

# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER



TEENS SIGNING AN ELVIS POSTER

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# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER

By THOMAS HINE

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<http://www.americanheritage.com/content/rise-and-decline-teenager>

The word emerged during the Depression to define a new kind of American adolescence—one that prevailed for half a century and may now be ending.

When the anthropologist Margaret Mead journeyed to the South Pacific in 1926, she was looking for something that experts of the time thought didn't exist: untroubled adolescence.

Adolescence, psychologists and educators believed, was inevitably a period of storm and stress. It debilitated young men and women. It made their actions unpredictable, their characters flighty and undependable. And if people who had lived through their teens didn't remember being that unhappy, some said, it was because it had been so traumatic that their conscious minds had suppressed what really happened.

At the age of twenty-five, Mead, who wasn't all that far beyond adolescence herself, simply couldn't believe that this picture of life's second decade expressed a necessary or universal truth. If she could find a place where social and sexual maturity could be attained without a struggle, where adolescence was so peaceful it scarcely seemed to exist, her point would be made. So she went to Samoa.

There are few places left on earth remote enough to give a contemporary observer real perspective on how Americans think about their young people. The teenager, with all the ideas about adolescence that the word encodes, is one of our most potent cultural exports. All around the world, satellites beam down MTV with its messages of consumption, self-indulgence, alienation, angst, and hedonism. The American invention of youth culture has become thoroughly international; it causes consternation and sells products everywhere.

Still, although it is extremely difficult to travel far enough across the earth to escape our culture's ideas about teenagers, one can travel in time. Youth has a history, and since the European colonization of North America, the second decade of life has offered a tremendous diversity of expectations and experiences. They haven't all been good experiences; most were backbreaking, some horrifying. One needn't be nostalgic for those lost forms of youth in order to learn from them. Nobody wants to send young people off to the coal mines, as was done a century ago, or rent them out to neighboring households as servants, as seventeenth-century New Englanders did. Nevertheless, history can be our Samoa, a window into very different ways of thinking and behaving that can throw our own attitudes into sharp relief and highlight assumptions that we don't even know we're making.

Like Mead, who freely admitted that her research in Samoa



Recreation instructor Miss Eleanor Kenny teaching her teenage group how to dance. The pictures on the wall are the girls favorite screen stars (1953).



was shaped by what she viewed as a problem in the American culture of her own time, I have set out on historical explorations spurred by a suspicion that something is deeply wrong with the way we think about youth. Many members of my generation, the baby boomers, have moved seamlessly from blaming our parents for the ills of society to blaming our children. Teenage villains, unwed mothers, new smokers, reckless drivers, and criminal predators are familiar figures in the media, even when the problems they represent are more common among other age groups. Cities and suburbs enact curfews and other laws that only young people need obey, while Congress and state legislatures find new ways to punish young offenders as adults.

The way we think about teenagers is most contradictory. We assume that they should be somehow protected from the world of work, yet many high school students work as much as twenty hours a week. Teenagers form the core of our low-wage retail and restaurant

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work force, the local equivalent of the even lower-wage overseas manufacturing work force that makes the footwear and other items teens covet.

Yet at the same time as our economy depends on the young, we tend to view teenagers as less than trustworthy. This is a hangover from the attitudes Mead was trying to fight, though nowadays we're likely to ascribe young people's perceived quirks to "raging hormones." Most adults seem to view this conflicted, contradictory figure of the teenager as inevitable, part of the growth of a human being. Yet many people now living came of age before there was anything called a teenager. This creature is a mid-twentieth century phenomenon. And almost everything has changed since the early 1940s, when it emerged. Are teenagers still necessary?

The word teenager initially saw print in 1941. It isn't known who thought up the word; its appearance, in an article in *Popular Science*, was not likely its first use. People had been speaking of someone in his or her teens for centuries, but that was a description of an individual. To speak of someone as a teenager is to make that person a member of a very large group, one defined only by age but presumed to have a lot in common. The word arose when it did because it described something new.

The teenager was a product of the Great Depression. Like other massive projects of the New Deal—the Hoover Dam, the TVA—it represented an immense channeling and redirection of energy. Unlike such public works, however, it was a more or less inadvertent invention. It happened in several steps.

First came the country's general economic collapse and a dramatic disappearance of jobs. As in previous panics and depressions, young people were among those thrown out of work. What was different was that after 1933, when Franklin D. Roosevelt took office, virtually all young people were thrown out of work, as part of a public policy to reserve jobs for men trying to support families. Businesses could



The teenager was a product of the Great Depression. Young people were thrown out of work to reserve jobs for men trying to support families.

actually be fined if they kept childless young people on their payrolls. Also, for the first two years of the Depression, the Roosevelt administration essentially ignored the needs of the youths it had turned out of work, except in the effort of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which was aimed at men in their late teens and early twenties.

There was, however, one very old and established institution available to young people who wanted to do something with their time and energy: high school. The first public high school had opened in Boston in 1821, but secondary education was very slow to win acceptance among working-class families that counted on their children's incomes for survival. Not until 112 years after that first school opened were a majority of high-school-age Americans actually enrolled.

The depression was the worst possible time for high school to catch on. The American public education system was, then as now, supported primarily by local real estate taxes; these had plummeted along with real estate values. Schools were laying off teachers even as they enrolled unprecedented numbers of students. They were ill equipped to deal with their new, diverse clientele.

For many of these new students, high school was a stopgap, something one did to weather a bad time. But by 1940 an overwhelming majority of young people were enrolled, and perhaps more important, there was a new expectation that nearly everyone would go, and even graduate.

This change in standards was a radical departure in the way society imagined itself. Before the Depression finishing high school was a clear mark that a youth, particularly a male, belonged to the middle class or above. Dropping out in the first or second

year indicated membership in the working class. Once a large majority started going to high school, all of them, regardless of their economic or social status, began to be seen as members of a single group. The word teenager appeared precisely at the

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Judy Garland and Mick Rooney co-starred in the film *Love Finds Andy Hardy* (1938), above. An enduring model for the emerging idea of the teenager was the perennial high schooler Archie, shown to the right on a 1942 comic book cover.

moment that it seemed to be needed.

