

# CHALLENGES OF TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD IN HUNGARY: PERCEPTIONS OF YOUTH IN THE SCIENTIFIC FIELD THROUGH THE LENS OF POST-ADOLESCENCE

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## **Abstract:**

*The transition from existential dependence to independence associated with entering adulthood is not a uniform process: this is evidenced by diverse pathways, varied forms, and often differing experiences of maturity. As a result of the prolonged nature of achieving existential autonomy and independence from parents, as well as financial insecurity, starting a family and having children are also postponed to a later stage of life. According to the results of the Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020, the realization of milestones related to the transition to adulthood clearly tracks the period of post-adolescence and prolonged maturation. Based on the analyzed data, it can be concluded that this seemingly uniform generation is, in fact, intersected by distinct social differences; the impact of subjective financial situation and status perception is significant regarding youth attitudes toward future plans and their current scope of action.*

**Key words:** youth sociology, post-adolescence, adulthood, insecurity, perception of youth

## INTRODUCTION

Sociological literature employs several terms to describe the transition between youth and adulthood. One of the most prevalent of these is post-adolescence, which interprets the characteristics of youth lifestyles in the context of separation, the attainment of independence, autonomy, and the organization and establishment of one's own existential foundation.<sup>1</sup> The concept of post-adolescence refers to the late independence and prolonged separation from parents affecting young people in their twenties and thirties. However, this period exhibits significant complexity, involving both objective and subjective conditions. It encompasses moving out of the parental home, achieving financial independence, and legally defined separation, as well as the parallel individual experiences of becoming autonomous and independent decision-making.

The present study is based on a youth sociology perspective, focusing on the exploration of the financial situation, existential stability, and future plans of the Hungarian youth cohort. A comprehensive picture of these issues is provided through the secondary analysis of the most recent accessible results from the 2020 large-sample youth survey (*Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020*) grounded in the presentation of international data. This approach enables the exploration of post-adolescent characteristics among teenagers and young adults. The interpretation of the data covers the topics of financial status, existential insecurity, the pursuit of independence, family planning, and the cohort-specific problem map.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Johanna Wyn advocates for a sociological approach to the study of youth.<sup>2</sup> According to her position, exploring the relationship between young people and their families through an analysis detached from normative frameworks is a crucial research task. To this end, sociology offers a toolkit that examines inequalities from a critical perspective and reflects on political practices

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<sup>1</sup> Vaskovics, László (2000): A posztadoleszcencia szociológia elmélete. *Szociológiai Szemle*, 10(4). Pp 3–20

<sup>2</sup> Wyn, Johanna (2011). The sociology of youth. A reflection on its contribution to the field and future directions. *Youth Studies Australia*, 30(3). Pp 34-39

addressing social differences and disadvantages. Bessant and colleagues further highlight the interdisciplinary nature of youth sociology.<sup>3</sup> Precisely defining youth sociology is a challenge due to its complexity and its methodological and thematic diversity. The blurring of age-based categories as boundaries is an increasingly characteristic trend; an universal interpretation of youth, much like that of the transition to adulthood, is no longer possible. Describing the life situations of young people, uncovering the differences between dependence on parents and the attainment of autonomy, as well as identifying inequalities, has become crucial. Thinking that assumes universality oversimplifies social changes, the lived experience of specific life stages, and the diversity of transitions. On the path to adulthood, building one's own home or career and establishing an existential foundation are not accessible to everyone; thus, uncovering the influencing factors and inequalities is of great importance.

The transition from existential dependence to independence is not a uniform process: this is evidenced by diverse pathways, varied forms, and often differing experiences of maturity. The various phases and states do not follow one another linearly; during the period of young adulthood, they are realized independently or may be shifted/postponed.<sup>4</sup> Existential difficulties carry a double weight in this life stage: status effects can be identified both regarding the family of origin (e.g., parental financial support) and the establishment of an independent, autonomous life (e.g., achieving existential stability). As a result of the prolonged nature of achieving existential autonomy and independence from parents, as well as financial insecurity, starting a family and having children are also postponed to a later stage. Consequently, the significance of the family of origin is heightened among those affected by prolonged independence (post-adolescence). In parallel, there is an increasing importance of supportive environments that participate in the socialization and maturation of young people (e.g., professional expertise and safety net functions in career choices).<sup>5</sup>

## INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Post-adolescence is a widespread phenomenon both globally and within Europe, one that is clearly identifiable through quantitative research results. Regarding financial status, several indicators are available within European statistics that provide a picture of the existential stability of the youth cohort. Youth unemployment represents a significant risk for young people, particularly during the period of experiencing economic uncertainty and establishing existential independence.<sup>6</sup> Looking at the averages of EU member states, 11 percent of EU citizens aged 15–29 are unemployed; in the case of Hungary, this rate is slightly lower, at 8 percent. The situation of young people at risk of poverty and social exclusion is even more difficult during the period of post-adolescence. In this regard, high rates can be found when examining European countries. A comparison of individual nations reveals that this life situation affects at least 12 percent and at most 32 percent of the youth in a given country.<sup>7</sup> The EU average stands at 21 percent, while in Hungary, this rate is 20 percent.

