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## ***A Statistical Portrait of Well-being in Early Adulthood***

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*A successful transition to an independent adulthood is a major goal of most young people and their families. This goal also drives a lot of child and youth policy in this country. Therefore, it is important to understand what we are driving towards, as well as the particular strengths and challenges faced by major social groups in attempting this transition.*

*In this data brief, we describe key characteristics of young adults in the United States at or around age 25. These characteristics include educational attainment and financial self-sufficiency, health behaviors, family formation, and civic involvement. In addition, we present separate descriptive portraits for the major racial groups and among Hispanics and immigrants. These portraits reveal very distinct patterns of well-being in early adulthood, and these patterns can inform future policies directed towards these groups as the nation seeks to reduce racial disparities and facilitate better long-term outcomes for all of America's children and youth, especially those who are at risk.*

*Note: This data brief is based on a longer report that was prepared by Child Trends for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. For more information, please see the entire report: Brown, Moore, & Bzostek. (2003). A Portrait of Well-Being in Early Adulthood, available at <http://www.hewlett.org/Archives/Publications/portraitOfWellBeing.htm>*

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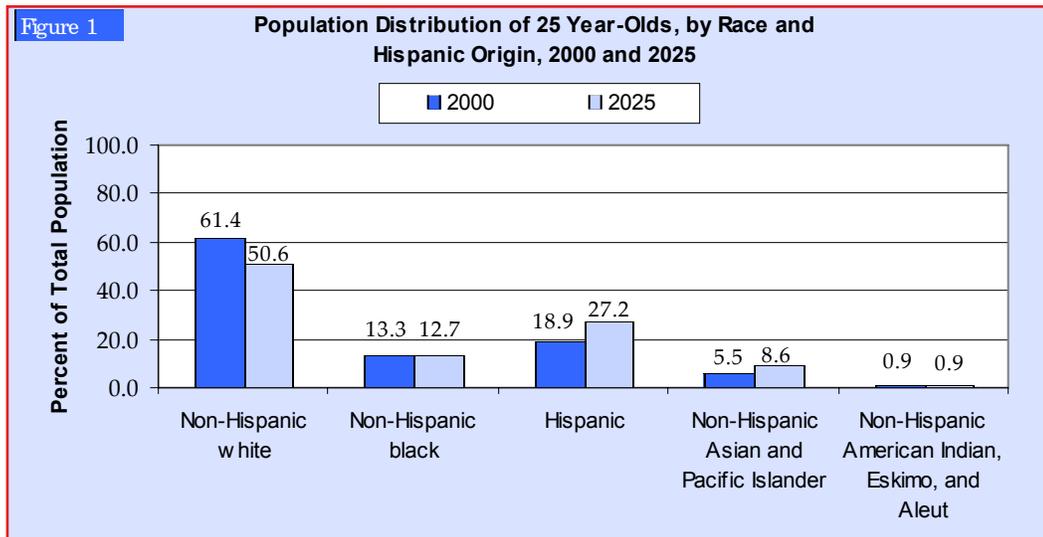
## **THE CHANGING COMPOSITION OF YOUNG ADULTS IN AMERICA**

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America has been undergoing significant racial and cultural transformations in the last several decades, a social trend that is expected to continue into the foreseeable future. This transformation is particularly evident among young adults. Between 2000 and 2025, the percentage of 25-year-olds who are minority (i.e., other than "non-Hispanic white") is expected to increase from 39 percent to nearly one-half (49 percent) of this population.

In 2000, Hispanics comprised the largest minority, at 19 percent; followed by non-Hispanic blacks, at 13 percent; non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islanders, at 6 percent; and non-Hispanic American Indians, at about 1 percent. (See Figure 1)

The substantial growth in the number of Hispanic and Asian young adults has been driven, in large part, by immigration. While the proportion of all 25-year-olds in 2000 who were born outside the United States was about 15 percent, the foreign-born proportion was 44 percent among Hispanics and 70 percent among Asians. And, while the proportion of Hispanics and Asians of this age who are immigrants is expected to fall by about one-half by 2025, their share of the age-25 population will continue to increase, to about 27 percent for Hispanics and 9 percent for non-Hispanic Asians.