Not long before, many young people in their mid-teens had been considered virtually grown up. Now that they were students rather than workers, they came to seem younger than before. During the 1920s “youth” in the movies had meant sexually mature figures, such as Joan Crawford, whom F. Scott Fitzgerald himself called the definitive flapper. Late in the 1930s a new kind of youth emerged in the movies, personified above all by the bizarre boy-man Mickey Rooney and the Andy Hardy movies he began to make in 1937. His frequent co-star Judy Garland was part of the phenomenon too. As Dorothy, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Garland was clearly a woman, not the girl everyone pretended she was. The tension between the maturity she feels and the childishness others see in her helps make the film more than a children’s fantasy. It is an early, piquant expression of the predicament of the teenager.

Another less profound but amazingly enduring model for the emerging idea of the teenager was that perennial high schooler Archie, who first appeared in a comic book in 1941. He was drawn by Bob Montana, a teenager himself, who was working for a living as a staff artist at a comic book company. For the last half-century Archie, Jughead, Betty, Veronica, and their circle have appealed more to youngsters aspiring to become teenagers

than to teenagers themselves.

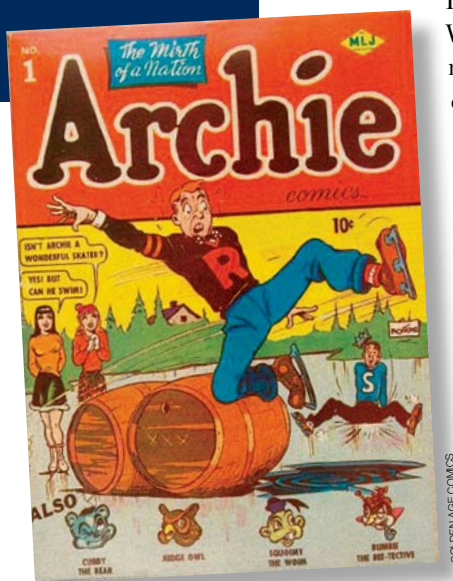
Nevertheless, the early popularity of characters like Andy Hardy and Archie indicated that the view of high school students as essentially juvenile was catching on. A far stronger signal came when the draft was revived, shortly before the United States entered World War II. Although married men with families were eligible for induction, in many cases up to the age of forty, high school students were automatically deferred. Young men of seventeen, sixteen, and younger had been soldiers in all of America’s previous wars and, more than likely, in every war that had ever been fought. By 1941 they had come to seem too young.

Having identified the teenager as a Frankenstein monster formed in the thirties by high school, Mickey Rooney movies, child psychology, mass manufacturing, and the New Deal, I might well have traced the story through bobbysoxers, drive-in movies, Holden Caulfield, Elvis, the civil rights martyr Emmett Till, top-forty radio, Gidget, the Mustang, heavy metal, Nirvana. Instead I found myself drawn farther into the past. While the teenager was a new thing in 1940, it nevertheless was an idea with deep roots in our culture.

At the very dawn of English settlement in North America, Puritan elders were declaring that they had come to this savage continent for the sake of their children, who did not seem sufficiently grateful. (Like latter-day suburbanites, they had made the move for the sake of the kids.) They were also shocked by the sheer size of their children. Better nutrition caused Americans of European background to reach physical and sexual maturity sooner than their parents had and to grow larger than their parents. No wonder some early settlers fretted that their children were different from them and at risk of going native.

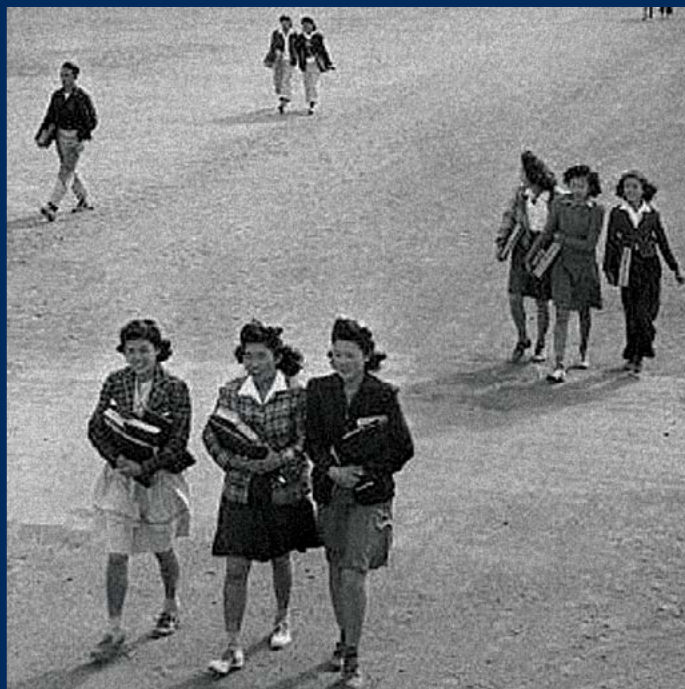
By the middle of the eighteenth century, there was a whole literature of complaint against both apprentices who affected expensive and exotic costumes and licentious young people given to nighttime “frolics.” Jonathan Edwards gave one of the most vivid descriptions of moral decline and then proceeded to deal with it by mobilizing youthful enthusiasm within the church. By the time of the American Revolution, half the population was under sixteen. Young women over eighteen were hard to marry off, as one upper-class observer noted, because their teeth were starting to rot. (Seemingly unrelated issues like dental hygiene have always played an unsung role in the way we define the ages of man and woman.)

Yet as youthful as the American population was, young people stood in the mainstream of social and economic life. They were not the discrete group that today’s teenagers are. “In America,”



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**Females constituted a majority of the public high school population when the tax-supported schools first displaced the privately operated academies. Some early high schools were conceived as a more practical and accessible alternative to college.**

wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, “there is in truth no adolescence. At the close of boyhood, he is a man and begins to trace out his own path.”

Things were beginning to change, however. High school, the institution that would eventually define the teenager, had already been invented. By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, it was becoming clear that rapid changes in manufacturing, transport, and marketing meant that the children of merchants, skilled artisans, and professionals would live in a very different world from that of their parents. Adults could no longer rely on passing on their businesses or imparting their skills to their children, who would probably need formal schooling. Increasingly, prosperous Americans were having fewer children and investing more in their education.

At the time, most secondary schooling took place in privately operated academies. These varied widely in nature and quality, and for the most part students went to them only when they had both a need and the time. These schools didn’t have fixed curricula, and students and teachers were constantly coming and going, since being a student was not yet a primary job. Students most often stayed at boardinghouses near the academies; they rarely lived at home.

