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# Transition to adulthood in Latin America: 1960s-2010s

Matheus Menezes dos Santos\*  
Bernardo Lanza Queiroz\*\*  
Ana Paula de Andrade Verona\*\*\*

Multidimensional discussion about transition to adulthood is an incipient theme in Latin America. This paper seeks to describe and characterize the process of change in the transition of men and women in the region between the 1960s and 2010's. Using census data from IPUMS-International for 15 Latin American countries, we calculate the mean ages at transition to adulthood, at entering the labor market, at first union, and at first birth. We concluded there was a process of postponing transition to adulthood, although much stronger for males than for females, which we attribute to the events linked to the transition of each group. With these results, we hope to encourage further research into transition to adulthood in Latin America.

**Keywords:** Transition to adulthood. Latin American youth. Mean age at entry in the labor market. Mean age at the first union. Mean age at the first birth.

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\* Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar), Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil ([matheus.menezes@hotmail.com.br](mailto:matheus.menezes@hotmail.com.br); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8164-61-82>).

\*\* Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar), Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil ([lanza@cedeplar.ufmg.br](mailto:lanza@cedeplar.ufmg.br); <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2890-1025>).

\*\*\* Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar), Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil ([anapaula@cedeplar.ufmg.br](mailto:anapaula@cedeplar.ufmg.br); <https://orcid.org/000-0002-2062-9194>).

## Introduction

Transition to adulthood has been an important research topic in sociology for decades in developed countries (BILLARI; HIEKEL; LIEFBROER, 2019; BILLARI; LIEFBROER, 2010). Social scientists study the topic to understand changes in the process of leaving the parental family and forming a new family, mainly from cohorts born after WWII. These processes are the sequence of events that begins with the end of formal education, entering the job market, and leaving the parental home, evolving into marriage and parenthood. The general conclusion is that young adults have spent more time connected to the parental family and have delayed the formation of their own family, which can be summarized as a postponement of the transition to adulthood (BUCHMAN, 1989; CORIJN; KLIJZING, 2001).

There are fewer studies about transition to adulthood in less developed economies with different cultural backgrounds (GRANT; FURSTENBER, 2007). Latin America is a special and interesting case to study because the region has social, economic and cultural characteristics different from those of developed countries. Fussel and Palloni (2004) and Heaton *et al.* (2002) show that the mean age at first union and at first child has remained stable on the continent in recent decades, while in Europe, Corijn and Klijsing (2001) and Billari (2004) show that young adults have postponed their family formation. Another important factor is the increasing educational level and economic modernization in Latin America, which might be a process leading to postponement of transition to adulthood by raising opportunity costs of early transitions (LLOYD, 2005).

The brief research note provides an overview of the changes in transition to adulthood for several countries in Latin America in recent decades by calculating the mean age at the transition to adulthood using census data. We situate the Latin American context in the literature on the transition to adulthood, highlighting specific characteristics of the region and pointing to more in-depth studies on countries and population subgroups on the continent and suggesting some research questions to deepen our knowledge in this context.

## Data and methodology

Modell *et al.* (1976) present an important methodological approach for the study of the transition to adulthood. It is based on the concept of social psychology whereby the individual becomes an adult when society sees him/her as such, defining the transition as the passage through events to assume social roles typical of adults. In other words, the young person becomes an adult when they assume the role of worker, husband/wife, parent, or when they leave the parental home. Once it is possible to identify whether the individual has gone through any of these transitions, it is possible to identify whether the individual is an adult or not. By using this adulthood identifying criterion, despite its conceptual limitations, it is possible to obtain the proportion of adult individuals by age and sex in each census. Then, we use these proportions to estimate the mean age at the transition

to adulthood using the Singulate Mean Age at First Marriage (SMAFM) method presented by Hajnal (1953). The method is an alternative for calculating life expectancy when there are no data on transition rates that would allow the construction of a traditional life table (WACHTER, 2014). Proposed for the study of nuptiality patterns in historical populations, it is still widely used today for contexts of lack of data on transitions (FUSSEL; PALLONI, 2004; ESTEVE *et al.*, 2013, for example).

