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Exiting and Returning to the Parental Home for Boomerang Kids

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Abstract

Young adults commonly exit from and return to the parental home, yet few studies have examined the motivation behind these exits and returns using a life course framework. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, the authors examined associations between mental health problems and economic characteristics and exits from ($n = 8,162$), and returns to ($n = 6,530$), the parental home during the transition to adulthood. The average age of the respondents was 24 years. The authors found evidence that mental health and economic characteristics were related to home leaving and returning. Emotional distress was associated with earlier exits from, and returns to, the parental home; alcohol problems were associated with earlier returns to the parental home. The findings regarding economic resources were unexpectedly mixed. Greater economic resources were linked to delayed exits from, and earlier returns to, the parental home. The implications of these findings for young adults are discussed.

Keywords

home leaving; home returning; National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997; transition to adulthood

During the past decade, young adults experienced many changes with regard to family formation patterns and economic factors in the United States (Shanahan, 2000; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). The pathway to adulthood became less standardized and more individualized as prior social institutions, such as marriage, weakened (Cherlin, 2004; Settersten & Gannon, 2005). Furthermore, the emergence of a global economy and changing labor market requirements allowed for greater flexibility and diversity in the workplace (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). The pathway to adulthood is no longer marked by early achievement of stable, full-time employment; instead, young adults commonly experience greater instability and fluidity in the workplace (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005).

In the United States, young adults emphasize educational and employment pursuits concurrently, and this exploration and instability are normative during this transitional period (Arnett, 2000). Because of increased globalization and a shift to an information-driven economy, youth pursue higher education and training at greater rates in order to obtain decent earnings and employment (Furstenberg et al., 2005). As a result of these

economic changes, youth ages 20–24 were more likely to have lived with their parents in the 2000s compared to youth in the 1980s (Qian, 2012; Settersten & Ray, 2010); approximately 30% of young adults coreside with parents (Lichter & Qian, 2004). Moreover, 40% of these young adults return to their parental home at least once after living independently (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994) and are often termed *boomerang kids* (e.g., Mitchell, 1998).

Despite the common occurrence of boomerang kids, youth live in a society where self-achievement and autonomy are highly valued (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002); failure to “do it yourself” by sustaining independent living is viewed negatively. Indeed, boomerang kids often represent a drain on parental resources in the popular press (Grind, 2013), and a common perception is that returning to live with parents may be indicative of stunted development (Newman, 2013). Although mental health problems have been linked to difficulty transitioning to adulthood in general (Gralinski-Bakker, Hauser, Billings, & Allen, 2005), the explicit assumption that boomerang kids are stunted has not been tested empirically. Thus, although overall diversity in pathways to adulthood appears to be more tolerated by society, this tolerance may not extend to these boomerang kids.

Existing studies commonly link demographic, family formation, and family-of-origin characteristics to home leaving and returning behavior (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994), yet the role of mental health problems, such as depression and alcohol abuse, has been relatively ignored by most research. Furthermore, few studies have examined the socioeconomic context that likely contributes to youth exits from and returns to the parental home. Using a contemporary sample of young adults, we provide in this study one of the first explorations into the role of mental health and economic factors in the home leaving and returning process. By empirically identifying new factors that may contribute to home leaving and returning, we hope to provide insight into a relatively common event that may contribute to negative parent and young adult outcomes.

Life Course Perspective

A life course perspective illustrates how life changes influence development across one's life; specific emphasis is placed on life transitions, developmental states, and life course trajectories (Elder, 1998). Under this perspective, the concept of *linked lives*, which states that individual lives are experienced interdependently, is a key principle (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). A youth's decision to exit the parental home and later return to the parental home is shaped in part by large societal changes. For instance, changes in the labor market requiring more education and delayed labor force participation (Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005) are likely to influence youth behavior with regard to exiting or returning to the parental home.

