

# Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Citizens

By Richard G. Braungart and Margaret M. Braungart

Today's youth as another "lost generation" is a theme being popularized by writers, film makers, and the press. Much of the impetus for this perception comes from Douglas Coupland's 1991 novel *Generation X*, which labeled the current cohort of youth the "X" generation because they have no real identity or future. Political writers Neil Howe and William Strauss echoed the theme in their 1993 book *13th Gen*, referring to these unlucky youths, born 13 generations after the founding fathers and the first downwardly mobile generation in American history.

Today's youth are often depicted as self-centered, alienated, apathetic, lazy, uncommitted, rootless, and without direction. It is not entirely their fault, the argument goes, since this cohort grew up in fractured families as latchkey kids in an accelerated, materialistic culture. With little but leftovers from the self-indulgent Baby Boomers, the American Dream has gone sour for youth in the 1990s. The implication is that given their alleged pessimistic attitudes, careless behavior, and ambivalence toward the larger community, today's youth do not look like promising citizens.

However, recent survey research, as presented below, shows that much of the above description is far from accurate.

## Responsible Citizenship

Citizenship involves rights, duties, and the identification of each member of society with his or her community, the larger society and government.<sup>1</sup> While much of the focus for the past 60 years has concerned citizen rights, freedoms, and entitlements, the national debate is shifting toward citizen duties, obligations, and responsibilities. The worry about young people's attitudes and be-

havior partially reflects this debate.

What are the characteristics of responsible citizens? In their 1995 essay, "Return of the Citizen," Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman identify the principal qualities of good citizenship as a sense of identity yet tolerance of others who are different; participation in the political process and promotion of the

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public good; and self-restraint in personal choices in areas such as economics, health, and the environment.<sup>2</sup>

Coming from a number of directions, much of the current debate concerns which of these attributes of good citizenship is most needed to get America back on track. For example, conservatives argue that the emphasis on equality and welfare rights has undermined a sense of citizen duty to be self-reliant and participate in the political process. Liberals contend that the emphasis on individualism and the free-market spirit has overridden the citizenry's feelings

of responsibility to the larger community and public good. Moderates charge that members of political extremist and special interest groups have an obligation as citizens to stop dividing this country in their incessant demands for rights, differential treatment, and special privileges. Finally, the national fiscal crisis and awareness of limited resources have sensitized public officials and taxpayers to the realization that government cannot effectively provide services such as health care, education, and environmental protection if citizens do not do their part by making responsible choices in their personal conduct.

With public attention being directed toward the negative aspects of youth and the growing demand for responsible citizenship in the 1990s, we decided to examine the personal conduct and collective orientations of today's youths.

## Assessing 1990s Youth

We gathered surveys conducted from 1991-1994 by four prominent research organizations which questioned national samples of youth from households, high schools, and colleges and universities (see Table 1). By pulling together these national data on American youth, we hope to provide a more objective approach to assessing the kind of citizens 1990s youth are likely to make. Youth is defined broadly by the age levels included in these studies, which range from 13-29 years of age. Citizenship is evaluated from the perspective of young people's *personal* conduct and views as well as their *collective* orientations and beliefs.

## Personal Conduct and Views

As the data show, youth in the 1990s have significant shortcomings in their personal conduct as well as a number of

strongly favorable attributes.

*Taking Risks.* Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on youth violence are alarming, with 22% of high school students carrying weapons such as guns, knives, and clubs during the past thirty days. Forty-two percent report participating in physical fights during the year. Moreover, 24% of teenagers say they seriously contemplated suicide, while 9% admit attempting suicide. Not surprisingly, schools are seen by youths as falling victim to such aggressive behaviors: students in the Gallup youth surveys rate classroom disturbances (69%) and fighting as “big” or “fairly big” problems (23%); they report that other students bring guns and knives to school (28%); and a rising percentage of youth say they fear for their physical safety at school (24%, up from 18% in 1977).

*Unhealthy Reports.* Another gloomy finding is that young people’s physical and emotional health appears to be declining rather than improving in the 1990s. Indicators of their unhealthy behavior, as reported in the CDC survey, include not only violence, but also substance abuse (cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs), weight problems, and sexual promiscuity. Teenagers themselves worry about their generation’s well-being. When asked, adolescents say that the top three problems currently facing teens are drug abuse, peer pressure, and AIDS—all of which reflect marked increases since the late 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, the 1994 survey conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program/American Council on Education (CIRP/ACE) reports the percentage of college freshmen considering themselves to be in good health has dropped since the mid-1980s, with significant declines in their self-ratings for physical and emotional health (20% and 13% decreases respectively), and a fourfold increase from 1985 to 1994 in the percentage of freshmen claiming they felt “overwhelmed” (24%, up from 6% in 1985).