**TABLE 1**  
**Census data of Latin America available in the IPUMS**

Argentina	1970, 1980, 1991, 2001
Bolivia	1976, 1992, 2001
Brazil	1960, 1970, 1980, 1991, 2000, 2010
Chile	1970, 1982, 1992, 2002
Colombia	1973, 1985, 1993, 2005
Costa Rica	1973, 1984, 2000, 2011
Ecuador	1974, 1982, 1990, 2001, 2010
Guatemala	1981, 1994, 2002
Honduras	1974, 1988, 2001
Mexico	1990, 2000, 2010
Nicaragua	1971, 1995, 2005
Panama	1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010
Paraguay	1962, 1972, 1982, 1992, 2002
Uruguay	1963, 1975, 1985, 1996, 2006, 2011
Venezuela	1971, 1981, 1990, 2001, 2012

Source: IPUMS (2020).

Table 1 presents the list of countries and censuses years used in the analysis. We used all countries with at least three censuses available. To identify the transition to adulthood, we focused on questions that capture, or at least approximate, the identification of a transitioned individual by each possible event, and are widely available in various demographic censuses in the region. To facilitate cross-national comparison, we use the standardized variables created by the IPUMS (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) from the original microdata from the censuses of Latin American countries:

- **LABFORCE**: shows the status of the individual's participation in the labor market. Although it does not directly capture whether the individual has ever worked or not since one can leave and enter the job market several times, this variable brings a good approximation when it comes to the young population.
- **MARST**: individual's marital status. It is possible to identify the individual who has already been through the complement of the category "single/never married".
- **NCHILD**: the number of children of the individual at home, a proxy to identify who has already transitioned to parenthood (if the number of children is higher than zero). This variable does not capture how many children born alive the individual had since the child may not be at home or have died before the census' reference

date. As this paper focuses on the young population, it is expected that the children are younger and, therefore, live with their mothers. We ignore this variable for men since it is not possible to be sure of the paternity of children assigned to them by the IPUMS algorithm.

- **RELATED:** through the individual's relationship with the head of the household, it is possible to identify who does not live with parents or any other family member. Again, it is not an absorbing state variable, since the individual can leave and return to the parental home, but we believe it is a good approximation.
- **ADULT:** It is a variable created by the authors. If the person has gone through at least one of the transitions (identified here by the variables LABFORCE, MARST, NCHILD, and RELATED), the person is then classified as an adult.

It should be noted that there may be problems with the census data, even after treatment by IPUMS. Variables such as number of children and marital status can have their results altered by changes in the way of asking between one census and another. However, it is still the best source of data for several countries in Latin America for the variables used in this paper.

An analysis of the quality of the data for each variable, each country, and each census year is a work far beyond what is intended in this note. In previous analyses, no alarming discrepancies were noted. We then chose to report the results as calculated directly from the IPUMS data, relying on an expected good quality of the information after decades of consistent use of that data source.

