



Adolescent Employment and Well-being: Findings from the Youth Development Study

Jeylan Mortimer, University of Minnesota

**Workplace Mental Health Webinar
Michigan Department of Labor
June 20, 2024**



Grateful Acknowledgments

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development

Other supporters:

- National Institute of Mental Health
- National Center for Research on Vocational Education
- National Institute on Aging
- WT Grant Foundation
- Northwest Area Foundation
- MacArthur Foundation
- Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, U of MN
- Life Course Center, U of MN



Overview

- Debate surrounding Adolescent Work
- YDS Contributions
 - Character of Teen Work
 - Outcomes during High School
 - Longer-Term Consequences



Debate about Adolescent Work

- Concern with “precocious maturity”

(Hall 1904; Greenberger and Steinberg 1986)

VS.

- Benefits of involvement in adult workforce

(Elder 1974; Coleman 1974)



Case Against Adolescent Work

- Physical risk, stressors
 - Contact with older workers---
Problem behavior (alcohol, smoking, delinquency)
 - Reduces time with family
 - Undermines educational investment
- (Greenberger and Steinberg 1986; Steinberg & Dornbusch 1991)



Some Teen Work Illegal and Dangerous

- A cleaning company based in Tennessee has been fined over \$649,000 after a U.S. Labor Department investigation found it was employing at least two dozen children, some as young as 13 years old, to clean slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants. Fayette Janitorial Service was found to have hired children to work overnight cleaning shifts, at times using corrosive materials to clean “dangerous kill floor equipment” at facilities in Sioux City, Iowa, and Accomac, Virginia.
- Democracy Now! May 8, 2024



The Case for Adolescent Work

- Encourages vocational exploration
 - Interests and work identity
 - Occupational goals, work values, “planful competence”
- Builds confidence, interpersonal skills, responsibility, time management



Youth Development Study responds to this debate

YDS is the only longitudinal study, starting in adolescence, which monitored teens' work experiences and potential outcomes through the transition to adulthood and beyond.



Initial YDS Sample, 1987

- 1,010 randomly-chosen 9th graders typical of St. Paul public schools
 - 74% White
 - 10% African-American
 - 5% Hispanic-American
 - 4% Asian-American
- Median household income:
 - \$30,000-39,000
- College graduates
 - 27% of Fathers
 - 19% of Mothers



YDS Data Collection

- G2: 20 surveys from W1 age 14-15 (1988) to W20 age 45-46 (2019)
 - W1-4 in classrooms
 - W5-19 by mail
 - W20 online
 - Retention~67-75% through 2011, 55% 2019
- G1: parent surveys: W1 (1988) and W4 (1991)
 - SES, attitudes toward children's work



YDS cohort

- Born 1973-74
- High school 1987-91
- Transition to Adulthood 1990' s to early 2000' s (age 30/31 in 2004)



**Weighted percentages based on annual survey data from the
Monitoring the Future Study**



Two Dimensions of Teen Work

- Time Investment

Months (duration) and Hours (intensity) of work

- Work Quality

Patterns of Work Investment

Duration (grades 10–12)		
Average Intensity	High (22 of 24)	Low (10–12 months of 24)
Work more than 20 hours a week	Most Invested (26%)	Sporadic (18%)
Work 20 hours a week or less	Steady (25%)	Occasional (24%)



Outcomes during Adolescence: Work Intensity

- No evidence that the intensity of work reduced grade point average or educational aspirations/plans

Mortimer, Finch et al., *Child Development*, 1996



Outcomes during Adolescence

- Intensive work linked to problem behavior and alcohol use

Staff & Uggen, *J of Research in Crime & Delinquency*, 2003

McMorris & Uggen, *J of Health & Social Behavior*, 2003

- Steady and Most Invested workers more confident about achieving economic goals

Cunnein et al., *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 2009



Longer-term Outcomes

The Most Invested (high duration, high intensity) workers moved more rapidly to “careers.”

Mortimer, et al., *Work & Occupations*, 2008

Steady and Occasional Work predicted Higher Educational Enrollment

Mortimer and Staff, *Social Forces*, 2007



Work Quality

- **Self-direction**-control over way work time is spent, freedom to make decisions
- **Learning and skills**-chance to learn new things, use skills
- **Satisfaction with wages**- “good pay”
- **Advancement opportunities**
- **Work stressors**-exposure to noxious conditions, overload, time pressure, responsibility for things outside one’s control



Mental Health Dimensions

- **Mastery (Pearlin scale)**
 - 7 items (“I can do just about anything I really set my mind to do”, “what happens to me in the future mostly depends on me”)
- **Self-esteem (Rosenberg scale)**
 - 3 items (I have a number of good qualities, take a positive attitude toward myself, and am satisfied with myself)
- **Depressed Mood**
 - 4 items (feel downhearted and blue; depressed).