These figures on youthful violence

and deteriorating health are dismal, but fortunately, there are a number of positive features about young people’s personal conduct and views in the 1990s which call into question several popular myths about this age cohort.

*Personally Doing Fine.* Challenging the portrait of young people as unhappy and estranged from adults, the Gallup and *Reader’s Digest* surveys indicate the overwhelming majority of teens are satisfied with their personal lives (86%). Rather than generational conflict, most youth say they get along with their parents (96%), their home life is “good” or “wonderful” (82%) and they give high marks (As and Bs) to their schools (70%) and teachers (76%). Although they view drugs, peer pressure, and AIDS as the major problems for teenagers *in general*, the two most frequently mentioned *personal* problems turn out to be their school grades and career uncertainties.

*Traditional American Values Alive and Well.* Contrary to the image of 1990s youth as lacking values and direction, according to recent national surveys, most youth support traditional American life-styles and the importance of the family, religion, and work in their personal lives. In this regard, young people’s values in the 1990s are not much different from those of adults. It may come as a surprise to their worried elders that despite growing up under conditions of high divorce rates and broken families, the Gallup surveys found that 88% of adolescents in the 1990s think that they will marry, and 84% want to have children. According to the *Reader’s Digest* survey, the great majority of young people believe in God (88%) and about half pray once a day or more.

*No Slackers Here.* Rather than being lazy and unconcerned with society, 1990s youth appear ambitious for themselves, and they take an active interest in the community. For example, nearly three-quarters of college freshmen in the 1994 CIRP/ACE survey responded they want to be very well off financially,

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and many would like to be an authority in their field and successful in their own business. Further, when compared to the 1977 freshman cohort, although fewer freshmen in 1994 wanted to develop a philosophy of life or be involved in environmental cleanup, higher percentages in 1994 said they would like to help others in difficulty and influence social values. Moreover, the *Reader’s Digest* poll reported that slightly over half of the young people surveyed performed volunteer work during the past year, an impressive percentage similar to the current volunteer level for adults.

*Noncommittal Politics.* Despite young people’s interest in social values and community life, politics is a mixed bag. On the down side, college freshmen in 1994 express less concern with keeping up with politics, discussing politics, or influencing the political structure, when compared to students in the 1970s and 1980s.

Traditionally, young people’s political party identification is weak, and the Gallup youth surveys found this to be the case, with only 21% of teenagers planning to join a political party, and a mere 6% indicating an interest in running for public office.<sup>3</sup> The tendency of first-year college students to identify themselves as “middle-of-the-road” politically, rather than on the political left or right, resembles their freshman predecessors in the late 1970s. The political party identifications of young people as uncovered in the *Reader’s Digest* poll are not much different from those of

**Table 1**  
**American Youth of The 1990s**

**PERSONAL CONDUCT AND VIEWS**

<b>1991-2 Gallup International Institute Surveys</b>	<b>1990s</b>	
Fear for physical safety at school	24%	(18% in 1977)
Classroom disturbances a very or fairly big problem	69	
Fighting in class is a big problem	23	(10% in 1985)
Students bring guns and knives to school	28	
Drug abuse is biggest problem facing teens	40	(27% in 1977)
Peer pressure is biggest problem facing teens	15	(5% in 1977)
AIDS is biggest problem facing teens	11	(5% in 1987)
Satisfied with personal life	86	(88% in 1985)
Grade their high school A or B	70	
Grade their teachers A or B	76	
Greatest personal problem is school grades	33	
Greatest personal problem is career uncertainties	25	
Get along with parents very or fairly well	96	
Likely to marry	88	(84% in 1977)
Want to have children	84	(79% in 1977)
Plan to join a political party	21	
Plan to run for public office	6	

