

# Young Adult Life-Courses in Uncertain Times: a Multi-Domain and Dynamic Approach

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## Short abstract

Young adulthood is increasingly characterized by uncertainty and flexibility. Previous research traditionally studies a few events that mark the so called transition to adulthood separately from each other. However, to capture how much uncertainty young adults experience, it is relevant to study how uncertainty in different domains (education, work, family, housing) relate to each other, as uncertainty may spill over from one domain to another. Have these combinations of uncertainty in different domains changed over time? And do they depend on young adults' socioeconomic background? We study these questions using register data of all young adults (aged 18 to 35) in the Netherlands over the period 2011 to 2021. The findings show that young adults from more affluent families have more economic stability. Family formation without having economic certainty is most common among young adults from lower socioeconomic background. These findings differ over the young adult life course. Whereas early in the young adult life course young adults from affluent families were mostly not settled down, this reverses later in the young adult life course. In the next step we will relate these domains to each other in a LCA or by estimating correlations. Moreover, we will examine the results over the young adult life-course.

## Background and aim

Young adulthood is increasingly characterized by uncertainty and flexibility (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Mills & Blossfeld, 2005). This manifests in various ways: precarity at work, postponement of steps toward adulthood, and more unstable living situations and relationships. The rise in uncertainty is often attributed to globalization, individualization, and global crises (Beck, 1992; Lesthaeghe, 2010; Mills & Blossfeld, 2005). Although all age groups are affected by such developments, young adults are especially susceptible because they have not yet settled down and still are “outsiders” on the labor market (Mills & Blossfeld, 2005).

Previous research traditionally studies a few events that mark the so called transition to adulthood separately from each other. However, the transition to adulthood is no longer linear and standardized (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010). In recent years, the literature has therefore started to explore multidomain and non-linear approaches to young adulthood. The first efforts are made to map out trajectories across work- and family domains (e.g., Aassve et al., 2007), and to relate their interactions to well-being (Comolli et al., 2021). To capture uncertainty in young adulthood, it is relevant to study interrelations between domains. In particular certain combinations of uncertainty may be concerning, such as having a temporary contract and being a parent. Moreover, uncertainty might spill over from one domain to another, such as from the work to the housing domain.

In this paper we bring uncertainty in young adulthood to the forefront. We 1) identify different profiles and trajectories of uncertainty in young adulthood, and 2) examine to what extent these are stratified by relating them to parental resources. We identify profiles with a *multidomain approach*, covering four domains: housing, family, education, work. Second, we take a *dynamic approach* by studying how uncertainty develops over the young adult life phase. Research on singular events highlights how postponement of settling down may be advantageous early in the life course but preferred later in the life course. By studying uncertainty in young adulthood dynamically, we can do justice to the dynamic experiences of young adults (e.g., role reversals such as returning home).

Our study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we provide insight in how the lives of young adults today are marked by uncertainty. More specifically, we are able to show whether uncertainty in many domains concentrates in a small group of young adults, or whether a large number of young adults experience some uncertainty. It is important to know to what extent young adults experience uncertainty, as the topic of uncertainty and its effects for the chances and well-being of young people is high on the agenda of policy makers.<sup>1</sup> Second, we contribute to the literature by showing to what extent the experiences of uncertainty in young adulthood are socially stratified. Earlier work shows that the transition to adulthood is highly stratified (Billari et al., 2019). In this paper we examine to what extent young people with few parental resources experience higher levels and more particular types of uncertainty (e.g., economic uncertainty, long-lasting uncertainty).

## **Data and method**

We use Dutch register data from the System of Social Statistical datasets from Statistics Netherlands. These data contain information of *all* young adults aged 18 to 35 in the period 2011-2022. This amounts up to longitudinal information of 7.4 million individuals. An important advantage of these data for our purposes is that there is no selection in who participates in the study. Hence, young people who experience a turbulent period and would not be likely to participate in survey research, are also included in our study. Moreover, the data include information on all four life domains: family, housing, work, education. The data

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events/youth-first>

are matched to information on each of the parents of the young adult regarding income and wealth.

We focus on several elements of each of the domains. A) Housing: having left home, homeownership; b) Family: parenthood, singlehood; c) Work: working, permanent contract; d) Education: in education, high level of education.