The principle of *timing* suggests that life events are experienced differentially depending on one's developmental stage; the principle of *time and place* suggests that the life course is shaped by the historical time and place (Elder et al., 2003). The transition to adulthood is broadly characterized as a period of self-focused exploration when residential instability is common (Arnett, 2000) and returning to the parental home is fairly normative (Goldscheider

& Goldscheider, 1999), although not positively perceived (Newman, 2013). Diversity in timing of the transition to adulthood can occur among youth, and institutional support, or a lack thereof, can encourage or discourage independent living (Mitchell, 2006b). For American youth, institutional supports are rarely implemented to help them sustain independent living arrangements (Mitchell, 2006b), and young adults' characteristics are greater determinants of parent–youth coresidence compared to parental characteristics (Ward & Spitze, 2007). Thus, young adult barriers to sustainable independent living, such as mental health vulnerabilities or economic vulnerabilities, may become more meaningful in these environments.

Role of Individual Characteristics

Economic Characteristics

Young adult economic resources help determine whether sustaining independent living is possible. Financial constraints, such as loss of income or lack of employment opportunities, are often linked to home returning behaviors, whereas success in these domains, identified as stable employment and a livable income, are often linked to early exits. Indeed, both loss of income (Smits, Van Gaalen, & Mulder, 2010) and lack of employment opportunities or a need for more education (Mitchell, 2006a; Sassler, Ciambone, & Benway, 2008) are linked to a greater likelihood of parent–child coresidence. The economic recessions experienced in the 1990s and again in the 2000s led to increased rates of returns to the parental home for young adults (Mitchell, 2006b; Qian, 2012).

Financial constraints are not the only motivation for youth's returns to the parental home. The greater cost of sustaining independent living for young adults and the delayed labor force participation in favor of greater educational attainment (Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005) encourage youth to return to the parental home to get ahead financially (Mitchell, 2004). In these situations, returning to the parental home is a mechanism by which these young adults ensure a greater likelihood of eventually sustaining an independent living arrangement during the later young adult years (Mitchell, 2004).

Mental Health Problems

Although no studies have examined the role of mental health problems in youth's home leaving and returning behavior, some evidence suggests that an association may exist. In general, mental health problems are understood to make the transition to adulthood more difficult by contributing to difficulties attaining employment or education as well as difficulties with drug or alcohol use (Gralinski-Bakker et al., 2005). In these situations, later exits from the parental home may allow vulnerable young adults more time to better prepare for the challenges of adulthood given that additional reliance on parental resources, both social and economic, may contribute to youth's resiliency upon entering an independent living arrangement. Furthermore, existing mental health vulnerabilities may exacerbate returns to the parental home. Indeed, poor emotional health is linked to less success in romantic unions (Daley & Hammen, 2002) and less success in employment settings (Mossakowski, 2009), both of which are linked to earlier returns to the parental home (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994; Smits et al., 2010).

In addition to emotional distress, problematic alcohol use is an indicator of mental health problems. Indeed, alcohol problems are often a more salient indicator of emotional distress, especially among men (Simon, 2002), and behavioral indicators are largely becoming incorporated into research assessing mental health (Sandberg-Thoma & Kamp Dush, 2014). Similar to emotional distress, problematic drinking is linked with difficulty in both personal relationships and educational and employment settings; individuals who engage in problematic drinking have a diminished quality of life in these arenas (Foster, Powell, Marshall, & Peters, 1999), yet the direct link between mental health problems and home leaving and returning behavior has not been examined. The assumption that there is something stunted about these youth (i.e., Newman, 2013) has not been empirically tested.

Confounding Variables

Demographic Characteristics

Decisions to exit from and return to the parental home differ by gender and race/ethnicity. Women are consistently more likely to leave home earlier and are less likely to return to the parental home (White, 1994). Black and Hispanic individuals are more likely to coreside with parents or other relationships compared to Whites in almost all age groups (White, 1994); thus, it is likely that these young adults live with their families longer than Whites and are more likely to return to parental households. Given the link between education and home leaving and home returning behaviors (Corcoran & Matsudaira, 2005), in this study we included whether the young adult was currently enrolled in school.

Marital (Gee, Mitchell, & Wister, 1995; Mitchell, 2006a) or cohabiting (Goldscheider, Thornton, & Young-DeMarco, 1993) union dissolution is often associated with returning to the parental home, whereas union entrance is linked to exits from the parental home (Michielin, Mulder, & Zorlu, 2008); thus, we considered both marital and cohabitation status in all analyses reported below. Childbirth and pregnancy decrease the likelihood that individuals move away from parents (Michielin et al., 2008) and may contribute to returns to the parental home because young adults may rely on their parents for child care (Smits et al., 2010). Furthermore, experiencing a pregnancy may be linked to delayed exits from, and earlier returns to, the parental home when the pregnancy is a nonunion one compared to pregnancies experienced within a union.