The tax-supported high school, which by the 1860s had displaced the private academy, was based on a different set of assumptions. Attendance at it was a full-time activity, in which the

student adjusted to the school’s schedule, not vice versa. Whereas academies had been the product of a society in which most economic activity happened in the home, high school evolved in tandem with the ideal of the bourgeois home, protected from the world of work and presided over by a mother who was also the primary moral teacher. High school students, by definition, led privileged, sheltered lives.

Most academies had enrolled only males, but nearly all high schools were from the outset coeducational. There was some public consternation over mixing the sexes at so volatile an age, but most cities decided that providing separate schools was too costly. High schools were acceptable places to send one’s daughter because they were close to home. Moreover, their graduates were qualified to teach elementary school, a major employment opportunity for young women. The result was that females constituted a majority of the high school population. Moreover, male graduates were likely to be upper class, since they included only those who didn’t have to drop out to work, while female graduates represented a wider social range.

Some of the early high schools were conceived as more practical and accessible alternatives to college. In a relatively short time, however, high school curricula became dominated by Latin and algebra, the courses required by the most selective colleges. Parents looked to win advantage for their children, so a “good” high school became one whose students went on to top colleges.

The earliest high schools treated their students almost as adults and allowed them to make decisions about their social lives. Students organized their own extracurricular activities and played on athletic teams with older men and workers. Toward the end of

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the nineteenth century, however, high schools increasingly sought to protect their charges from the dangers of the larger world. They organized dances so that their students wouldn’t go to dance halls. They organized sports so that students would compete with others their own age. They created cheerleading squads, in the hope that

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the presence of females would make boys play less violently. They discovered and promoted that ineffable quality “school spirit,” which was supposed to promote loyalty, patriotism, and social control. By the turn of the twentieth century, the football captain could escort the chief cheerleader to the senior prom.

This all sounds familiar, but this high school crowd still accounted for less than 10 percent of the secondary-school-age population.

Nearly all the rest were working, most of them with their families on farms, but also in factories, mines, and department stores, in the “street trades” (as newspaper hawkers or delivery boys), in the home doing piecework, or even as prostitutes. If early high school students are obvious predecessors to today’s teenagers, their working contemporaries also helped create the youth culture.

One thing the working-class young shared with high school students and with today’s teenagers is that they were emissaries of the new. Parents wanted their children to be prepared for the future. Among the working class, a substantially immigrant population, newness was America itself. Throughout the nineteenth century settlement workers and journalists repeatedly observed the way immigrant parents depended on their children to teach them the way things worked in their new country. They also noted a generation gap, as parents tried to cling to traditions and values from the old country while their children learned and invented other ways to live. Parents both applauded and deplored their children’s participation in a new world. Youth became, in itself, a source of authority. When contemporary parents look to their children to fix the computer, program the VCR, or tell them what’s new in the culture, they continue a long American tradition.

For laboring purposes one ceased to be a child no later than the age of ten. In many states schooling was required until twelve or thirteen, but compulsory attendance laws were rarely strictly enforced. In Philadelphia in the 1880s the standard bribe to free one’s child from schooling was twenty-five cents. This was an excellent investment, considering how dependent many families were on their children. In Fall River, Massachusetts, some mill owners hired only men who had able-bodied sons who could also work. In Scranton, Pennsylvania, children’s incomes usually added up to more than their fathers’.

The working teenager is, of course, hardly extinct. American high school students are far more likely to have part-time jobs than are their counterparts in other developed countries, and their work hours are on average substantially longer. The difference is that



**High schools increasingly sought to protect their charges from the dangers of the larger world. They organized sports so that students would compete with others their own age.**

families don’t often depend on their wages for their livelihood. Teenagers today spend most of what they earn on their own cars, clothing, and amusement. Indeed, they largely carry such industries as music, film, and footwear, in which the United States is a world leader. Their economic might sustains the powerful youth culture that so many find threatening, violent, and crude.

We can see the origins of

this youth culture and of its ability to horrify in the young urban workers of the late nineteenth century. Young people, especially the rootless entrepreneurs of the street trades, were among the chief patrons of cheap theaters featuring music and melodrama that sprang up by the hundreds in the largest cities. (In Horatio Alger’s hugely popular novels, the first stage of the hero’s reform is often the decision to stay away from the theater and use the admission price to open a savings account.) They also helped support public dance halls, which promoted wild new forms of dancing and, many thought, easy virtue.

Adults are perennially shocked by the sexuality and the physical vitality of the young. There is nevertheless a real difference between the surprise and fear parents feel when they see their babies grow strong and independent and the mistrust of young people as a class. One is timeless. The other dates from 1904 and the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s fourteen-hundred-page *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*.

With this book Hall, a psychologist and the president of Clark University, invented the field of adolescent psychology. He defined adolescence as a universal, unavoidable, and extremely precarious stage of human development. He asserted that behavior that would indicate insanity in an adult should be considered normal in an adolescent. (This has long since been proved untrue, but it is still widely believed.) He provided a basis for dealing with adolescents as neither children nor adults but as distinctive, beautiful, dangerous creatures. That people in their teens should be considered separately from others, which seems obvious to us today, was Hall’s boldest, most original, and most influential idea.

The physical and sexual development of young people was not, he argued, evidence of maturity. Their body changes were merely armaments in a struggle to achieve a higher state of being. “Youth awakes to a new world,” he wrote, “and understands neither it nor himself.” People in their teens were, he thought, recapitulating the stage of human evolution in which people ceased to be savages

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and became civilized. He worried that young people were growing up too quickly, and he blamed it on “our urbanized hothouse life that tends to ripen everything before its time.” He believed it was necessary to fight this growing precocity by giving young people the time, space, and guidance to help them weather the tumult and pain of adolescence.

It is hard to believe that a book so unreadable could be so influential, but the size and comprehensiveness of Hall’s discussion of adolescents lent weight and authority to other social movements whose common aim was to treat people in their teens differently from adults and children. Among the book’s supporters were secondary school educators who found in Hall’s writing a justification for their new enthusiasm about moving beyond academic training to shape the whole person. They also found in it a justification for raising the age for ending compulsory school attendance.

Hall’s book coincided as well with the rise of the juvenile-court movement, whose goal was to treat youth crime as a problem of personal development rather than as a transgression against society. This view encouraged legislatures and city councils to enact laws creating curfews and other “status offenses”—acts affecting only young people. (A decade earlier women’s organizations had successfully campaigned to raise the age of consent for sex in most states, which greatly increased the number of statutory-rape prosecutions.)

