

# *THE CONSUMPTION ASPIRATIONS OF ADOLESCENTS*

## *Determinants and Implications*

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**The consumption aspirations of adolescents**, which are important for many aspects of their lives, now and in the future, are affected both by the general consumption aspirations in the society and by the situation within the parental household. On the one hand, the mass media and other nonfamilial influences project as desirable, life-styles with high consumption levels. These presumably affect all adolescents. On the other hand, children raised in relatively affluent families probably have been more exposed to high consumption levels within the parental household. However, the adolescents' own consumption experiences, namely, the extent to

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which they themselves participate in today's high-consumption society by owning substantial consumer durables such as a car, stereo, or television may depend on several factors. Some parental families may provide such objects for their adolescent children. Others, particularly parents who place a high value on the importance of higher education, may choose not to do this, perhaps regarding a car or television set as a likely encroachment on time needed for school work. However, adolescents today, whether rich or poor, are not solely dependent on their parents for spending money, since most have opportunities to earn money on their own for such purchases.

This article examines the determinants of the consumption aspirations of adolescents, with a major emphasis on the influence of the parental family. The importance of familial influences on the achievement of children has been well documented (Sewell and Hauser, 1980). Presumably, familial influences would also extend to adolescent consumption aspirations, since adolescents raised in affluent households are likely to place a high value on the enjoyment of similar amenities in their own households. The personal consumption behavior of adolescents, nurtured by the growing emphasis among businesses on catering to the teenage market, should also influence their aspirations for future consumption.

Little empirical evidence exists on the determinants of the consumption aspirations of adolescents. Several social scientists have stressed the likely importance of socialization within the family for the development of children's material aspirations (Boulding, 1972; Strumpel, 1972; Duncan, 1969). Easterlin (1966) attributes the period swings in fertility to the degree of tension between the consumption aspirations and the income potential in the different cohorts of adolescents. He singles out the living standards of the parental home as the major determinant of the consumption aspirations of young adult children. However, no supporting empirical evidence was available. The data set for this study permits an examination of the relative effect of a number of forces, including parental living standards, on adolescent consumption aspirations.

The presumption that parental living standards would determine the material aspirations of adolescents is plausible, since research

has documented the influences of the parental family on the general aspiration levels of children, showing a substantial relationship between the socioeconomic status of parents and the educational and occupational aspirations of their adolescent children (Sewell and Hauser, 1980). However, a search of the literature has revealed no substantial empirical studies of the familial determinants of adolescent consumption aspirations.

Data from a panel study of parents and their young adult children, which includes information about the socioeconomic characteristics and attitudes of both generations, are used to examine the following questions: (1) What is the nature and magnitude of the relationship between the characteristics of the parental family and both the material aspirations and achieved consumption of their young adult children? (2) To what extent are the adolescents' own consumption experiences related to their consumption aspirations, independently of familial influences?

First, the rationale for the likely correlates of both adolescent consumption behavior and their family size goals are identified. The description of the data set follows. Then the results are presented. Finally, the meaning and implications of the results are discussed.

### THE EXPECTED RELATIONSHIPS

We expect adolescent consumption aspirations to be influenced by the parental family's economic well-being. Parental income is expected to show a positive relationship to the consumption aspirations of their offspring. The level of consumption within the parental home—such as home quality or ownership of consumer durables—may exert an even stronger influence. Number of siblings<sup>1</sup> should be negatively related to adolescent aspirations, since larger families, at each income level, have less to spend on each child. Family size has been shown to have a disadvantageous effect on the school attendance of adolescents (Alwin and Thornton, 1984).

Parental education is expected to show a negative relationship to adolescent consumption aspirations. Educated parents place a

high premium on their children's educational attainment and may feel that allowing adolescents to have a car or television of their own might impede their educational achievement.

Forces outside the parental family, such as peer group pressures and pervasive media messages displaying attractive consumer goods, also can affect the importance attached to owning consumption items. Such media campaigns presumably have been a major force in the rapid growth of strong markets among adolescents for new consumer goods, ranging from designer jeans and the latest records to more expensive items, such as motorcycles and cars. No data were collected on either peer or media pressures on adolescent consumption, so they are not included directly in our analysis.

