

## Transcript: America's Children Telebriefing - July 9, 2014

### TELEBRIEFING TRANSCRIPT

JULY 9, 2014

9:30 AM ET

**Evelyn  
Kappeler:**

Good morning. I'm Evelyn Kappeler, Director of the HHS Office of Adolescent Health. Now in its fifth year, the Office of Adolescent Health provides information and resources to help promote adolescent health. We also operate two grant programs—the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program and the Pregnancy Assistance Fund—to help states and tribal entities assist expectant and parenting young families and students. It's my pleasure to provide some background and context for this report. Organized 20 years ago, the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics has produced information on a range of indicators in an annual report on child and family well-being.

This year, the forum, a collaboration of 22 federal agencies, produced a one-time special issue on America's Young Adults. This statistical report provides a rich portrait of the education, health, and well-being of some 31 million young adults, ages 18 to 24, living in the United States. For the America's Young Adults report, we included data from nationally representative, federally sponsored surveys covering five key things: education; economic circumstances; family formation; civic, social, and personal behavior; and health and safety. These summer months are an exciting and also transformative time for many young adults. Many are graduating from high school and moving on to college; others are graduating from college and looking to land a good job. Still others are in the workforce or looking for employment. As the mother of a recent high school graduate about to enter college, I can tell you this can be an exciting and somewhat anxious transition for parents as well.

So, what do we know about these young adults? What are the trends, and what does this information tell us about the future of our nation? Young adults represent just over 13 percent of the United States population. Not surprisingly, this age group is more racially and ethnically diverse than are older Americans. Among those adults 18 to 24 years old, 56 percent are white non-Hispanic vs. nearly 68 percent for those ages 25 and older. Hispanics now account for 21 percent; blacks, 15 percent; and Asians, American Indians, Alaskan natives, mixed races, and others for 8 percent of young adults—reflecting the continuing trend of a more diverse nation. The vast majority of these young adults are born in the United States, just over 12 percent are foreign born compared to 17 percent among adults 25 and older.

Turning now to education, we're pleased to tell you about a number of positive trends. First, education levels for young adults continue to climb over historic averages. In 2013, 84 percent of young adult women and 81 percent of adult men had at least a high school education. These percentages are up 7 points for males and 5 points for females since 2000. More young people are entering college, too. Today, four out of ten 18- to 24-year-olds are enrolled in college. Among Asian youth, nearly 6 in 10 are enrolled. We see the biggest gain, however, among Hispanic youth. College enrollment for Hispanic youth has risen from 22 percent in 2000 to 37 percent in 2012, and this is a very positive trend. At the same time period, 2000 to 2012, enrollment among blacks has increased by 5 percentage points to 36 percent, while enrollment among whites is up 3 percent, to 42 percent. Just as there is a gender gap among high school graduates, we see a similar disparity at the college level. In 2012, 44 percent of young adult females were enrolled in college versus 38 percent for young adult males. This has been a consistent trend since the early 1990s. While there's still much work to do to improve education outcomes and to address disparities, we cheer the fact that, on the whole, young adults are becoming more educated. These higher education levels are important for providing a skilled workforce for the jobs of today and in the future. Additionally, more than half a million young adults were serving on active duty in the Armed Forces in 2012.

In the past year, much has been reported on the level of student debt carried by young adults. The report notes that the average total cumulative amount borrowed by undergraduates in their fourth year of college or above is significantly higher than in earlier decades. For example, in 2011 to 2012, the average fourth-year college student with loans had \$25,400 in debt, up from \$14,700 in 1989 to 1990, after adjusting for inflation. Among black college students with loans, the average cumulative debt is nearly \$30,000, which is more than for white, Hispanic, or Asian students. In addition, 68 percent of fourth-year students had loans in 2011 to 2012, compared with 50 percent in 1989 to 1990. When we look at employment, a smaller percentage of young adults are in the labor force compared to previous decades. In 2013, 65 percent of young adults were working or looking for work, compared to 69 percent in 2008, and 75 percent in 1986. Last year, 17 percent of young adults were neither enrolled in school nor working nor looking for work, compared with 19 percent in 2010. A few troubling disparities to note, 35 percent of young adults ages 20 to 24 who are from families living below the poverty level were neither enrolled in college nor working last year. Close to 50 percent of American Indians and Alaska Natives also fall into this category, clearly reflecting the educational and economic challenges facing these youth.