Parental Characteristics

Although not as important as young adult characteristics (Ward & Spitze, 1996, 2007), parental characteristics are linked to coresidence decisions. Youth with alternative family structures, such as stepfamily households, are less likely to move back into their parental home compared to youth with more traditional family structures (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1998; Goldscheider et al., 1993; Mitchell, 2006a). Also, the presence of additional household members living in the parental home may decrease the likelihood of returning to the parental home because space is limited. Indeed, the presence of a younger child was shown to reduce the likelihood of coresidence (Ward & Spitze, 2007).

The Current Study

In the current study we built on prior research by examining the role of individual characteristics in the home leaving and returning process for a contemporary sample of young adults in the United States. We addressed the following four research questions:

1. How is mental health associated with a first exit from the parental home?
2. How is mental health associated with a first return to the parental home?
3. How are economic characteristics associated with a first exit from the parental home?
4. How are economic characteristics associated with a first return to the parental home?

Related to these research questions, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Poor mental health, measured by emotional distress and alcohol problems, will be associated in a delayed first exit from the parental home.

Hypothesis 2: Poor mental health, measured by emotional distress and alcohol problems, will be associated with an earlier first return to the parental home for returning youth.

Hypothesis 3: Greater economic resources, measured by postsecondary education and full-time employment, will be associated with an earlier first exit from the parental home; fewer economic resources, measured by unemployment, less than a secondary degree, and young adult poverty, will be associated with a delayed first exit from the parental home.

Hypothesis 4: Greater economic resources, measured by postsecondary education and full-time employment, will be associated with a delayed first return to the parental home for returning youth; fewer economic resources, measured by unemployment, less than a secondary degree, and young adult poverty will be associated with an earlier first return to the parental home for returning youth.

Method

We used public and geocode data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97; www.bls.gov/nls/nlsy97.htm), a nationally representative panel sample of youth born between 1980 and 1984 in the United States. Designed to capture detailed information on employment and educational experiences, family and community backgrounds, and family formation patterns of youth, the NLSY97 interviewed respondents annually from 1997, when the respondents were 12 to 18, until 2011, when the respondents were in their late 20s. On average, respondents were 24 years of age. The initial sample contained 8,984 young adults who completed in-home interviews in 1997.

Dependent Variable: First Exit From and First Return to the Parental Home

Exiting from and returning to the parental home were measured using data about household members who shared a residence with the young adult. First exits from the parental home

were defined as the first year that respondents did not report their parent as a household member. We excluded those who did not report their parents as household members in the 1997 survey year. By 2011, 83% had experienced a first exit from the parental home. Returns to the parental home were defined as the year respondents who had previously exited the parental home reported parents as household members again. By 2011, 36% of respondents had experienced a return to the parental home.

Independent Variables

Economic characteristics—Economic characteristics were measured by participant: poverty status, employment, and education from the 1997–2011 survey years. Poverty status was a yearly time-varying dichotomous indicator created from the poverty ratio, where 0 = not in poverty and 1 = in poverty. Education was measured as a yearly time-varying dichotomous variable of the highest degree obtained by the respondent: less than a high school degree, high school degree, some college, college degree, or more than college, each survey year. Postestimation Wald tests indicated that respondents with a college degree and those with more than a college degree were significantly different and should be included separately in the analyses. The employment status history file was used to create employment variables; employment was measured as a time-varying dichotomous variable of current employment status for each survey year. Respondents who worked more than 39 hours per week for more than 50 weeks were coded as being employed full time, those who worked less than 39 hours per week for less than 50 weeks per year were coded as being employed part time, and others were considered not working.