Adolescents who have already acquired substantial consumer items, such as cars, televisions, or stereos, are expected to express higher consumption aspirations than others. Adolescents today enjoy a high level of personal consumption (shown later) and apparently do not depend solely on parental financing for purchases of major consumer goods, since most high school students report some gainful employment (Bachman et al., 1984; Michael and Tuma, 1983). The ability of adolescents to attain current high consumption levels can itself foster continuing high aspirations. Lewin (1935) showed that aspirations tend to be reality oriented and, thus, can be heightened by the successful attainment of intermediate goals. Adolescents who have demonstrated their ability to obtain consumer durables should acquire confidence in their ability to achieve even higher consumption goals and thus develop heightened aspirations. The direction of causality, however, may be reciprocal, since ownership levels may reflect prior aspirations as well as fostering subsequent aspirations. To the extent that adolescents can obtain consumer durables independently of their familial background, their aspirations may have only a weak or no relationship to their familial background. Under these circumstances, such aspirations on the part of low-status, poorly educated adolescents may not be realized and may result in frustration and disappointment.

## THE DATA SET

The data come from a panel study of mothers and children. The original sample of mothers was randomly selected from the birth certificates of married white women, registered in the Detroit metropolitan area in the summer of 1961, with those births divided almost equally among first, second, and fourth parities. The mothers were interviewed seven times between 1962 and 1985. As part of the 1980 and 1985 waves of the study, interviews also were conducted with the child born in 1962; at the 1980 interview they were all 18 years old. The data used in this article come from the 1980 and earlier waves of the study.

All the original respondents have remained eligible for the sample, regardless of their location. Although the original sample consisted entirely of women living in the Detroit metropolitan area, about half of these women lived elsewhere in 1980. In all, 85% of the sample still resided in Michigan; the other 15% was scattered throughout the United States. Sample retention remains high; the 1980 sample of 916 families, in which interviews were obtained from both the mothers and the adolescents, represents 85% of the original sample (Thornton et al., 1982). A comparison of the characteristics of the group of respondents lost to the survey with those of the ongoing sample attest to the continuing representativeness of the latter. The mean family income of the sample women in 1980 is very close to that obtained for all white married couples in Michigan in the 1980 census (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1983)

The following adolescent consumption measures are included in the analysis:

- (1) Aspirations for specific consumer goods. The importance they *attach to having each of seven consumer items in the future*, when they will have been married for a while or out of school and working for a number of years. The list of items included a color television, kitchen appliances (such as a dishwasher or microwave oven), their own home, enough money to fly somewhere each year on a two-week vacation, a recreational vehicle (such as a snowmobile or powerboat), a high-quality stereo, and clothes in the latest style.

Answers were recorded on a 4-point scale denoting very important, somewhat important, not very important, and not important at all. The scores for all seven items were aggregated into a total aspiration index measures, ranging from 7 to 28, with high values denoting high aspirations.<sup>2</sup>

- (2) Ownership of consumer durables. Whether, just before their eighteenth birthday (approximately a year prior to their interview), they had an automobile, a high-quality stereo, or a television set that they had either bought themselves or that had been provided for their own personal use.<sup>3</sup> The total number of items owned serves as an index of ownership with values ranging from zero to three items.
- (3) Their assessment of their own family's living standards relative to those of friends and other high school students, and of their own personal consumption level compared to that of other students.
- (4) Future living standard expectations. Whether the adolescents expected their future living standard to be better, about the same, or not quite as good as that of the parental family.

Other adolescent variables include current work, school attendance, and living situation; expectations for educational attainment, experience of premarital sex, and desired family size.

The parental measures used in the analysis include mother's work, age, religion, and final parity; combined parental education, family income, husband's income, home value, and ownership of consumer durables, each collected in several waves of the study. Repeated measures of family income and assets make it possible to identify whether adolescent aspirations are more closely related to earlier or to more recent familial economic circumstances.