## WELL-BEING AT AGE 25: AN OVERVIEW

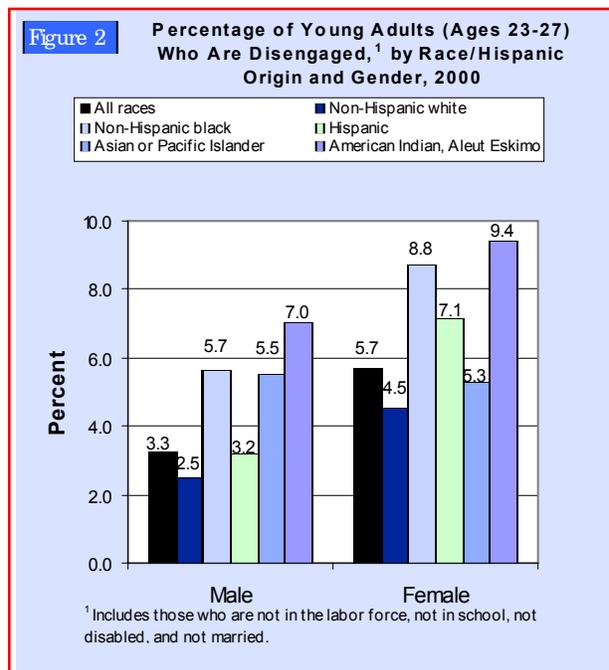
### Education and Employment

The importance of education to well-being in early adulthood can hardly be overstated. Indeed, the relationship of education to all aspects of success—such as employment and earnings, health, family formation and civic involvement—is well documented.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the critical link between a college education and future economic success has actually grown in the last several decades.<sup>2</sup> In 2000, 11 percent of all 25-year-olds<sup>3</sup> lacked a high school degree or GED.<sup>4</sup> At the other end of the continuum, slightly more than one-quarter (28 percent) had earned a bachelor's degree.

Employment, and particularly full-time employment, is the key to self-sufficiency for most young adults.<sup>5</sup> At age 25, 92 percent of males and 81 percent of females reported working during 2001. In the same year, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of all males, and about one-half (48 percent) of all females of that age worked full-time, year-round.<sup>6</sup>

In 2000, the percentage of non-institutionalized young adults who were disengaged from both the labor force and schooling was modest, with women more likely than men to be disengaged (5.7 percent versus 3.3 percent, respectively). (See Figure 2) Though relatively small as a percentage, these young adults are of greatest concern to policymakers, as they are clearly floundering in the transition, and are more likely to

be financially dependent on government programs.<sup>7</sup>



### Family Formation

Leaving the parental household is a traditional milestone of adult independence, as are marriage and having children. Having children too early, however, can be a major barrier to independence.

Data from 2002 show that by the time people reach their mid-twenties, more than three-

quarters (77 percent) have left the parental household. In the same year, about four in ten young adults were currently or had been married (41 percent), while an additional 12 percent were cohabiting (living together) with a partner of the opposite sex. In 2000, about four in ten young adults reported having ever had a child, though women were much more likely than men to report having children (48 percent, versus 32 percent, respectively).<sup>8</sup>