Mental health problems—In the NLSY97, emotional distress was measured biannually at the 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010 survey years as the occurrence of the following symptoms on a scale that ranged from 1 (*all of the time*) to 4 (*none of the time*). “How much of the time during the last month have you...” (1) “been a very nervous person?”, (2) “felt calm and peaceful?”, (3) “felt downhearted and blue?”, (4) “been a happy person?”, (5) “felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up?” Responses to Questions 1, 3, and 5 were reverse coded, with higher values indicating greater emotional distress. Scale reliabilities at each year for the sample are acceptable, ranging from $\alpha = .77$ to $\alpha = .82$. For each year that emotional distress was not assessed by the NLSY97, we back-filled from the next year available. Alcohol problems were measured from the 1997–2011 survey years as a time-varying dichotomous indicator of problematic drinking. Respondents were given a 0 if they reported no alcohol use or if they reported drinking in the past year (or since the date of last interview) and were given a 1 if they indicated that they had engaged in binge drinking (defined as drinking five or more drinks in one sitting) at least once in the last 30 days or if they had had a drink at least once prior to school or work.

Control Variables

Demographic characteristics—Demographic controls were measured as gender, race, school enrollment status, union formation (i.e. cohabitation or marriage), nonunion pregnancy (i.e. nonmarital or noncohabitation pregnancy), and childbirth. All variables except gender and race were time-varying indicators taken from the 1997–2011 survey years. *Gender* was measured as a dichotomous indicator for which 1 = female and 0 = male.

Race of respondent was categorized as Black, Hispanic, or White; the reference category was White. *Current school enrollment* was measured as a time-varying categorical variable for which 0 = no current school enrollment, 1 = enrolled in primary or secondary school or GED program, 2 = enrolled in 2-year college, 3 = enrolled in a 4-year college, and 4 = enrolled in graduate or professional school. *Cohabitation status* was a time-varying dichotomous variable for which 1 = currently in a cohabitation and 0 = not currently in a cohabitation at the survey year. *Marital status* was a time-varying dichotomous variable for which 1 = currently married and 0 = currently unmarried at the survey year. *Nonmarital pregnancy* was a time-varying variable measured as 1 = experiencing a pregnancy in no union or in a cohabiting union and 0 = experiencing a pregnancy in a marital union; *noncohabiting pregnancy* was a time-varying variable measured as 1 = experiencing a pregnancy in no union or 0 = experiencing a pregnancy in a cohabiting union or marital union. *Childbirth* was a time-varying variable of whether a child was born since the last survey year.

Parental characteristics—Family characteristics were measured as follows: intact family in 1997 and household size. *Intact family* was measured as a dichotomous variable in the 1997 survey year of whether or not the respondent lived with both biological parents. *Household size* was measured as a time-varying indicator each survey year of the number of current members in the household.

Analytic Plan

We used the multivariate imputation using chained equations method (MICE) to account for missing data in our sample. MICE imputes missing data by treating each variable as the dependent variable and regressing all other variables in the model onto the dependent variable; this method has been shown to produce reliable estimates (Johnson & Young, 2011). In addition, we used the multiple imputation, then deletion (MID) technique. This technique entails including the dependent variable in the MICE imputation process but excluding imputed dependent variables from the final analyses (von Hippel, 2007). Our exclusion of the dependent variable meant that our final sample size was $n = 8,162$ when predicting first exits from the parental home and $n = 6,530$ when predicting first returns to the parental home.

Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine possible multicollinearity within the data set. Correlations and variance inflation factor statistics indicated that multicollinearity was not a problem within our data. Thus, to test our hypotheses, we used Cox regression models to predict exiting from the parental home from mental health and economic characteristics, controlling for relevant demographic and parental characteristics. If young adults did not transition out of the parental home, they were censored at the final interview date. Next, Cox regression models predicted returns to the parental home from mental health and economic characteristics. Youth who had exited the parental home but did not return to the parental home were censored at the date of their last interview.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Descriptive statistics are presented for the full sample in Table 1. Overall, the sample was primarily White, had a high school degree, and was employed part time. The sample consisted of equal representations of men and women; the average age was 24. Few depressive symptoms and alcohol problems were endorsed by respondents; few young adults were living in poverty. Most of the sample had not formed a union, given birth to a child, or experienced a nonunion pregnancy. Many young adults were not enrolled in school at the time of the survey.

In regard to family characteristics, the majority of young adults grew up in intact families. The average household had three members. Sample characteristics were similar for respondents who exited the parental home and those who later returned to the parental home, yet there were statistically significant differences between those who returned to the parental home and those who continued to live independently (see Table 2). Home leavers and home returners differed on all characteristics except gender, Hispanic ethnicity, and experiencing childbirth.