Tables 1 through 4 show the distribution of the adolescent consumption measures. Table 1 shows the importance attached by the adolescents to owning each of the seven consumption items. Owning a home is definitely most important to these adolescents. Gender differences are not large, but except for high-style clothing, a higher percentage of young men than young women want each item, with a particularly strong male bias toward recreational vehicles. Aside from home ownership (the most valued item) and recreational vehicles (the least valued), the mean scores for most of the other items were fairly similar.

TABLE I  
**Percentage of Young Adults Expressing Various  
 Degrees of Importance of Future Ownership of Consumer Goods, by Sex**

	Color Television		Stereo		Recreational Vehicle		High-Style Clothing		Extra Kitchen Appliances		Own Home		Vacations	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Very important	11.4	8.4	33.4	18.7	13.4	3.8	21.1	26.9	14.7	13.1	68.0	64.5	23.3	21.6
Somewhat important	45.5	36.7	39.2	44.2	28.9	14.9	51.7	55.3	50.4	43.6	25.6	27.8	35.7	40.0
Not very important	34.5	44.5	24.6	31.1	40.0	46.2	22.2	15.1	28.9	37.3	6.0	6.4	34.7	30.0
Not at all important	8.6	10.4	2.8	6.0	17.7	35.1	5.0	2.7	6.0	6.0	0.4	1.3	6.3	8.4
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Mean <sup>a</sup>	2.60	2.43	3.03	2.76	2.38	1.87	2.89	3.07	2.74	2.64	3.61	3.55	2.76	2.75
Standard deviation	.80	.79	.83	.82	.93	.80	.79	.72	.78	.78	.62	.68	.88	.89
Coefficient of variation	.31	.33	.27	.30	.39	.43	.27	.23	.28	.30	.17	.19	.32	.32

NOTE: N = 916.

a. The mean scores for importance were based on the summation of the 4-point scales for each item, with very important scored as 4, somewhat important as 3, not very important as 2, and not at all important as 1.

TABLE 2  
**Percentage of Adolescents Having a Car,  
 TV, or Stereo for Their Own Use, by Sex**

	<i>Males</i>	<i>Females</i>	<i>Total</i>
Car	71	50	61
Stereo	71	53	62
Television	47	50	44

NOTE: *N* = 916.

TABLE 3  
**Adolescent Perceptions of How the Material  
 Possessions of Their Family and Their Own Possessions  
 Compare to Those of Their Peer Groups, for Total Group Only**

	<i>Family's Material Possessions Relative to Families of</i>		<i>Own Possessions Relative to Those of</i>
	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Students in High School</i>	<i>Students in High School</i>
Better	25	22	18
About the same	69	68	71
Not quite as good	6	10	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

NOTE: *N* = 916.

Table 2 shows the fairly high level of personal consumption of these adolescents shortly before they turned 18. At that time, almost a year prior to the survey, when most were still in high school and living with their parental family, more than half had a car for their own use, a similar proportion had a high-quality stereo, and over 40% had their own television set. More males than females had each of the three items, with particularly large gender differentials for ownership of a car or stereo.

Most of the adolescents assessed their own possessions and familial living standards as about the same as those of their peers; almost a fourth said they were better off than their peers (Table 3). As a group, the respondents appear to have exaggerated their relative affluence, since we would expect the numbers saying "better" and "not quite as good" to be similar, if the sample were representative of those with whom they compare themselves. Only



**TABLE 4**  
**Adolescent Expectations for Material**  
**Achievement Relative to That of Parents, by Sex**

<i>Expect to Achieve</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>T</i>
Better than parents	42	32	37
About the same as parents	43	47	45
Not quite as good as parents	15	21	18
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%

NOTE: *N* = 916.

a small percentage reported that they or their families were relatively disadvantaged. A substantial proportion (almost 40%), especially the males, expected to exceed the consumption standards of their parents during their own adulthood, while less than 20% expected to fare more poorly (Table 4).<sup>4</sup>

### THE REGRESSION ANALYSIS

For the regression analysis the sample was limited to 677 families, excluding the 24 adolescents who had already married<sup>5</sup> and the 239 cases in which divorce made father's recent income unavailable and complicated intergenerational comparisons.