### **Earnings and Food Stamp Receipt**

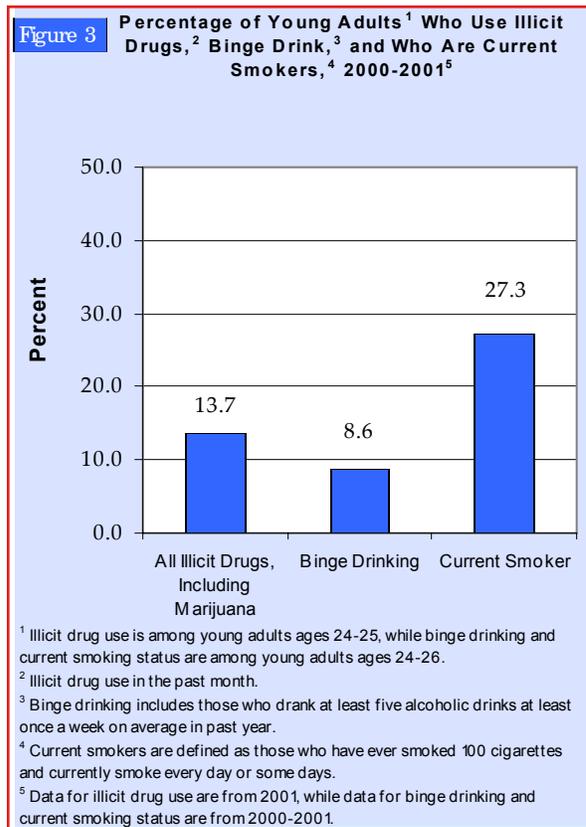
In 2001, the median earnings for 25-year-olds were \$20,800.<sup>9</sup> In that year, those with bachelor's degrees had roughly twice the median earnings of those who were high school dropouts. Seven percent of young adults lived in families receiving food stamps in 2001.<sup>10</sup>

### **Health Behaviors and Outcomes**

Even though young adults are generally quite healthy, they suffer from a variety of negative health behaviors and conditions that substantially reduce their quality of life, represent threats to their long-term well-being, and may make it much more difficult to achieve and sustain a successful transition to adulthood. The abuse of drugs and alcohol, in particular, is related to problems getting and keeping jobs, to fulfilling family roles of parent and spouse, and to higher rates of domestic violence.<sup>11</sup> And cigarette smoking has been related to lost economic productivity, in addition to its negative effects on health.<sup>12</sup>

Among young adults in their mid-twenties, 14 percent reported having used marijuana or other illicit drugs in the previous month in 2001.<sup>13</sup> Nine percent reported regular binge drinking (five or more drinks in a row at least once per week during the past year) between 2000 and 2001, and slightly more than one-quarter (27 percent) were current smokers during the same time period.<sup>14</sup> (See Figure 3)

Obesity is a growing threat to adult and child health. In 2000-2001, 17 percent of young adults were obese, and only four in ten participated in regular leisure-time physical activity.<sup>15</sup>



### **Civic Participation: Citizenship, Voting, and Church Attendance**

Being an active citizen is a critical adult role in a democracy. Civic engagement is essential for the health of society, for the representation of key social groups in the political process, and for the empowerment of the individual. In addition, citizenship confers important rights and access to social supports.

In 2000, one in eight young adults in the U.S. lacked American citizenship. Among the foreign born at this age, less than 20 percent were citizens. A modest majority of all young adults (58 percent) were registered to vote in 2000, and a minority (42 percent) actually voted in that presidential election year.<sup>16</sup>

Although a large majority of young adults (72 percent in 2001) report that religion is "very important" to their lives, most are not strongly connected to religious institutions. Forty percent of young adults in 2001 did not attend a religious service even once during the previous year, while only one in five attended on a regular basis (25 or more times in the previous year).<sup>17</sup>

# PORTRAITS OF EARLY ADULTHOOD ACROSS RACE AND HISPANIC ORIGIN

There are many paths to becoming a fully functioning and independent adult, and different groups face distinct challenges to making a successful transition. Policies designed to aid that transition are often targeted to particular communities in recognition of these distinct challenges, and with regard for the cultural appropriateness of interventions. Understanding the different challenges facing young adults in different racial and ethnic groups is an important step to forming effective policies to aid their transition.

