

**Transitions to Adulthood in Urban South Africa:  
Evidence from a Panel Survey**

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**David Lam and Jeremy Seekings**

**Abstract:**

This paper uses the Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS), a new longitudinal survey of 4,800 young people in metropolitan Cape Town, to analyze multiple dimensions of the transition to adulthood. CAPS provides data on reproductive health, sexual activity, schooling, work, and living arrangements for urban youth. Results indicate high levels of sexual activity, but low levels of marriage and cohabitation. Over 70% of 18 year-old African females have had sex, 22% have been pregnant, and 14% have given birth, but only 4% have lived with a partner. These patterns are combined with high levels of school enrollment, but limited transitions into employment for African males and females.

## **Introduction**

The dramatic social and political changes in South Africa over the last decade have greatly changed the opportunities and incentives facing young people. The apartheid system that ended with the 1994 election imposed restrictions on non-white South Africans in many dimensions, including what schools they could attend, where they could live, whom they could marry, and what jobs they could hold. Although opportunities have expanded, young South Africans today face many challenges. Like their parents, they will enter a labor market with high unemployment and extreme earnings inequality. Unlike their parents, they have grown up during the age of HIV/AIDS, surrounded by one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world. This makes transitions in reproductive behavior especially complex, with the impact of new opportunities in school and work combining with the impact of HIV/AIDS. The purpose of this paper is to analyze transitions to adulthood for urban South African youth in a wide variety of dimensions, including sexual activity, childbearing, schooling, work, and living arrangements.

## **The Cape Area Panel Study**

This paper takes advantage of a new household survey in metropolitan Cape Town. The Cape Area Panel Study (CAPS), a collaborative project of the University of Cape Town and the University of Michigan, is a longitudinal study of youth and their families. This paper uses the first wave of the survey, which was conducted in the second half of 2002. <sup>1</sup>

Wave 1 of CAPS contains two major sources of data. First, the survey includes a household questionnaire, in which demographic data on the entire household is collected. Second, the survey includes a detailed young adult questionnaire, which collects data on schooling, employment, and fertility of household members between the ages of 14 and 22. The young adult questionnaire includes a life history calendar that provides retrospective information on schooling, living arrangements, employment, fertility, and sexual partnerships. A basic numeracy and literacy skills test was also administered to each youth respondent.

CAPS was designed using a two-stage probability sample of households. In terms of race, the population of Cape Town is predominantly coloured (about 50%), with white (22%) and

black/African (27%) minority populations. Because we desired roughly equal numbers of young adults from each racial group, we oversampled African and white households. The first-stage sample of Census Enumeration Areas (EAs) was drawn using the 1996 Census as a sampling frame. Because EAs in South Africa are highly racially homogeneous, we sampled EAs at different rates by race to obtain the desired selection of households by race. Once a household was contacted for interview, a decision on whether to include it in the survey was made based on the household's demographics. All households containing at least one resident between the ages of 14 and 22 were selected for inclusion in the sample. Additionally, a subset of households with no 14-22 year olds were also included. Upon recruitment into the survey, the household demographic questionnaire was administered to the person most knowledgeable about the household. Full-length young adult interviews were given separately to up to three young adults in the household. The baseline wave of CAPS provides data on roughly 5,000 households and 4,750 young adults.

### **Overview of the CAPS sample**

Table 1 shows the distribution of our young adult sample by population group. The unweighted sample has 2151 African respondents, 2002 coloured respondents (including 22 Indian), and 599 white respondents. The roughly equal numbers of African and coloured respondents is the result of our intentional oversampling of African areas. The weighted sample is roughly 19% white, 28% African, and 53% coloured. These numbers are within one percentage point of the population group distribution of 14-22 year-olds in the 1996 South African census for metropolitan Cape Town.<sup>2</sup>

Following the experience of most household surveys in South Africa, response rates in CAPS were relatively high in African and coloured areas and disappointingly low in white areas. Household level response rates were about 89% in African areas, 83% in coloured areas, and 46% in white areas, for an overall household response rate of 74%. Young adult response rates, conditional on the participation of the household, were quite high, even in white areas. Given participation of the household, response rates for the selected young adults were 93% in African