The regression analysis focuses on the determinants of two adolescent consumption measures—the consumption aspiration index and the ownership index.

Predictors for the adolescent consumption variables included four control variables—mother's age, religion, number of children, and combined parental education, all measured in 1980. The other predictors included

- father's income, 1976, in dollars<sup>6</sup>
- family income from all sources, 1979, in dollars
- home value, 1977 (mother's estimate)
- number of consumer durables in the parental home, 1976 (from a seven-item list)
- adolescent school/living situation at interview, in six categories as follows:<sup>7</sup>
  - enrolled in higher education, dormitory resident

enrolled in higher education, lives at home  
 enrolled in higher education, lives elsewhere  
 attends high school, all living situations  
 no school attendance, lives at home  
 no school attendance, lives away from home  
 adolescent hours of work in usual week<sup>8</sup>  
 adolescent ownership index<sup>9</sup>

The predictors for adolescent desired family size included their consumption aspirations, number of siblings, parental education, and family income.

### FINDINGS: ADOLESCENT CONSUMPTION MEASURES

For the analysis of adolescent consumption, both ownership (Table 5) and consumption aspirations (Table 6), were regressed first on the four control variables noted above (Equation 1). Then the familial economic measures were added, first singly and then in various groupings (Equations 2-7). Finally, adolescent schooling/living arrangements were added (Equations 8 and 9 in Table 5 and 8 and 11 in Table 6). The adolescent aspiration index also was regressed on adolescent ownership and weekly work hours (Table 6, Equations 9-11).

Both number of siblings and parental education have a negative relation to adolescent ownership of durables (Table 5, Equation 1). Number of siblings, perhaps because of financial and/or housing space constraints, apparently limits parental help to children for the purchase of a car, stereo, or television. Better-educated parents, who place a high value on their children's education, may consider these objects a likely distraction from time needed for school work. Such purchases also may be deterred by the necessity to save for college expenses.

The negative coefficient for parental education becomes larger when a measure of income, either family or father's, is included in the regression (Equations 2 and 3). Because of the strong positive correlation between parental education and income, the absolute magnitude of the negative effect of education on ownership is

TABLE 5  
**Standardized Coefficients for Regression of Ownership Index for Adolescents on Parental Family's Socioeconomic Characteristics and on the Adolescent's Current Living Arrangements and Schooling**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Number of siblings	-.12 <sup>a</sup>	-.12 <sup>a</sup>	-.12 <sup>a</sup>	-.12 <sup>a</sup>	-.12 <sup>a</sup>	-.11 <sup>a</sup>	-.11 <sup>a</sup>	-.13 <sup>a</sup>	-.13 <sup>a</sup>
Average parental education	-.13 <sup>a</sup>	-.18 <sup>a</sup>	-.16 <sup>a</sup>	-.15 <sup>a</sup>	-.15 <sup>a</sup>	-.12 <sup>a</sup>	-.19 <sup>a</sup>	-.04 <sup>a</sup>	-.12 <sup>b</sup>
Mother's religion*									
Protestant, Fundamentalist	.04	.05	.05	.04	.03	.04	.04	.03	.03
Catholic	.03	.04	.03	.03	.03	.03	.04	.02	.03
Mother's age	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.03	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.03	-.01
Father's income, 1976		.14 <sup>a</sup>					.15 <sup>a</sup>		.16 <sup>a</sup>
Family income, 1979			.09 <sup>b</sup>						.00
Family home value, 1977				.05			-.03		.11 <sup>a</sup>
Family consumer durables, 1977					.13 <sup>a</sup>	.05	.07		.05
Mother's work, 1962-1980									
Adolescent's school/living situation**									
higher education, lives dorm								-.24 <sup>a</sup>	-.27 <sup>a</sup>
higher education, lives home								-.03	-.04
higher education, lives other								.03	.03
high school, any living situation								-.03	-.05
no school, lives away from home								.04	-.01
R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.04	.03	.03	.04	.03	.05	.07	.10

NOTE: N = 677.

a. Significance = .01.

b. Significance = .05.