## ***A Portrait of White Young Adults***

Non-Hispanic white young adults, on average, have relatively high rates of educational attainment, employment, and income, significantly exceeding outcomes for all minorities except for Asians. Whites have low rates of imprisonment, they have teen fertility rates less than one-half those of Hispanics, non-Hispanic blacks, and Native Americans, though still high relative to Asians.<sup>18</sup>

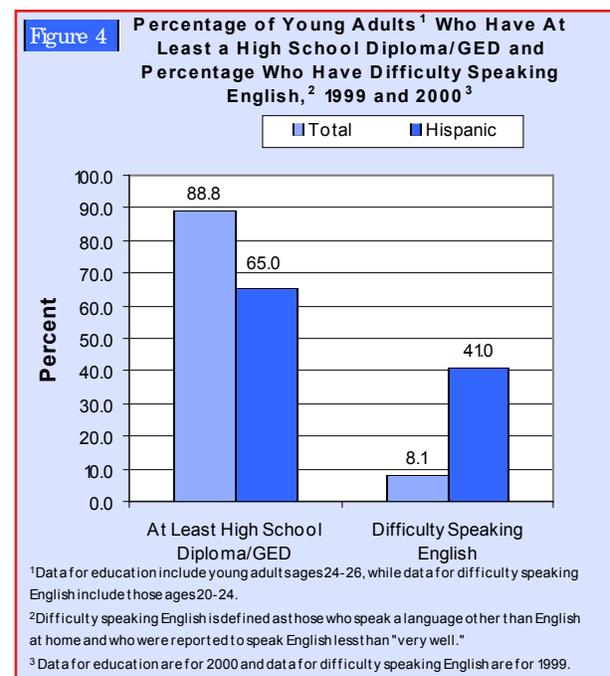
From a policy perspective, however, it is important to note the sheer size of this group: 61 percent of all 25-year-olds in 2000. This size means that even low rates of problems can represent large numbers of non-Hispanic white young people who are struggling, in some cases exceeding, the combined *absolute* number of minorities struggling with similar problems. In addition, non-Hispanic white young adults constituted one-third of all high school dropouts in 2000 and more than 45 percent of those receiving food stamps in their age group in 2001.

Young non-Hispanic white adults particularly struggle with drug and alcohol use. The proportion engaged in heavy drinking, smoking, and use of illicit drugs is as high as or higher than any of the other racial and ethnic groups. Among poorly educated whites, problems with cigarette addiction and the use of illicit drugs other than marijuana are even more pronounced.

## ***A Portrait of Hispanic Young Adults***

The portrait of Hispanic young adults is strongly influenced by the fact that more than 40 percent were born outside the United States. Non-citizen status and limited English proficiency

and education are major factors limiting their success. More than 40 percent spoke English less than "very well" in 1999, and only 65 percent had a high school diploma in 2000, the lowest percentage of any group and much lower than the overall average of 89 percent for this age group. (See Figure 4)



Hispanic teens have by far the highest annual birth rate of any racial and ethnic group: 92 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 in 2000-2001, compared with 73 per 1,000 among blacks, 30 per 1,000 among non-Hispanic whites, and 21 per 1,000 among Asians. Data from 2000 indicate that by their mid-twenties, two-thirds of Hispanic females have had at least one child, much higher than Asians and non-Hispanic whites, and about the same as non-

Hispanic blacks.

Young Hispanic men and women have a significantly different relationship to the labor force. Despite their lack of education and language limitations, 93 percent of Hispanic young men were working in 2001, similar to the average for all men in this age group (92 percent). Hispanic women, on the other hand, were less likely to be working (69 percent among Hispanic women versus 81 percent among all women in 2001). This discrepancy may, in part, reflect more traditional family roles in the Hispanic community, whereby young women are more likely to be at home and taking care of children.

