

## A Generation Apart: Comparing the Economic Status of Young Singles in 1984-85 and 2004-05

A recent article using data from the BLS Consumer Expenditure Survey (CE) compares the spending patterns of young (21-to-29-year-old), single adults interviewed in 2004-05 to those of young, single adults interviewed twenty years earlier in 1984-85 (Geoffrey Paulin, *Monthly Labor Review*, December 2008, "Expenditure patterns of young single adults: two recent generations compared," pp. 19-50; on the Internet at [www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2008/12/art2full.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2008/12/art2full.pdf)). Below, the author summarizes some of the key findings from the article.

The results show clear differences in some spending patterns and other characteristics for these two groups. However, the results also show some ways in which these two groups are similar.

### Ways in which young singles were better off in 2004-05 than in 1984-85

Young singles in the more recent period were more likely to:

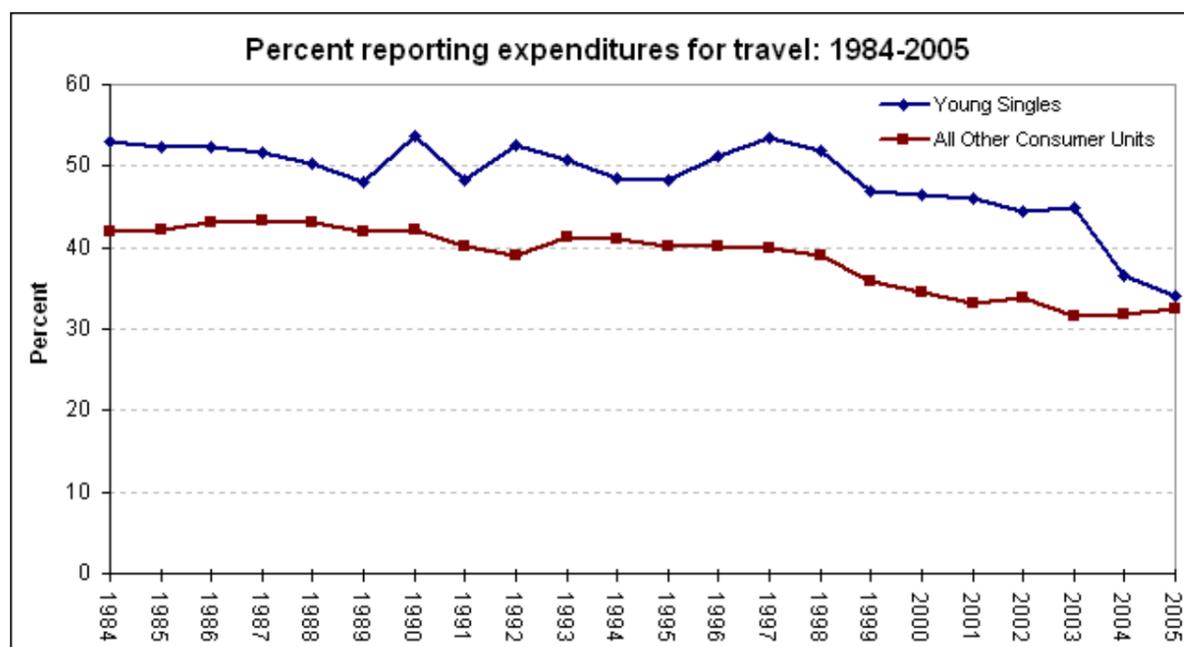
- have at least some college experience;
- own their homes;
- be sole occupants of their households (that is, not relying on roommates or living with family members in order to afford housing) than were their counterparts in the mid-1980s.

### Ways in which young singles were worse off in 2004-05 than in 1984-85

Young singles in the more recent period:

- traveled less than those in the earlier period;
- faced higher education costs. The inflation rate for college tuition and fees rose much faster than prices for all goods and services from January 1984 to December 2005.

Travel provides a particularly interesting example of how spending by young singles has changed over time. Total outlays for non-business travel by young singles were down in 2004-05 compared with 1984-85, as was the percent of young singles reporting having these travel expenditures.



This decrease in percent reporting is consistent with patterns observed for other households. Some of the decline may be due to price increases for travel-related items. Some may be attributable to new technologies that were not so widely available in 1984-85, such as e-mail, cell phones, and instant messaging that facilitate communication.

### Ways in which young singles were about the same in 2004-05 and in 1984-85

- After adjusting for inflation, average total spending for young singles did not change in a statistically significant way.
- Young singles in 2004-05 may be better off than young singles in 1994-95, as young singles in 1984-85 clearly were. That is, previous research found that young singles in 1994-95 were clearly worse off than young singles in 1984-85 (Geoffrey Paulin and Brian Riordon, *Monthly Labor Review*, February 1998, pp. 10-21; [www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1998/02/art2full.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1998/02/art2full.pdf)), and the current work states that the fortunes of young singles may be improving after this period of decline. If so, young singles in both 1984-85 and 2004-05 were better off than those in the mid-1990s.

### Definitions

Young singles are defined here as persons ranging in age from 21 to 29 years old who have never been married and who constitute their own consumer units (see also [www.bls.gov/cex/csxfags.htm#definitions](http://www.bls.gov/cex/csxfags.htm#definitions)). In addition, outlays are analyzed to describe spending patterns and economic status because the income data are not directly comparable over time due to methodological changes in data processing starting with the publication of the 2004 CE data, and because outlays include certain payments that are not included in the definition of expenditures. Other technical differences between outlays and expenditures are described in the article at [www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2008/12/art2full.pdf](http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2008/12/art2full.pdf).

### Percent reporting expenditures for travel: 1984-2005

Year	Young singles	All other consumer units
1984	52.9	42.0
1985	52.4	42.1

Year	Young singles	All other consumer units
1986	52.3	43.0
1987	51.6	43.3
1988	50.3	43.0
1989	48.0	41.9
1990	53.6	42.1
1991	48.3	40.1
1992	52.7	39.0
1993	50.9	41.2
1994	48.6	41.0
1995	48.2	40.1
1996	51.1	40.1
1997	53.4	40.0
1998	51.9	39.0
1999	47.0	35.9
2000	46.5	34.6
2001	46.0	33.1
2002	44.5	33.7
2003	44.9	31.7
2004	36.6	31.9
2005	34.2	32.5

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