\*Omitted category is Protestant, Non-Fundamentalist.

\*\*Omitted category is "no school, lives at home."

TABLE 6

**Standardized Coefficients for Regression of Consumption Aspirations Index for Adolescents on Parental Family's Socioeconomic Characteristics and on the Adolescent's Current Living Arrangements, Schooling, and Work**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Number of siblings	-.04	-.04	-.05	-.04	-.04	-.03	-.04	-.04	-.04	-.01	-.02
Average parental education	-.05	-.08 <sup>b</sup>	-.11 <sup>a</sup>	-.10 <sup>b</sup>	-.07	-.05	-.13 <sup>a</sup>	-.01	-.03	-.02	-.07
Mother's religion*											
Protestant, Fundamentalist	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.02	-.03	-.02	-.02	.04	-.02	-.03	-.03
Catholic	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.06	.04	.06	.05	.05
Mother's age	.01	.01	.02	.01	.02	.01	.02	.04	.02	.02	.04
Father's income, 1976		.07									
Family income, 1979			.13 <sup>a</sup>				.11 <sup>b</sup>				.08
Family home value, 1977				.09 <sup>b</sup>			.04				.06
Family consumer durables, 1977					.08 <sup>b</sup>		.06				.03
Mother's work, 1962-1980						.05	.05				.04
Adolescent's weekly work, 1980									.09 <sup>b</sup>		
Adolescent's school/living situation**											
higher education, lives dorm								-.08			-.05
higher education, lives home								.06			.06
higher education, lives other								-.05			-.06
high school, any living situation								-.04			-.04
no school, lives away from home								.04			.04
Adolescent ownership index										.24 <sup>a</sup>	.22 <sup>a</sup>
R <sup>2</sup>	0	0	.01	.01	.01	0	.02	.01	.01	.06	.07

NOTE: N = 677.

a. Significance = .01.

b. Significance = .05.

\*Omitted category is Protestant, Non-Fundamentalist.

\*\*Omitted category is "no school, lives at home."

biased downward when income is omitted from the regression (Equation 1).

When each of the familial economic measures is added in turn to the equations (Equations 2-6, Table 5), father's income, and to a lesser degree family income, have a positive, and statistically significant, effect on adolescent ownership. Families with means can buy more for themselves and their children. However, the income effect on adolescent ownership, though positive, is fairly small.<sup>10</sup>

Parental holdings of consumer durables has a positive effect on adolescent ownership. Adolescents who become accustomed to television and stereos in the parental home may place a higher value on having such items for their own personal use. Neither home value nor mother's work show a statistically significant effect on ownership. The addition of all the parental economic measures to the parental demographic variables increases the explained variance from 3% to 5% (Equation 5).

Equations 8 and 9 in Table 5 show that among the possible school/living situations of the adolescents at the time of the survey, being enrolled in college and resident in a dormitory had the strongest relationship (negative) to what they owned a year earlier, at which time they were still in high school and usually living at home. The prior ownership of these items among college dormitory residents was lower, frequently by substantial margins, than that for any other group. Dormitory residents include the majority of those attending four-year colleges; 70% of the four-year college students in our sample lived in a college dormitory, and 92% of the dormitory residents were enrolled in four-year programs. High school seniors who went on to college and resided in a dorm either had less disposable income of their own while in high school, had parents who were less willing to purchase these items for them, and/or had alternative interests that made them less motivated to own them. They certainly expressed high educational aspirations at the survey date, at which time most of these adolescents had left high school and many were enrolled in higher education; 71% expected to attain five or more years of college, more than twice the percentage for nonresident college students (data not shown).

The adolescents who have high educational aspirations appear most willing to defer current gratification. They owned, on average, substantially fewer consumer durables while in high school than did those with less ambitious educational plans (data not shown). Also, adolescents who expressed the highest level of educational expectations were least likely to have had premarital sex, a plausible indicator of a willingness to forgo immediate gratification in order to attain future goals. The relationship of educational expectations to premarital sexual experience is completely monotonic—the higher the educational expectations the smaller the percentage of adolescents who reported premarital sex (data not shown).

