Making It? Paths to Achieving and Not Achieving Aspirations in the Transition to Adulthood

Jessica Halliday Hardie

Carolina Population Center
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
CB# 8120, University Square
123 West Franklin Street
Chapel Hill, NC 27516-2524

Tel: 919-843-2509
Fax: 919-966-6638

Email: jhardie@unc.edu

Abstract

How do life course transitions in young adulthood and family background factors contribute to the failure to attain educational and occupational aspirations? This paper uses data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY79) and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) to understand why many young adults fall short of their aspirations for schooling and work. I demonstrate that life course transitions and the timing of these events, particularly family formation and dissolution, contribute to the likelihood that a young person will fail to attain their aspirations by adulthood. I also find support for previous research that has pointed to the importance of family background in predicting attainment. Finally, I provide evidence of stability and change between two cohorts of youth, born approximately 14 years apart.

Introduction

Young people's educational and occupational aspirations have long been a centerpiece of status attainment research (Sewell, Haller, and Ohlendorf 1970; Hauser, Tsai, and Sewell 1983; Jacobs, Karen, and McClelland 1991; Hitlin 2006), and have formed the basis of numerous sociological papers, beginning in the mid-1960s[1]. Initially included as a proxy for the psychological component of the status attainment process, aspirations are, in a sense, the starting point in a young person's trajectory from high school into adulthood. Responsive to feedback mechanisms such as grades and adult encouragement (Juang and Silbereisen 2002; Garg et al. 2002), they reveal a young person's estimation of his or her ability, chances for success, and ultimate lifestyle preferences. A young person who aspires to be a surgeon and a young person who hopes to be a firefighter are not only making choices about the types of jobs they wish to hold, but also about the lifestyle, friends, opportunities, and living environment they envision for themselves.

Setting goals is easier than achieving them, however. Prior studies of aspirations suggest that they are reliably related to, but not a mirror of, later attainment. That is, a young person with a higher educational or occupational aspiration than his or her peers will generally complete more education and hold a more prestigious job. Yet many young people fall short of their goals. In addition, the likelihood of failing to attain one's aspirations appears to be rising in recent years. In the past few decades, American adolescents' aspirations for educational and occupational attainment have increased (Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider 2000; Schneider and Stevenson 1999), but the correspondence between aspirations and attainment has decreased over the same period (Reynolds et al. 2006). This is troubling because young people who do not set

[1] A search of papers in sociology journals on ISI Citation Index reported 390 papers with topics "aspirations" or "expectations." Limiting this search to those that also have topics of "youth", "children" or education yields over 140 papers. A similar search on "attainment" yields 288 sociology-related papers.

achievable goals in high school may be more likely to spend time "floundering", or moving between jobs and schooling in the transition to adulthood. The jobs that these young people do find may be a poor fit, and they may be ill-prepared to fill the roles required of them. Additionally, the gap between aspirations and attainment may create dissatisfaction and disappointment on the part of young people who fall short of their aspirations.

What factors predict a match between aspirations set in adolescence and attainment in adulthood, and how have these changed over time? Previous studies have suggested that family background plays a key role in goal-setting (Plank and Jordan 2001; Trusty 2000; Trusty and Niles 2004). Parents provide information and guidance to their children in young adulthood, and these resources can inform and motivate these adolescents' aspirations. Highly educated parents, and those with broader networks, may be in a better position to introduce their children to a wider set of educational and career options, offer them more advice based on their knowledge of possible careers, and connect their children to resources for applying to colleges or gaining practical occupational experiences. However, even when young people form realistic aspirations, they face structural barriers to attaining these goals in the transition to adulthood. Intervening events in the transition to adulthood, such as family formation and dissolution, health problems, and incarceration, may inhibit their ability to attain the goals they once held. The timing of these events is also important; early transitions into parenthood and marriage create competing demands on young people's time, potentially stalling the completion of schooling and limiting the time they can devote to work.

This paper examines the structural and contextual factors that predict a mismatch between aspirations and attainment. By using two datasets of cohorts born approximately 14 years apart, I identify changes in the factors that inhibit young people's chances of attaining the

education and occupations to which they aspired. First, I discuss why aspirations are an important part of the attainment process, taking socialization and allocation perspectives into account. Second, I review known factors that contribute to the aspirations-attainment link. Specifically, I argue that family background affects the likelihood that young people will attain their goals. Third, I introduce a new factor, intervening events, which may predict whether adolescents attain the level of schooling and occupational status to which they aspire. Intervening events such as family formation, dissolution, illness, and incarceration in the transition to adulthood may delay young people's academic and occupational success. Lastly, I note the importance of observing changes over time in the impact of family background and intervening events on the likelihood of attaining one's aspirations.

The Role of Aspirations in the Lives of Young People

Social scientists have offered two primary explanations for the relationship between aspirations and attainment: the socialization and allocation perspectives (Kerckhoff 1976). The socialization perspective is typified by early status attainment models, which conceptualized youth aspirations as an indicator of a latent achievement orientation (Sewell, Haller, and Portes 1969). According to this perspective, young people's aspirations are learned motivations that develop in response to resources provided by family and schools. Once developed, aspirations guide achievement-related choices. For example, a young person who wishes to attend college will be more likely than otherwise to take advanced coursework. In this way, the aspiration becomes a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (Morgan 2004, pp. 7).

Subsequent analyses, however, demonstrated that the accuracy of aspirations in predicting attainment might depend on question wording (Jencks, Crouse, and Mueser 1983),

race (Kerckhoff and Campbell 1977), and gender (Marini 1984), among other factors. Some researchers questioned the motivational relevance of aspirations, arguing that aspirations could be "vague preferences, flights of fancy conjured up on the spur of the moment, merely reports of a foregone conclusion known practically since birth, or realistic appraisals of the likely course of events." (Alexander and Cook 1979: pp. 202-203). Others followed suit (Alexander and Pallas 1983; Howell and Frese 1981; Jencks, Crouse, and Mueser 1983). This gave rise to the allocation perspective, which argues that aspirations are a reflection of adolescents' assessment of their chances for success in the real world. In this view, aspirations are responsive to the structural barriers that youth encounter within schools and anticipate in looking forward to the labor market.

Research has supported the assertion that aspirations can exert a powerful influence over adolescent's achievement. Young people with high occupational and educational aspirations are more likely to earn high grades (Alexander, Entwisle, and Bedinger 1994), attend and graduate from college (Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Powers and Wojtkiewicz 2004), and attain more prestigious jobs (Schoon and Parsons 2002). In addition, in a comprehensive and rigorous test of five empirical models estimating the effect of aspirations on attainment, Morgan (2004) demonstrated that there is a strong argument, although no definitive proof, for a causal relationship between aspirations and attainment. Using a path model, an instrumental variable approach, a rational expectation forecasting approach, and a panel data model of educational expectations over time, Morgan concluded that aspirations are a substantive factor in attainment[2]. Thus, while evidence supporting a causal relationship between aspirations and attainment is not

[2] Morgan's (2004) paper attempted to adjudicate between diverse opinions on the aspirations-attainment link, testing the existence of a causal explanation using five alternative models. Only the most cautious empirical approach, built on the logic of a counterfactual framework, attains ambiguous results that could suggest no relationship between aspirations and attainment, within the lowest bounds of the effect estimate.

unequivocal, it is sufficient to suggest that aspirations are a real and present consideration in the attainment process.

This paper takes both the socialization and allocation perspectives into account when considering factors that contribute to a mismatch between aspirations and attainment. I argue that aspirations are an evaluation of where an adolescent believes he or she will "fit" into the social structure. This act of imagining a future self incorporates one's social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1973), because young people emulate others that they see as "like me". Thus, aspirations are expected to reflect an adolescent's sense of identity relative to a reference group (Morgan 2004) as influenced by both their socialization within a particular community and their perception of the barriers and opportunities available to others like them. This conceptualization of educational and occupational aspirations as a part of a larger set of expectations about one's future is reflected in the relationship between marriage and childbearing plans and educational and occupational aspirations among teenage girls (Hakim 2002; Mahaffy and Ward 2002), or notions of masculinity and work preferences among boys (Taylor 2005). I do not suggest that young people know exactly what a given job entails, or how to achieve their dream. I do argue, however, that young people assert their vision of themselves through their plans for the future. In turn, educational and occupational aspirations are expected to influence the micro-level processes of course taking, effort, and participation in extracurricular activities that create opportunities to succeed in school.

However, establishing an aspiration for the future and acquiring the motivation to pursue one's aspiration is only one part of the process. Socialization and allocation processes also influence young people's ability to accomplish their aspirations. Adolescents may not be prepared to accurately assess their own abilities while in high school. They may lack the

necessary resources to realize their aspirations. For example, financial considerations may delay or prohibit entry into college. Finally, structural barriers may serve as a major impediment to some young people in the transition to adulthood. The following two sections theorize the importance of two factors affecting both aspirations and attainment: family background and intervening events.