Hall’s findings also gave ammunition to advocates of child labor laws. Their campaigns were for the most part unsuccessful, but employment of children and teens dropped during the first two decades of the twentieth century anyway, as machines replaced unskilled manufacturing jobs in many industries. In the years after Hall’s book came out, manufacturers increasingly spoke of workers in their teens as unreliable, irresponsible, and even disruptive. They had stopped thinking of fourteen-year-olds as young ordinary workers and begun to view them as adolescents.

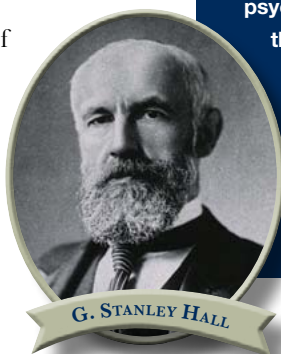
Each of these movements was seen as a progressive attempt to reform American society, and their advocates certainly had their hearts in the right place. But the price for young people was a stigma of incompetence, instability, and even insanity. Adolescents couldn’t be counted on. Hall even argued that female adolescents be “put to grass” for a few years and not allowed to work or attend school until the crisis had passed.

This was the orthodoxy Mead was trying to combat when she wrote *Coming of Age in Samoa*. She wanted to disprove Hall’s psychoanalytic assertion that adolescence is inherent to all human development and replace it with the anthropological view that cultures invent the adolescence they need. Maturity, she argued,



**G. Stanley Hall, below, invented the field of adolescent psychology with the writing of his book. His findings on the critical development of adolescents, gave ammunition to advocates of child labor laws.**

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G. STANLEY HALL

is at least as much a matter of social acceptance as it is of an individual’s physical and mental development. In Samoa, she said, adolescence was relatively untroubled, because it didn’t have to accomplish very much. The society changed little from generation to generation. Roles were more or less fixed. Young people knew from childhood what they should expect. American adolescence was more difficult because it had to achieve more, although she clearly didn’t believe it had to be quite so horrible as Hall and his followers thought.

Serious questions have been raised about some of Mead’s methods and findings in Samoa, and Hall’s theories have been thoroughly discredited. These two seminal thinkers on adolescence represented extreme views, and adolescence is of course both biological and cultural. The changes it brings are unmistakable, but countless external factors shape what it means to be a grown-up in a particular place and time. In a dynamic society like that of the United States, the nature of adolescence must inevitably shift over time.

Indeed, Mead’s research, which concentrated on young women, was a product of the sexual revolution of the 1920s, in which female sexuality was widely acknowledged for the first time. Prostitution was on the decrease, and the sexual activity of “respectable” young women was rising. In *This Side of Paradise* F. Scott Fitzgerald’s young Princetonians were amazed at how easy it was to be kissed. But the protagonist in the novel gives what proved to be an accurate account of what was going on. “Just as

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a cooling pot gives off heat,” she says, “so all through youth and adolescence we give off calories of virtue. That’s what’s called ingenuousness.” Short skirts, bobbed hair, corset checkrooms at dances, and petting parties were seen by people at the time as symptoms of libertinism among the “flaming youth,” but when Kinsey interviewed members of this generation three decades later, he learned that the heat had been more finely calibrated than it appeared. Young women had been making their chastity last as long as they needed it to. It turned out that while 40 percent of females in their teens and 50 percent of males petted to orgasm in the 1920s—nearly twice the pre-war rate—petting was most common among those who had had the most schooling. While commentators focused on the antics of the upper classes, working-class young people, who were closer to marriage, were twice as likely to have gone beyond and had sexual intercourse.

Despite enduring popular interest in Mead’s findings, Hall’s notion that adolescence is an inevitable crisis of the individual has, over the years, been more potent. (Perhaps it speaks more forcefully to our individualistic culture than does Mead’s emphasis on shared challenges and values.) Certainly, during the post-World War II era, when the teenager grew to be a major cultural and economic phenomenon, the psychoanalytic approach dominated. J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield, literature’s most famous teenager, has an unforgettable voice and great charm, but it is difficult to read *Catcher in the Rye* today without feeling that Holden’s problems are not, as he hopes, a phase he’s going through but truly pathological. While Salinger doesn’t make a judgment in the book, 1950s readers would most likely have thought Holden just another troubled adolescent, albeit an uncommonly interesting one.

When Hall was writing, at the turn of the twentieth century, he generalized about adolescents from a group that was still a small minority, middle-class youths whose main occupation was schooling. In all of his fourteen hundred pages, he never mentioned the large number of young people who still had to work to help support their



Teenage girls signing an Elvis poster, as their culture gave rise to rock 'n' roll.

families. Half a century later American society was more or less as Hall had described it, and just about everyone could afford to have an adolescence.

The twenty-five-year period following the end of World War II was the classic era of the teenager. Family incomes were growing, which meant that more could be spent on each child and educational aspirations could rise. Declining industries, such as radio and the movies, both of which were threatened by television, remade themselves to appeal to the youth market. Teenage culture gave rise to rock 'n' roll. Young people acquired automobiles of their own and invented a whole new car culture.

At the same time, though, teenagers were provoking a lot of anxiety. Congressional committees investigated juvenile delinquency for a decade. High

schools and police forces took action against a rising wave of youth crime, a phenomenon that really didn't exist. Moreover, there were indications that not all teenagers were happy in their presumed immaturity. Many, if not most, of the pop icons of the time, from

Elvis on down, were working-class outsiders who embodied a style very different from that of the suburban teen.

And many teenagers were escaping from their status in a more substantive way, by getting married. The general prosperity meant that there were jobs available in which the high school dropout or graduate could make enough to support a family. In 1960 about half of all brides were under twenty. In 1959 teenage pregnancy reached its all-time peak, but nearly all the mothers were married.