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<sup>1</sup> One-third of the sample was interviewed for a second time in 2003, the remaining two-thirds were interviewed for a second time in 2004, and the entire sample is being interviewed again in 2005. Details about CAPS, including questionnaires, are available at <http://caps.psc.isr.umich.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> Additional details on the design of the CAPS sample, including analysis of response rates, is presented in the CAPS technical documentation (Lam and Seekings, 2005).

areas, 88% in coloured areas, and 86% in white areas. Combining the household and young adult response rates, the proportion of potential young adult respondents who actually completed questionnaires was 83% in African areas, 72% in coloured areas, and 42% in white areas. While we think it is important to include the white results in our analysis, it is important to keep in mind that the white sample may not be representative of the population of all white young adults in Cape Town.

## **Schooling**

Given the importance of schooling in the lives of these young adults, we begin with an overview of schooling patterns. Figure 1 shows three important indicators of schooling at each age from 6 to 20 based on the retrospective reports of the CAPS respondents who were age 20-22 in 2002. The results are broken down by gender and population group. The top panel shows the proportion of respondents who were enrolled in school or post-school educational institution at each age. There are several important features about the age profile of school enrollment. The first is that enrollment rates are high, with enrollment rates for all groups are close to or above 90% for all ages between 9 and 15. A second important feature is that female enrollment rates are slightly higher than male enrollment rates for all three population groups until around age 18. The figure shows that Africans lag behind in starting school, with similar patterns for males and females. Only about 80% of African males and females were in school at age 8, compared to 99% for coloured and white males and females. Above age 9 Africans have enrollment rates of 95% to 99%, similar to those of coloured and white youth. Another important feature of the figure is the fact that Coloured enrollment rates begin to fall above age 15, with Africans having higher enrollment rates than Coloured youth at all ages above 15. African enrollment rates are about 85% at age 17 and 70% at age 18.

The second panel of Figure 1 shows the number of grades completed at each age for our 20-22 year-old respondents. The figure shows that white males and females advance almost one grade of school per year on average, reaching a mean of about 8 grades completed by age 14. Although coloured youth start school at a similar age as whites, and have almost identical enrollment rates, the figure shows that they lag behind white youth in grade advancement from an early age. By age 14 coloured females were about 0.5 grades behind white females, with a similar gap between white males and coloured males. Africans start school later and their age profile of

grade advancement has a lower slope. By age 14 African females had completed 6.4 grades and African males had completed 5.8 grades. The gap between African males and white males was already two full grades by age 14. Because of the high enrollment rates for Africans in the late teens, African grade attainment almost catches up with coloured grade attainment by age 20.

The second panel of Figure 1 also shows a female advantage in grade attainment in all three groups. As pointed out by Anderson, Case, and Lam (2001), girls move through school faster than boys in South Africa, with female schooling exceeding male schooling by about one full grade among recent cohorts of Africans who have finished schooling.

The top two panels suggest that grade repetition may be an important factor in determining grade attainment. One of the valuable features of the CAPS data is that it provides direct measures of grade repetition. For each grade of schooling respondents were asked whether they passed the grade, failed the grade, or dropped out before completing the grade. The bottom panel of Figure 1 shows the cumulative number of grades failed at each age, as reported by our respondents age 20-22.

### **Transitions from School to Work**

Figures 2 and 3 analyze the transition from school to work as reported retrospectively by the same respondents aged 20-22 who were used in Figure 1. The figures show the percentage in each of four school/work combinations at each age – in school and not working, in school and working, working and not in school, and neither working nor in school. Work is defined broadly here, and includes any work done during the year. This includes work during school vacations, so it is important to keep in mind that the work/school combination does not necessarily imply that work was being combined with school.