The Role of Family Background in Predicting Unrealized Aspirations

Families—and in particular, parents—may encourage young people to dream big, while helping them to take concrete steps toward accomplishing these goals. Parents are a particularly salient influence on young people's aspirations in countries like the United States, where schools are marked by relative openness (Buchmann and Dalton 2002). Their support and guidance is expected to increase the odds that young people will accomplish their educational and occupational aspirations. Yet not all parents are able to provide their children with the same support and guidance. The educational background and financial resources of middle and upper class families offers a distinct advantage. Parents with more education are better situated to advise their children on educational options, and to connect their children to social networks in order to facilitate attainment. Furthermore, economic resources provide a safety net for children from middle class families. If they do get "off track", their families are better able to promote resilience by offering social support and financial resources. These resources translate into higher aspirations and higher attainment, compounding a pre-existing advantage. Additionally, poverty and minority status confer a social disadvantage on youth. Poor and working class adolescents are more likely to encounter barriers to attainment due to differential allocation

procedures within schools (Lucas 1999) and discrimination in the labor market (Kim and Tamborini 2006).

We know a great deal about how parental resources predict aspiration formation and attainment as separate processes. One such study used the framework of lost talent, which selects young people who have proven academic ability (scoring higher than the mean on a standardized mathematics test) and aspire to graduate from college (Trusty and Harris 1999). Using this selective sample of talented and ambitious youth, researchers then regressed the likelihood of attaining this aspiration on family background characteristics. They found that students from families with higher socioeconomic statuses were more likely to hold stable expectations over time, while factors such as family resources and parent's involvement in schooling were also protectors against lost talent. Subsequent studies followed suit. The use of school resources (such as seeking advice from guidance services, parental involvement in the school, and student effort) appeared particularly important in translating aspirations into attainment (Plank and Jordan 2001; Trusty 2000; Trusty and Niles 2004).

Intervening Events in the Transition to Adulthood

For many adolescents, aspirations set in high school may be reasonable approximations of their chances for future success. Yet the path from high school to a young person's first long-term job is not a smooth one. Adolescents may experience disruptive events during the transition to adulthood that make their goals more difficult to reach. The transition to adulthood is "demographically dense" (Rindfuss 1991) and increasingly diverse in terms of sequencing (Shanahan 2000). Instability and "out of order" transitions may have repercussions on young

people's ability to complete schooling and secure good jobs (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim 1997; Rindfuss, Swicegood, and Rosenfeld 1987; Hogan 1978).

In particular, the transition to adulthood is marked by changes in family structure. Young adults marry, have children, and divorce. Although some of these events may be positive experiences for the individual, they also pose challenges to educational and occupational attainment, as the role of "parent" or "spouse" often conflicts with that of "student" or "worker". The timing of these transitions is also likely to matter for young adults' attainment (i.e., early childbirth is likely to be more disruptive for work and schooling than childbirth in later years). Thus, I consider family formation behaviors within this paper as potential factors that may affect young people's abilities to attain their aspirations.

I also consider two additional disruptive events in the transition to adulthood: incarceration and poor health. Incarceration creates barriers to occupational success by disrupting labor force participation. In addition, men who have been incarcerated are much less likely to be hired in a variety of low-skilled jobs than their peers (Pager 2003). While rare in the aggregate, these events pose serious barriers for young people's ability to attain their aspirations. Finally, the health of young people in the transition to adulthood is likely to affect their ability to continue schooling and secure employment. This is particularly true for serious health conditions or disabilities that affect young people's ability to work or the types of work that they can do.

These disruptions are not random; poor youth and minorities are impacted by such negative events more than middle class and White youth, both in their propensity to experience such problems and in a lack of financial resources to minimize their disruption (Elman and O'Rand 2006). Black males are more likely to be incarcerated than females or White males, and this is particularly likely for less educated Black men in the transition to adulthood (Pettit and

Western 2004). As men and women move in and out of schooling and work, health care is likely to be intermittent among low-skilled workers (Park et al. 2006). Finally, women of any racial/ethnic group are more likely to be sidetracked by family formation events such as childbirth and marriage (Rindfuss, Cooksey and Sutterlin 1999; McClelland 1990). Having a child outside of marriage is particularly likely to create an impediment to further schooling and may prevent women from pursuing a time-intensive occupational path. Thus, these factors are not expected to replace the importance of family background. Rather, I expect to find that these life course events explain some of the remaining ambiguity surrounding young people's failure to attain their aspirations.

Changes over Time in the Aspirations-Attainment Link

Aspirations, historically a marker of potential attainment, are losing their viability as a predictor of educational and occupational success. Adolescents are more ambitious than ever, yet they are increasingly falling short of their goals. In this paper, I ask: 1) What factors help to explain the "disconnect" between some students' aspirations and attainment while others meet or exceed their expectations? and 2) How has this changed over time? By using two nationally representative surveys of youth, I can identify and test alternative explanations for the link between family background and unrealized aspirations. Using descriptive data, I can first identify changes in the aspirations-attainment link over time. I will then test multivariate models predicting the failure to attain one's aspirations, to determine whether the impact of certain factors has changed over time.

Data

Understanding the factors that predict a mismatch between aspirations and attainment requires a longitudinal dataset that spans adolescence and the transition to adulthood, with measures of background factors and aspirations in adolescence and attainment outcomes in young adulthood. The National Longitudinal Study of Youth, 1979 (NLSY79) is ideal for this purpose. It began in 1979 as a nationally representative panel study of youth ages 14 to 22, and it continued to interview sample members annually until 1994 and every other year after that time. By following this cohort, born in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the NLSY79 collected in-depth data about respondents' family background, ability and aspirations in adolescence, events in the transition to adulthood, and attainment. It consists of three primary samples: a nationally representative sample of young men and women (N=6,111), a supplemental sample of Hispanic or Latino, Black, and economically disadvantaged non-Black/non-Hispanic youth (N = 5,295), and a nationally representative sample of youth serving in the military (N = 1,280). Most of the military sample, however, was dropped in 1984. Nearly a third of the minority and economically disadvantaged sample were no longer interviewed beginning in 1991. I use data from all respondents who completed surveys in the baseline year and between the years of 1983 and 1994, which encompasses the time span in which all members of the sample were ages 26 and 30. This comprised slightly over 58% of the original sample members, or an analytic sample of 7404 for analyses of educational attainment and 5946 for occupational attainment[3]. All descriptive and inferential statistics are weighted.

[3] The difference in non-response between educational and occupational attainment analyses is primarily due to a large number of people who were not employed and not looking for work. Although the NLSY79 survey asks the respondent about their most recent job, several respondents who were not working did not answer this question. There was also more missing data regarding occupational aspirations than educational aspirations. About 10% of respondents did not indicate an occupational aspiration, compared to 1% of respondents who did not report an educational aspiration.

The NLSY79 follows respondents well into adulthood, which allows me to obtain a stable measure of educational and occupational attainment. However, recent evidence suggests that the gap between aspirations and attainment has been growing over time (Reynolds et al. 1999). Thus, in order to compare my findings from the NLSY79 cohort to a more recent cohort, I also use data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). NELS is an ideal dataset with which to probe the relationship between background factors, intervening events, and the match between aspirations and later outcomes. It contains comprehensive measures of aspirations, family background, and attainment, and follows a cohort born in the mid-1970s from adolescence into adulthood. This dataset began as a nationally representative survey of eighth graders in 1988. Approximately 24 eighth graders were sampled from each of 1,000 public and private schools. This sample was re-interviewed in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000. As of 2000, respondents were approximately 26 years old. Asian and Hispanic students were oversampled, allowing for analyses of both racial/ethnic groups along with Whites and Blacks. Students' teachers and school administrators were interviewed in the first three waves, and parents were surveyed in 1988 and 1992. Slightly less than 10,000 young people and their parents participated in all five survey waves. Once again, I use weights to adjust for unequal sampling. My analytic sample size is 8700 for educational attainment and 6682 for occupational attainment[4].

Both the NLSY79 and NELS datasets offer a unique opportunity to understand the role of family background and intervening events in young people's abilities to follow through on their aspirations. The NLSY79 dataset provides an in-depth look through closely-spaced, repeated surveys of a cohort from adolescence to adulthood. Using this dataset, I am able to measure

[4] In the NELS survey, item nonresponse for the occupational aspiration question was the major contributor to missing information. While the NLSY79 survey probed respondents who answered "not working" or "staying at home", the NELS survey did not. Thus, a much greater proportion of NELS respondents did not state an occupational aspiration.

attainment at a relatively late age. However, the NELS survey offers a more current cohort of youth, allowing me to estimate changes in the importance of family background and intervening events on attainment.

In comparing these two datasets, I lose some specificity in measurement and design in order to provide equivalent results. In order to strike a balance between the advantages of careful measurement and equivalence, I present detailed results using only the NLSY79 data, and then compare results from the two datasets using figures. In the tables, the NLSY79 data is taken full advantage of, and measures are constructed that reflect the detailed nature of the data. The most significant difference between the tables and figures concerns the age at which the outcome variable is measured. For the detailed tables using the NLSY79 cohort, I measure failure to attain one's educational and occupational aspirations at age 30. Measuring attainment at age 30 is appropriate, given the time it takes to complete schooling and find a stable job. However, because the NELS survey only follows respondents to age 26[5], I measure attainment at age 26 in the figures comparing NLSY79 and NELS results. Results are similar for NLSY79 respondents using either age as the outcome[6]. I also make some minor adjustments to variable measurement, in order to create equivalency across datasets. In the measurement sections below, I discuss the NLSY79 and NELS measures, noting where the NLSY79 data measurement was adjusted to create comparable figures.