This post-World War II era brought forth the third key thinker on American adolescence, the psychologist Erik Erikson. He assumed, like Hall, that adolescence was inherent to human development and that an *identity crisis*, a term he invented, was necessarily a part of it. But he also acknowledged that this identity must be found in the context of a culture and of history. He argued that not only does adolescence change





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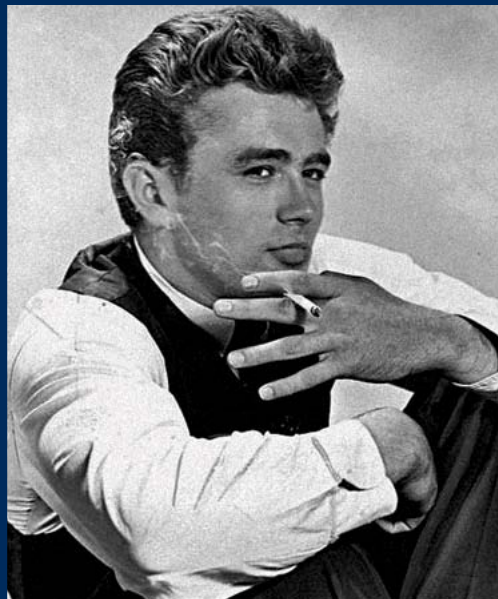
over the course of history but it also is the time when individuals learn to adapt themselves to their historical moment. “The identity problem changes with the historical period,” he wrote. “That is, in fact, its job.” While earlier thinkers on adolescence had made much of youthful idealism, Erikson argued that one of the tasks of adolescence was to be fiercely realistic about one’s society and time.

He did not think that forging an identity in such a complex and confusing society as ours was easy for most people. He wanted adolescence to be what he termed “a psycho-social moratorium,” to allow people the time and space to get a sense of how they would deal with the world of which they would be a part. Among the results would be an occupational identity, a sense of how one would support and express oneself.

And so ideas about the nature of adolescence have shaped our image of teenagers. Reclassifying all people of secondary school age as teenagers wasn’t possible until nearly all had some period of adolescence before entering adult life. Still, teenager isn’t just another word for adolescent. Indeed, the teenager may be, as Edgar Z. Friedenberg argued in a 1959 book, a failed adolescent. Being a teenager is, he said, a false identity, meant to short-circuit the quest for a real one. By giving people superficial roles to play, advertising, the mass media, and even the schools confuse young people and leave them dissatisfied and thus open to sales pitches that promise a deepening of identity.

Whether you agree with that argument or not, it does seem evident that the challenges of adolescence have been changing rapidly in the last several decades, leaving the label “teenager” as little more than a lazy way of talking about young people. The term encompasses a contradictory grab bag of beliefs, prejudices, and expectations. It can allow us to build a wall around an age group and to assume that its members’ problems can safely be ignored.

The generation entering its teens today will be in sheer number, if not as a percentage of the population, the largest in our history. The people in this age group have already emerged as the most significant marketing phenomenon since the baby boom. They have spurred the opening of new teen-oriented clothing stores in malls and the launching of successful new magazines. They are



**Advertising, the mass media, and even the schools confuse young people and leave them dissatisfied and thus open to sales pitches that promise a deepening of identity. Movie star James Dean, above, became a cultural icon of teenage disillusionment in the mid-1950s.**

helping make the Internet grow. They even have their own television network, the WB. They have their own money to spend, and they spend a lot of their families’ income too, partly because their mothers are too busy to shop.

But they do not represent any return to the teenage golden age of the 1950s and 1960s. This generation has grown up in a period of declining personal income and increasing inequality. A sizable percentage consists of the children of immigrants. Educational aspirations are very high, and no wonder: You need a college education today to make a salary equivalent to that of a high school graduate in 1970. The permanent occupational identity that was available in the post-World War II society of which Erikson wrote, one in which lifelong work for large corporations was the norm, has all but disappeared. Many see their parents still striving for the sort of

stable identity Erikson thought could be resolved in youth. While it appears to be a great time to be a teenager, it seems a difficult one to be an adolescent.

Throughout history Americans in their teens have often played highly responsible roles in their society. They have helped their families survive. They have worked with new technologies and hastened their adoption. Young people became teenagers because we had nothing better for them to do. High schools became custodial institutions for the young. We stopped expecting young people to be productive members of the society and began to think of them as gullible consumers. We denned maturity primarily in terms of being permitted adult vices, and then were surprised when teenagers drank, smoked, or had promiscuous sex.

We can no longer go to Samoa to gain perspective on the shape of our lives at the dawn of the third millennium, nor can we go back in time to find a model for the future. What we learn from looking at the past is that there are many different ways in which Americans have been young. Young people and adults need to keep reinventing adolescence so that it serves us all. Sometimes what we think we know about teenagers gets in our way. But just as there was a time, not long ago, before there were teenagers, perhaps we will live to see a day when teenagers themselves will be history. ❁

# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER EDUCATION SUMMARY – HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

<http://www.census.gov/statab/hist/HS-21.pdf>

## No. HS-21. Education Summary—High School Graduates, and College Enrollment and Degrees: 1900 to 2001

[For school year beginning in year shown. (95 represents 95,000)]

Year	High school graduates		Institutions of higher education		
	Total (1,000)	Graduates per 100 17-yr. olds	Total enrollment <sup>1</sup> (1,000)	BA degrees conferred <sup>2</sup>	
Total (1,000)				Per 100 high school graduates 4 years earlier	
1900	<sup>3</sup> 95	<sup>3</sup> 6.4	<sup>3</sup> 238	28.7	36
1901	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	29.0	34
1902	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	29.9	33
1903	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	30.5	32
1904	(NA)	(NA)	264	31.5	32
1905	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	32.0	32
1906	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	32.2	31
1907	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	33.8	30
1908	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	37.9	32
1909	156	8.8	355	37.2	30
1910	(NA)	(NA)	354	37.5	30
1911	(NA)	(NA)	356	39.4	30
1912	(NA)	(NA)	361	42.4	30
1913	(NA)	(NA)	379	44.3	28
1914	(NA)	(NA)	404	43.9	26
1915	(NA)	(NA)	441	45.3	25
1916	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1917	(NA)	(NA)	441	38.6	18
1918	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1919	311	16.8	598	48.6	19
1920	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1921	(NA)	(NA)	681	61.7	22
1922	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1923	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1924	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	27
1925	(NA)	(NA)	941	97.3	(NA)
1926	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1927	(NA)	(NA)	1,054	111.2	22
1928	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1929	667	29.0	1,101	122.5	22
1930	747	32.1	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1931	827	35.5	1,154	138.1	23
1932	871	37.3	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1933	915	39.2	1,055	136.2	20
1934	965	41.1	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1935	1,015	42.7	1,208	143.1	17
1936	1,068	44.2	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1937	1,120	45.6	1,351	164.9	18
1938	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1939	1,221	50.8	1,494	186.5	18
1940	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1941	1,242	51.3	1,404	185.3	16
1942	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1943	1,019	42.7	1,155	125.9	10
1944	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)	(NA)
1945	1,080	47.4	1,677	136.2	11
1946	(NA)	(NA)	2,078	(NA)	(NA)
1947	1,190	52.6	2,338	271.2	27
1948	(NA)	(NA)	2,403	365.5	36
1949	1,200	59.0	2,445	432.1	40
1950	(NA)	(NA)	2,281	382.5	35
1951	1,197	57.4	2,102	330.0	28
1952	(NA)	(NA)	2,134	303.0	25
1953	1,276	59.8	2,231	291.5	24
1954	(NA)	(NA)	2,447	285.8	24
1955	1,415	63.1	2,653	309.5	26
1956	1,434	63.1	2,918	338.4	28
1957	1,506	64.8	3,324	363.5	28
1958	1,627	66.2	(NA)	379.9	28
1959	1,858	69.5	3,640	392.4	27
1960	1,964	67.9	(NA)	365.2	25
1961	1,918	69.3	4,145	384.0	25
1962	1,943	70.9	(NA)	411.4	25
1963	2,283	76.7	4,780	461.3	25
1964	2,658	72.1	5,280	493.8	25