**1993 CDC National Survey**

Carried a weapon (gun, knife, club) during past month	22%	(8% a gun)
Engaged in a physical fight during past year	42	
Seriously contemplated suicide during past year	24	
Attempted suicide during past year	9	
Regular cigarette use	25	
Episodic heavy drinking	30	
Current marijuana use	18	
Current cocaine use	2	
Claim to be overweight	34	
Attempting weight loss	40	
Had sexual intercourse during lifetime	53	
Intercourse with four or more partners	19	
Condom used last intercourse	53	

**1994 CIRP/ACE Freshman National Norms Survey**

Felt overwhelmed	24%	(6% in 1985)
Felt depressed	10	(12% in 1985)
Rated self above average for emotional health	52	(65% in 1985)
Rated self above average for physical health	52	(72% in 1985)
Classify self as liberal/left	25	(28% in 1977)
Classify self as conservative/right	22	(19% in 1977)
Classify self as middle-of-the-road	53	(53% in 1977)
Become authority in my field	65	(78% in 1977)
Be very well off financially	74	(66% in 1977)
Be successful in own business	41	(56% in 1977)
Develop a philosophy of life	43	(56% in 1977)
Help others in difficulty	62	(57% in 1977)
Influence social values	40	(29% in 1977)
Influence political structure	19	(19% in 1977)
Be involved in environmental clean up	24	(31% in 1977)
Keep up with politics	32	(45% in 1977)
Discuss politics	16	(22% in 1988)
Plan to participate in community action	24	(27% in 1977)
Have participated in a demonstration	40	(16% in 1978)

**PERSONAL CONDUCT AND VIEWS—continued**

**1994 Reader's Digest National Poll**

Family shaped beliefs a great deal	75%	(adults 84%)
Values pretty much same as parents	67	(adults 76%)
Quality of life at home good or wonderful	82	(adults 87%)
Satisfied with job	78	(adults 83%)
Believe in God and always have	88	(adults 89%)
Pray once a day or more	49	(adults 58%)
Identify as a Republican	31	(adults 31%)
Identify as a Democrat	27	(adults 31%)
Identify as an independent	36	(adults 35%)
Performed volunteer work in past year	51	(adults 53%)
Volunteered during past month	44	(adults 55%)
Petitioned government during past year	38	(adults 50%)
Attended public meeting	33	(adults 44%)
Attended political rally or speech	20	(adults 23%)
Written congressman or state representative	16	(adults 34%)

**COLLECTIVE ORIENTATIONS AND BELIEFS**

**1994 CIRP/ACE Freshman National Norms Survey**

Government should do more to control handguns	80%	(67% in 1989)
Government not protecting consumer	72	(68% in 1977)
Government not controlling pollution	84	(79% in 1977)
National health care plan needed	71	(60% in 1977)
The wealthy should pay more taxes	67	(77% in 1977)
Racial discrimination not a problem	17	
There is too much concern for criminals	73	(69% in 1977)
Should abolish death penalty	20	(27% in 1978)

**1994 Reader's Digest National Poll**

Dissatisfied with way things going in the US	63%	(adults 64%)
Congress more concerned with own political future	87	(adults 89%)
Big government is a threat to country	72	(adults 66%)
Approve of Bill Clinton's character and policies	30	(adults 28%)
Ethics and honesty have fallen	61	(adults 63%)
If you work hard, you can get ahead	75	(adults 73%)
Each individual should have opportunity, even if some people are more successful	75	(adults 73%)
There should not be a top limit on incomes	80	(adults 72%)
America is still the best place to live	72	(adults 82%)
"In God We Trust" is appropriate motto for the US	72	(adults 87%)
Children should be brought up practicing a religious faith—very or somewhat important	89	(adults 94%)
Black Americans have an equal chance to succeed	49	(adults 60%)
Affirmative action programs are a good idea	60	(adults 39%)

**Notes:** The 1991-92 Gallup youth surveys interviewed national probability samples of American households with youth between the ages of 13-17. The 1993 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey polled 16,296 high school students in grades 9-12 (between the ages of 14-18). The 1994 Cooperative Institutional Research Program/American Council on Education (CIRP/ACE) survey is based on a sample of 237,777 freshmen attending 461 colleges and universities. CIRP/ACE comparisons are made with similar size samples. The *Reader's Digest/Roper* Center for Public Opinion Research national poll surveyed 1,053 adults nationwide 18 years old and older. The age group 18-29 was used in this analysis; comparisons were made with adults 30 years of age and older.