First Exits From the Parental Home

Cox regression models indicated that mental health status and economic characteristics were significantly associated with first exits from the parental home, controlling for relevant demographic, family formation, and parental characteristics (see Table 3). Youth with emotional distress experienced an earlier exit from the parental home; alcohol problems were not significantly associated with exiting the parental home. A one-unit increase in emotional distress was associated with a 2% increase in the hazard of exiting the parental home.

Economic characteristics were also associated with exiting the parental household. Compared to those with a high school degree, young adults with less than a high school education were 88% more likely to experience earlier exits from a parental home; for those with some college, a college education, or more than a college degree, the hazard of exiting a parental home decreased by 46%, 51%, and 71% respectively compared to those with a high school degree. Compared to those employed part time, those not employed were 31% less likely to exit the parental home. Contrary to our expectations, those in poverty were 53% more likely to exit the parental home earlier than young adults not in poverty.

Several control variables were also significant. Demographic characteristics indicated that respondents who were Black or Hispanic experienced a delayed exit from the parental home compared to Whites. Being female, experiencing a childbirth or nonmarital pregnancy, and being enrolled in school were associated with earlier exits from the parental home. For family characteristics, household size and family intactness were associated with a delayed exit from the parental household.

First Returns to the Parental Home

Cox regression models indicated that mental health status and youth economic characteristics were also associated with first returns to the parental home, controlling for relevant demographic, family formation, and parental characteristics (see Table 4). Emotional distress and alcohol problems were associated with earlier returns to the parental home; that is, a one-unit increase in emotional distress was associated with a 4% increase in the hazard of returning to the parental home. Furthermore, the hazard of returning to the parental home for youth reporting alcohol problems was 8% higher than the hazard of returning to the parental home for youth reporting no alcohol problems.

Economic characteristics—specifically education, employment, and poverty—were associated with returning to the parental home. Compared to those with a high school education, youth with less than a high school education were 45% more likely to return to the parental home; those with some college, a college degree, and more than a college degree were less likely to return to the parental home by 49%, 38%, and 69%, respectively, compared to those with a high school degree. In addition, compared to young adults employed part time, young adults with full-time employment were 93% more likely to move back in with parents; unemployed young adults were 20% less likely to return to the parental home. The hazard of returning to the parental home for youth experiencing poverty was 20% lower than the hazard for returning to the parental home for youth not experiencing poverty.

Several control variables were also significant. Demographic characteristics indicated that being female and experiencing a union formation were associated with delayed returns to the parental home; nonunion pregnancies and current school enrollment were associated with earlier returns to the parental home. For family characteristics, household size and family intactness were associated with earlier returns to the parental household.

Discussion

Compared to past decades, the pathway to adulthood for youth today is more individualized and less standardized (Settersten & Gannon, 2005), and the transition to adulthood is characterized by increased exploration and instability in employment and education pursuits (Arnett, 2000). Young adults commonly exit the parental home during this transitional period, yet many youth also return (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994), where they are likely perceived as developmentally stunted (Newman, 2013). We found that young adult mental health and economic factors influenced the timing of exits and returns to the parental home after controlling for demographic and parental characteristics.

Contrary to our first hypothesis, we found no evidence that poor mental health, measured by emotional distress and alcohol problems, was associated with a delayed first exit. Instead, we found evidence that emotional distress was associated with an earlier first exit from the parental home. Emotional distress is linked to difficulties maintaining social relationships (Daley & Hammen, 2002); thus, it may be that distressed youth have difficulty maintaining a high-quality relationship with parents. Boomerang kids have more negative prior parent–youth relationships compared to youth who never exit the parental home (Ward & Spitze, 2007), suggesting that perhaps youth are unprepared to exit the parental home but may do so

to avoid negative relations with parents. Furthermore, women are more susceptible to emotional distress than men (Simon, 2002), and women experience earlier exits from the parental home, which is often speculated to be due to the increased parental monitoring they receive (White, 1994). It may be likely that distressed women receive greater parental monitoring than nondistressed women, and this monitoring may contribute to their decision to exit the parental home earlier. Independent living, with the freedom and autonomy it provides, may be especially appealing for distressed young adults.