Self-esteem & Mastery

- Increase with high quality work:
 - advancement opportunity
 - opportunities for learning and skill development
 - self-direction
 - satisfaction with wages
- Diminish with
 - work stressors
 - (Finch, et al., *American Sociological Review*, 1991
 - Staff & Mortimer, 2024 *Social Forces*)



Depressed mood

- Increases with
 - Work stressors
- Decreases with
 - Opportunities for learning and skill development
 - Advancement opportunity
- (Shanahan, et al., *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 1991)



Resilience

- Youth who reported stressors in high school jobs were more resilient when faced with similar stressors four years after high school

(Mortimer & Staff, *Development & Psychopathology*, 2004)



Eustress

- Earlier stressful experiences heighten adaptive capacity;
- Mastery of difficult tasks promotes self-efficacy, motivation, and resilience in future similar situations
- Shanahan and Mortimer 1996




Teen Work Quality Predicts Adult Work Quality from Adolescence to Mid-Life

Work stress, self-direction, learning and advancement opportunities, & wage satisfaction predicted the same work experiences during the ensuing occupational career

Based on N = 711 individuals over 3164 occasions, and hybrid panel models to control for unobserved time-stable selection influences

(Staff & Mortimer, J of Research on Adolescence, 2023)



- The effects of work quality on mental health are the same for teens and adults

- Staff and Mortimer, Social Forces, 2024



Conclusions: Work Investment and Work Quality Both Important

- Work Investment predicts short and long-term outcomes (problem behavior, educational attainment, “career” acquisition)
- Teen Work Quality predicts Adult Work Quality
- Work Quality predicts mental health in adolescence and adulthood in similar fashion



Youth Development Study Resources

Codebooks, Publications: Sociology Dept. website

- <https://cla.umn.edu/sociology/graduate/collaboration-opportunities/youth-development-study>

Publicly Available Data

- <https://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/ICPSR/studies/24881>

- 
-
- Additional slides follow if time permits



Loss of Agency?

- Scholars question the capacity of youth to envision futures and move toward them in a rapidly changing society
 - Increased risks (Beck, 1992)
 - Rapid change in work (Heinz, 2003)
 - Lack of institutional bridges from school to work (Mortimer & Kruger, 2000)



Continuing Agency

- Still, YDS adolescents exercised agency through their pathways of school-to-work transition (STW)



Precursors to Work Investment

- 9th graders with low academic promise (low grades, aspirations, perceived ability, and engagement in school) pursued high intensity work (Most Invested or Sporadic)
- 9th graders with high academic promise pursued low intensity work (Steady or Occasional)



1st Pathway of STW Transition

- High educational goals & academic promise
- Investment in school with steady or occasional work
- 4-year college admission
- Continued combination of part-time work and schooling
- Receipt of college degree



2nd Pathway of STW Transition

- Early disinterest in school
- Human capital development through “most invested” work
- Attend community college or vo-tech institute
- Rapid movement to self-identified “careers”



Work Pattern and Agency

- Socioeconomic career starts well *before* the first job after school completion
- Many teenagers acted agentically:
- Steady and Most Invested Work moved youth toward outcomes consistent with earlier goals and resources
- Sporadic Work Pattern is problematic: Youth do *not* acquire human capital through education or through work.



Historical Specificity

- Coming-of-age differs across cohorts
 - Changing opportunities & constraints
 - Declining adolescent work experience
 - Increasingly prolonged and unpredictable transition to adulthood
- (Shanahan 2000)



Work Patterns & Work Quality

- Compared to Occasional & Steady workers, Most Invested and Sporadic had:
 - more learning & advancement opportunities
 - stronger engagement in work
 - more work stressors
 - more “adult-like” work
 - higher earnings



Findings: Work Quality Matters

- Adolescent work can be an “arena of comfort”
(Simmons, 2001)
- Good relationships with supervisors & absence of stressors lessen distress when youth have problems in other domains
- (Call and Mortimer, *Arenas of Comfort in Adolescence*, 2001)

Work Patterns & Time Investment

	Months*		Hours*	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Steady	22.0	22.0	1263	1328
Sporadic	10.4	11.8	1216	1376
Occasional	9.8	11.7	578	650
Most Invested	21.9	22.2	2678	2587
Not Working	0	0	0	0

***Cumulative, Grades 10-12**

Figure 3. Percentage Earning BA Degree or Higher (age 28-29) by High School Work and Educational Promise