**Sources:** Robert Bezilla (ed.), *American Youth in the 1990s* (Princeton, NJ: Gallup International Institute, 1993); Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 1993," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Reports*, Vol. 44, March 24, 1995, pp. 1-17; Cooperative Institutional Research Program/American Council on Education, *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1994* (Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education, 1994); Cooperative Institutional Research Program/American Council on Education, "The American Freshman: Twenty-Five Year Trends" (Los Angeles: UCLA Graduate School of Education, 1991); and survey by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research for *Reader's Digest*, August 22-29, 1994.

adults, with an approximate three-way split among Republicans, Democrats, and independents. In the area of political activities and conduct, college freshmen in the 1994 CIRP/ACE survey were much more likely than in 1978 to have participated in a demonstration. However, youths were less likely than adults to have signed a petition (38% of youths, 50% of adults) or attended a public meeting (33%/44%), and they were much less likely than adults to have written a congressman or state representative (16%/34%).

### Collective Orientations and Beliefs

Today's youths have negative feelings about politics, which carry over and limit their conception of citizenship. Students criticize the way politics is conducted, are disgusted with the federal government, and their notions of citizenship are restricted.

*The Big Bad Government.* Young people in the 1990s are critical of American politics and government. However, while 63% of youths in the *Reader's Digest* survey said they are dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States, an important qualifier is that adults are just as dissatisfied as youth. Moreover, youth and adults share many of the same criticisms of government. Age groups are united in their beliefs that Congress is more concerned with its own future than with passing good legislation (87% of youths, 89% of adults), ethics and honesty have fallen in this country over the past decade (61%/63%), and big government is more of a threat to the United States than either big business or big labor.<sup>4</sup> The generations are in accord as well with their low approval of President Clinton (30% of youths, 28% of adults).

*Less Government Should Do More.* Paradoxically, along with their desire for leaner government, young people want the government to exercise *more* influence in solving national problems. And what kind of problems worry young people? In the CIRP/ACE survey, over 80% of freshmen agreed that the government is not doing enough to control pollution or handguns, with the percentages of youth wanting handgun control jumping rapidly over a five year period (up from 67% in 1989). There is also criticism that the government is not protecting the consumer and that a national health care plan is needed. Moreover, about three-quarters of students concur that criminals receive too much concern and only a small minority (20%) think that the death penalty should be abolished.

Do their criticisms of politics and government imply that youth are detached and uncommitted to their country and its core values? Decidedly not. As with their personal attitudes and behavior, there are a number of encouraging signs regarding youth's outlook and beliefs about the United States and their role as citizens.

*America the Beautiful.* Although dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States, the *Reader's Digest* survey found that roughly three-quarters of young people in the 1990s think America is still the best place to live, and they are as committed to social and political norms as adults. In addition, young people's criticism of politics and politicians is in keeping with the Jeffersonian view of "good" citizens as persons who care enough about their community and nation to exercise critical judgment and hold public officials accountable.<sup>5</sup>

*Affirming Private Enterprise and Affirmative Action.* Despite the talk about dead-end jobs and lazy youth, the overwhelming majority of young people in the *Reader's Digest* survey supported the American work ethic and spirit of capitalism. They agreed with adults that if people work hard they can get ahead (75%), there should be individual opportunity even if some people are more successful (75%), and most of all, there should not be a top limit on incomes (80%). Where the younger generation differs from adults is over the issue of equality, prejudice, and discrimination. Young people are less likely to think that African-Americans have an equal chance to succeed in this country (49% of youths, 60% of adults) and much more supportive of affirmative action programs than adults (60%/39%).

*Citizenship Without Politics.* Something runs amuck in youth's ability to link citizenship with politics. This was evident in several of the youth surveys. For example, according to the *Reader's Digest* poll, about half of the youth surveyed participated in some form of community volunteer work during the previous year—a percentage similar to adults. The CIRP/ACE freshman survey found that students were much more likely to say that they wanted to influence social values than the political structure. Despite this significant level of community involvement and social interest, as noted earlier, youths have little desire to become active in traditional politics.

### A Generation Searching for Balance and Solutions

These national surveys give little credence to the image of 1990s youth as a "lost generation." Quite the contrary. Satisfied with their lives, ambitious, concerned about their generation and community, young people's values and beliefs resemble the adult generation—although youth are more concerned with equality and discrimination than are adults. While survey researchers in the United States and elsewhere commonly report that only a small percentage of youth are discontented with their lives

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and estranged from their parents, schools, and society, the intriguing question is why the penchant to portray today's youth as aberrant and alienated, and why the cultural appeal of this negative stereotype?