Consistent with our second hypothesis, we found evidence that poor mental health was associated with an earlier return to the parental home for returning youth. The life course framework suggests that events in the life course are shaped by the historical time and place (Elder et al., 2003). For American youth in this cohort, institutional supports, such as access to stable employment at various levels of education, are rarely implemented to help youth sustain independent living (Mitchell, 2006b), and youth with predisposed mental health vulnerabilities may find it especially difficult to sustain independence. Indeed, young adults with mental health problems experience difficulty transitioning to adulthood in general and often experience problems with regard to schooling, work, residential stability (Gralinski-Bakker et al., 2005), and intimate relationships (Daley & Hammen, 2002).

The United States experienced many changes in the economy during the past decade that likely influences home leaving and home returning behavior for youth today. The shift to an information-driven economy has contributed to young adults' need for higher education and training in order to ensure decent employment and earnings (Furstenberg et al., 2005). Indeed, the life course framework suggests that individual lives are experienced interdependently (Elder et al., 2003) and larger societal changes, such as these economic shifts, contribute to individual behavior. Consistent with our expectations, we found that unemployment delayed exits from the parental home; for youth who returned to the parental home, postsecondary education was associated with a delayed first return, and less than a high school degree was associated with an earlier first return. Our results provide some evidence that youth with greater economic resources may be able to enter into, and sustain, independent living more easily than youth with fewer economic resources. Indeed, unemployment and need for more education increase the likelihood of parent-child coresidence (Mitchell, 2006a; Sassler et al., 2008). Thus, unemployed individuals may have difficulty entering into an independent living arrangement, those with more education may be more able to sustain independent living, and youth with less education may not be able to sustain independent living.

However, our results did not point to a clear link between greater economic resources and earlier home leaving and delayed home returning youth behavior. Contrary to our expectations, postsecondary education was associated with delayed exits and young adult poverty, and obtaining less than a high school degree was associated with earlier exits. Furthermore, full-time employment was associated with an earlier first return for returning youth; young adult poverty and unemployment were associated with delayed first returns for returning youth. These contradictory findings highlight the diversity that exists among young adults. Although general trends with regard to home leaving and home returning behaviors emerge during this period of the life course, youth today experience greater

freedom from social control and social norms, contributing to different interests and behaviors (Arnett, 2006). In this study, individuality was reflected in the observed variability in home leaving and home returning behavior between the economically advantaged youth and economically disadvantaged youth.

Youth with greater economic resources, such as higher levels of education and full-time employment, may be remaining in, or returning to, the parental home in order to get ahead financially, either consciously or unconsciously (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Mitchell, 2004). Given that economic resources are often highly correlated between parents and youth, economically advantaged youth may be more apt to utilize this get-ahead approach compared to those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, the economic recessions experienced by youth in the late 1990s and again in the 2000s (Mitchell, 2006b), may have encouraged them to remain in the parental home for longer periods of time as they pursued stable employment or higher education and return to the parental home in unstable environments where loss of employment is likely. Youth in later cohorts, who experienced the Great Recession in the late 2000s, may experience similar trajectories to our 1997 cohort because they may be wary of attempting independent living with little security. Indeed, during the Great Recession young adults faced difficulties getting hired and maintaining that position (Qian, 2012) even when they had a college degree (Elsby, Hobijn, & Sahin, 2010). Thus, these youth may be likely to remain in the parental home longer to ensure that they are able to sustain independent living once they exit the parental home, or they may return to the parental home when employment instability seems common.

Youth with fewer economic resources are likely to experience their own diverse trajectory in comparison to youth with greater economic resources. All youth live in a society where self-achievement and autonomy are highly valued (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), yet young adults in poverty, with minimal education, and those unemployed may be conscious of “doing it yourself” and more eager to prove themselves by living independently and sustaining independent living in spite of economic constraints. Youth with greater economic resources may be able to prove themselves in other arenas, such as by completing college or getting a successful job, and may not be as reliant on achieving residential stability as an indicator of a successful transition to adulthood.