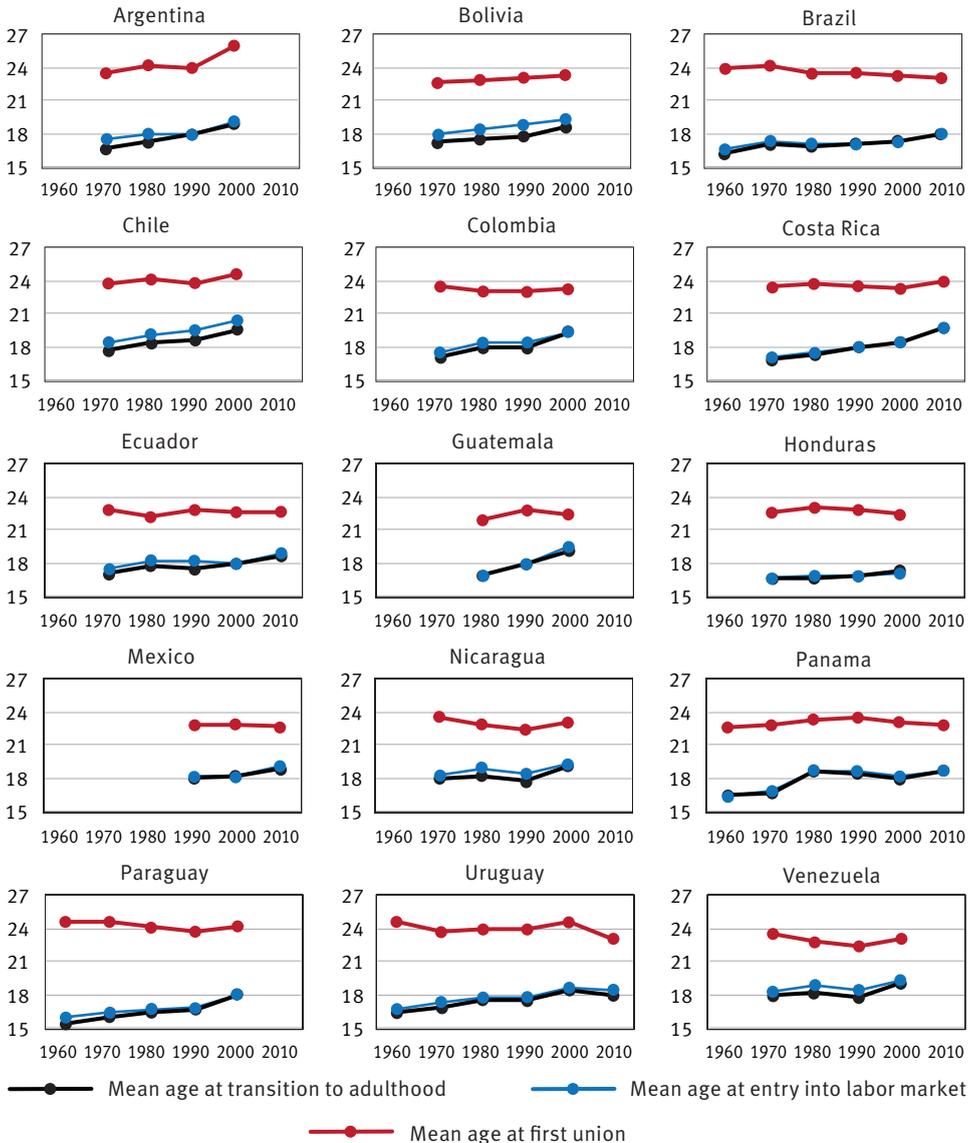
## Results

Figure 1 shows the changes in mean age at transition to adulthood, mean age at entry into the labor market, and mean age at first union among men in Latin America by census' round. We observed an increase in the mean age at transition to adulthood for males in all countries in recent decades, or in other words, a consistent postponement of transition to adulthood in the region. But there are some important regional differences: transition to adulthood in Colombia, the oldest age in the 2000s round, is 2.05 years greater than in Nicaragua, the lowest age in the same census' round.

The postponement of transition can be explained by the increase in the schooling of young Latin Americans from the 1960s (NEIDHÖGER; SERRANO; GASPARINI, 2018; ESTEVE *et al.*, 2013). The idea is that this increase could lead to the postponement of transition to adulthood through two mechanisms (BUCHMAN, 1989; CORIJN; KLIJZING, 2001). The first is that the increase in the schooling period would lead to the postponement of transitions such as entering the labor market due to the simple difficulty of reconciling work and school; the second is that the increase in schooling would lead to an increase in the human capital

of young Latin Americans, thus also increasing their opportunity cost to enter the labor market early or to form a family prematurely.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Mean age of men at transition to adulthood, at entry into the labor market, and at the first union**  
**Latin America countries –1960-2010**



Source: IPUMS (2020).

The results suggest that the adulthood transition of men is strongly determined by entering the labor market, given the extremely high correlation between both transitions. One hypothesis to explain this result is that there is pressure for men to assume the role

of bread-winner within families, which may lead them to choose to enter the labor market only to form a family later, after having an income to do so.