Perhaps one of the more sobering data points is the information on wages. Median annual earnings in constant 2012 dollars have declined since 2000 for young adults ages 20 to 24. This is true for all levels of educational attainment. In 2012, the median annual earnings for someone age 20 to 24 was \$17,460. In 2000, this figure was \$21,330; still, the median earnings for someone with a bachelor's or higher degree would be significantly more than someone with a high school or even an associate's degree. For example, the median earnings for those young adults with at least a 4-year college degree were \$25,000 annually. At the Office of Adolescent Health, our focus is on promoting positive health outcomes for our country's youth and preventing teen birth and supporting those teens that do give birth.

I'm particularly pleased to report on the progress we're seeing in lowering the teen birth rate. Among 18- and 19-year-old women, the birth rate is the lowest on record for this age group. In 2012, among this age group, there were 51 live births per 1,000 women. In 1991, the rate was nearly 94 per 1,000 women. And this is important because we know that teen girls who have babies are less likely to finish high school and are more likely to be poor as adults than those teens who don't have babies. In addition, children born to teenage mothers generally have poorer educational, behavioral and health outcomes over the course of their lives than do children born to older adults. It's also encouraging to see the decline in smoking among young adults. In 2012, 20 percent of young adult males and 15 percent of young females smoked cigarettes. While smoking rates are declining among all racial and ethnic groups, white youth are still more than twice as likely to smoke as Hispanic and black youth.

Smoking rates are also higher for young adults who are below or near the poverty level than for those from higher income households. Just as there are significant gender differences among smokers, there are gender differences among young adults reporting instances of depression. Females are twice as likely to suffer from a major depressive episode as males, 11 percent for females vs. 6 percent for males. We also observed a gender difference when it comes to obesity. Nearly 27 percent of female young adults are obese as opposed to 19 percent of males.

The report also documents an increase in health insurance coverage among this age group. From 2010 to 2012, the percentage of young adults with private health insurance increased from 52 to 58 percent, and those who were uninsured declined from 31 to 25 percent. This is the same timeframe when the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act required health insurance providers to allow parents to keep their young adult children on their health plan until age 26.

The report also looked at indicators in the civic, social, and personal behavior areas. One of those indicators was voting patterns among young adults. So what do we know about those newest voters? Well, like older voters, they too are less likely to vote in congressional election years than presidential elections. In the 2012 presidential election year 38 percent of young adults voted, compared to just 20 percent in the 2010 congressional election year. If historic patterns hold true, we would expect female young adults to be slightly more likely to vote than males in the November elections. We might also expect white and black young adults to be more likely to vote than Asians or Hispanics of the same age. And even more telling, when we look at their educational levels, we see that one-third of young adults with bachelor's degrees voted in the 2010 midterm elections, and more than 60 percent of them voted in our most recent presidential elections.

As it's summer, let me end with a statistic about leisure time and physical activity. Over 30 percent of young adults who participated in both leisure-time aerobic and muscle-strengthening activity met the federal guidelines for the amount of exercise to achieve substantial health benefits—that is, at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activities a week. Young males are twice as likely as females to meet these guidelines for physical activity. While the guys are doing better, my message to all young adults is get active. Enjoy the summer by walking, running, biking, hiking, or other physical activity.

I want to thank you for allowing me this time to share some of the highlights with you today. It's been both a privilege and a pleasure serving as the spokesperson for this report. I'm also grateful for the many experts from so many government agencies who contributed to this first-ever Forum report on young adults. We believe the information in this report will help researchers, policymakers, and practitioners as they look at ways to improve educational, economic, health, and other outcomes for our young adults.