Although the desire to achieve residential stability likely influences certain disadvantaged youth, parental economic resources are also likely to contribute to residential decisions. Unemployed and impoverished young adults who return home may experience these delays because of a lack of parental resources. Parental resources may be negatively affected during the same recessions experienced by youth late 1990s and 2000s; indeed, during the Great Recession experienced by later cohorts, parental economic resources were negatively affected (Settersten, 2012), and parents with the fewest economic resources were the most affected (Grusky, Western, & Wimer, 2011). Thus, economic shifts may alter the parental capacity to provide economic support to young adult children; instead, parents may focus on instrumental or social support. As a result, these youth may rely on other types of living arrangements, such as cohabitation or doubling up, to buffer against economic hardship.

Furthermore, youth in these contexts may be given opportunity to prove themselves by assisting families, either financially or in other forms of support.

Our results provide evidence that both mental health status and young adult economic factors influence decisions to exit and possibly return to the parental household. However, we acknowledge some limitations. In our measurement of exits from and returns to the parental home, we acknowledge that we likely underestimate actual incidences of the events for two reasons. First, the NLSY97 collected information on the household composition based on respondents' permanent residence. Thus, college students who live in temporary units such as a dormitory or a shared apartment may not be captured as "exiting" the parental home. Second, variables about household composition were available only yearly, which does not count leaving and returning home events within a short interval such as those within a year. Furthermore, given data limitations, we were unable to capture key parental variables in the data. Information on parent-child relationship quality beyond the first three survey waves was unavailable. It is likely that young adults would be more likely to remain in the parental home, or move back into the parental home, if they have a current high-quality relationship with their parents. Furthermore, parental economic variables were too highly correlated with youth economic variables and could not be included in the statistical models used.

Despite these limitations, we have empirically identified factors that influence a young adult's decision to exit the parental home and later return to the parental home. By relying on mental health status and young adult economic characteristics, we were able to gain a more holistic view of variables influencing this common phenomenon. Moving forward, if individualism and autonomy become increasingly more valued as an indicator of a successful transition to adulthood, then focusing on broad trends in home leaving and home returning behavior may become less important. Instead, the growing diversity between pathways to adulthood with regard to home leaving and home returning behavior may become more valuable to understand, especially among more vulnerable populations, such as those with fewer economic resources and those with mental health problems. Our results suggest that youth continue to rely on parents well into young adulthood in regard to their home leaving and home returning behavior, although the popular press depiction of boomerang kids as a drain on parental resources (Grind, 2013) was not supported given that youth displayed inconsistent patterns. Because exiting and reentering the parental home may lead to positive or negative outcomes for the young adults themselves, their parents, and other household members, understanding what contributes to these events is imperative as a necessary first step with important policy implications.

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Table 1
Full Sample Weighted Descriptive Statistics (*N* = 8,984)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Mental health problems			
Emotional distress	9.48	2.48	1–20
Alcohol problems	.39		0–1
Economic characteristics			
Poverty	.15		0–1
Employment status			
Not employed	.17		0–1
Part-time employment (ref.)	.55		0–1
Full-time employment	.28		0–1
Education			
Less than high school	.16		0–1
High school (ref.)	.55		0–1
Some college	.04		0–1
College degree	.12		0–1
More than a college degree	.02		0–1
Demographic and parental controls			
Age	23.55	3.73	16–31
Female	.49		0–1
Race			
White (ref.)	.71		0–1
Black	.16		0–1
Hispanic	.13		0–1
Union formation			
Married	.20		0–1
Cohabited	.27		0–1
Childbirth	.07		0–1
Nonmarital pregnancy	.01		0–1
Noncohabiting pregnancy	.03		0–1
Current school enrollment	0.72	1.21	0–4
Household size	3.34	1.62	1–19
Intact family in 1997	.53		0–1

Note. ref. = reference category.

Table 2
Weighted Descriptive Statistics for Those Exiting From and Those Returning to the Parental Home

Variables	Home leavers (<i>n</i> = 8,162)			Home returners (<i>n</i> = 6,530)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Mental health problems						
Emotional distress	9.53 _a	2.47	1–20	9.80	2.62	1–20
Alcohol problems	.42 _a		0–1	.44		0–1
Economic characteristics						
Poverty	.40 _a		0–1	.17		0–1
Employment status						
Not employed	.08 _a		0–1	.10		0–1
Part-time employment (ref.)	.63 _a		0–1	.66		0–1
Full-time employment	.29 _a		0–1	.24		0–1
Education						
Less than high school	.14 _a		0–1	.16		0–1
High school (ref.)	.69 _a		0–1	.66		0–1
Some college	.04 _a		0–1	.04		0–1
College degree	.12 _a		0–1	.13		0–1
More than a college degree	.01 _a		0–1	.01		0–1
Demographic and parental controls						
Age	21.60 _a	2.68	16–31	23.10	3.03	16–31
Female	.49		0–1	.48		0–1
Race						
White (ref.)	.73 _a		0–1	.69		0–1
Black	.15 _a		0–1	.17		0–1
Hispanic	.12		0–1	.14		0–1
Union formation						
Married	.14 _a		0–1	.12		0–1