Despite being part of the calculation of the mean age at transition to adulthood, the mean age at leaving home is not shown in this paper because it would be redundant: this measure coincides exactly with the mean age at first union because leaving parental home in Latin America is an event led almost exclusively by marriage.

Figure 2 shows the transitions for women in the same countries and periods. In this case, we also include the transition to having the first child. We found greater stability of mean age at the transition to adulthood over the past few decades compared to men. In some countries, such as Brazil, there was even an inversion: men transitioned earlier than women in 1960 (16.24 years against 18.30 years) but started transitioning later in 2010 (17.92 years against 17.86 years). Moreover, it is notable that the transition of women appears not to be as strongly defined by entry into the labor market, as is the case with men.

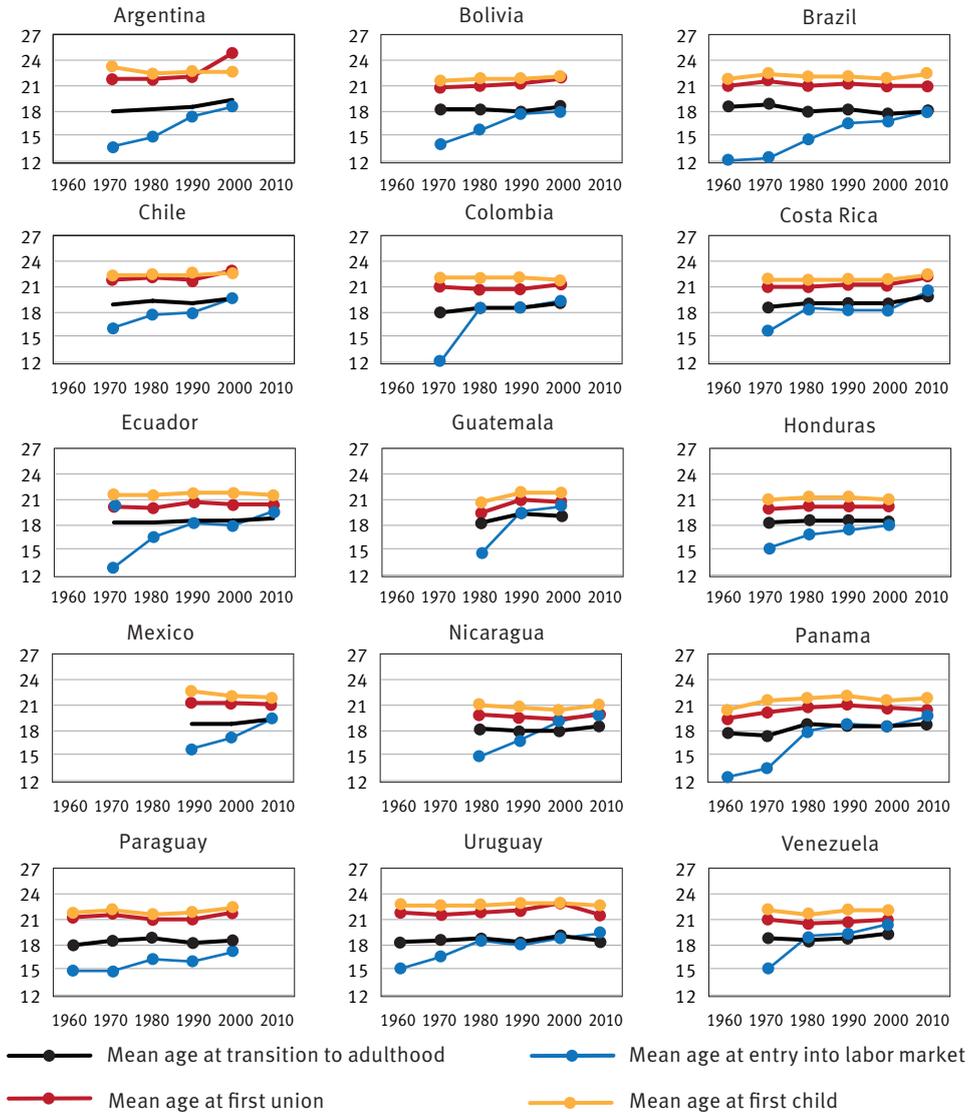
It is important to note that the mean age at entry into the labor market in the 1960s and 1970s may be due to a bias in the SMAFM method: there was a very rapid change in the age structure of females in the labor market, which affects the assumption of the stability method (or *quasi* stability), necessary for the interpretation of the results as a hypothetical cohort. However, it is possible that mean age at entry into the labor market for females is lower than that of males because a considerable part of Latin American females works in paid domestic service, which tends to accept very young workers (BARROS *et al.*, 2001).