See footnotes at end of table.

# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER EDUCATION SUMMARY – HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

– CONTINUED –

## No. HS-21. Education Summary—High School Graduates, and College Enrollment and Degrees: 1900 to 2001—Con.

[For school year beginning in year shown. (95 represents 95,000)]

Year	High school graduates		Institutions of higher education		
	Total (1,000)	Graduates per 100 17-yr. olds	Total enrollment <sup>1</sup> (1,000)	BA degrees conferred <sup>2</sup>	
Total (1,000)				Per 100 high school graduates 4 years earlier	
1965	2,665	76.4	5,921	520.1	27
1966	2,672	76.3	6,390	558.5	29
1967	2,695	76.3	6,912	632.3	28
1968	2,822	77.1	7,513	728.8	27
1969	2,889	76.9	8,005	792.3	30
1970	2,937	75.9	8,581	839.7	31
1971	3,001	75.6	8,949	887.3	33
1972	3,036	75.0	9,215	922.4	33
1973	3,073	74.4	9,602	945.8	33
1974	3,133	73.6	10,224	922.9	31
1975	3,148	73.7	11,185	925.7	31
1976	3,155	73.8	11,012	919.5	30
1977	3,127	73.0	11,286	921.2	30
1978	3,117	71.7	11,260	921.4	29
1979	3,043	71.4	11,570	929.4	30
1980	3,020	71.7	12,097	935.1	30
1981	2,995	72.4	12,372	953.0	30
1982	2,888	72.9	12,426	969.5	31
1983	2,767	73.1	12,465	974.3	32
1984	2,677	72.4	12,242	979.5	32
1985	2,643	72.0	12,247	987.8	33
1986	2,694	71.8	12,504	991.3	34
1987	2,773	72.0	12,767	994.8	36
1988	2,744	71.4	13,055	1,018.8	38
1989	2,589	73.9	13,539	1,051.3	40
1990	2,493	72.9	13,819	1,094.5	41
1991	2,478	73.1	14,359	1,136.6	41
1992	2,480	72.0	14,487	1,165.2	42
1993	2,464	71.2	14,305	1,169.3	45
1994	2,520	70.2	14,279	1,160.1	47
1995	2,518	69.2	14,262	1,164.8	47
1996	2,612	69.2	14,368	1,172.9	47
1997	2,704	68.8	14,502	1,184.4	48
1998	2,759	69.6	14,507	1,200.3	48
1999	2,823	70.3	14,791	1,237.9	49
2000	2,847	71.1	15,312	1,244.2	48
2001	2,889	72.5	<sup>4</sup> 15,442	1,282.0	47

NA Not available. <sup>1</sup> Beginning 1996 not entirely comparable with previous years due to reclassification of some institutions. <sup>2</sup> Prior to 1960, includes first professional degrees. <sup>3</sup> 1899 data. <sup>4</sup> Projection.

Source: U.S. National Center for Education Statistics, 1900-1985, *120 Years of Education, A Statistical Portrait*; beginning 1986, *Digest of Education Statistics*, annual.

# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER

## OLD STYLE PARENTS AND NEW STYLE SONS

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1922-08-13/ED-1/SEQ-53/>

### New York Tribune

SUNDAY, AUGUST 13, 1922

## OLD STYLE PARENTS AND NEW STYLE SONS

By AN ANXIOUS MOTHER

Illustrations by JEFFERSON MACHAMER



One lad of twenty said in all sincerity and seriousness that he never expected to marry for “women bore me sick”

FROM the day he was born I have supported him, this manly little son of mine, who has just rounded out his thirteenth year and who stands confident and opinionated upon the threshold of manhood.

There have been no secrets of life that we have not shared. Our relations are as frank as it is possible for relations between mother and son to be. Each new phase of life and character we have met together with understanding. Nor has it ever occurred to me that anything could come up that would cause me

continued worry and anxiety about my boy's future.

The flapper and her attitude toward life have interested me not at all. If ever I have given her thought it has been that the papers and periodicals have been largely at fault in increasing her sense of her own importance

by giving her as much prominence in print as a coming election. That she should be an influence in the life of My Son! Such a preposterous idea never entered my head. That was eons ago.

Today she is the strongest factor in the development of this child of mine. She has thrown a shadow over our understanding. I cannot “get” his point of view--this emphatic approval of all and anything a flapper may do-- and he cannot understand why I do not approve of her. For the first time we are a bit intolerant of each other's attitude, for though we have disagreed before there has always been understanding of why the other one believed.

This draws such fine lines of distinction between the privileges and conventionalities, or rather lack of them, proper for the flapper and improper for a married woman or any one past the budding years; he seems to consider any wild act, if performed

by a flapper, as quite the “cat's ankle,” as he says, that I frankly admit I am worried.

I find myself fascinated by every word uttered by this feminine ruler of the new order. Her manners and mental attitude interest but they do not give light, while I approve and grope to find a safe way for him to enjoy a happy normal life and not lose his respect for womanhood as I fear, in time, he must, if his attitude of mind continues without check along the lines developed this year.

He went away to boarding school just a little boy with an unusual fund of interesting knowledge such as a boy who has been intimately associated with men and women who earn their living by doing things would acquire. Far be it from him to consider meeting the President of the United States in the White House an unusual event. He is neither conceited nor overbearing in his acceptance of life, but he has grown up with a slightly different point of view from the boy who does not enjoy opportunities for seeing things from the inside.

