ARE YOUNG PEOPLE LEAVING HOME EARLIER OR LATER?

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Although the popular view is that young people are leaving home later, a closer investigation of the data from 1979 to 1995 shows that this is not entirely true. Decreases are observed in the proportion of 15-19 year old men and women living at home at least since the mid-1980s, the increase for 20-24 year old men ceased in 1990, and only 20-24 year old women show a sustained increase. If only unattached young adults are considered instead of the conventional measure, any increases are even more subdued. The overall trend seems to be that while late leavers may be leaving home later, early leavers are leaving earlier or at the same time.

Over the last century, and particularly over the past three decades, there have been major changes in the leaving home transition of young adults in developed countries. There is now growing interest in whether leaving home is occurring sooner or later. In Australia, there are two main sources of data relating to young people leaving home. The first is obtained from special surveys in which young adults (or their parents) are asked about the age at which they left home. The second is from annual surveys conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (or from census data) about the living arrangements of young adults, and these produce data on the proportion of young people living at home. This paper describes what can be gleaned from these two sources about trends in the timing of leaving home, and also examines the impact of returning home on measures of leaving home.

Background of Leaving Home

Studies of young adults in Britain (Wall 1978, 1987) and Canada (Katz and Davey 1978) in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries show that substantial proportions of young unmarried adults lived away from their parents’ household, either as boarders and lodgers or as servants and apprentices, or less commonly to attend school. From the late nineteenth century this pattern of leaving home changed, possibly due to increasing industrialization and the shift of work from the household to the factory, and young adults began staying in their parents’ household until marriage (Katz and Davey 1978). Accordingly, the age at marriage was a useful proxy for the
age at leaving home, and this was used in many demographic studies of the life cycle of the family (Glick 1947).

However, from about the 1960s another change developed, and increasing evidence showed that many young unmarried people were living alone and away from their parents (Kobrin 1976; Di Iulio 1981; Kiernan 1986, 1989). It became evident that a new stage in the transition to adulthood was emerging — a stage of independence between living with the parents and marriage (and starting a new family).

In most Western countries, the role of marriage in the leaving home process has been declining over the past two or three decades. In particular, in Australia there is evidence of a steep decrease in the proportions leaving for this reason between the surveys conducted in 1971 and 1977 by the Department of Demography, The Australian National University and in 1981-82 by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). In contrast, increasing proportions of young adults are leaving home to be independent, because of conflict, to enter a de facto union, to travel and to study, with some of these changes affecting young women more than men (Young 1987).

The 1981-82 AIFS Survey showed that the oldest average age at leaving occurred when marriage was the reason for leaving. The youngest average ages occurred with leaving home for study, for a job or because of conflict, while middle level averages occurred for those who left for independence, travel, to live with others or to live with a partner. For almost all reasons for leaving, sons left home when slightly older than daughters, but sex differences were highest when marriage was the reason for leaving (Young 1987).

This new transition is at least partially a response to social change. For example, young people are staying at school longer (or in post-school education) and are also experiencing longer delays in finding the first job, thus creating an enforced financial dependence on parents, but at the same time perhaps invoking an even stronger desire for some other form of independence. In addition, rising levels of divorce have meant that young people have more experience of family disruption through the breakdown of their parents’ marriage, and this has perhaps affected their choices and decisions with regard to their living arrangements. Attitudes to women’s roles went through a rapid transition in the 1960s, and in particular, attitudes to marriage changed, and the age at marriage increased. Marriage was no longer regarded as the only legitimate reason for leaving home, and young people could gain independence without getting married. Furthermore, the rapid increase in female labour force participation from the 1960s meant that increasing proportions of mothers had returned to work when their children were teenagers, thereby providing more freedom and privacy at home during