Looking at the results for females in Figure 1, we see large differences in the transitions from school to work across population groups. While being in school without working is by far the predominant activity for all three groups at age 14, by age 17 some sharp differences have emerged. Significant proportions of white females are working during years when they are still in school, with 45% of white girls in the work and school category at age 17. African females have extremely low rates of work. The percentage of African girls who work during years when they are still in school is negligible, never exceeding 3%. Less than 10% of the African females report that they were working at age 20, compared to 58% of white females. The transition from school

to work for coloured females is characterized more by a sharp transition than it is for either white or African females. Relatively small proportions of coloured females work during the years they are in school, and the proportion of coloured females enrolled in school drops below that of both Africans and whites by age 16. White females have the highest proportions working at all ages, but almost always combine this work with school until age 18.

### **Transitions in Sexual Activity and Pregnancy**

Wave 1 of CAPS collected extensive data on the sexual activity and childbearing experience of our young adult respondents, including retrospective histories as part of the life history calendar. Figure 4 shows the transitions in sexual activity and pregnancy reported by our respondents aged 21-22. Rates of sexual activity before age 16 are low in all three groups. About 12% of African females report that they had sex by age 15, compared to 5% for coloured females and 3% for white females. Rates of sexual activity increase rapidly with age for Africans, with 60% having had sex by age 18 and 80% by age 20. Coloured females have considerably lower rates of sexual activity than Africans, but very similar rates of pregnancy. About 24% had a pregnancy by age 19 and about 31% had a pregnancy by age 20 in both the African and coloured sample of 21-22 year-olds. White females have very similar rates of sexual activity as Coloured females, with about 46% having had sex by age 20, but less than one percent of our white female sample had been pregnant by age 20.

### **Overview of Other Results**

Table 1 provides an illustrative set of descriptive statistics for key reproductive, demographic, and economic transitions, looking only at the African (black) female portion of the sample. These results use the cross-section of all African respondents age 14-22, rather than being limited to the 21-22 year-olds used for the retrospective reports in Figures 1-4. With over 1000 African females in our sample, we are able to generate meaningful statistics by single year of age, an important feature of our data given the rapid changes that take place as young people make the transition through the teenage years. Table 2 presents a selected set of outcomes for males. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate several important features of the transition to adulthood in South Africa. Sexual activity begins relatively young for urban African youth, with 25% of 15 year-old girls and 22% of 15 year-old boys reporting that they had ever had sex. This percentage rises to about 53% for both boys and girls at age 17.

As shown in Table 1, girls typically have their first sexual encounter with older males, consistent with the pattern observed in most populations. It is noteworthy, however, that the age differences are not as large as those often suggested in discussions of HIV/AIDS and reproductive health in South Africa. Among the 25% of 15 year-olds who reported having experienced a sexual encounter, the average age of the sexual partner was 17.4. While some girls reported having sex with men who were 10 or more years older, this was far from typical among our respondents. Responses for boys present a fairly consistent picture, with the average age of the first sexual partner reported as between 14 and 15 for boys age 17 and above.

As shown in Table 1, the percentage of young women who have ever been pregnant rises steeply with age, from 14% at age 16 to 22% at age 18 and 31% at age 19. These pregnancies often lead to births, with 13% of 17 year-olds and 21% of 19 year-olds reporting that they had ever given birth. (In the final paper we will present detailed analysis of pregnancy outcomes, using the results from the CAPS retrospective calendars.) Marriage and cohabitation, even using a broad definition, are much less common than childbirth for young South African women. While 21% of 19 year-old women report that they had given birth to at least one child, only 8.5% had ever been married or lived in a cohabiting relationship. Even at age 22, when 39% of women report having had a birth, only 17% of women have ever been married or cohabited with a partner.

An important feature of the CAPS survey is that it collects data on a wide range of youth outcomes, including detailed information on school and labor force activity. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate some important features of school and work in urban South Africa. School enrollment rates for Africans are quite high, with around 95% enrollment rates for both boys and girls at age 15, and over 75% enrolled at age 18. As pointed out in Figure 1, girls move through school faster than boys in South Africa, with female schooling exceeding male schooling by about one full grade among recent cohorts of Africans who have finished schooling. This absence of a female disadvantage in schooling is an interesting feature of South Africa society that we will include in our analysis of transitions to adulthood.