To explain, some years ago, when President Wilson was in office, it was my duty to go to Washington to interview him. Thinking it would be an experience my son, then eight, would like to recall in later years, I took him from the little private country school for a few days at the capital. We were received in the course of time by the President, who showed a kindly interest in the boy, keeping his arm about him throughout the interview. We later visited all the public buildings and I do not recall that the visit to the White House was mentioned again: it was all in the day's work.

The woman at the head of the school told me that she waited all day, after Tom's return, for him to mention his visit. But not a word.

At supper table she casually said, “Tom, did you meet the President?”

“Oh, yes,” he answered.

“What did he say?”

“Why,” he said “‘Good morning,’ to me, and it was afternoon, so I said ‘Good afternoon, Mr. President.’”

Summer time, my boy has been on a farm in the White

## THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER OLD STYLE PARENTS AND NEW STYLE SONS

— CONTINUED —

Mountains, where he has entered the life of the community by singing in the choir; taking up the collection and, as near as I can learn, by attending every dance and buying ice cream cones for the entire party with money he has earned by raking hay, or hoeing potatoes, or milking cows. Girls have been his comrades.

But at thirteen he returns from school where small boys are in the minority in stanch defense of the flapper. In defiance of all else his psychology is an emotional hieroglyphic to which I do not hold the master key.

From his slant of life I should judge him at least sixteen. Certainly his main interest in life is the flapper whom he allows all sorts of liberties (mentally) that he does not concede to married women, including his mother, who he considers old fashioned.

He confided to Nellie Revell, the brave pioneer of women press agents who has lain three years on her back in St. Vincent's Hospital, that I am old fashioned, and it shook Nellie so with mirth that had Dr. Lorenz been present he certainly would have forbidden another visit from the sub-adolescent caller. Nellie, who has known me through the hectic years that, as a newspaper woman, I have been intimately connected with the opera, the theater

and the motion picture world, later said: "To think that I should live to see the day that you are considered old fashioned!"

Going over some mail the other day I ran across a letter to my son from a girl his own age, the daughter of a well known couple, both of whom are prominent in the writing world. Imagine reading: "Mother has read your first four letters, but she did not read the one that arrived to-day and she will read no more, for I shall tactfully arrange it that she doesn't."

I spoke of it to Tom and he said, "Mother, can't I have any privacy? Do you think you have a right to read my letters unless I give them to you? And why should her mother read the letters I write her?"

Just before vacation I spent several days at the school, where I met many of the pupils, most of them ready to enter college.

They were worldly-wise specimens of masculinity. Cynics, weary of life. They had attended so many "petting" parties (my vocabulary considerably increased during the visit and "necked" so many girls that no longer does the girl lure and mystify. Those boys were bored with life and, yes, with the flapper!

One lad of twenty, the son of a Middle Western minister, who believes he knows all that life holds, told me in all sincerity and seriousness that he never expected to marry, for "women bore me sick."

"My!" he ejaculated, "The girls do not even give you a chance to start the petting. I just tell them nowadays when they start anything that I am not in love with them and that they cannot make a fool of me.

"One girl at home was awfully good looking and charming. I used to take her about a good deal and we had lots of fun for several months. Then one night she began this 'petting' business. I told her I did not want to start petting. In injured tones she told me that she was not a bad girl but that everybody 'necked' and that there was no fun going out unless you did. Well, that friendship is over, because I have had all the fun and torture of petting parties I want to have."



Another lad, seventeen, from a small town upstate, a handsome lad of wealth and position who vibrates personality, spent several hours frankly discussing the flapper. That is one of the astounding things about this whole flapper business, the frankness with which the boy of to-day will discuss her with older folks as well as with other boys. It is not a matter of making a confidant of some one, but just discussion. It is considered no breach of honor for a group of boys to sit around and catalogue the girls they know as those who will be "petted," those who will be "necked" (the fine distinction in "necked" and "petted" is still a mystery to me) and to what degree.

They discuss the characteristics of the girls with the same frankness and impersonal manner they use in discussing the qualifications of a ball player. The most intimate things are

## THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER OLD STYLE PARENTS AND NEW STYLE SONS

— CONTINUED —

topics of conversation. Not only the methods of what in my days was called “spooning” but the results attendant are analyzed and studied as though the flapper were under the microscope in a biological laboratory.

One youth with a world-weary voice and a he-flapper manner told me without boasting just as a matter of making conversation that he had kissed every girl in his set, until his kisses had become absolutely perfunctory and blasé. Merely an observance of a social custom established and insisted upon by the species flapper, who in some way seem to come through unburned and--miracle of miracles--even without a singeing of the wings!

Now again to my sub-adolescent son. He is anxiously awaiting the day that he will be old enough to imprint his lips upon the cheek of some flapper he likes. As near as I can understand it, any flapper will do for the initial kiss--the only requirement is that he likes her.

He already has the frankness of the younger set in discussing life; voices his desires to me without blush or hesitancy, which is, of course, as I wish it, for I have a feeling that as long as things are frankly discussed between us just so long is he safe. Already he has completely mastered the vocabulary of the flapper, the flopper and the shifter.

He is in a prep school for boys where the ages range from twelve to twenty. The younger boys watch every move of the old and build their ideals and conversation on the attitude of their elders toward girls at the dances, the meets and the ball games. They have all the older boys catalogued, those who are “neckers” and successful; those who would be “neckers” and unsuccessful. They know the boys who are seriously in love and distinguish them from

the more flopper. “But, my dear,” I said to him as he discussed his plans for getting a flapper this summer, “don’t you realize by making kissing so promiscuous you will lower your own standard of womankind?”

“You’re old fashioned, mother,” he remarked; “kissing won’t make any difference.” I tried to impress him with the errors in the social laxity of the flapper or so at least it seems to me, a mother of thirty-three, who has seen the intimate side of the life of the theater, the moving picture, the newspaper. “Don’t

you understand that if you expect this kissing of every girl you take anywhere, and all the other boys have the same expectation, when you marry, possibly, every boy or almost every boy in your set can say: “There goes Mrs. So-and-So; I used to “neck” her.” “Well, I don’t care, mother. Men usually do not say anything about other men’s wives, and, anyway, she will be my wife, and no more ‘necked’ than any of the other men’s wives.”