All is not rosy for young people in the 1990s, however, as is most evident in the CDC survey on the personal conduct of youths regarding their health and well-being.<sup>6</sup> The rising trend in youthful violence and poor health, which is occurring at younger ages, places this generation at risk, and citizenship responsibility is at the heart of the problem. Part of the difficulty is the heavy weight Americans give to personal freedom and citizen rights over citizenship responsibility. Another difficulty is that while the standard recommendation is to put more resources into parent, school, and community-based youth programs, any genuine resolution of these youth problems ultimately hinges on young people taking responsibility and doing their part by exercising good judgment and self-restraint in their personal conduct. This task will be difficult for numerous reasons.

One reason involves the youthful stage of life. As new citizens, the younger generation is readily admonished for being overly concerned with freedom, entitlements, and individual rights and too little concerned about duties and personal responsibility. Yet younger people's orientation to citizenship is very much in keeping with their youthful life-cycle stage, which revolves around breaking away, gaining independence, finding an identity, and negotiating the transition to self-sufficient adulthood. Freedom, idealism, and the right to experiment infuse this youthful quest. Perhaps being concerned with responsibility is an "adult thing." What these survey findings suggest is that while the majority of youth in the 1990s feel positive about their own lives, the risky personal conduct and lack of self-restraint among some members of their generation is a growing worry.

Young American's collective orientations and beliefs reflect their cultural heritage as well as a shift in political style. At first glance, 1990s youth appear to endorse a combination of contradictory values and political perspectives. They favor libertarian and communitarian views, and they dislike politics and politicians yet want to resolve social problems and perform community service. More interested in solutions than a coherent political philosophy, young people prefer to classify themselves as nondescript moderates, middle-of-the-roaders, and independents. Rather than being rootless and adrift on political seas, however, today's youths display some of the very characteristics which most impressed de Tocqueville about American citizens in the nineteenth century, such as expressing a love of wealth, personal freedom, equality, and individualism; being practical rather than theoretical or ideological; and having a keen distrust of authority and government.<sup>7</sup>

What is different about the younger generation in the 1990s is their clear rejection of the 1960s ideological style of politics that continues to dominate the political discourse and decision making in the United States. While the national debate over responsible citizenship pits conservatives, liberals, political moderates, public officials, and taxpayers against each other as they argue over which characteristic of good citizenship is the most important, 1990s youth appear to be searching for ways to strike a balance among the desirable traits. With their emphasis on political compromise achieved through cooperation and civility, a more positive and involved approach to solving America's problems appeals to the youth generation of the 1990s. Although young people are suspicious of big government, the New Right's agenda to dismantle government does not seem to be what "Generation X" has in mind. Young people's goal appears to be to make government more responsive and effective in dealing with the significant issues concerning their generation.

The challenge ahead will be to turn this youthful pragmatism and idealism into genuine political trust and constructive problem-solving.

Despite their shortcomings, tomorrow's citizens look promising.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> See J.M. Barbalet, *Citizenship* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Paul Barry Clarke, *Citizenship* (Boulder, CO: Pluto Press, 1994); and Bart van Steenberg, ed., *The Condition of Citizenship* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman, "Return of the Citizen: A Survey of Recent Work on Citizenship Theory," in Ronald Beiner, ed., *Theorizing Citizenship* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 283-322.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison of the low voter registration and voting record among youth over the last 30 years, see Susan Mitchell, *The Official Guide to the Generations*, 1st Edition (Ithaca, NY: New Strategist Publications, 1995), pp. 366-71.

<sup>4</sup> When asked in the 1994 *Reader's Digest* poll whether big business, big labor, or big government were the biggest threat to the country, youth responded: big business 13% (adults 14%), big labor 9% (adults 4%), and big government 72% (adults 66%). This attitude item is partially reported on Table 1.

<sup>5</sup> See Thomas Jefferson, *Democracy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> For further information on this topic, see Michele D. Wilson and Alain Joffe, "Adolescent Medicine," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Vol. 273, No. 21, 1995, pp. 1657-59.

<sup>7</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (New York: Knopf, 1945).



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