[5] NELS began as a survey of 8th graders, and therefore the large majority of respondents were at or about age 14 at the baseline survey, and were at or about age 26 in the final year of the survey. However, the survey contained youth who had been skipped ahead or held back in grade level. The age range of respondents in the first wave, therefore, actually varied between 12 and 16 years of age. Therefore, age 26 is an estimate for this cohort; a small percentage of respondents (about 3%) were age 24 or 28 in 2000.

[6] Most respondents had finished their educational attainment by age 26. Of the NLSY79 respondents who participated in the study through age 35, 86% of respondents had completed all the education they would receive by age 26, and 93% had done so by age 30. Occupational attainment varies more by year; 54% of young people age 26 were working in occupations that were within a half a standard deviation in prestige value as the occupation they held at age 35. This proportion increased to 61% among 30-year-olds.

Measurement

Dependent Variable: Failure to Attain Educational Aspirations

Educational expectations and attainment were measured in both surveys with the question, "As things stand now, how far in school do you expect to get?" I collapsed these responses into: less than a high school education (1st through 11th grades), high school degree (12th grade), some college (1st through 3rd year of college), a bachelor's degree (4 years of college), or a graduate or professional degree (5 or more years of college). In order to estimate the models predicting the likelihood of failing to attain one's educational aspiration, I constructed a dichotomous variable reporting whether the respondent attained a lower category of educational attainment than he or she had aspired to (1) or whether the respondent had met or exceeded his or her aspirations (0).

Dependent Variable: Failure to Attain Occupational Aspirations

Occupational attainment poses a more difficult challenge, as occupations are categorical in nature. In the first wave of the NLSY79 survey, respondents were asked to report their occupational aspiration, and this was converted into a 1970 census occupational code. Respondents were also asked to report their current or most recent job in each survey year, and this was also converted into census codes. In order to measure occupational aspirations and attainment on a hierarchical scale, and thus compare aspirations and attainment, I converted this data on occupational aspirations and attainment into prestige scores, using the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (Duncan SEI). This scale was estimated from age-adjusted education and income data in the 1950 census (Reiss 1961). I then created a dependent variable indicating whether the respondent had failed to attain his or her occupational aspiration (1) or not (0) by

comparing the SEI score of the occupational aspiration and job held. Respondents whose occupational prestige fell more than half of a standard deviation below that of the occupation they had aspired to were considered to have "failed."

Occupational aspirations in the NELS survey were measured with the question, "Which of the categories below comes closest to describing the job or occupation that you expect to have when you are 30 years old." Possible responses were: clerical, craftsman, farmer, homemaker, laborer, manager/administrator, military, operative, "low" professional (e.g., nurse), high professional (e.g., lawyer), proprietor, protective services, sales, school teacher, service, technical, not planning to work, other, and don't know. For most of these occupational categories, the survey included 5 to 6 examples of the types of jobs that fell within each category, and respondents were instructed to make their best guess if they did not know. I converted these 19 categories into 13 occupational groups by converting the not working, homemaking, other, and don't know categories to missing, and combining proprietor and manager/administrator into a single group and military and protective service into another group. I then calculated an average prestige level of all examples given in the original questionnaire. After doing this, I found that the clerical and sales groups held prestige levels that were very similar, so I combined these groups and created an average prestige score across both groups. Attainment in the NELS survey was measured by more exact categories of occupation, which I converted into categories to match those used to measure aspirations. I then created a dummy variable indicating whether the respondent held a job in a category with less prestige than the job category he or she had once aspired to (1), or not (0).

The measurement of NELS occupational aspirations and attainment poses some problems to comparability across datasets. It is possible that differences in measurement of the outcome

variable between NLSY79 and the NELS surveys may generate different results. In order to test this, I used an alternative measure of occupational aspirations and attainment for the NLSY79 cohort, by converting the census code categories into the 12 NELS occupational groups[7]. After doing this, I first checked the consistency of my outcome measure, based on this method of coding. This alternative coding method resulted in the same outcome value (success or failure) 80% of the time. In addition, in multivariate analyses, results were consistent across coding method. I report results based on the outcome measure described above, as it is a more accurate method of determining success or failure.

Independent Variables: Family Background

I use two measures of family background: socioeconomic status and family structure. These factors were measured during the first wave of the NLSY79 survey, when the respondents were between the ages of 14 and 22, and they were reported by the respondents themselves. The NELS asked the same questions when the respondent was an 8th grader in the NELS survey, and they were asked of the respondents' parents. Socioeconomic status is measured in both datasets by parental occupation, parental education, and the family structure of the household. Occupation is measured with a dummy variable indicating whether one or both parents are employed in a professional occupation (1) or not (0). Parent's education is measured by a series of dummy variables indicating the highest level of education by a parent. The categories of education are: less than a high school degree, some college, and completed college or more, in

[7] I converted the detailed census occupational categories into the 12 NELS occupational groups by using five independent coders to place each detailed census occupational category into a NELS group, based only on the descriptions that NELS had provided survey respondents. All five coders agreed on the same grouping 85% of the time. Four out of the five coders agreed 11% of the time. Where there was more disagreement, I used my judgment to place the occupation in an appropriate category. This method of re-coding was used for less than 5% of all occupations (19 in total).

comparison to completing high school. Family structure is measured by whether the respondents' birth or adoptive parents were married at the time of the survey and the number of siblings in the home.

Independent Variables: Intervening Events

In estimating the influence of intervening events on attainment, I consider five factors: marriage, childbirth, divorce, illness, and arrest or incarceration. Using the NLSY79 data, dummy variables were constructed for each of three events (marriage, childbirth, and divorce) to indicate whether they occurred before age 22, between ages 22 and 25, or between ages 26 and 30. The reference category indicates that the event did not occur before the time at which the outcome variable was measured. In analyses using both datasets, the outcome variable for marriage and childbirth is measured at age 26, and thus the last of these dummy variables is not included. In addition, NELS does not collect information regarding the date at which respondents divorced, so any divorce before age 26 is indicated by one dummy variable. In order to make these measures comparable, I created a single variable indicating divorce prior to age 26 for the NLSY79 cohort, which I use to compare results across the two datasets.

Next, I constructed a variable indicating whether the respondent is either unable to work, limited in the type of work they can do, or limited in the amount of work they can do because of an illness. I use a single dummy variable to indicate whether the respondent indicated that any of these limitations were a factor prior to the year in which the outcome variable was measured. The NELS survey only asks whether the respondent is limited in the kind or amount of work they can do by an illness or impairment, however, and this question is only asked in the third follow-up survey, when respondents were about age 20.

Finally, I included an indicator of arrest or incarceration as a potential intervening event between setting aspirations and later attainment. In the NLSY79 survey, specific questions about illegal activities and incarceration are only measured in the second wave of data collection. However, based on place of residence records, I will create a dummy variable for each respondent indicating whether they were in jail or juvenile detention at any time before the outcome variable was measured. In the NELS survey, this is measured by a question asked at Wave 3, when respondents were about age 20, which asks whether the respondent or a close friend has been arrested or incarcerated in the last year. This measure does not ask only about the respondents themselves. However, it is likely to tap into the likelihood that the respondent is also involved in illegal activities, as young people whose young people whose peers commit crimes are more likely to do so themselves (Giordono, Cernkovich, and Holland 2003).

Control Variables

I control for several background variables likely to affect the match between aspirations and subsequent attainment. These include sex, race/ethnicity, age, region, place of birth, ability, and aspiration category. A dummy variable indicates whether the respondent is female (1) or male (0). Race/ethnicity is measured in the NLSY79 dataset using dummy variables indicating Black, Hispanic, and Other, with White as the reference category. White is also the comparison group for analyses using the NELS dataset, with dummy variables indicating Black, Hispanic, or Asian descent. I do not include a category of "Other" race for the NELS dataset, because less than 2% of respondents claimed another race/ethnicity. Similarly, a very small percentage of the NLSY79 sample claimed an Asian heritage. In both datasets, age is controlled for by a single

variable indicating age in the baseline year from which the respondents report their aspirations[8]. I also include dummy variables indicating whether the respondent lived in the Southern United States or in an urban area at the baseline survey, and whether the respondent was foreign-born. I include controls for ability using the Armed Forces Qualifying Test (AFQT) for the NLSY79 respondents and a standardized reading test for the NELS respondents. Finally, I control for the level of initial aspiration. For educational aspirations, this is a series of dummy variables indicating: some college, college degree, and graduate or professional schooling, in comparison to a high school degree or less. In occupational models, I control for the prestige level of the respondents occupation (NLSY79) or occupational category (NELS).