The characteristics of native-born and foreign-born Hispanic young adults are often very different. In 2000, the foreign born were three times more likely to have less than a high school degree (51 percent versus 17 percent, respectively) and one-quarter as likely to have a bachelor's degree (4 percent versus 16 percent, respectively). More than two-thirds of foreign-born Hispanic young adults reported speaking English less than "very well" in 1999. This compares with about one in eight native-born, Hispanic young adults, a much lower though still surprisingly high proportion.

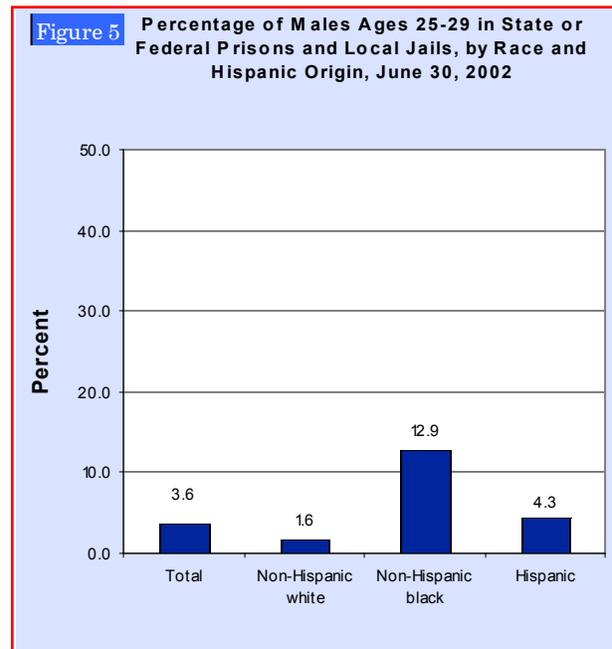
The gap in work experience between native- and foreign-born Hispanic women is also particularly large. Among Hispanic women in 2001, native-born were more likely than foreign-born to have been employed in the previous year (79 percent versus 58 percent, respectively) and far more likely to have been employed full-time, year-round (50 percent versus 34 percent, respectively).

Foreign-born Hispanic young adults are more likely than the native-born to be married (46 percent versus 37 percent, respectively, in 2002) and are less than one-half as likely to be living with their parents (14 percent versus 32 percent in 2002). Foreign-born Hispanic young adults are also slightly more than one-half as likely as the native-born to smoke cigarettes (data from 2000-2001), and about one-quarter as likely to use marijuana (in 2001).

### ***A Portrait of Black Young Adults***

In 2002, more than one in every eight non-Hispanic black men ages 25-29 was in prison or

jail (13 percent). That is triple the rate for Hispanics (the next most likely to be incarcerated), and more than seven times the rate for non-Hispanic white young men. (See Figure 5)



When those who are in prison or jail are combined with those who are not in jail but who are disengaged (not in school, not in the labor force, not disabled, and not married), the result is that nearly one in five young non-Hispanic black men is clearly not on the path to becoming an independent and self-sufficient adult. While these circumstances are certainly not unique to young black men, they experience them to a far greater degree, with profound economic and social effects for the whole black community.

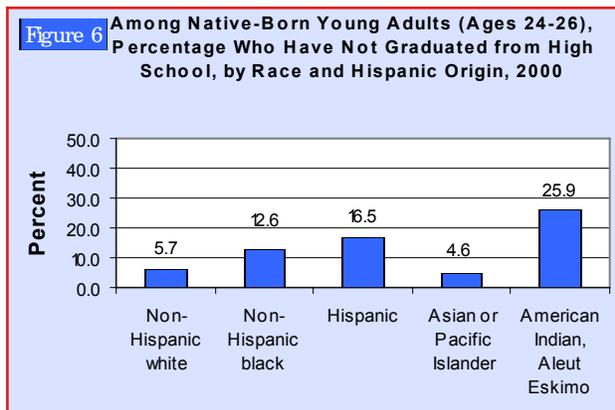
The birth rate for black teens has decreased substantially in the last several years, to 73 per 1,000 in 2001, but it is still more than twice that of non-Hispanic white teens, and second only to rates for Hispanic teens (92 per 1,000). And, because of young black adults' low rates of marriage, by their mid-twenties they are by far the most likely to be single parents (23 percent in 2002, compared with 7 percent for non-Hispanic whites, 10 percent for Hispanics, and 2 percent for Asians).