Looking at the percentage of young people who report that they worked for pay in the last year, using a very broad definition of work, Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate the consequences of high youth unemployment in South Africa. Among 19 year-olds, only 8% of women and 11% of men report having worked in the last year. Even by age 22 the percentage working is only 22% for

women and 36% for men. As we will discuss in the final paper, these very low employment rates for African youth are considerably lower than the rates reported by Coloured and White youth. These poor employment opportunities, which continue to be observed among adult Africans, are an important part of the context that must be kept in mind in analyzing transitions to adulthood for urban youth.

Tables 1 and 2 are presented in order to give some sense of the kinds of data that are available in the CAPS survey and to illustrate some of the patterns that we plan to analyze in greater detail in the paper. The goal of the paper will be to analyze transitions to adulthood in a broad perspective, looking at the links between transitions in different dimensions. For example, we will be able to look at the connections between school, work, and sexual transitions, even though the causal links may not be entirely clear. We also plan to look at the impact of household circumstances, including both long-term and short-term economic conditions, on youth outcomes. The questionnaire includes detailed questions on health and economic shocks experienced in the household, including the death, illness, and unemployment of adult household members. A major focus of the project is on the impact of these shocks on youth outcomes, including school, sexual activity, and work. The survey also includes rich detail on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior related to HIV/AIDS, including number of sexual partners, condom use, knowledge of means to prevent HIV infection, and whether respondents know individuals who are HIV positive.

## **References**

- Anderson, Kermyt G., Anne Case, and David Lam (2001) "Causes and Consequences of Schooling Outcomes in South Africa: Evidence from Survey Data." *Social Dynamics* 27(1): 1-23.
- Lloyd, Cynthia (2005) Editor, *Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*, National Academies Press: Washington, DC.

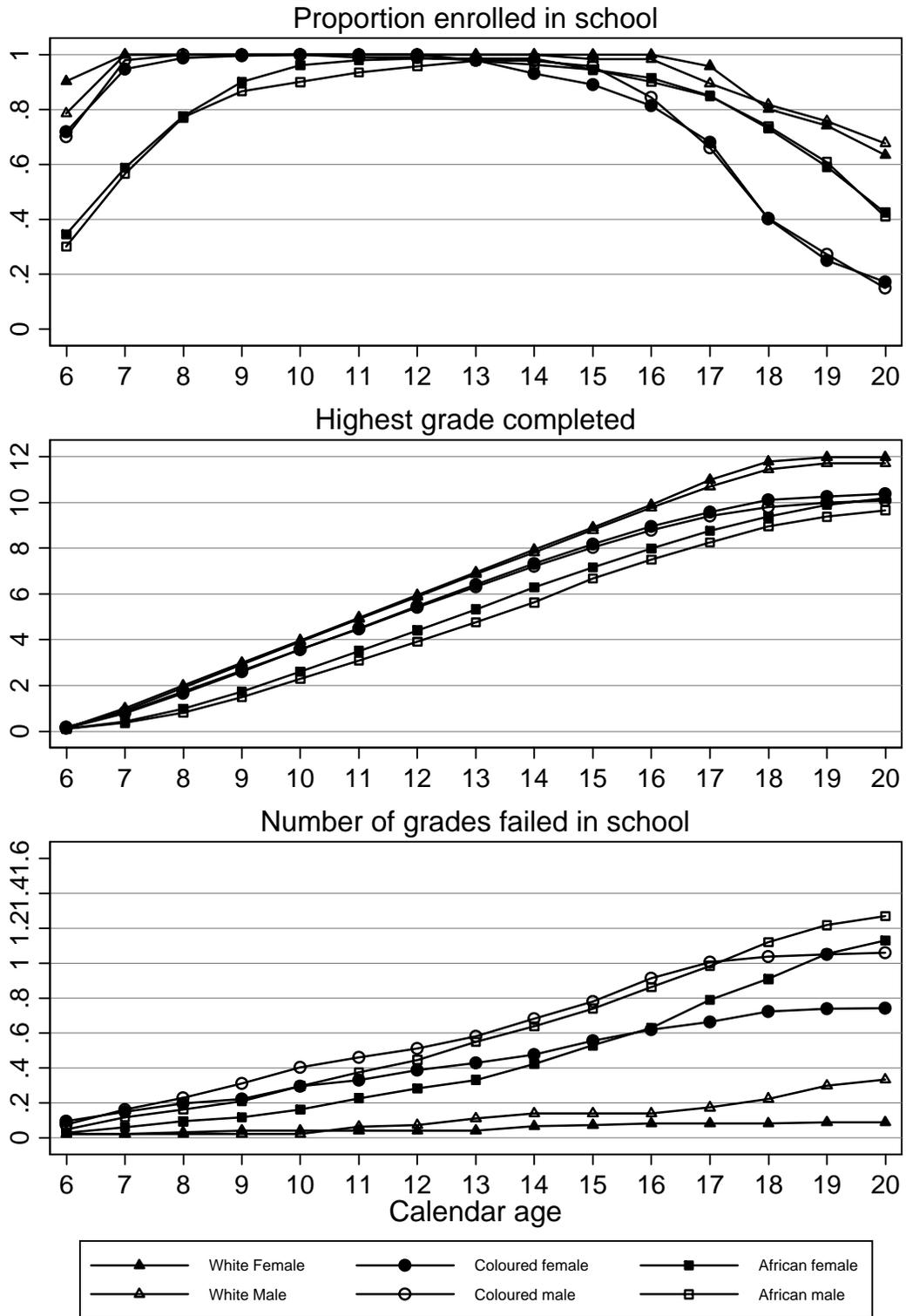
**Table 1.**  
Markers of key transitions by year of age, African females, Cape Town South Africa  
Cape Area Panel Study Wave 1, 2002