Analytic Strategy

In this paper, I ask: (1) What are the factors that explain some young people's failure to attain their educational and occupational aspirations? and (2) How has this changed over time? In order to understand the context under which young people set and achieve their aspirations, I present weighted descriptive and analytic tables estimating the likelihood of failing to attain one's educational and occupational aspirations. I first outline the likelihood of failing to attain one's aspirations for each level of educational and occupational aspiration. I then estimate the effects of family background factors and intervening events on the probability of failure using logistic regression models. I present my results using the NLSY79 data, first testing the relationship between family background and misaligned aspirations in separate education and occupation models. Next, I introduce intervening events, one at a time. By examining the impact

[8] The NLSY79 respondents ranged in age from 14 to 22. The NELS respondents were all in the 8th grade in 1988, and most were in 10th grade by 1990, the time at which aspirations were measured. Ages for this sample ranged between 14 and 18. I tested a linear measure of age against a categorical measure indicating whether each respondent was younger or older than the modal age (16), but both measures performed equally well, so I chose the more parsimonious measure.

of each variable separately, I can observe changes in the coefficients of family background variables for each intervening event. Finally, I include a saturated final model of all control and explanatory variables, in order to identify the most influential explanatory variables.

I next compare my results across cohorts. In order to obtain comparable estimates across cohorts, I use a measure of failure to obtain one's aspirations based on educational and occupational attainment at age 26. I also create a single indicator of divorce at any period prior to age 26 for the NLSY79 data, because the NELS survey does not allow me to measure the timing of divorce.

Finally, I investigate whether the impact of intervening events varies by socioeconomic status, sex, and race. In models not shown here, I introduced an interaction term for each of these factors and each intervening event. To test the robustness of my results, I compared the log-likelihood for the interaction model to the baseline model including all family background, intervening event, and control variables. I then identified the models that were a significant improvement over the baseline model. I discuss these results briefly.

RESULTS

Descriptives

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for each variable, weighted to adjust for unequal sampling. Looking at attainment in the NLSY79 cohort, we can see that 40% of the sample did not attain their educational aspirations by age 26, only and additional 3% had attained their goal in the next four years. Similarly, nearly half of the sample had failed to attain an occupation similar to one they had initially aspired to by age 26, and this dropped only by 3% in the next four years. Thus, attainment appears to remain steady from the late twenties to age 30. We can

also see a change over time in the likelihood of attaining one's aspirations by comparing the NLSY79 and NELS samples. While 40% of the NLSY79 sample did not attain their educational aspiration by the time they were 26, 57% of the NELS sample had failed to attain the education they had aspired to in high school by the same age. This demonstrates that members of the younger cohort are significantly less likely to attain their aspirations than members of the older cohort. The difference in occupational aspirations and attainment is equally dramatic: 48% of the NLSY79 sample and 64% of the NELS sample had failed to attain their occupational aspiration by age 26.

These results offer some support for the contention that failed educational aspirations have been increasing over time (Reynolds et al. 2006). They also demonstrate that a similar trend has occurred over time for occupational aspirations. We know little about the origins of this aspirations-attainment gap, however. In order to examine this more closely, I look at the percentage of young adults who fail to meet their earlier aspirations by educational and occupational categories. Figure 1 shows this trend for each educational category. The bars represent the percentage of adolescents who aspired to attain a particular level of education, yet failed to do so by age 26. Comparing outcomes for the NLSY79 and NELS respondents, it appears that members of the NELS cohort were more likely to attain the education they had aspired to among those who aspired to go to college, but not graduate. Among those with lower and very high aspirations, however, the likelihood of falling short of one's aspirations has increased over time. In particular, the finding that members of the younger cohort were much more likely to fall short of their goals appears to be driven by changes in the highest category. There was a substantial increase in the percentage of teens who aspired to attain a post-

baccalaureate degree, coupled with a greater proportion of respondents who failed to attain this degree in the younger cohort.

It is possible that members of the NELS cohort chose to take time off between college and graduate schooling. In analyses not shown, I examine the difference in availability to attend graduate school, measured by the percentage of youth who have completed a BA or BS by age 26, for the NLSY79 and NELS cohorts. It does not appear to be the case that NELS cohort members are simply taking more time to complete their education, however: of those who aspired to attain a post-graduate degree but had failed to do so at age 26, 55% had obtained a college degree in the NLSY79 cohort and 51% of the NELS cohort had done so.

The likelihood of attaining one's occupational aspiration, by category of aspiration, is depicted in Figure 2[9]. Members of the NELS sample were more likely to attain their aspirations in nearly every occupational category, except among those who aspired to obtain a high professional occupation. Roughly the same proportion of respondents who aspired to a high professional occupation in the NELS and NLSY79 cohorts failed to do so. However, a greater proportion of the NELS sample aspired to this level of occupation (25%) compared to the NLSY79 cohort (10%). Again, I tested the potential to move into a high professional occupation, as measured by the percentage of sample members who had aspired to and failed to be employed as a high professional by age 26, but were employed as a low professional, manager or administrator, teacher, or in a technical profession. It appeared that NELS sample members were in a somewhat better position to attain this level of occupation: 46% of these young people were employed as a low professional, manager or administrator, teacher, or in a technical occupation,

[9] In order to maintain comparability across NLSY79 and NELS cohorts in this figure, NLSY79 occupational aspirations and attainment were converted into NELS occupational categories.

while about 40% of the NLSY79 sample members were employed in these occupations if they had aspired to be in a high professional occupation but had failed to do so.

Failing to Attain Educational Aspirations: Intervening Events and Family Background

In Table 2, I regress the likelihood of failing to attain one's educational aspirations on family background factors and intervening events. The first model includes only family background and control variables, while the 2nd through 6th models introduce several intervening events that young people experience as the transition into adulthood. Finally, model 7 considers all of these factors at once.

As expected, Model 1 demonstrates that socioeconomic status is a protective factor for young people. Young adults whose parents are employed in professional occupations and are highly educated are less likely to fail to attain the educational aspirations they set for themselves. Furthermore, living with married parents appears to be correlated with a reduced likelihood of failing to attain one's educational aspirations.

Some control variables are also related to the likelihood a young adult will fail to attain his or her aspirations. I find that females and Black youth are slightly more likely to attain the education they expected than males. This result is surprising, given the higher likelihood that Black youth will fall short of their goals in bivariate analyses. However, this model also controls for AFQT scores and aspiration in adolescence. In separate analyses (not shown), I find that eliminating either of these controls, or both, reverses the direction and strength of this association, suggesting that Black youth are more likely to fall short of their goals. Finally, I find

that test scores predict that young people will attain their educational aspirations, and that high aspirations reduce one's likelihood of achieving them.

Models 2 through 6 indicate that the *timing* of family formation and dissolution are particularly important in predicting young adults' attainment. First, marriage at an early age (before age 22) appears to be predictive of failing to attain one's educational aspiration. This is also true for childbirth; having a child before age 22 increases the odds of failing to attain one's educational aspiration by a factor of more than three, while having a child between the ages of 23 and 25 increase the odds by a factor of two. There are two possible explanations for these results. Young people who marry or have a child before completing their schooling may be less likely to finish, due to competing demands on their time. Alternatively, young people who become less interested in school may choose to begin to have a family at a younger age. I next look at the effect of divorce on attaining one's aspirations. Although there is a timing effect here such that earlier divorces are more of an impediment to attaining one's aspirations, there is a negative effect of divorce on attainment at any age.

Poor health and incarceration are my final two explanatory variables. These events are rare, so timing effects cannot be observed. In addition, it is likely that illness and incarceration have a lasting impact on attainment at any age. Results from models 5 and 6 suggest that both factors are predictive of failing to reach one's educational aspirations. In the case of incarceration, it may be the case that these events disrupt a young person's educational trajectory, or it may be that they first lose interest in schooling and then turn toward criminal activity. Health, however, is an unpredictable event which appears to stall attainment in the transition to adulthood.

I included each of these explanatory variables in a final model, to see which intervening events appear to be most strongly related to failing to attain one's aspirations. This final model suggests early childbearing remains strongly related to failing to meet one's aspirations, although marrying at a young age is no longer related to this outcome. Divorce also remains important, but the size of the effect decreases when controlling for other factors. Finally, while the effect of incarceration increases slightly, the effect of poor health diminishes. Thus, it may be the case that adverse life events, such as divorce and incarceration, explain the initial relationship between poor health and failing to attain one's educational aspiration.

I next compare results from the NLSY79 and NELS datasets. Because NELS only follows respondents to age 26, I used age 26 as an endpoint for NLSY79 respondents also[10]. Using this comparable data, I then ran logistic regressions predicting failure to attain one's educational aspiration by age 26 for both datasets. Figures 3 and 4 present the odds ratios for each of the primary variables of interest for each dataset. Figure 3 suggests that parent's occupation, education, and marital status have an important impact on a young person's ability to attain his or her aspirations. Having a parent employed as a professional, and living in a two-parent family appear to be protective factors for young people in both cohorts. The relationship between parent's education and child's attainment differs somewhat between cohorts, however. While having parents who did not complete high school increases the likelihood that a young person will fail to attain his or her aspiration, net of other factors, for both cohorts, high parental education is more of a benefit for the younger cohort than among the NLSY79 youth.