Rates of cigarette use among young black

adults are much lower than among non-Hispanic whites (18 percent in 2000-2001, compared with 32 percent) and are comparable with rates among Hispanics.

### ***A Portrait of Native American Young Adults***

One-quarter of young Native American adults in 2000 had failed to graduate from high school, second only to the percentage for Hispanics (35 percent). Among native-born young adults, Native Americans have the highest percentage failing to graduate from high school.<sup>19</sup> (See Figure 6)



Eight percent of young Native American adults were disengaged in 2000, higher than Asians and non-Hispanic whites, and similar to the percentage for non-Hispanic blacks (7 percent). (See Figure 2) Data for 2001 show that Native Americans hold a middle ground in earning power, fall in the middle for teen birth rates (66 per 1,000 in 2001, lower than for blacks and Hispanics but twice the rate for non-Hispanic whites) and, at 15 percent in 2002, they were the second most-likely group to report being single parents.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to these challenges, young Native American adults, virtually all of whom are American citizens, are much less likely to be registered to vote than their non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black counterparts (36 percent versus 65 and 71 percent, respectively, in 2000).

### ***A Portrait of Asian Young Adults***

By most of the measures discussed in this brief, young Asian adults are, as a group, thriving.

Young adult Asian workers reported the highest median incomes in 2001, and one-half (51 percent) had bachelor's degrees in 2000, far higher than any other group.<sup>21</sup> Young Asian adults have the lowest rates of dependence on government assistance (data from 2001), the lowest rates of teen fertility (data from 2000-2001), and are the least likely to be single parents as young adults (data from 2000). Data on most health outcomes and behaviors show them to be among the healthiest.

The experience of young Asian adults is influenced strongly by immigration. Similar to Hispanics, nearly one-half were not U.S. citizens in 2000, and few (about 20 percent) voted in the 2000 elections. Young Asian adults, however, are considerably less likely than Hispanics to be limited in their ability to speak English (17 percent versus 41 percent, respectively, in 1999) and, unlike Hispanics, are at least as well educated as their native-born counterparts (data from 2000).

### ***A Portrait of Immigrant Young Adults***

Across racial and ethnic groups, foreign-born young adults are, as a whole, healthier than their native-born counterparts. They are much less likely to be obese (data from 2000-2001), use marijuana (data from 2001), drink heavily (data from 2000-2001), or smoke cigarettes (data from 2000-2001) than are U.S.-born young adults. They are also much less likely to report limitations that interfere with their ability to do daily tasks (2 percent versus 5 percent overall in 2000-2001). These positive health behaviors and characteristics are valuable in and of themselves, and many are related positively to work success.

In contrast, more than one-half of the foreign-born young adult population spoke English less than "very well" in 1999, and three in ten foreign-born young adults lacked a high school diploma in 2000 (compared with 8 percent among the native born). Interestingly, the education gap between native-born and foreign-born young adults is much smaller when one considers the percentage with bachelor's degrees (29 percent versus 25 percent, respectively). What we are seeing is a bimodal pattern of immigration that includes large percentages of highly educated (mostly Asian, white, and black) and highly undereducated (overwhelm-

ingly Hispanic) foreign born. The earnings of young foreign-born workers were considerably less than their U.S.-born peers in 2001, reflecting, in part, the overall educational disadvantage of many in this population and, quite probably, the language barrier.

While percentages of working are similar among foreign-born and native-born young adult males, the pattern is very different for their female counterparts. Eighty-four percent of young native-born females reported working in the previous year in 2001, compared with only 64 percent of the foreign born. This may reflect more traditional cultural family patterns among the foreign born, but may also reflect differences in work eligibility. Whatever the cause or causes, it has important policy implications, as foreign-born young women are much less likely to be gaining an employment history or to be generating income for themselves and their families.

