

Opinion: Millennials v baby boomers—a battle we could have done without

April 7 2016, by Steven Roberts And Kim Allen

The generation of young people who came of age during the new millennium – "millennials", as they're commonly known – has divided opinion like no other. Some have deemed them a [self-pitying and entitled](#) bunch; [lazy](#), deluded and [narcissistic](#). Others take a more sympathetic view, raising concerns that millennials are at risk of becoming a "[lost generation](#)". After all, they are making the transition into adulthood under much more precarious circumstances than their parents experienced as part of the "baby boomers" generation.

The challenges millennials face include the [rising costs of education](#); an increased likelihood of unemployment and underemployment – even for a growing [number of graduates](#) – and [falling incomes](#) even when they are employed. For millennials, home ownership is an increasingly distant prospect, and [private rents are soaring](#). To top it all off, [young people](#) have been [hit particularly hard](#) by benefit sanctions and cuts to public sector funding.

Since the global [financial crisis](#), the supposed plight of the millennials has given rise to the argument that inequality is an age-related issue: young people are disadvantaged, while baby boomers collectively [prosper at their expense](#). This idea is exemplified by the Guardian's [recent series on millennials](#), and perpetuated by [other outlets](#). With austerity and weak economic growth ensuring that the opportunities for younger people are comparatively diminished, even academics are raising "[the issue of youth-as-class](#)".

Facing the changes

We don't deny that the experience of being young has changed significantly. But this notion of a single millennial experience deserves some serious questioning. While young people are encountering changes – and often challenges – in terms of employment, education and housing, they do not all experience this hostile landscape in the same way.

By talking about "the millennials" as a disadvantaged group, we're in danger of obscuring other, more fundamental differences between young people. For example, class background is still a particularly important determinant of a young person's [life chances](#). Our [own research](#) – as well as the work of many others – demonstrates the importance of parental support for young people transitioning into adulthood.

Having a room in the family home or access to other family finances is key to undertaking unpaid internships or volunteer work. A monthly allowance from your folks while at university facilitates access to important [CV building activities](#), which top graduate employers seek from applicants. It ensures that during your exams you don't have to carry on looking for a job, and it helps you to avoid the choice between eating or heating.

Gifting or loaning deposits for a [rented or purchased home](#) is still a middle-class practice. There are many other ways that parents can, and do, use their resources to help their [children onto the property ladder](#).

Class struggle

So, while middle-class young people are clearly facing difficulties during their transition to independence, they are also more likely to have access to resources that are unavailable to their less-advantaged peers, which

help to reduce risks and protect them from uncertainties. These resources help young people to "weather the storm" and influence who survives and prospers in the current conditions.

Let us recall some other significant class-based advantages: higher education [remains very stratified](#), and those attending elite research-intensive institutions are [disproportionately middle class](#). Children of middle-class parents [earn more](#) than peers of working class origins, even when they obtain employment in top jobs. And while baby-boomers may be [holding onto the housing stock](#) for now, the children of the property-owning middle classes will one day inherit it.

As well as class, research has long shown how gender, race, disability and a host of other factors work to shape a person's future. More recent evidence suggests that the financial crisis and subsequent austerity have had a particularly [disproportionate effect on women](#), certain [black and minority ethnic groups](#) and [the disabled](#).

What's more, proclaiming an inter-generational war unhelpfully clouds the fact that the prospects for certain groups of older people are just as bad – if not worse – than for many young people. Despite the dominant media image of the resource-rich retiree, many older people [do not have](#) comfortable pensions, homes or savings to fall back on. And as the state withdraws funding for public services such as social care, older women have been forced to step in and undertake [unpaid labour](#) by caring for elderly family members.

Declarations of inter-generational conflict between [baby boomers](#) and millennials might grab headlines. But the real story is the same as it ever was; that our society is plagued by long-standing, ongoing inequalities relating to class, race and gender. The portrayal of millennials as victims has allowed the experience of the squeezed middle class to take centre stage. Now, it's up to us to question who's really at a disadvantage in our

society – and how we can make life fairer for all.

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