

How toxic economic trends have impacted millennials

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Millennials—young adults in their 20s and 30s—earn less money without a college degree and are more likely to die prematurely from suicide or drug overdose than previous generations, according to a new report from the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

The report also found that millennials also have a wider set of identities from which they can choose: Unlike older generations, millennials are frequently embracing multiracial and unconventional gender identities. However, this doesn't mean they are any more accepting of people different from them compared with previous generations. The report found that millennials believe common racial and gender stereotypes to be true just as much as people from the Baby Boomer cohort, who were born from 1946 to 1964, and Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980.

The report, to be issued on June 6, brought together some of the country's leading experts on poverty and inequality and offers a comprehensive assessment of data on education, health, employment and income, occupational segregation, debt and poverty rates, economic mobility, racial and gender identities, [social connections](#), housing and incarceration trends.

"Millennials are the first generation to experience in a full-throttled way the social and economic problems of our time," said David Grusky, professor of sociology and director of the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

As millennials tried to enter the job market during the Great Recession of the late 2000s, they also had to deal with decades-long economic issues, such as rising inequality and declining economic mobility. This made it an especially difficult period, he said.

"We can think of them as canaries in the coalmine who reveal just how toxic those problems are. By assembling a report that provides a comprehensive understanding of their situation, we can go beyond the usual patchwork policy and begin to address underlying problems," Grusky said.

Millennial education

Contrary to some popular assumptions, when college-educated millennials entered the labor market, they earned just as much as Baby Boomers and Gen Xers when they were their age.

But millennials with only a [high school diploma](#) or less are earning much less than their counterparts from previous generations, according to the report's analyses of education, written by Stanford sociologist Florencia Torche and doctoral sociology student Amy Johnson.

For example, the median earnings for 25-year-old [millennial](#) men with a bachelor's or higher degree were about \$50,000 per year, which is slightly higher than for previous generations after adjusting for inflation. The median earnings for 25-year-old millennial men who have high school degrees or less were \$29,000 per year, which is about \$2,600 dollars less than Gen Xers and nearly \$10,000 less than Baby Boomers received at the same age, according to Torche and Johnson's analysis of U.S. Census data from 1975 to 2018.

"It's not that going to college amounts to striking gold for most people," Grusky said. "The big news is that if you don't go to college you're likely to do worse than ever. What makes college attractive is mainly that it offers some protection from that fate."

Millennial health

Mortality rates among [young adults](#) have also increased substantially, according to the report's analyses of health, written by Stanford economist Mark Duggan and economics undergraduate Jackie Li.

Between 2008 and 2016, mortality rates among those between 25 and 34

years old increased by more than 20 percent. These deaths were mainly driven by a rise in suicides and drug overdoses, Duggan and Li found. The mortality rate among non-Hispanic whites, aged 20 through 34, saw the highest jump—27 percent—in comparison to a 9 percent increase for blacks and a 6 percent increase for the Hispanic population, according to their analyses of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

These findings are in juxtaposition with the fact that more millennials were covered by health insurance. Duggan and Li found that because of the Affordable Care Act, the share of adults in their 20s without health insurance fell by more than half from 2009 to 2017.

Duggan and Li also showed that the racial gap in health insurance coverage has grown smaller through the expansion of health insurance under the ACA.

Millennial identities

The report shows that millennials were more likely to identify as multiracial and to adopt unconventional gender identities.

But millennials embrace racial and gender stereotypes in a similar way to previous generations. According to the report, one-fifth of millennials still adopt traditional views of gender roles, nearly the same as the rates among Gen Xers and Baby Boomers, according to analysis of data from the General Social Survey between 1994 and 2016 and previous research from Stanford scholars.

Millennials are also equally likely as Gen Xers to believe that blacks are lazier than whites, according to analyses by sociologist Aliya Saperstein and sociology doctoral student Sasha Shen Johfre.

"When it comes to their identities, millennials are a truly innovative generation that is forging new options," Grusky said. "But when it comes to their attitudes about race and gender, they're just not as special."

Compassion for young adults

Among other findings, the report shows that the racial gap in homeownership among young adults was larger for millennials than for any [generation](#) in the past century.

In 2010, young white adults between 20 and 29 years old were 2.7 times more likely to own a home than their black counterparts, according to an analysis of U.S. Census data from 1940 to 2017. Even if you reach back to the Silent Generation, which includes those born between 1928 and 1945, the [racial gap](#) in homeownership among those young adults was smaller than it is now.

According to Grusky, these and other results make it clear that millennials are facing big challenges, many of which stem from the "endemic racial, gender and economic problems" of our time. He hopes that the report can inform future policies.

"If you understand the economic and social context within which millennials are growing up," Grusky says, "it's natural to feel real empathy and hard, by contrast, to understand the anger that's often directed toward them."

Provided by Stanford University

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