Findings displayed in Figure 4 suggest that early family formation is more of a detriment to attaining one's educational aspiration among the more recent cohort of youth. While having a

[10] Because the NELS dataset follows a cohort of 8th graders in 1988, some respondents are older or younger than age 26 in 2000, during the last wave of data, if they had either skipped or been held back a grade in earlier years. Age 26 was the most common age for NELS respondents in this wave, however.

child before age 22 increases the odds of failure by about 2.5 for the older cohort, members of the younger cohort are 3.5 times as likely to fail if they have a child before age 22 as those who do not. In addition, incarceration appears to be a greater impediment to attaining one's aspirations in the older cohort. This may be due to differences in measurement, as the NELS survey asks a single question about whether the respondent or close friend had been arrested.

Multivariate Results: Occupation

Next, I look at the likelihood of failing to attain one's occupational aspiration by age 30. Results are presented in Table 3. There are a few surprising relationships between the control variables and failing to attain one's occupational aspiration. First, females are less likely to experience failure, and this relationship is stronger than the one between sex and educational attainment. Previous research typically finds that while women have exceeded men in educational attainment, the same is not necessarily true for occupations (Rindfuss et al. 1999). However, it appears that women who work are more likely to attain an occupation similar to their occupational aspiration. This is not due to lowered aspirations, as women had higher occupational aspirations on average than men (analyses not shown). It may be partly explained by the absence of women not in the labor force, however. About 12% of women were not working at age 30, while only 5% of males were similarly not employed (analyses not shown).

Results for family background are more muted than those in Table 2. Having a parent employed as a professional lowered the likelihood that a young person would fail to attain his or her aspirations. However, parent's education was largely unrelated to attainment, except among those with less educated parents. Young people whose parents never completed high school were

more likely to fall short of their aspirations. Finally, there was no statistically significant relationship between family structure and attainment.

In looking at the role of intervening events on one's likelihood of failure, the results are similar to those found for education. Marrying or having a child early predict a failure to attain one's desired occupational status in Models 2 and 3. However, in Model 7, it appears that marrying after age 21 is related to a decreased likelihood of failure. The causal order of this particular relationship, however, most likely works in reverse; young adults are more likely to marry once they attain a steady job and income (Sweeney 2002; Oppenheimer and Lewin 1999). It also appears that divorce at a relatively young age is predictive of failure, although this relationship diminishes somewhat when controlling for other life course factors. Finally, as expected, poor health and incarceration are significantly related to failing to attain one's occupational aspiration in all three final models.

In Figures 5 and 6, I compare results predicting the odds of failing to attain one's occupational aspiration from the NLSY79 and NELS cohorts. Figure 5 demonstrates that parent's occupation and marital status are protective factors among the NLSY79 cohort, but not the NELS cohort (where the effect is nearly zero). The results for parent's educational attainment is also interesting to note. While low parental educational attainment appears to increase the likelihood of failure for the older cohort, this relationship does not exist among the younger cohort. Instead, high parental educational attainment appears to be a protective factor among the younger cohort.

Figure 6 demonstrates a similar relationship between life course events in the transition to adulthood and failing to attain one's aspirations across cohorts. Marital timing appears unrelated to failure for both cohorts, while having a child at a young age is related to a much higher

likelihood of failure. Having a child before age 22 is more related to failure for the NLSY79 cohort, while having a child between ages 22 and 25 poses a greater impediment to the NELS cohort. This latter result may occur because the normative age for childbearing has shifted upwards, such that childbearing before age 25 signals a reduced commitment to work among young adults. Finally, the relationship between divorce and failure to attain one's aspirations is greater for the NELS cohort, while results for health problems and incarceration appear consistent across both cohorts.

Differences in Attainment by Class, Race, and Gender

Attaining one's educational and occupational aspirations appears to be strongly related to family formation, and to the timing of these family formation events. Since many of these events create different demands young people across class, race, and gender, I next examined whether these demographic factors moderated the relationship between events in the transition to adulthood and later attainment (results not shown, available from author). The outcome variable is measured at 26 for these analyses. I first ran models interacting class, race, and sex and each intervening event separately. I used parental occupation as a proxy for class in these analyses. I controlled for all other variables in each model. For example, when interacting parental occupation and marital timing, I also controlled for all control variables, family background variables, and indicators of births, divorce, health, and incarceration. I then tested whether these interactions were significant, whether a likelihood-ratio test indicated that the model offered a significant improvement over the baseline model, and whether results were consistent across datasets. Surprisingly, I found that the impact of these transitions did not differ significantly by class or race. Sex did moderate the relationship between intervening events and failure to attain

one's aspirations for only one relationship; the relationship between birth and occupational attainment. I found that early childbirth was more strongly related to failure among women than men. However, this relationship was still significant and positive for men.

CONCLUSION

The aspirations-attainment link has interested sociologists for decades. In understanding how goals influence attainment, researchers have sought answers in the effects of family background, peers, and school quality. I demonstrate that family background remains an important element in understanding young adults' attainment. Yet the analyses offered here also suggest that there is something to be gained from understanding what happens to young people between setting their aspirations and attaining them. The transition to adulthood is an increasingly complex stage of the life course in which young people move out of their parent's homes, complete schooling, form and dissolve families, and occasionally encounter unforeseen barriers.

These events are not unrelated to family background and to a host of other factors that influence young people in high school: the setting of aspirations, effort exerted to follow through on them, structural barriers, intervening events, and outcomes are causally complex. Teenagers differ in their desire to follow through on their aspirations as well as the ability to do so. If they perceive that a particular goal is unattainable, it is easy to imagine that they may re-direct their aspirations into a lower tiered job or family life. "Failure", then, is subjective. What this paper demonstrates is that, controlling for family background and ability, these intervening events—childbirth, marriage, divorce, illness, and incarceration—are related to a young person's likelihood of attaining a goal they once held. While the desire to marry or have a child may, in

some cases, alter one's educational and occupational aspirations, it is an important sociological fact that these desires conflict with educational and occupational attainment. In addition, many young people may continue to hold high aspirations, but find them difficult to achieve once a child and married partner create competing demands. In addition, these analyses also show that unforeseen events such as divorce, illness, and incarceration have an effect on young people's attainment trajectory. These intervening events signal disorganization in the transition to adulthood, which makes it difficult to attain the educational and occupational goals an individual once held.

Finally, this paper demonstrates important changes in the relationship between family background, intervening events, and the aspirations-attainment link over time. First, it appears that parent's education is becoming a more important factor in young people's ability to attain their goals. This is particularly true for young people with highly educated parents; the resources garnered from their parents appear to offer protection against failure. Second, early childbirth appears to have become more of an impediment over time, particularly for educational attainment. It appears that the role conflict between student and parent is even greater for the NELS cohort than the NLSY79 cohort. The causal order of this relationship is impossible to ascertain from these analyses, and may differ among young adults. Some young people may decide that they are uninterested in pursuing more education, and would prefer to have a child. Others may have a child and find it incompatible with their intentions to go to or complete college. Either way, it appears that the roles of student and parent (particularly mother) have grown more incompatible over time.

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Table 1: Weighted Means, Standard Errors, and Range for NLSY79 and NELS Variables

	NLSY			NELS		
	Mean	Std. Error	Range	Mean	Std. Error	Range
Did not attain educational aspiration by age 26	.40	.01	0 to 1	.57	.01	0 to 1
Did not attain educational aspiration by age 30	.37	.01	0 to 1			
Did not attain occupational aspiration by age 26	.48	.01	0 to 1	.64	.01	0 to 1
Did not attain occupational aspiration by age 30	.45	.01	0 to 1			
Married before age 22	.33	.01	0 to 1	.16	.01	0 to 1
Married between ages 22 and 25	.25	.01	0 to 1	.30	.01	0 to 1
Married between ages 26 and 30	.15	.01	0 to 1			
Had first child before age 22	.23	.01	0 to 1	.12	.01	0 to 1
Had first child between ages 22 and 25	.17	.01	0 to 1	.23	.01	0 to 1
Had first child between ages 26 and 30	.17	.01	0 to 1			
Divorced before age 22	.02	.00	0 to 1			
Divorced between ages 22 and 25	.07	.00	0 to 1			
Divorced between ages 26 and 30	.07	.00	0 to 1			
Divorced prior to age 26	.10	.00	0 to 1	.08	.01	0 to 1
Poor health prevents work	.21	.01	0 to 1	.03	.00	0 to 1
Incarcerated	.01	.00	0 to 1	.22	.01	0 to 1
Parent employed as professional	.17	.01	0 to 1	.29	.01	0 to 1
Parent did not complete HS	.20	.01	0 to 1	.08	.01	0 to 1
Parent graduated from high school	.44	.01	0 to 1	.18	.01	0 to 1
Parent attended college	.15	.01	0 to 1	.42	.01	0 to 1
Parent completed BA/BS	.22	.01	0 to 1	.32	.01	0 to 1
Two-parent family	.78	.01	0 to 1	.69	.01	0 to 1
Number of siblings	3.23	.03	0-14	2.19	.03	0 to 6
Female	.45	.01	0 to 1	.50	.01	0 to 1
White	.69	.01	0 to 1	.77	.01	0 to 1
Black	.12	.00	0 to 1	.10	.01	0 to 1
Latin	.05	.00	0 to 1	.09	.00	0 to 1
Asian				.03	.00	0 to 1
Other	.14	.01	0 to 1			
Age	17.66	.04	14-22	16.09	.01	14-18
Lived in South	.31	.01	0 to 1	.35	.01	0 to 1
Lived in urban area	.77	.01	0 to 1	.69	.01	0 to 1
Foreign-born	.03	.00	0 to 1	.04	.00	0 to 1
AFQT Score	53.54	.46	0-100			
Reading Comprehension Score				52.22	.18	31-69
Youth expected less than high school	.04	.00	0 to 1	.01	.00	0 to 1
Youth expected to graduate from high school	.35	.01	0 to 1	.07	.01	0 to 1
Youth expected some college	.19	.01	0 to 1	.27	.01	0 to 1
Youth expected BA/BS	.29	.01	0 to 1	.33	.01	0 to 1
Youth expected grad/prof school	.13	.01	0 to 1	.32	.01	0 to 1
Expected Occupation (SEI Score)	53.96	.01	4-96	61.26	.34	7-82