I retreated into silence.

A sixteen-year-old chum of my boy came up. The conversation once more got under way. The sixteen-year-old, with soft fuzz growing on his face almost profusely enough to warrant the weekly use of a razor, spoke as frankly as my son, and with the same lack of embarrassment. He said that he usually stayed at home because he felt out of it, not being able to get up the courage to “pet” a girl, “though,” he asserted, “my boy friend has kissed every girl he knows, and he is certainly tired of women.”

Another student of eighteen joined us, and the three boys began to catalogue the girls that had attended the meet the day before.

I confess my sense of propriety, which I have always considered far too broad, was shocked. “All the girls know we discuss them,” was the answer when I spoke of what seemed to be an un-chivalrous conversation.

“You know they are not bad,” was remarked, “‘Evil to him who evil thinks.’ That is their motto.”

“Well, I am off to call on Elizabeth, said the oldest boy, and down the hill he went toward the little village.

Elizabeth, I learned, is a miss of nearly sixteen who has usurped the place of the former college widow. She never has less than eleven callers a day each having the privilege of “petting” or “necking” her. She has an individual pet name for each of her floppers and she never gets them mixed. All of the boys get the thrill they are looking for. Even one of the masters is at her flap and call. All of the boys know that all of the others are among the privileged. Nobody seems to mind.

“Will any of the boys marry this successor to the college widow?”

“Certainly not, but she’s a good kid.” . . .



# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER OLD STYLE PARENTS AND NEW STYLE SONS

— CONTINUED —

Well, all I can say is that I am beginning to feel that there will soon be a Twentieth Amendment, which will read: "The right of polyandry shall not be denied or abridged to any female citizen by the United States or by any state. Congress shall have power by appropriate legislation to enforce the provisions of this article."

Of course this is said partly in jest. But to an anxious mother it seems that unless the boys call a halt polyandry may become a reality, if it is not already here in the minds and hearts of the flappers, who, consciously or unconsciously, are asserting a woman's right to many mates.

Is it possible for my boy to hold the respect for womankind the men of his name have ever had? Where does his open

acceptance of the manners of the flapper lead? What evil or good is portended by the fact that he does not mind the flapper wearing her stockings rolled down and exposing her bared knees with leg crossed, though he considers it highly objectionable for a married woman, or his mother to do such a thing?

Will the grip of the flapper go and the standards I have tried to instill hold? Will my boy at eighteen be satiated with all the mysteries of life?

Am I at thirty-three old fashioned and reactionary? Unable to progress with the world? Worrying unduly? A handicap to the progress of my son and all the other sons?

Or am I sane in a bobbed-hair, flapper world? ❁



# THE RISE AND DECLINE OF THE TEENAGER

## NO JOBS WITHOUT COLLEGE AS EMPLOYERS TREAT DEGREE AS A MINIMUM

BY RICHARD WHITMIRE  
MARCH 27, 2009

<http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2009/03/27/no-jobs-without-college-as-employers-treat-degree-as-a-minimum>



One snowy February afternoon in 2007, I flew into St. Louis and ended up on the Enterprise Rent-A-Car lot looking for my car. There, I was met by an engaging young woman identified by her name tag as Lyndsay. St. Louis being my hometown, I asked Lyndsay about her background and learned she had recently graduated from a nearby university with a marketing degree.

Lyndsay competently completed all the basics that day, noting the mileage and checking the car for damage. But her job required no advanced skills. The entire transaction took only a minute or two, required no calculus, no deconstruction of Hemingway. Nothing Lyndsay did that morning required a college degree.

But I got something important out of that encounter, an early understanding into why President Obama said this in a speech last month: “And so tonight, I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school, vocational school or an apprenticeship.”

Obama didn’t come right out and say it, but the message is clear: College has become the new high school. Soon after my St. Louis trip I called Enterprise and learned that with a few exceptions for military it hires only college graduates for Lyndsay’s position. The ability to multitask and communicate with customers, skills that years ago high schools supplied, are now found almost solely among those with two- or four-year degrees.

To hammer that reality home to high school students, states such as Kentucky and Michigan have moved to raise minimum dropout ages. If you don’t make it through high school you’ve got no chance of acquiring the post-high school credentialing demanded by jobs of the future.

But, as a recent report by the Lumina Foundation summed up, “College attainment rates are rising in almost every industrialized or post-industrialized country in the world, except for the U.S.” Lumina’s point was the same as Obama’s: Eventually, our flat education levels will hurt our international economic competitiveness.

That’s true, but it doesn’t quite capture the whole picture. Lyndsay renting me a car isn’t helping our international competitiveness. Whether your bank teller has a high school degree or a Ph.D. says little about international competitiveness,

but it says a lot about economic survival, which is what high school students should care about.

The college-as-high school phenomenon is picking up speed during the recession, with employers having their pick of better-educated workers. A recent Denver Post article captured that nicely: “If I had a light labor job, I’d have a Ph.D. do it,” explained a Denver employment agency staffer who had just hired two people with B.A.s to pick up sticks from sidewalks.

So what’s the best solution? In many states, 40 percent of high school students entering college need remediation in math, reading, or both, which cuts the odds of their earning that four-year degree.

Those with the smartest answers are the ones closest to the ground. Foundations appear to be on the right track in funding “early college” for high school students, where they take college classes as sort of dress rehearsal for higher education. Brookings dubs this preparing students for “middle skill” jobs. A new program at City University of New York, Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), requires full-time study and gives many of the students tuition waivers and all students books and Metrocards for transportation. That hurry-up approach through college into a career is proving successful, reports [insidehighered.com](http://insidehighered.com).

Gov. Deval Patrick of Massachusetts appears to have a prescient grasp of the challenge. Two years ago, Patrick proposed free community college to students, part of a broader plan to wrap students in an education cocoon starting with pre-K and ending with an associate’s degree.

While Patrick’s plan ran into a recession slowdown, it’s clear he “gets” what other politicians have been slow to grasp; that the need to push education beyond high school goes far beyond the somewhat esoteric “international competitiveness” issue that think tankers extol.

All the best solutions focus on dangling bankable job skills before high school graduates not likely to see themselves as college material. The toughest nut to crack will be young men, who lag badly behind in earning community college and four-year degrees. Too many guys remain oblivious to the college-is-the-new-high school message: You may know about cars, but unless you’ve got a college degree, the Lyndsays of the world are going to get first dibs on those Enterprise jobs. ❁