The stability of mean age at first union over the decades, both for men and women, confirms the results from Fussel and Paloni (2004), despite the increase in schooling. Esteve *et al.* (2013) explain this stability by increasing informal unions, which are historically younger than formal unions. Informal union in Latin America is strongly associated with lower socioeconomic status due to lower costs and the distance from legal institutions, in contrast to the informal union in the European context, which is associated with higher social classes due to greater degrees of modernity and secularization (ESTEVE *et al.*, 2013; VERONA *et al.*, 2015). Lesthaeghe (2020) argues that part of the increase in informal unions among more educated women is due to more modern patterns of union, but that in particular for Latin America the role of economic vulnerability and cultural inheritance is stronger.

The mean age at the first child follows the trend of mean age at the first union, just a little older. At first, this result seems logical, as a consequence of the marital fertility. However, Latin America has a considerable proportion of non-marital fertility (LAPLANTE *et al.*, 2015), which prompts an alternative explanation: the same factors at micro and macro levels that lead to early union formation also lead to early pregnancy. For example, in a context of greater distance from formal institutions, both unions can form earlier as an economic protection strategy, and fertility can appear earlier due to the lack of access to contraceptive methods. Lima *et al.* (2018) discuss the heterogeneity of the age pattern of fertility in the region, which also appears in our results.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Mean age of women at the transition to adulthood, at entry into the labor market, at the first union, and at the first child**

Latin America countries – 1960-2010



Source: IPUMS (2020).

The greater weight of family formation for the transition to adulthood among women and the stability of mean age at the first union and at first child would explain the stability of the mean age at the transition to adulthood of Latin American females. This hypothesis corroborates the increase in mean age at entry into the labor market despite the maintenance of mean age at transition to adulthood.

## Conclusion

This research note sought to present the Latin American context of transition to adulthood. Most of the previous research focusing on more developed countries indicate a delay in transition to adulthood. We contributed to the analysis of transition to adulthood by looking at different dimensions of the transition whereas previous studies focused on the transition to marriage or trends in fertility. In this paper, we found a movement to postpone the transition to adulthood in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century. We observed that this movement of postponement was stronger for males, while the mean age at the transition to adulthood among females was fairly stable in the period analyzed in almost all countries. A possible explanation for this result could be the difference in the transition of males and females concerning the catalyst event: men would tend to transit to adulthood by entering the labor market and women by forming a new family, as observed before (FUSSEL; PALLONI, 2004). As a result, postponing entry into the labor market due to increased schooling and policies to limit child labor was more effective in delaying transition to adulthood among men than among women. Transition to adulthood of men in Latin America is affected by what Corijn and Klijzing (2001) identify as the institutionalization of the transition to adulthood: it was postponed by increasing the legal restrictions on the transition via entry into the labor market. The transition of women was less affected by institutionalization, as their transition is still strongly linked to events that historically take place outside legal institutions, such as informal union and teenage pregnancy.

Mean age at transitions in Latin America is lower than that reported in the US (FUSSEL *et al.*, 2007) and Europe (BILLARI, 2004), which might be explained by the early family formation and younger entry into the labor market due to a lower rate of entry into higher education. Transition to adulthood in Latin America was expected to be closer to that described in countries like Portugal, Spain, and Italy due to cultural heritage. However, these countries, classified as *familistic* (MAYER, 2001; BILLARI, 2004), have the latest transitions in Europe, especially concerning family formation. We hypothesize that this cultural heritage is attenuated by the greater economic vulnerability and distance from legal institutions among Latin American families, which forces young people to work earlier and allows them to form families sooner. As a region in which the women's consolidation movement in the labor market is still ongoing, gender inequality also plays a role in advancing the transition to women's adulthood by discouraging them from pursuing a career in the labor market. An interesting hypothesis is that wealthier families can protect their children from economic vulnerability, and perhaps some *familistic* cultural heritage will prevail among them.