<i>Age</i>	<i>Sample size</i>	<i>Ever had sex</i>	<i>Age of partner at first sex</i>	<i>Ever pregnant</i>	<i>Ever had child</i>	<i>Ever married or lived with partner</i>	<i>Worked in last year</i>	<i>Currently in school</i>
14	89	2.2%	14.5	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	98.9%
15	114	25.4%	17.4	3.4%	0.9%	0.0%	0.0%	94.7%
16	135	35.6%	17.4	14.3%	3.7%	0.0%	1.5%	88.9%
17	132	53.0%	18.8	18.6%	8.3%	2.3%	2.3%	82.6%
18	148	72.8%	18.5	21.7%	13.5%	4.1%	2.0%	77.6%
19	142	81.7%	19.3	31.0%	21.1%	8.5%	7.7%	54.9%
20	132	90.1%	19.8	29.7%	25.0%	7.6%	18.9%	33.6%
21	111	88.3%	19.7	40.0%	30.6%	9.9%	19.8%	28.8%
22	111	93.7%	19.7	48.1%	38.7%	17.1%	21.8%	27.0%
Total	1,114	62.2%	19.1	29.4%	15.9%	5.5%	8.1%	65.0%

**Table 2.**  
Markers of key transitions by year of age, African males, Cape Town South Africa  
Cape Area Panel Study Wave 1, 2002