The substantial decrease in the coefficients for parental education when adolescent residential status is added (Equations 1 and 8, Table 5) shows that some of the effect of parental education on the ownership of their high school senior children is mediated by the intended college route of those children. Equation 8, with college enrollment/dormitory residence and the four parental control variables, explains 7% of the variance in ownership. Equation 9, which adds all the familial parental family economic variables, explains 10% of the variance. The addition of the adolescent's school/living situation to the parental variables doubles the variance explained by the parental measures alone (Table 5).

Turning now to adolescent consumption aspirations, Table 6 shows that familial variables have a somewhat smaller relationship with adolescent consumption aspirations than with ownership. Number of siblings has no statistically significant effect on consumption aspirations and the effect of education is less than it was for ownership. The four control variables (Equation 1) explain almost none of the variance in consumption aspirations. Of the economic measures, family income shows the largest standardized coefficient (.13) (Equation 2), but the size of the relationship is quite modest, indicating that an additional \$20,000 of family income is associated with an additional .42 points on the consumption aspiration scale out of a possible spread of 21 points. Father's income, the proxy Easterlin (1966) used for parental living standards in his analysis, shows no statistically significant relationship to aspirations for this sample. We had expected that parental home value and

holdings of consumer durables, which themselves constitute part of the adolescent's standard of living, would show a stronger relationship to consumption aspirations than would parental income, which probably is less well known to the adolescents, but such is not the case. The total group of familial variables, both background and economic measures, explain only 2% of the variance in consumption aspirations (Equation 7), considerably less than they explained for ownership.

The variable with the strongest relationship to adolescents' consumption aspirations is their own prior ownership of consumer durables. The coefficient for ownership is sizable (.24), statistically significant, and increases the explained variance from the 2% accounted for by the familial variables to just over 6%. None of the other adolescent variables showed a meaningful relationship to aspirations. The school/living situation of the adolescents, which was significantly related to ownership, is not similarly related to aspirations for the future.

An important question is why familial economic status has only weak effects on the ownership and aspirations of adolescents. One key to the weak relationships could be that young people nowadays are able to obtain a number of sizable consumer durables through their own efforts, making their own personal ownership quite independent of their familial standard of living. Although these acquisitions probably were motivated in part by prior unmeasured aspirations, the experience of personal ownership, a qualitatively different experience from sharing familial items, could serve to heighten aspirations. The link between ownership and aspirations should be particularly strong for adolescents who obtained consumer durables through their own work efforts. Studies have shown that the achievement of economic goals through one's own efforts is strongly related to optimistic economic expectations (Katona, 1968, 1975, 1976), and that the achievement of a goal generates confidence in one's ability to achieve and thus broadens aspirations (Lewin, 1935).

Data from Monitoring the Future (MTF; Johnston et al., 1981) provides evidence about the earning patterns of high school youths, showing that a large percentage of high school seniors earn the

means to purchase substantial consumer items on their own. These surveys have collected information from a broad sample of high school seniors for a number of years, obtaining information on aspirations for consumer goods, hours of work for pay, earnings per week, and the disposition of those earnings. Although these data come from a different sample, the age of the respondents in both data sets is similar, and most comparisons can be made across data sets collected in the same year. Reinforcement for the comparability of these two sample populations is provided by the similarity of their views on consumption aspirations and on their expectations to achieve more than their fathers did.

The 1980 MTF data show that 42% of the male and 30% of the female high school seniors earned more than \$50 in an average week. Actually, many high school students begin to work at considerably younger ages, since even 14- and 15-year-olds do substantial amounts of work for pay (Michael and Tuma, 1983). Among the seniors in the MTF survey, the college bound worked fewer hours and earned less money than others. Most high school seniors, whether or not college bound, reported that they received relatively little money from other sources, such as allowances.

The 1982 MTF survey (Bachman, 1983) also found that the majority of seniors spend most of their earnings on personal consumption. Almost half said they saved nothing for higher education, and only 17% saved as much as half of their earnings for that purpose. Saving for educational purposes was more prevalent among the college bound, of whom 22% saved half or more of their earnings for that purpose as compared to only 10% of the non-college bound.