## CONCLUSIONS

The reduction of racial disparities in the transition to adulthood is a strong goal in American domestic policy across many areas including health promotion, education, employment, and civic engagement.<sup>22</sup> As our society becomes ever more racially and ethnically diverse, it becomes ever more important that we understand the particular strengths and needs of each group, so that we can develop more thoughtful and targeted policies in the future.

In the Hispanic community, particular attention is needed to the high proportion of young adults who lack high school degrees and those who do not speak English well, problems related in large part to the high rates of immigration for this population. While these problems do not appear to have affected overall employment levels, at least among men, they do put significant limitations on future advancement and earnings. Because many immigrate as young adults, programs designed specifically to reach these older groups would seem to be needed. Likewise, programs to increase the very low rates of citizenship among these recent immigrants would also seem to be indicated so they can fully participate in the civic life of their new country.

For the black community, a major issue is the marginalization of too many young black men from the worlds of school and work, too often leading to involvement with the criminal justice system. Policies clearly are needed to ease the transition of black male youth into the world of employment and to reduce their likelihood of going to prison.

For Native Americans, educational attainment and civic engagement are also very low relative to other groups, while rates of disengagement from work and school are relatively high.

White and Asian young adults are much less likely than other groups to experience problems related to educational attainment, work, and income, but they have their own particular challenges in the areas of health and civic engagement, respectively. White young adults have among the highest rates of drug use, binge drinking, smoking, and obesity. While the number of programs addressing these problems is large, most target teens and college-age students rather than young adults.

While high rates of immigration among young Asian adults have not produced the same sort of socioeconomic challenges that it has for Hispanics due to Asians' generally high rates of educational attainment, being foreign born is nevertheless associated with low rates of citizenship and voting for this group. Programs designed to facilitate citizenship, and to encourage forms of civic involvement, may be important for this group.

Clearly, each of these groups has needs at some level in all areas of well-being, including health, civic engagement, and the worlds of schooling and work. In addition, within each group, individuals will have unique personal needs. However, by understanding patterns of greatest need, as well as patterns of strength, we may be able to develop more sensitive, effective, and efficient policies that will bring greater success in early adulthood for members of every group.

Note:

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Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D., is President and Senior Scholar at Child Trends.

Sharon Bzostek is a Sociology graduate student at Princeton University, and was the project manager for the Child Trends DataBank and a program analyst at Child Trends.

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## DATA SOURCES FOR FIGURES

### Figure 1

Estimates for 2000 are based on the "Bridged-Race Vintage 2001 Postcensal File" for July 1, 2000, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Estimates for 2025 are based on simple calculations by Child Trends. The ratio of the projected 2025 population to the 2000 population (as estimated using 1990 Census-based population projections) was applied to the new 2000 Census-based estimates for July 1, creating a new projected estimate for 2025. These calculations were performed because, the Census Bureau, to date, has not released new projections for 2025 based on Census 2000 data.

### Figure 2

Original analysis by Child Trends of October 2000 Current Population Survey data.

### Figure 3

National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, 2001, and Child Trends Analysis of 2000 and 2001 National Health Interview Surveys

### Figure 4

Data for education are from original analysis by Child Trends of October 2000 Current Population Survey; data for difficulty speaking English are from original analysis by Child Trends of October 1999 Current Population Survey.

### Figure 5

U.S. Department of Justice, "Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002," April 2003, Table 14.

### Figure 6

Original analysis by Child Trends of October 2000 Current Population Survey.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Brown, Moore, & Bzostek. (2003). A portrait of well-being in early adulthood. Paper prepared for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

<http://www.hewlett.org/Archives/Publications/portraitOfWellBeing.htm>; Settersetn, R., Furstenberg, F., and Rumbaut, R. (Eds.) (In press) *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, P60-203,

Measuring 50 Years of Economic Change Using the March Current Population Survey, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1998: Figures 1.10 and 1.11. Available at:

<http://www.census.gov/prod/3/98pubs/p60-203.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup>These estimates are based on analyses for persons ages 24-26.