In relation to family planning, an OECD 2024 study highlights the traceability of the characteristics and attitude changes associated with the second demographic transition. According to the study, the consideration of non-material aspects and the prioritization of individual needs are

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<sup>3</sup> Bessant, Judith. Collin, Philippa. O’Keeffe, Patrick. (2024). *Research Handbook on the Sociology of Youth*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Fazekas, Anna (2023). A státuszszelés hatása a jövőtervezésre és a családalapításra. In Csepeli, György. Örkény, Antal. (Eds.). *Kötő-Jelek – A Doktori Iskola évkönyve 2023*. ELTE. Pp 8-21

<sup>5</sup> Nagy, Ádám (2013). Szocializációs közegek, *Replika*: 83. Pp 95-108

<sup>6</sup> Eurostat (2023a). *Unemployment by sex and age - annual data*.

<sup>7</sup> Eurostat (2023b). *Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex*.

becoming increasingly prevalent in the field of childbearing.<sup>8</sup> Self-actualization and the importance of quality of life are gaining ground; along these lines, deliberation and consciousness are playing a larger role in decision-making and planning. Young people's plans for starting a family are influenced by expectations and ideals regarding the parental role, the impacts of socio-economic and political changes (e.g., economic prudence, climate change), the implementation of the domestic division of labor, and the beneficiaries of family support measures, among others. Across EU member states, there is a growing trend in the proportion of births outside of marriage, which points to a transformation in family structure.<sup>9</sup> Becoming a parent independently of marriage is increasingly common, while the age of entering marriage continues to be postponed.

## THE HUNGARIAN CONTEXT

Based on data from the latest wave of Hungarian large-sample youth surveys (*Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020*), 51 percent of 15–29-year-olds are employed as their primary activity, 38 percent are students, while 11 percent are considered NEET youth (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Eighteen percent of this age group have experienced unemployment, the majority of them in a registered form. Looking back over a ten-year period, 30 percent of 15–29-year-olds reported that their family's financial situation had deteriorated, 54 percent perceived stagnation, while 16 percent reported improvement. Regarding social self-classification, the majority (54%) place themselves in the middle group, 40 percent view themselves as members of the lower or lower-middle social class, and 6 percent identify their position with the upper or upper-middle class. Regular financial difficulties are reported by 5 percent of 15–29-year-olds, 27 percent barely make ends meet on a monthly basis, while 58 percent can manage their salary well with careful budgeting, and 10 percent are financially carefree.

The problem area associated with subjective financial status fundamentally supports a more pessimistic view among young people, with their concerns coming to the forefront. Based on the 2020 data collection, 15–29-year-olds identify uncertainty (23%) and financial difficulties (22%) as the most significant problems facing their generation. In this regard, a clear type of existential determinism can be identified, which dominates the fears young people define concerning the difficulties of their own age group.

According to the findings of the 2020 survey, the majority of 15–29-year-olds (68%) live with their parents for most of the year. Eleven percent live in their own apartment, while 8 percent live in their own house. Eighty-two percent of young people judge their housing conditions to be adequate. The significance of homeownership is strongly dominant: 93 percent of 15–29-year-olds believe it is important to have a self-owned house or apartment in adult life. Regarding moving out from the parental home, a mixed picture of mobility is visible. Among young people living with their parents, 17 percent plan to move out, 30 percent would like to move but lack the opportunity, and 49 percent do not even plan for this form of independence.

Based on the results of the *Magyar Ifjúság Kutatás 2020*, observing the realization of milestones related to becoming an adult, the period of post-adolescence and prolonged maturation is clearly traceable. Although 70 percent of 15–29-year-olds consider themselves adults, moving out and gaining independence from parents characterizes only 32 percent of the cohort. Twenty-six percent of respondents possess their own home. Eighty-two percent have already been on a date, and six-tenths have or have had a serious relationship. Those young people who have already taken certain steps toward adulthood and maturity experienced these at a significantly younger average age than those who estimate the expected age based on their current life situation. Young people who have not yet moved out from their parents' home date this transition to an average age of 26. The purchase of a first home is projected even later, at an average age of 28.

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<sup>8</sup> OECD (2024): *Society at a Glance 2024: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat (2022): *Being young in Europe today – family and society. Statistics Explained*.

Data from 2020 show that 73 percent of 15–29-year-olds are single (unmarried), 11 percent are married, and 16 percent live in a domestic partnership. While 17 percent of this age group believe in the institution of marriage, 6 percent do not consider it necessary.<sup>10</sup> Regarding the perception of youth lifestyles, the opinion on the utility of cohabitation is strikingly characteristic: 63 percent of 15–29-year-olds believe it is worthwhile to live with a chosen partner before marriage. Eighteen percent of young people would recommend a domestic partnership as the ideal lifestyle for a young couple, 8 percent favor an independent lifestyle, and a further 8 percent prefer marriage without prior cohabitation.