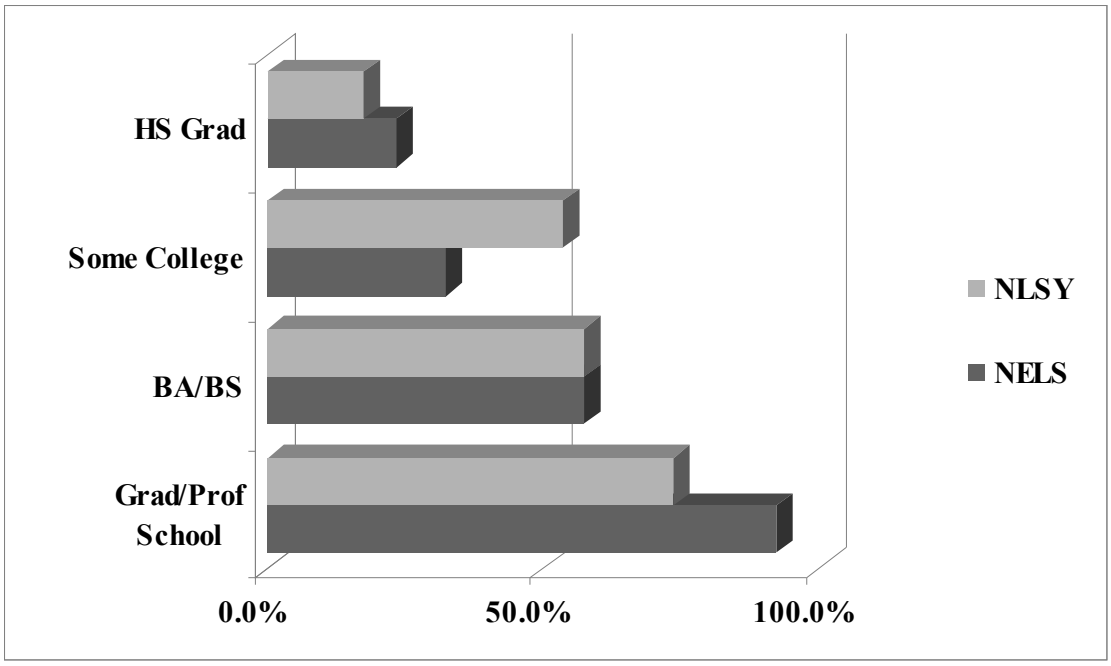

Figure 1: Weighted Proportion of Youth who Failed to Attain Educational Aspiration, by Aspiration Category

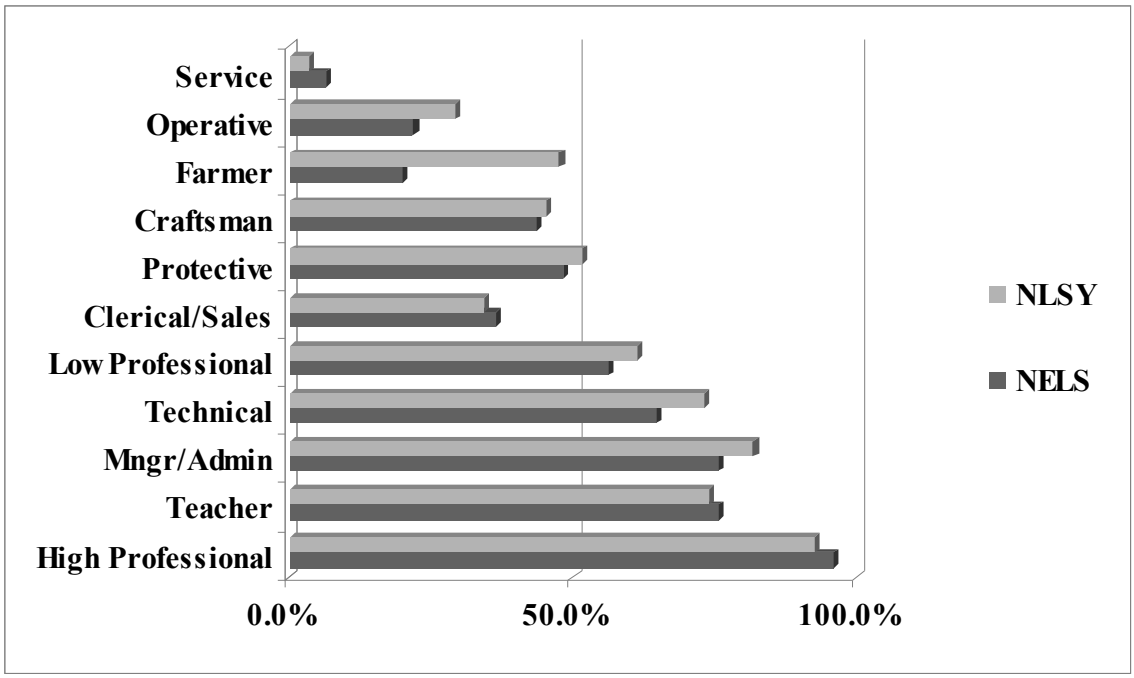

Figure 2: Weighted Proportion of Youth who Failed to Attain Occupational Aspiration, by Aspiration Category

Table 2: Coefficients from Logistic Regression of Failing to Attain Expected Education by Age 30 on Family Background Characteristics and Intervening Events (NLSY: N=7322)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Marriage Timing[a]							
Married before age 22		0.79***					0.17
		(7.84)					(1.32)
Married between ages 22 and 25		0.11					-0.07
		(1.07)					(-0.59)
Married between ages 26 and 30		-0.029					-0.01
		(-0.23)					(-0.06)
Birth Timing[b]							
Had first child before age 22			1.14***				0.92***
			(10.47)				(7.10)
Had first child between ages 22 and 25			0.68***				0.63***
			(6.17)				(4.78)
Had first child between ages 26 and 30			0.04				0.06
			(0.38)				(0.50)
Divorce Timing[c]							
Divorced before age 22				1.23***			0.94***
				(6.09)			(4.33)
Divorced between ages 22 and 25				0.60***			0.35*
				(4.42)			(2.25)
Divorced between ages 26 and 30				0.45**			0.30
				(2.96)			(1.94)
Poor health prevents work					0.31***		0.15
					(3.54)		(1.66)
Incarcerated						0.54*	0.60*
						(2.46)	(2.53)
Parent employed as professional	-0.32**	-0.33**	-0.31**	-0.33**	-0.31**	-0.32**	-0.32**
	(-2.81)	(-2.85)	(-2.62)	(-2.89)	(-2.70)	(-2.71)	(-2.69)
Highest level of education by a parent[d]							
Parent did not complete HS	0.40***	0.41***	0.37***	0.41***	0.38***	0.42***	0.42***
	(3.83)	(3.93)	(3.51)	(3.88)	(3.62)	(3.95)	(3.81)
Parent attended college	-0.064	-0.052	-0.0041	-0.062	-0.070	-0.077	-0.031
	(-0.54)	(-0.44)	(-0.03)	(-0.53)	(-0.59)	(-0.65)	(-0.26)
Parent completed BA/BS	-0.44***	-0.38**	-0.36**	-0.41***	-0.46***	-0.47***	-0.37**
	(-3.76)	(-3.21)	(-3.11)	(-3.51)	(-3.89)	(-3.97)	(-3.09)
Two-parent family	-0.52***	-0.49***	-0.46***	-0.50***	-0.51***	-0.50***	-0.41***
	(-5.90)	(-5.54)	(-5.11)	(-5.64)	(-5.77)	(-5.55)	(-4.45)
Number of siblings	0.020	0.013	0.0033	0.021	0.015	0.014	-0.0041
	(1.25)	(0.76)	(0.20)	(1.27)	(0.89)	(0.84)	(-0.24)
Female	-0.18*	-0.31***	-0.34***	-0.23**	-0.22**	-0.17*	-0.38***