Our analytical approach consists of three steps. First, we predict profiles on the basis of young adults' situation concerning housing, family, education, and work using *Latent Class Analysis*. The profiles represent different types of uncertainty. Potential examples are: an “all settled down” cluster (i.e. stable housing, partnered, permanent contract), an “everything flex” cluster (i.e., unstable/uncertain situation in all domains), and an “economically uncertain” cluster (i.e., no stable employment situation).

Second, we examine how young adults move through to different profiles throughout the young adult life phase. We do this using *Sequence Analysis*. This allows us to identify whether some young adults have particular turbulent paths (i.e., moving back and forth through profiles), linear paths (i.e., moving from more uncertain to more stable situations), or stable paths (i.e., little change throughout the years).

In the last step, we show how the profiles and trajectories of uncertainty differ between young adults with more and less parental resources.

## First findings

The table shows the percentage of 27-year-olds in 2012 who were in each life-course situation by parental income tertile. The findings show that young adults from more affluent families have more economic stability: they are more often employed, have permanent contracts, a higher level of education, and are more often home-owners. On the other hand, young adults from the lowest tertile are most likely to be parents. There are few differences in singlehood and leaving home.

**Table 1. Percentage of 27-year-olds per life-course situation by parental income tertile.**

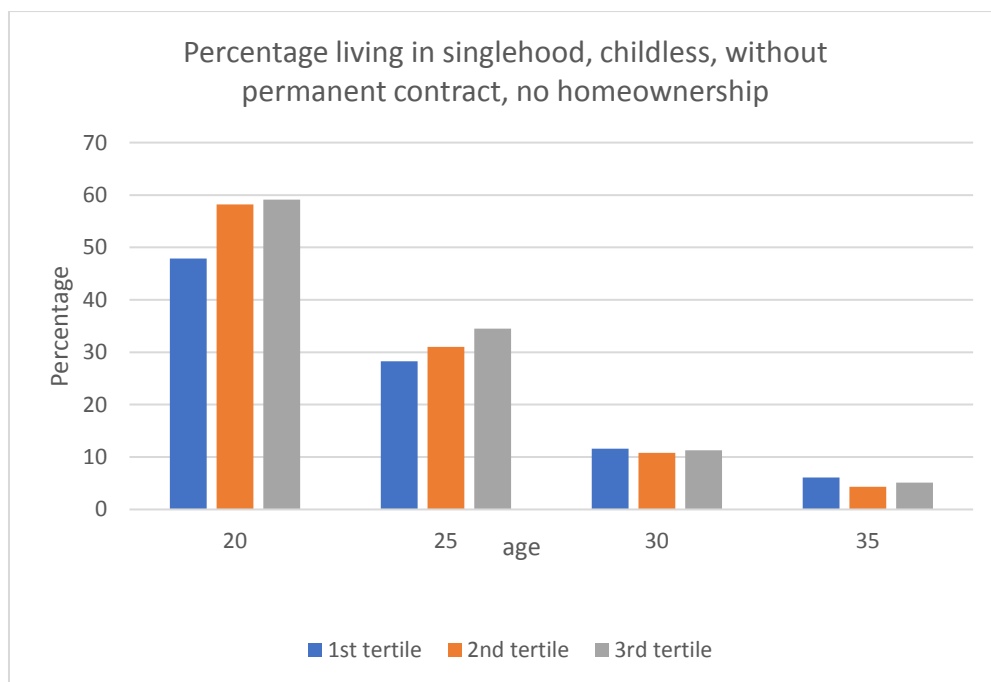
	Lowest income tertile	Mid income tertile	Highest income tertile
<i>Housing</i>			
Left home	80.5	75.1	77.1
Homeowner	20.3	33.0	37.4
<i>Family</i>			
Single	37.3	40.9	39.0
Parent	25.8	18.1	10.6
<i>Work</i>			
Working	69.4	84.3	90.5
Permanent contract	45.2	54.6	56.8
<i>Education</i>			
In education	7.3	5.1	4.6
High level of education achieved	19.0	33.4	54.7

Figure 1 provides some first insight in how interactions between domains may be socially stratified over the young adult life course. At age 20, the higher income tertiles are most likely in a not settled down situation (i.e., single, childless, no permanent contract, no homeowner). At age 30 the chance is comparable for the income tertiles, despite them being more economically independent if we look at singular events in Table 1. At age 35, the lowest income tertile is most likely to be in the “not settled down” situation.

### Next steps

In the next step we will relate these domains to each other in a LCA or by estimating correlations. Moreover, we will examine the results over the young adult life-course.

Figure 1



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