Thirteen percent of 15–29-year-olds have children, the vast majority of whom have one child. The timing of the first child for those affected ranged between the ages of 14 and 29, with the first child born at an average age of 23 (mode: 25 years – 13 percent of those concerned). Only 1 percent of respondents stated that the reason they do not have (more) children is that it is not possible (presumably for medical reasons). Eighty-six percent of the 15–29 age group consider having children to be more or less important. The 2020 research results show that 16 percent of 15–29-year-olds cannot yet say at what age they would have a child. However, those who have concrete plans in this regard date the birth of their first (or next) child to an average age of 29 (mode: 30), with responses distributed between the ages of 16 and 37.

Eleven percent of 15–29-year-olds do not plan to have children. The average planned number of children is 1.77, with the majority of young people (54%) wanting to have two children. Higher values for the average planned number of children can be measured in the following social groups: women (1.85), those with higher education (1.84), those with primary education (1.80), the oldest age group (1.83 among those over 25), residents of major provincial cities (1.83), and those living in villages (1.82). The impact of subjective status is also measurable in this question. Parallel to a decline in status, the average value for the planned number of children increases: among those living without financial worries, this value is 1.67, while among young people in the worst financial situation, the average is 2.31.<sup>11</sup>

When examining the role of factors determining the intention to have children, it is evident that financial conditions are the most significant. Based on the 2020 data collection results, it can be stated that in the areas of childbearing and family formation, alongside the significance of existential aspects (e.g., financial situation, owning a home), the prominence of subjective factors and a deliberation that goes beyond the forced choice between work and family can be detected. Alongside the burden of economic consciousness and predictability, individual choice and the freedom of personal decision-making also appear—for instance, the challenges experienced in finding a partner and the perceived maturity related to the parental role.

Table 1. The significance of perceived maturity for the parental role based on socio-demographic background in 2020 (N = 7924; percentage distribution; \*\*p ≤ 0,001)

|                                      |                                                      |           |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
|                                      |                                                      | 34        |
| <b>Age group**</b>                   | 15-19 years old                                      | 39        |
|                                      | 20-24 years old                                      | 35        |
|                                      | 25-29 years old                                      | 31        |
|                                      |                                                      |           |
| <b>Social class**</b>                | Lower/Lower-middle                                   | 31        |
|                                      | Middle                                               | 37        |
|                                      | Upper-middle/Upper                                   | 36        |
| <b>Subjective financial status**</b> | Living without financial worries                     | 30        |
|                                      | Managing wekk on their income with careful budgeting | <b>38</b> |
|                                      | Just making ends meet with careful budgeting         | 31        |
|                                      | Having regular financial difficulties                | 24        |

<sup>10</sup> Notably, 77 percent of respondents provided no answer, reflecting uncertainty about future marriage plans.

<sup>11</sup> Fazekas, Anna. Hamarics, Eszter. (2022): Értékvilág – prioritás, nyitottság, befogadás, érzékenység. In Nagy, Ádám (Ed.): *Lábjegyzeten is túl. Magyar ifjúságkutatás 2020*. Szociális Demokráciáért Intézet – Excenter Kutatóközpont. Pp 189-218

If we consider the significance of socio-demographic factors regarding the increasing role of consciousness, several correlations can be observed (*Table 1*). The older a young person is, the less likely it is that maturity associated with the parental role influences their decisions on having children. The significance of status perception is also measurable: among young people of higher social status, consciousness related to maturity is stronger, whereas it carries less weight among those of lower status. In examining these correlations, a further finding is that no significant relationship could be identified concerning gender, type of settlement, or level of education.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

International statistics clearly track the prolonged transition to autonomy among the youth, as well as the experience of partial or total dependence on parents. Simultaneously, we have gained insight into the financial risks facing youth cohorts and the status characteristics influencing them. Based on the correlations identified through the results of Hungarian large-sample youth research, it is evident that while post-adolescence is defined as a universal phenomenon, it is a crucial finding that this does not imply a uniform existential transition.<sup>13</sup> Instead of group formation based on traditional approaches emphasizing age-specific differences, the underlying, unequal financial opportunities and prospects become apparent. All of these factors shape the preferences, attitudes, and subsequent actions emerging in relation to family formation and future planning. Following the large-sample youth surveys, it is observable that among 15–29-year-olds, a mindset centered on marriage, a division of labor tied to traditional gender roles, and the intention to have multiple children remains characteristic. However, it is an important finding that consciousness is playing an increasingly significant role in the areas of settling down and childbearing; for a portion of the cohort, this is complicated by the challenges of partner-seeking and the perceived maturity required for the parental role.

Regarding Hungarian youth, socio-economic and political processes, the specificities of the individual micro-environment, global influences, cultural context, and knowledge capital all hold significance.<sup>14</sup> Based on the analyzed data, it can be concluded that this seemingly uniform generation is, in fact, intersected by distinct social differences. The correlations drawn from the research results suggest that the impact of subjective financial status and status perception is significant concerning youth attitudes toward future plans and their current scope of action. In line with the theory of the prolonged youth life stage (post-adolescence) and the cornerstones of the problem map derived from national youth data collections, it is clear that plans and actions related to family formation are heavily framed by financial opportunities and the importance of existential stability.

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