Only a few of the seniors contributed a substantial part of their earnings toward family expenses. Over half reported no such contribution, another fourth contributed only a little, and only 1 in 20 contributed more than half of their earnings to the parental family. All high school seniors, irrespective of gender, said they spent a large part of their earnings on cars, clothing, stereos, television, recreation, and other personal expenses, with males spending a larger share on automobiles than did females. Adolescent control over such sizable sums for personal discretionary spending consti-



tutes a marked change from earlier times. Although the historical data remain sketchy, children in earlier decades either contributed much of their earnings to the parental family or saved them for the establishment of their future household (Thornton and Fricke, 1987).

The current working and spending patterns of young people, as documented in the MTF study, probably help to explain the relatively small association between parental income and adolescent ownership in our sample. If college-bound adolescents—who more often come from well-off families—do less remunerative work in high school, have smaller earnings, and save more of their earnings for their future education, they would be less able and possibly less willing to purchase large consumer goods on their own. Since the MTF seniors also reported that a large proportion of their spending money comes from their own earnings, the higher earnings and lower saving patterns of the non-college bound could enable them to achieve the ownership patterns of the college bound, who may get more help from wealthier parents but have less earned income to spend on consumption goods.

The consumption aspirations expressed by many young people may be higher than they can attain. These aspirations are based on their ability to use all their earnings, frequently quite sizable, for discretionary expenditures while their parents continue to pay for basic living expenses. A large proportion, irrespective of parental income, owned sizable consumption items for their own personal use, and ownership varied little across parental income groups. The ability to use all their income for such purchases may give them an erroneous view of the income required to support their consumption tastes once they are on their own (Bachman, 1983). Many of the adolescents in our study also may overestimate their income potential. A large proportion of these young adults have spent their adolescence in fairly well-off households, raised by parents who had enjoyed a fairly long period of prosperity and had attained the height of their earning power. A high proportion of them said they expected to enjoy an even higher standard of living than their parents had, and the higher their consumption aspirations the more likely they are to think they will surpass their parent's living

standards. A large proportion of them appear to underestimate the importance of additional education for material advancement. Recent census data has reaffirmed the substantial positive relationship between earnings and educational attainment in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984). Yet the mean consumption aspirations of these adolescents varied little (only 0.5 of a point on a 21-point scale across all categories of both educational expectations and current school enrollment), with the highest educational groups expressing the lowest consumption aspirations.

Many of these adolescents probably do not realize that the median real income of white families in the United States has been fairly level since 1970 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1984), that the well-paying factory jobs held by some of their fathers have become more scarce, and that the large size of their cohort will intensify competition for the available good jobs. Thus many of them may not achieve the economic status of their parents and may experience considerable disappointment if they find they cannot attain their consumption aspirations.

One way some of these adolescents may try to protect their consumption goals is by having fewer children than they said they wanted in 1980. These adolescents have expressed fairly large family-size goals, an average of 2.9 children. This is considerably higher than most young couples today are likely to have, given the current total fertility rates of about 1.8 in 1984 (Statistical Abstract, 1987).<sup>11</sup> The consumption aspirations of our young adult sample were negatively related to their family-size plans, with a difference of 0.6 of a child across the expressed range of aspirations — a fairly substantial difference. If their income falls short of meeting both their consumption and family-size goals, many may decide to limit their family size to make their income more adequately support their consumption goals.

The disappointment that may result for many of the young people in our sample could well be a general problem for this age cohort. This is the first generation in the United States that has, for the most part, been completely reared in an urban environment. Previously, urban populations included a large percentage of rural migrants, most of whom, prior to World War II, were white. These migrants,

usually unskilled and poorly educated, were employed predominantly in low-paying jobs. They were willing to accept the life-style that these jobs would support because their consumption goals were modest, reflecting the austerity of their rural background. Although some of today's low-paying urban jobs may be filled by migrants from other countries, most will have to be filled by long-term urban residents, predominantly by the poorly educated. Unlike adolescents of a previous time, the current generation of adolescents has been socialized in an urban environment, with a considerable exposure to affluent life-styles. However, the high consumption aspirations of poorly educated urban youths may lead to disillusionment, if they find they are limited to jobs that cannot support their consumption goals.