We also emphasize that there are limitations in the database, but census data are still the main source of data for studying the population of Latin America from a cross-country perspective and over long periods of time. The purpose of this note is not to analyze the transition for each country, or even the difference between them, but rather to present an

overview of the theme on the region. One-country studies are essential to fill these gaps, even by using unique data sources from each country.

Thus, this brief research note brings two main contributions. The first is to locate Latin America as a whole in the discussion about postponing or advancing the transition to adulthood. The second, and more important, is to encourage new studies to better understand the particularities of the transition to adulthood in the continent and its population subgroups. Latin America is a region marked by strong inequalities, and the results for the total population shown in this paper certainly conceal socioeconomic disparities that, once clarified, will help understand transition in the continent better.

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## About the authors

*Matheus Menezes dos Santos* is a Ph.D. Candidate in Demography at Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar), Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG).

*Bernardo Lanza Queiroz* is Associate Professor of Demography at Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar), Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG).

*Ana Paula de Andrade Verona* is Associate Professor of Demography at Centro de Desenvolvimento e Planejamento Regional (Cedeplar), Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG).

## Contact address

*Matheus Menezes dos Santos*

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Ciências Econômicas, sala 2096  
Avenida Antônio Carlos, 6627, Pampulha  
31270-901 – Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil

*Bernardo Lanza Queiroz*

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Ciências Econômicas, sala 2096  
Avenida Antônio Carlos, 6627, Pampulha  
31270-901 – Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil

*Ana Paula de Andrade Verona*

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Ciências Econômicas, sala 2096  
Avenida Antônio Carlos, 6627, Pampulha  
31270-901 – Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil

## Resumo

*Transição para a vida adulta na América Latina: 1960-2010*

A transição para a vida adulta é um tema pouco explorado de forma multidimensional na América Latina. Este artigo busca descrever e caracterizar o processo de mudança na transição de homens e mulheres na região, entre 1960 e 2010. Utilizando dados censitários fornecidos pela plataforma IPUMS para 15 países latino-americanos, foram calculadas as idades médias na transição para a vida adulta, no ingresso no mercado de trabalho, na primeira união e no nascimento do primeiro filho. Conclui-se que houve um processo de postergação da transição para a vida adulta, porém, foi muito mais forte para os homens do que para as mulheres, o que pode ser atribuído aos acontecimentos ligados à transição de cada grupo. Com esses resultados, esperamos encorajar mais investigações sobre a transição para a vida adulta na América Latina.

**Palavras-chave:** Transição para a vida adulta. Juventude latino-americana. Idade média de entrada no mercado de trabalho. Idade média na primeira união. Idade média ao nascimento do primeiro filho.

## Resumen

*Transición a la adultez en América Latina 1960-2010*

La transición a la adultez es un tema poco explorado de manera multidimensional en América Latina. Este artículo busca describir y caracterizar el proceso de cambio en la transición de hombres y mujeres en la región entre las décadas de 1960 y 2010. Utilizando datos censales proporcionados por la plataforma IPUMS para 15 países de América Latina, calculamos las edades medias en la transición a la edad adulta, entrada al mercado laboral, primera unión y primer nacimiento. Concluimos que hubo un proceso de postergación de la transición a la adultez que fue mucho más fuerte para los hombres que para las mujeres, lo que atribuimos a los hechos relacionados con la transición de cada grupo. Con estos resultados esperamos impulsar nuevas investigaciones sobre la transición a la vida adulta en América Latina.

**Palabras clave:** Transición a la adultez. Juventud latinoamericana. Edad media de ingreso al mercado laboral. Edad media de la primera unión. Edad media al primer nacimiento.

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