both poverty and addiction. Within these extended family networks, financial challenges were typically shared so reci-

procuity was expected. Indeed, low-income households frequently described receiving, and extending, aid to their parents and other extended family members, as has been documented in other rural communities (Pickering 2000; Sherman 2009).

Engaging in these exchanges was another element that lingered in the lives of the low-income respondents in young adulthood. Several described caring for neighbors' children and offering meals to those who struggled with addiction. Lulu, for example, took it upon herself to care for the neighbors' children, often providing meals, when their drug-addicted parents simply failed to come home, sometimes for days at a time. She told us that an evening meal at her home could include as many as eight such children. This generosity sometimes meant forgoing the meal herself, as her financial resources were meager. Lulu did not charge for her services.

Yet these acts of generosity were extended despite pervasive mistrust, often exacerbated by drug addiction. Aurora, who also routinely fed the hungry in her home, recounted that some of her impromptu guests, who were struggling with addiction, had stolen groceries from her. Her account was not the exception but the norm. Among low-income households in our sample, moral judgments about addiction and the other behaviors it spawned (stealing) were typically suspended in a context in which so many friends, family members, and respondents themselves had experienced similar struggles.

Throughout our interviews, many low-income participants voiced the goal of establishing permanent independent households. However, most currently lived with, had recently lived with, or anticipating once again living with, kin. They doubled up with mothers, mothers-in-law, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, and friends or friends of friends. Angel, age forty-five, was doubled up with her friend Crystal, age thirty-one, and Crystal's children. They also housed Angel's young adult children and their romantic partners. Like Angel's adult children, the majority of those in their young adult years were doubled up. One respondent temporarily established an independent household but an abusive partner, high on meth,

threatened to kill her, and she was evicted after her landlord learned that the police had been called. At the time of the interview, she was doubled up with a cousin.

Family caregiving responsibilities also prevented the establishment of independent households for some during the young adult years. Shania, for example, told us she spent most of her time caring for a son with severe yet untreated mental health issues. At the same time, she was living with and caring for her elderly mother to keep her out of a nursing home, though at the time of our interview the mother had recently died. A twenty-three-year-old respondent who asked us to refer to her as Pooh Bear coped with her own frequent epileptic seizures while serving as a full-time caregiver for her mother, who also suffered from seizures. In sum, although marriages may be fragile, thick extended family ties both support and bind young adults to the community.

## CONCLUSION

Scholars of young adulthood have highlighted the importance of moving beyond the white middle-class portrayals of adulthood and encourage researchers to capture diverse and heterogeneous experiences. This article adds to this body of work by providing a case study of young adulthood as it is experienced in a predominantly poor, predominantly white Appalachian community. Decades of economic and labor-market decline and a sharp rise of illicit drug use and addiction shape this community and region. However, although these challenges are present for everyone in the county, we observed a stark class divide in who has the resources—both social and material—to weather them.

Clay County's middle-class youth were able to achieve markers to adulthood in a sequence that mirrors the typical American young adult. Education was prioritized, and most pursued four-year postsecondary degrees. For those who returned to the county after college, a job in a relatively well-paying sector was frequently a necessary prerequisite, often courtesy of connections with influential family members or friends.

In contrast, low-income respondents had to grow up fast, some after losing a parent to ad-

diction, others finding refuge from a dysfunctional family through early marriage and family formation. However, once these initial steps to adulthood were taken, the next were shaky at best. Three of the Big 5 markers of adulthood—completing schooling, finding stable work, and establishing a permanent independent household, remained out of reach for nearly every low-income respondent in young adulthood despite repeated efforts to achieve them. Coming of age in Clay County thus involves both expedited and emerging (extended) transitions across the Big 5 markers of adulthood.

Family formation was expedited, yet unstable. Marriages were tested by a failing economy, addition, and violence. When these challenges occurred, mothers in particular were caught between enacting their partner and parental roles. When marriages failed, many low-income young adults swore off marriage, which carried reputational costs that could impede their mobility by cutting them off from the vital social capital that participation in a key community institution, the church, could have provided. In a small community, where “everyone knows everyone,” family reputations earned through the intergenerational transmission of poverty were hard to overcome. Social exclusion from places frequented by the middle class—both church and school—may have stymied upward mobility for low-income youth.

Meanwhile, young adults were left overwhelmed and isolated and had few opportunities to achieve or stably maintain other markers of adulthood. Respondents worked toward these markers throughout their young adult years, but the markers were emerging slowly and sporadically. Young adults pursued financial stability through participation in the labor market, following another important community norm. Similarly, throughout the young adult years, most made plans to complete high school or a postsecondary degree. Yet these plans were frequently derailed. What little money was gleaned from low-paying, unstable employment or meager government assistance was quickly absorbed by pressing household needs of one’s own household, not to mention those of kin and neighbors, needs that were exacerbated by addiction. For those who managed to start an independent household, this

achievement was almost always temporary. As low-income young adults aged out of young adulthood, for most, completing the Big 5 seemed no more feasible than at the start.

In Clay County and in other poor rural places, policymakers and researchers need to recognize that launching young adults is a “public issue.” Individual efforts alone cannot overcome chronic community challenges such as intergenerational poverty, a lack of well-paying jobs, and addiction, much less the interplay of these challenges in family and individual lives. Although community members may prefer to advance faith-based solutions to such challenges, they are far beyond the capacity of even the most well-resourced congregation. An additional challenge is that low-income youth are often profoundly distrustful of religious institutions. Such young adults wrest partial adult status from parenthood and marriage, but these are only partially won, and full adult status may never materialize. When a whole cohort of disadvantaged young people seem locked out of a stable path for adulthood, a societal response is required.

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