Variables	Home leavers (<i>n</i> = 8,162)			Home returners (<i>n</i> = 6,530)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Cohabited	.30 _a		0–1	.34		0–1
Childbirth	.08		0–1	.08		0–1
Nonmarital pregnancy	.02 _a		0–1	.02		0–1
Noncohabiting pregnancy	.03 _a		0–1	.02		0–1
Current school enrollment	0.86 _a	1.32	0–4	0.53	1.10	0–4
Household size	2.42 _a	1.30	1–15	4.15	1.66	2–19
Intact family in 1997	.55 _a		0–1	.50		0–1

Note. Subscript letters indicate a significant difference between home leavers and home returners. ref. = reference category.

Table 3
Cox Regression Model Predicting First Exits From the Parental Home ($n = 8,162$)

Variables	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	HR
Mental health problems			
Emotional distress	0.02	0.01	1.02***
Alcohol problems	0.03	0.03	1.03
Economic characteristics			
Poverty	0.43	0.05	1.53***
Employment status (ref.: part-time employment)			
Not employed	−0.37	0.03	0.69***
Full-time employment	0.05	0.03	1.06 [†]
Education (ref.: high school)			
Less than high school	0.63	0.06	1.88***
Some college	−0.62	0.04	0.54***
College degree	−0.71	0.02	0.49***
More than a college degree	−1.23	0.05	0.29***
Demographic and parental controls			
Female	0.23	0.03	1.26***
Race (ref.: White)			
Black	−0.41	0.02	0.67***
Hispanic	−0.30	0.02	0.74***
Union formation			
Married	−0.02	0.04	0.98
Cohabited	−0.01	0.03	0.99
Childbirth	0.26	0.06	1.30***
Nonmarital pregnancy ^a	0.31	0.11	1.36***
Noncohabiting pregnancy ^a	0.12	0.09	1.13
Current school enrollment	0.12	0.01	1.13***
Household size	−0.17	0.01	0.85***
Intact family in 1997	−0.09	0.02	0.91***

Note. HR = hazard ratio; ref. = reference category.

^aThe nonmarital and noncohabiting pregnancy categories are mutually exclusive.

[†] $p < .10$.

 $p < .001$.

Table 4
Cox Regression Model Predicting First Returns to the Parental Home ($n = 6,530$)

Variables	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	HR
Mental health problems			
Emotional distress	0.04	0.01	1.04***
Alcohol problems	0.08	0.04	1.08*
Economic characteristics			
Poverty	−0.22	0.04	0.80***
Employment status (ref.: part time employment)			
Not employed	−0.22	0.05	0.80***
Full time employment	0.66	0.09	1.93***
Education (ref.: high school)			
Less than high school	0.37	0.07	1.45***
Some college	−0.67	0.05	0.51***
College degree	−0.48	0.04	0.62***
More than a college degree	−1.17	0.05	0.31***
Demographic and parental controls			
Female	−0.14	0.03	0.88***
Race (ref.: White)			
Black	−0.02	0.04	0.99
Hispanic	−0.08	0.04	0.92 [†]
Union formation			
Married	−1.83	0.01	0.16***
Cohabited	−0.63	0.02	0.53***
Childbirth	−0.02	0.07	0.98
Nonmarital pregnancy ^a	0.29	0.15	1.34*
Noncohabiting pregnancy ^a	1.17	0.47	3.22***
Current school enrollment	0.14	0.02	1.15***
Household size	0.21	0.01	1.24***
Intact family in 1997	0.09	0.04	1.10*

Note. HR = hazard ratio; ref. = reference category.

^aThe nonmarital and noncohabiting pregnancy categories are mutually exclusive.

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

*** $p < .001$.