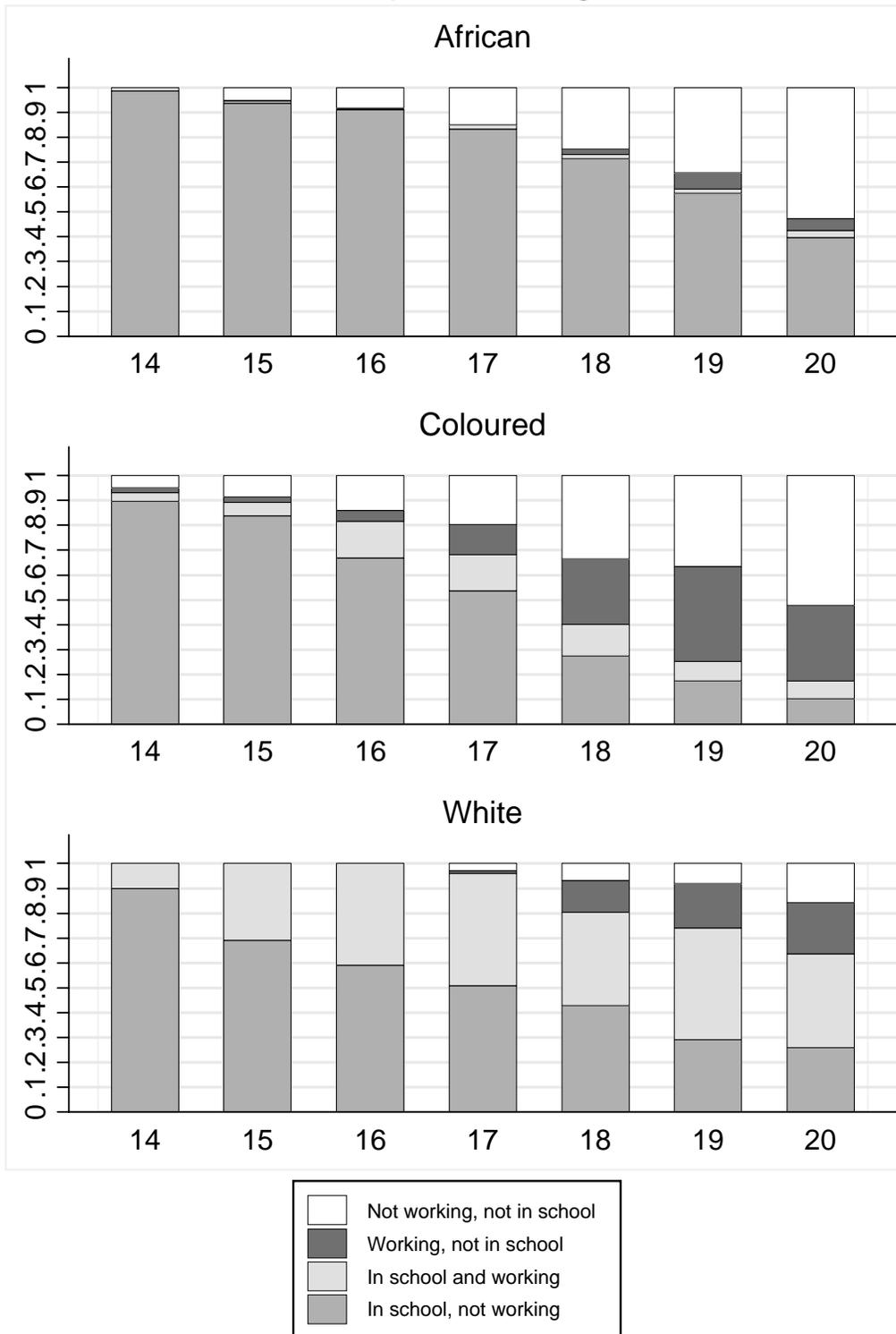
<i>Age</i>	<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>Ever had sex</i>	<i>Age of first sex partner</i>	<i>Worked in last year</i>	<i>Currently in school</i>
14	91	14.3%	12.8	1.1%	94.5%
15	87	21.8%	12.8	1.1%	96.6%
16	86	49.4%	13.5	4.7%	91.9%
17	91	52.7%	14.3	6.6%	89.0%
18	98	63.3%	14.1	9.2%	76.5%
19	123	81.8%	14.8	10.7%	68.0%
20	92	81.3%	14.5	23.9%	43.5%
21	92	89.1%	14.8	23.9%	33.7%
22	96	87.4%	14.9	35.8%	20.8%
Total	856	61.3%	14.4	13.1%	67.7%

Figure 1. Schooling experience from retrospective histories  
CAPS respondents age 21-22, 2002