<sup>4</sup>For the remainder of this brief, unless otherwise specified, those obtaining a GED are considered to have graduated from high school. Research indicates, however, that a GED is not equal to a high school degree in terms of future earning power. (Boesel, D., Alsalam, N., & Smith, T. 1998. Research synthesis: Educational and labor market performance of GED recipients. U.S. Department of Education.

<http://www.ed.gov/pubs/GED/> Among all young adults in 2000 ages 24 to 26, 4.8 percent held GEDs as their highest degree. See Brown, Moore, & Bzostek. (2003). A portrait of well-being in early adulthood. Paper prepared for the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. <http://www.hewlett.org/Archives/Publications/portraitOfWellBeing.htm> Table 3.

<sup>5</sup>A notable exception is the man or woman who chooses the path of a full-time homemaker as part of a family strategy in which the spouse (or spouse equivalent) is the breadwinner. This path, once the norm for young women, is increasingly less common.

<sup>6</sup>These estimates are based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 26.

<sup>7</sup>Those who are married and those who are disabled are excluded from our definition of disengaged. Marriage to someone who is connected to the labor force is still considered a legitimate path to adult self-sufficiency for someone who chooses to stay out of the labor force, and so such individuals were not included in the definition of disengaged.

<sup>8</sup>Estimates based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 26 or 23 to 27. For details, see Brown, Moore, and Bzostek 2003.

<sup>9</sup>These estimates for median earnings include both full-time and part-time workers.

<sup>10</sup>Estimates based on earnings of those ages 24 to 26.

<sup>11</sup>Bryant, R., Jayawardhana, A., Samaranyake, V., & Wilhite, A. (1996). The Impact of Alcohol and Drug Use on Employment: A Labor Market Study Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper No. 1092-96. Madison: Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Healthy People 2010*. 2nd Edition. With Understanding and Improving Health and Objectives for Improving Health. 2 vols. (focus area 26) Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO.

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). *Healthy People 2010*. 2nd Edition. With Understanding and Improving Health and Objectives for Improving Health. 2 vols. (focus area 27) Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO.

<sup>13</sup>This includes 12 percent reporting marijuana use, and 5 percent reporting use of other illicit drugs, with some reporting both.

<sup>14</sup>Estimates of illicit drug use based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 25. Estimates of binge drinking and current smoking based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 26.

<sup>15</sup>Regular leisure time physical activity is defined here as moderate activity at least five times a week for at least 30 minutes each, or vigorous activity at least three times a week for at least 20 minutes each time. Estimates based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 26.

<sup>16</sup>Estimates based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 26.

<sup>17</sup>Estimates based on analyses of persons ages 24 to 25.

<sup>18</sup>The difference between non-Hispanic whites and American Indians for the percentage working was large but not significant at the .05 level, probably due to the small sample sizes.

<sup>19</sup>Differences between American Indians and blacks and Hispanics were not statistically significant at the .05 level.

<sup>20</sup>The difference between Native Americans and Hispanics was not significant at the .05 level, probably due to small sample sizes.

<sup>21</sup>The difference between Asians and American Indians was large but not significant at the .05 level, probably due to the small sample sizes.

<sup>22</sup>For example, a key component of *Healthy People 2010's* second primary goal (to eliminate health disparities) involves reducing racial health disparities. For more information, please see

[http://www.healthypeople.gov/Document/html/uih/uih\\_bw/uih\\_2.htm#goals](http://www.healthypeople.gov/Document/html/uih/uih_bw/uih_2.htm#goals). In addition, the *No Child Left Behind* initiative of the U.S. Department of Education aims to reduce racial academic achievement gaps through greater accountability. For more information, please see <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=pb>.