## CONCLUSIONS

The large changes in adolescent life-styles in recent decades may account for the relatively modest relationship between adolescent consumption aspirations and parental economic status. Family well-being may have exerted a stronger influence on the consumption aspirations of children in previous decades when consumerism was less widespread among adolescents. But at present it appears that the most important determinant of adolescents' consumption aspirations stems from their own acquisition of consumer durables rather than the economic well-being of their families.

A high percentage of all the sample adolescents, across all parental economic strata, own these durables. This uniformity in ownership probably occurs because many high school students now acquire these durables on their own and because educated parents may be reluctant to give their children things that could impede their educational achievement. Adolescent consumption aspirations also vary little across parental income strata, in part because of the uniformity in adolescent ownership.

The consumption goals of many of these adolescents may not be attained. Their ability to purchase substantial consumer items with their own earnings while being supported in the parental household

may have led them to underestimate the total income needed to support their achieved life-style and future consumption goals. Many of them, given their educational expectations, also may overestimate their earning potential. This cohort also may be unduly optimistic about their financial prospects. A large proportion of them expect to be better off than their fathers and apparently are unaware of recent trends in real income and in the lesser availability of well-paying blue-collar jobs.

Many in this generation, when they marry and must maintain their own household, may well be disappointed when their incomes fall short of supporting their consumption aspirations. This may be particularly true for home ownership, the acquisition considered most important by our adolescent sample, in view of the inflation in home prices in recent years. The less well educated youths may be particularly hard hit, since their consumption aspirations were as high or higher than those with higher levels of either current school enrollment or educational expectations.

The inability of these young adults to attain their desired consumption levels could have many ramifications. Family relationships could be adversely affected. Wives may feel more pressure to work full-time outside the home. Pressure on governments to provide support for "affordable housing" could intensify. Also, many couples might well decide to limit their family size to make their income more adequately support their consumption goals.

## NOTES

1. Since childhood mortality is negligible in this sample, the mother's total births, which was obtained in the survey, provides an accurate measure of sibling size.

2. Aspirations for each of the seven consumer items showed a consistent but moderate zero-order correlation with aspirations for the other items, varying between .23 and .33. Owning a particular item and the importance attached to owning that item in the future were positively related. High adolescent consumption goals were positively associated with owning durables, with a favorable assessment of one's current living standards, and with the expectation of equaling or exceeding parental achievements.

3. A few of the young respondents indicated that they shared one of these items with a sibling. This was coded as having the item for their own use.

4. The adolescents also show some realism; those who say they are better off than their peers less often expect to exceed parental achievement. Additional evidence of this realism comes from the consistent negative correlations between all measures of parental income and assets and adolescent expectations that they will surpass their parents (data not shown).

5. Presumably, these young adults were involved in consumption situations different from those of the single adults.

6. The regressions include only the most recent measure for each parental familial variable, since the zero-order correlations of 1980 adolescent ownership and aspirations with the most recent economic measures for the parental family were consistently stronger than those with familial economic measures for earlier years (data not shown).

7. In the regression analysis this six-category variable was converted into five dichotomous dummy variables, each coded one for respondents who fell into that category and zero if they did not. The omitted category in the regression analysis is "no school attendance; lives at home."

8. Used only in the analysis of aspirations. It is not relevant for the analysis of ownership since it was measured in spring 1980, a year after the ownership reported in the survey.

9. Serves both as a dependent variable and as a predictor of consumption aspirations.

10. Of course, differentials in the value of the items owned by these adolescents, not measured in this survey, may be related to family income measures.

11. Data from a subsample of the 1982 National Study of Family Growth, which asked desired family size of a national sample of women, showed that those with the characteristics of our sample — namely, 18 years old, white, and single — expressed fairly similar family-size goals. Communication from William Pratt, Chief, National Family Growth Study, from data collected in the 1982 Family Growth Survey.

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