	(-2.53)	(-4.13)	(-4.51)	(-3.19)	(-2.95)	(-2.31)	(-4.78)
Race/Ethnicity[e]							
Black	-0.46***	-0.30**	-0.57***	-0.37***	-0.45***	-0.49***	-0.49***
	(-4.52)	(-2.81)	(-5.43)	(-3.54)	(-4.37)	(-4.81)	(-4.32)
Latin	-0.050	-0.061	-0.12	-0.047	-0.028	-0.065	-0.11
	(-0.41)	(-0.49)	(-0.95)	(-0.38)	(-0.23)	(-0.53)	(-0.85)
Other	-0.16	-0.17	-0.19	-0.18	-0.14	-0.14	-0.16
	(-1.41)	(-1.47)	(-1.59)	(-1.56)	(-1.19)	(-1.19)	(-1.35)
Age in 1979	-0.036*	-0.042*	-0.046**	-0.039*	-0.035*	-0.034*	-0.043*
	(-2.24)	(-2.54)	(-2.75)	(-2.35)	(-2.11)	(-2.08)	(-2.51)
Lived in South	-0.0099	-0.081	-0.048	-0.058	-0.0049	-0.022	-0.10
	(-0.12)	(-1.00)	(-0.59)	(-0.72)	(-0.06)	(-0.27)	(-1.21)
Lived in urban area	0.063	0.098	0.078	0.073	0.066	0.070	0.094
	(0.69)	(1.06)	(0.85)	(0.80)	(0.72)	(0.76)	(0.99)
Foreign-born	-0.052	-0.040	-0.063	-0.042	-0.026	-0.075	-0.029
	(-0.27)	(-0.21)	(-0.32)	(-0.22)	(-0.14)	(-0.37)	(-0.14)
AFQT Score	-0.034***	-0.034***	-0.033***	-0.034***	-0.034***	-0.034***	-0.033***
	(-17.54)	(-17.40)	(-16.80)	(-17.31)	(-17.19)	(-17.17)	(-16.09)
Educational expectations[f]							
Youth expected some college	2.90***	3.00***	3.08***	2.96***	2.91***	2.94***	3.17***
	(24.42)	(24.81)	(24.68)	(24.59)	(24.34)	(24.14)	(24.36)
Youth expected BA/BS	3.78***	4.01***	4.11***	3.87***	3.81***	3.83***	4.23***
	(29.81)	(29.98)	(29.64)	(30.04)	(29.88)	(29.43)	(29.25)
Youth expected grad/prof school	4.74***	5.01***	5.13***	4.85***	4.77***	4.78***	5.27***
	(28.47)	(28.92)	(28.95)	(28.61)	(28.51)	(28.03)	(28.52)
Constant	-0.00	-0.28	-0.40	-0.14	-0.12	-0.09	-0.66
	(-0.01)	(-0.85)	(-1.20)	(-0.44)	(-0.37)	(-0.28)	(-1.91)
Log-likelihood	-3617.77	**-3571.26**	**-3523.27**	**-3593.91**	**-3613.23**	**-3609.91**	**-3499.31**

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Log-likelihood in **bold** if model is significantly different from baseline model at the .01 level.
[a]Reference category is "No marriage by age 30"
[b]Reference category is "No birth by age 30"
[c]Reference category is "No divorce by age 30"
[d]Reference category is "Parent completed high school"
[e]Reference category is "White"
[f]Reference category is "Youth expected high school degree or less"

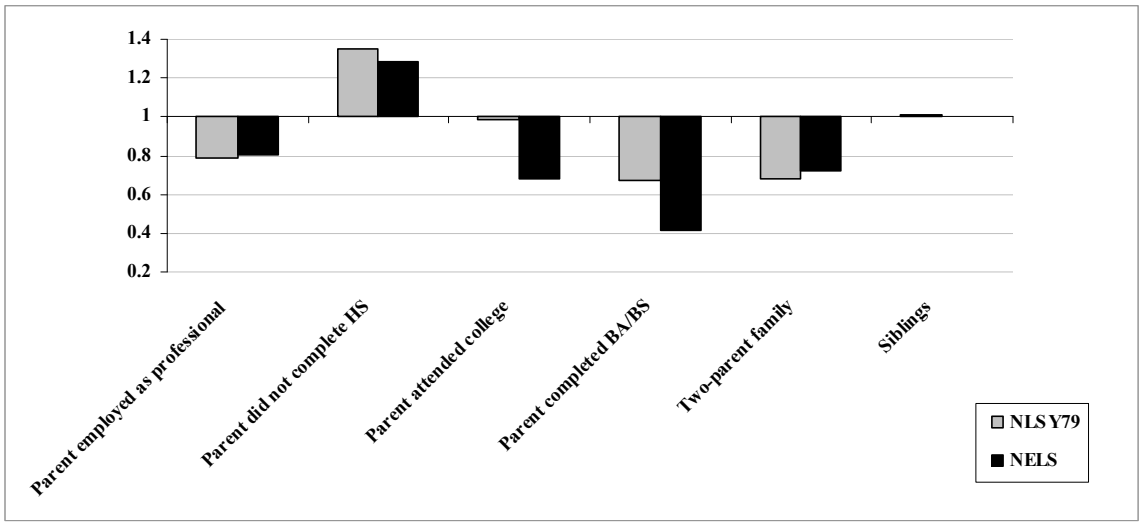

Figure 3: Family Background Predictors of Failing to Attain Educational Aspirations in Adulthood for NLSY79 and NELS

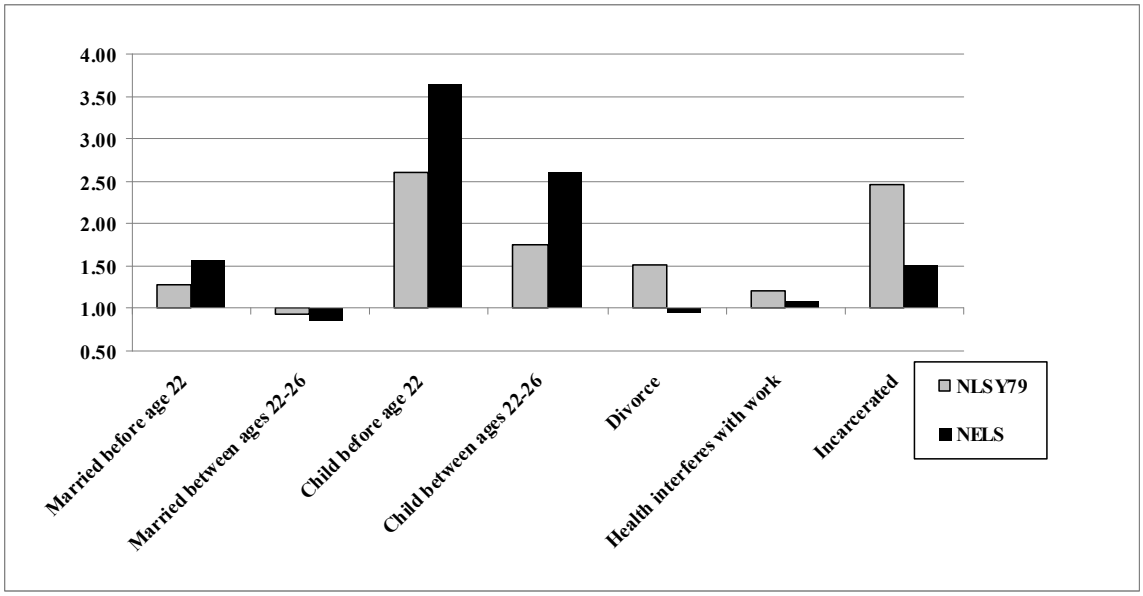

Figure 4: Odds Ratios of Failing to Attain Educational Aspiration by Age 26, NLSY79 and NELS Datasets