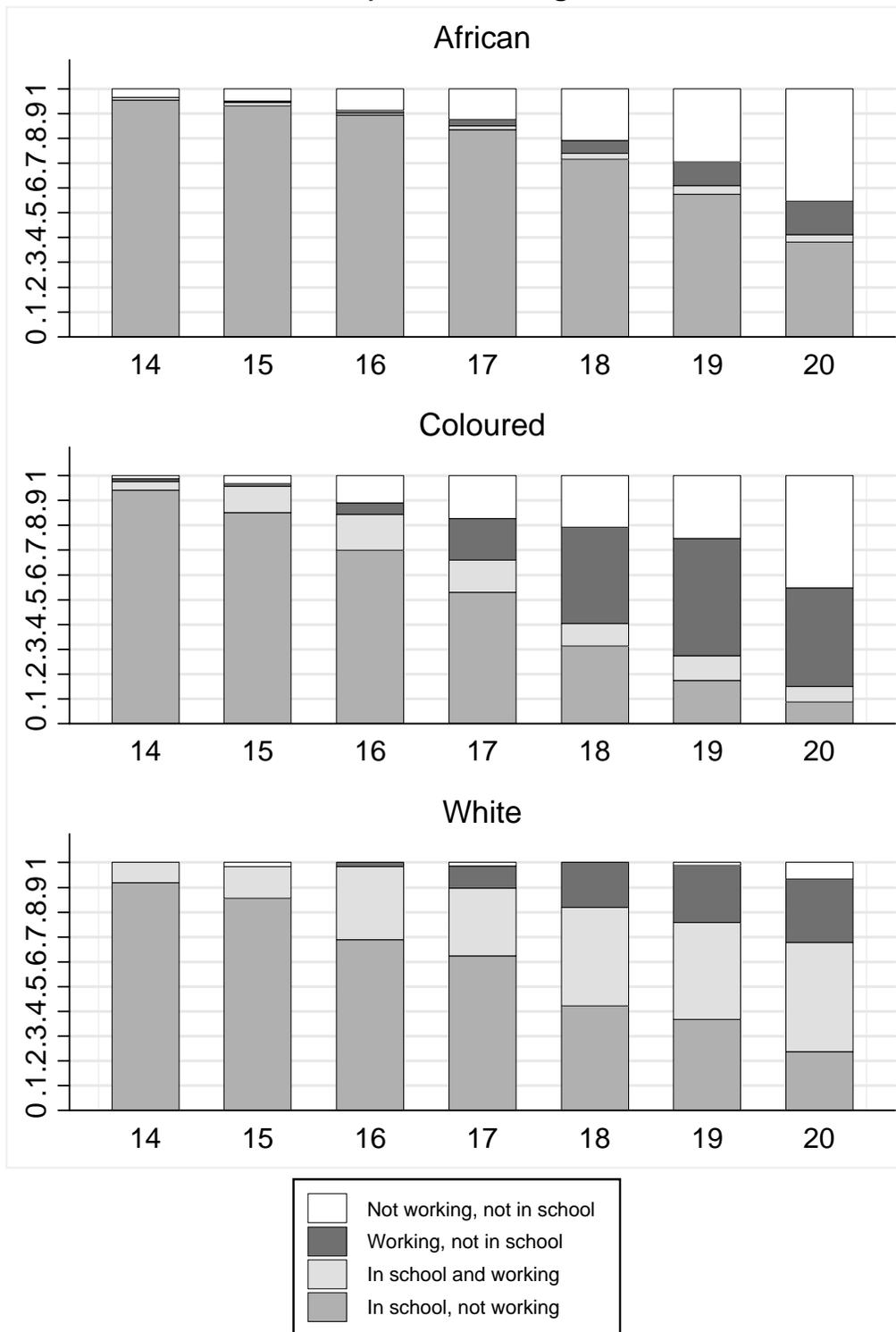
Cape Area Panel Study Wave 1, 2002

Figure 2. Categories of work and school at age 14-22  
 Female CAPS respondents age 21-22, 2002



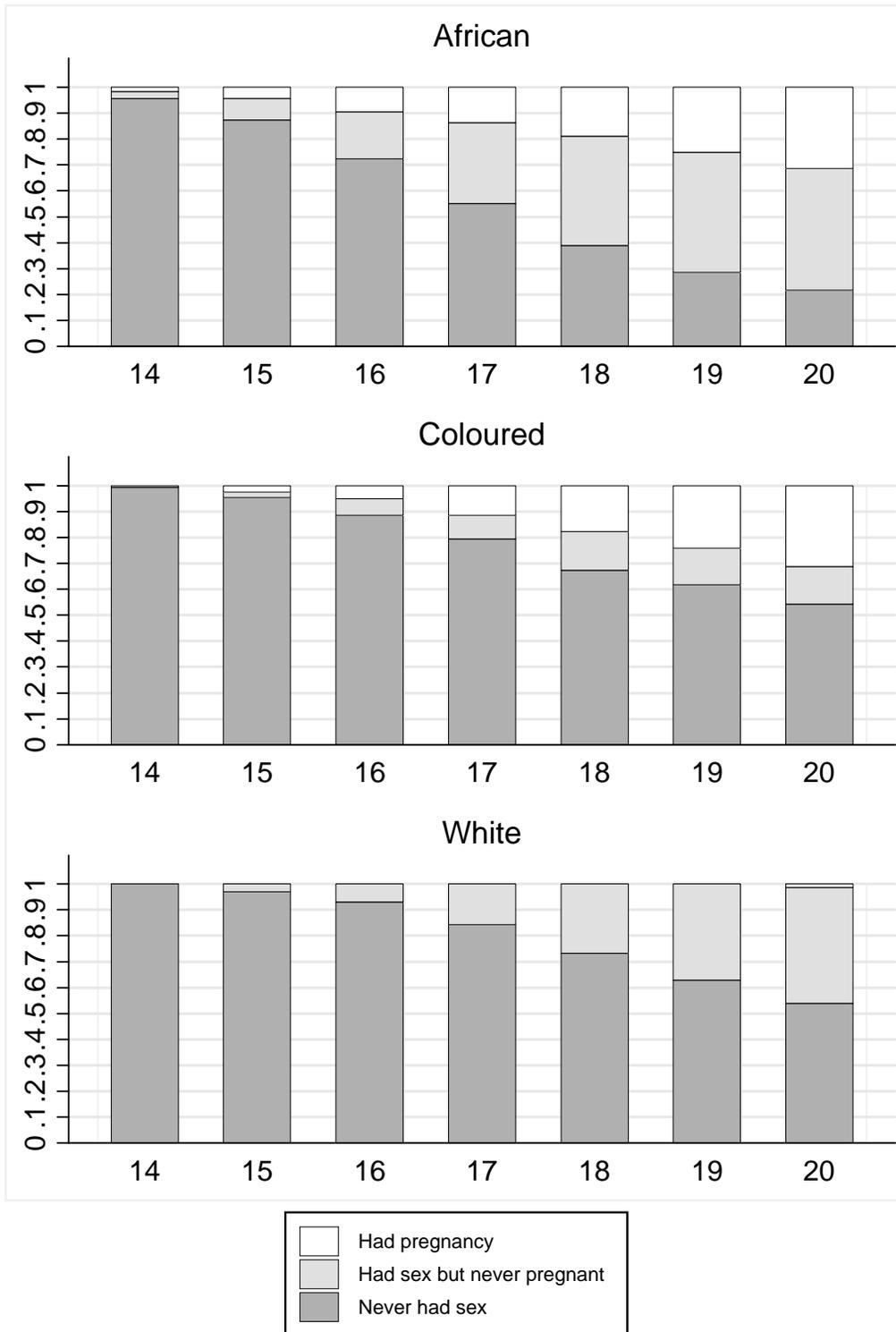
Cape Area Panel Study Wave 1, 2002

Figure 3. Categories of work and school at age 14-22  
Male CAPS respondents age 21-22, 2002



Cape Area Panel Study Wave 1, 2002

Figure 4. Sexual activity between ages 14 and 20  
Female CAPS respondents age 21-22, 2002



Cape Area Panel Study Wave 1, 2002