Table 3: Coefficients from Logistic Regression of Failing to Attain Expected Occupation by Age 30 on Family Background Characteristics and Intervening Events (NLSY: N=5946)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7
Marriage Timing[a]							
Married before age 22		0.31**					-0.19
		(2.88)					(-1.32)
Married between ages 22 and 25		-0.18					-0.37**
		(-1.60)					(-2.86)
Married between ages 26 and 30		-0.21					-0.24
		(-1.54)					(-1.72)
Birth Timing[b]							
Had first child before age 22			0.67***				0.65***
			(6.21)				(4.88)
Had first child between ages 22 and 25			0.30*				0.37**
			(2.55)				(2.68)
Had first child between ages 26 and 30			0.08				0.22
			(0.68)				(1.73)
Divorce Timing[c]							
Divorced before age 22				0.55*			0.26
				(2.45)			(1.12)
Divorced between ages 22 and 25				0.52***			0.41*
				(3.50)			(2.47)
Divorced between ages 26 and 30				0.30			0.25
				(1.76)			(1.41)
Poor health prevents work					0.37***		0.28**
					(3.84)		(2.87)
Incarcerated						0.76*	0.68*
						(2.51)	(2.23)
Parent employed as professional	-0.28*	-0.28*	-0.25	-0.28*	-0.26*	-0.27*	-0.25
	(-2.15)	(-2.13)	(-1.91)	(-2.17)	(-2.01)	(-2.06)	(-1.89)
Highest level of education by a parent[d]							
Parent did not complete HS	0.35**	0.34**	0.32**	0.35**	0.34**	0.36***	0.32**
	(3.27)	(3.19)	(2.95)	(3.24)	(3.12)	(3.34)	(2.93)
Parent attended college	0.15	0.17	0.18	0.15	0.16	0.12	0.16
	(1.17)	(1.35)	(1.47)	(1.19)	(1.28)	(0.98)	(1.25)
Parent completed BA/BS	-0.20	-0.15	-0.15	-0.18	-0.21	-0.22	-0.15
	(-1.55)	(-1.15)	(-1.16)	(-1.38)	(-1.62)	(-1.69)	(-1.15)
Two-parent family	-0.15	-0.12	-0.10	-0.12	-0.14	-0.13	-0.05
	(-1.54)	(-1.20)	(-1.04)	(-1.21)	(-1.46)	(-1.35)	(-0.51)
Number of siblings	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02
	(1.81)	(1.67)	(1.18)	(1.75)	(1.65)	(1.73)	(1.10)
Female	-0.52***	-0.59***	-0.61***	-0.56***	-0.56***	-0.49***	-0.63***

	(-6.52)	(-7.16)	(-7.47)	(-6.91)	(-6.91)	(-6.04)	(-7.38)
Race/Ethnicity[e]							
Black	-0.02	0.07	-0.04	0.05	-0.02	-0.05	-0.06
	(-0.18)	(0.60)	(-0.42)	(0.44)	(-0.18)	(-0.46)	(-0.53)
Latin	-0.16	-0.16	-0.18	-0.15	-0.18	-0.19	-0.21
	(-1.23)	(-1.18)	(-1.34)	(-1.11)	(-1.31)	(-1.36)	(-1.49)
Other	-0.06	-0.08	-0.08	-0.07	-0.05	-0.07	-0.08
	(-0.52)	(-0.62)	(-0.63)	(-0.58)	(-0.36)	(-0.53)	(-0.62)
Age in 1979	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.04*	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
	(-1.89)	(-1.92)	(-1.91)	(-2.00)	(-1.94)	(-1.66)	(-1.69)
Lived in South	-0.21*	-0.25**	-0.23**	-0.24**	-0.20*	-0.22*	-0.25**
	(-2.39)	(-2.74)	(-2.59)	(-2.72)	(-2.20)	(-2.49)	(-2.67)
Lived in urban area	-0.16	-0.15	-0.15	-0.16	-0.15	-0.16	-0.16
	(-1.65)	(-1.52)	(-1.52)	(-1.62)	(-1.55)	(-1.63)	(-1.59)
Foreign-born	-0.24	-0.19	-0.22	-0.25	-0.22	-0.21	-0.16
	(-1.09)	(-0.91)	(-1.02)	(-1.11)	(-1.02)	(-0.96)	(-0.69)
AFQT Score	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***	-0.02***
	(-12.34)	(-11.70)	(-11.40)	(-12.11)	(-11.90)	(-11.76)	(-10.28)
SEI of Expected Occupation	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***	0.07***
	(29.94)	(29.66)	(29.90)	(29.86)	(29.84)	(29.71)	(29.42)
Constant	-2.23***	-2.28***	-2.63***	-2.32***	-2.32***	-2.27***	-2.64***
	(-7.69)	(-7.73)	(-8.82)	(-7.96)	(-7.98)	(-7.79)	(-8.75)
Log-likelihood	-3024.75	**-3008.78**	**-2990.18**	**-3014.70**	**-3017.90**	-3023.60	**-2973.91**

t statistics in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$
Log-likelihood in **bold** if model is significantly different from baseline model at the .01 level.
[a]Reference category is "No marriage by age 30"
[b]Reference category is "No birth by age 30"
[c]Reference category is "No divorce by age 30"
[d]Reference category is "Parent completed high school"
[e]Reference category is "White"

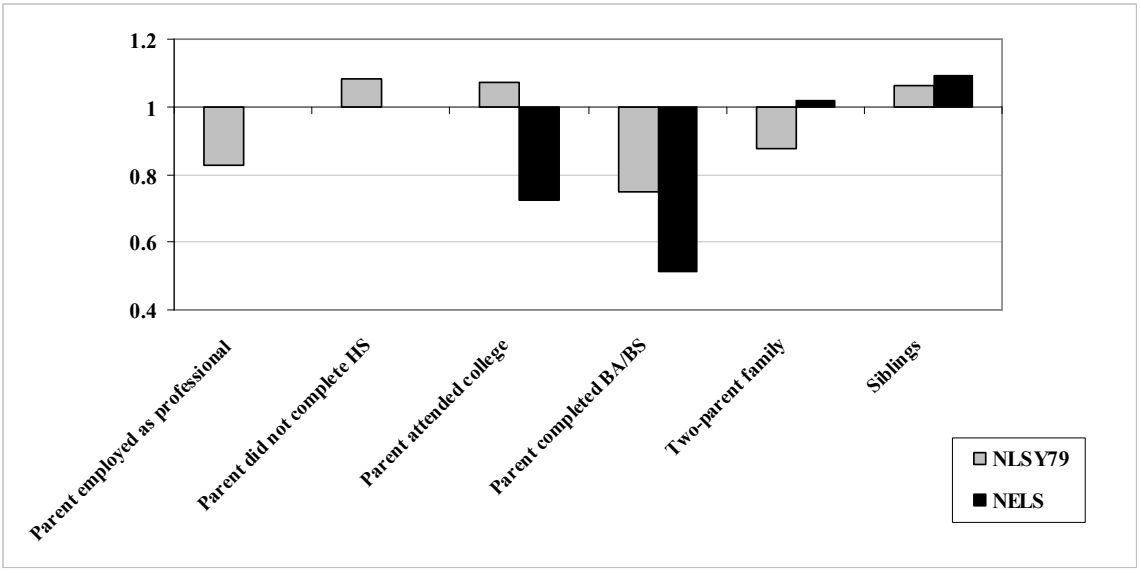

Figure 5: Family Background Predictors of Failing to Attain Occupational Aspirations in Adulthood for NLSY79 and NELS

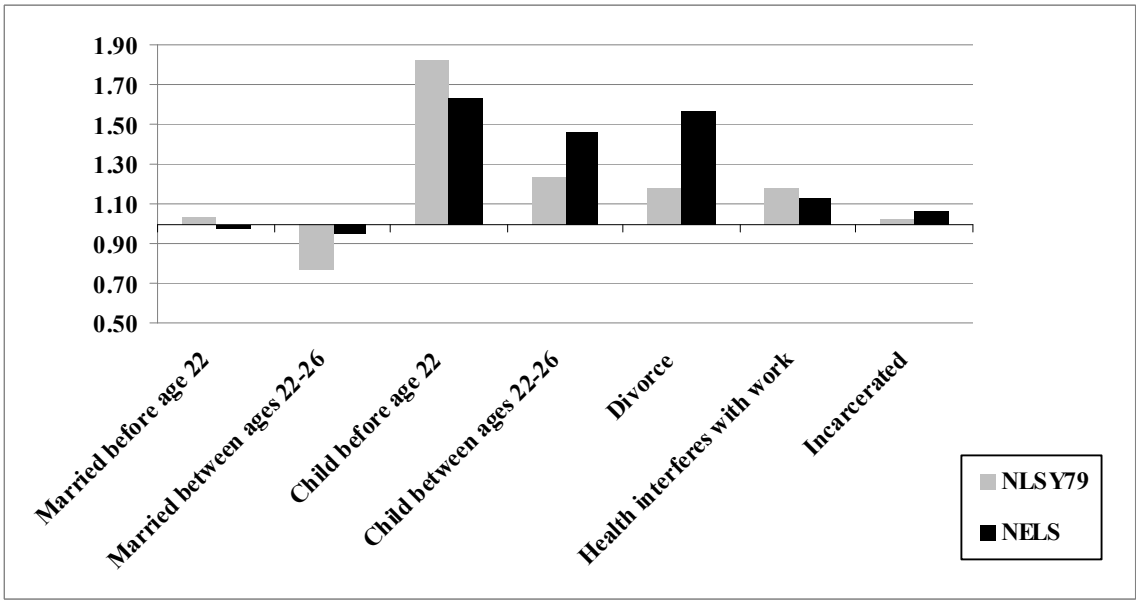

Figure 6: Odds Ratios of Failing to Attain Occupational Aspiration by Age 26, NLSY79 and NELS Datasets