



After the Fact | [Who Is Generation Z?](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

Dan LeDuc, host: If you think you've been hearing a lot about the Millennial generation, you're right. If you think you've been hearing about them for a long time and wondering if it isn't time for a new generation to be forming, you're also right. And now this post-Millennial generation has a name: Generation Z. That's what the Pew Research Center is calling anyone born in America after 1996.

[Music break]

For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact." When we look at generations, we peer through a window of time that tells us something about the nation in a particular period of history. The Silent Generation came of age in the years right before World War II, the Baby Boomers in the two decades after the war. They were followed by Generation X and then the Millennials. The evolving demographics of the generations tell us about where the country may be headed and what it may come to look like. But how to name a generation? The Pew Research Center analyzed Google searches about this newest group and found most people were using Generation Z and so decided to use that name. Gen Zers are different from previous groups: Nearly half of Generation Z is a racial or ethnic minority—48 percent, to be exact. And that's our data point for this episode. For more about this new group, we spoke with Kim Parker, who directs social trends research at The Pew Research Center.

[Music break]

Dan LeDuc: So, for years now, we've been hearing talk about the Millennials. And we've heard all sorts of stories about them, who they are. And a lot of what we know about the Millennials is thanks to the Pew Research Center's extensive work. But now there's a new group in town. Who are they, and what do we know about them?

Kim Parker, director of social trends research, Pew Research Center: There is a new group in town. And we at first were calling them the post-Millennial generation. Because we didn't really even have a name for them yet. But we have come to adopt the name Generation Z, which seemed to be kind of taking hold in popular culture and with the media.



So they are—the way we're defining them right now is people who were born after 1996. And so it spans from relatively young children—you know, 5, 6 years old—up to folks who are turning 22 this year. So it's children, teens, and young adults. Which is a very challenging group of people to study. And particularly a challenging group to survey. So we've come up with some different ways of trying to tackle that.

Dan LeDuc: And as I understand it, first of all, this is a group, of course, that is probably the most technologically oriented generation. So it's like technology defines them, but also technology defined them.

Kim Parker: So technology is really one of the ways in which we feel like this generation is different from Millennials. And Millennials obviously are very adept at smartphones and social media and streaming of entertainment. Those are things that they have adapted to as those things have come online.

But for this next generation, Gen Z, those are things which are just part of the ecosystem for them. Things that they're coming of age just kind of taking for granted. So in that way, their experience with technology and the way in which they experience the world through technology seems unique. As compared to Millennials and certainly to older generations.

Dan LeDuc: So it's not just age; it's not just time. There are attributes about people and groups that change. What was the deciding factor or things that you looked at to say, time for a new generation label here? We have a new group out there?

Kim Parker: First I want to say that it's not an exact science defining generations. And in the literature and the research that's out there, you'll even see different cutoff points for generations, differences of one to three years in terms of how people determine these things.

But we find that the broad age range of about 15 to 18 years tends to be about what defines a generation. And then we look at other factors. Maybe the demographic makeup of a generation. So in this case, the post-Millennial generation is clearly the most racially and ethnically diverse generation that we've seen. So that's something that sets them apart. As we mentioned, their experience with technology is different from the Millennials. And there are also factors, sort of outside factors that will come into play as well.

Dan LeDuc: Well, sure. Because that's the thing to remember. We all sort of react to the world around us based on the events. So this is a cohort of people growing up in a post-recession world. And what's going on in the news is different for them. And that will influence their worldview.



Kim Parker: A good chunk of the Millennial generation came of age, came into adulthood either in the throes of the recession or in the wake of the recession. Which, as we know, had a very long tail in terms of its impact on unemployment and labor force opportunities. So they got a slower start at adulthood.

And we think clearly this next generation is going to inherit a different kind of economy and a different set of opportunities. So that was one distinction. Also, the Millennial generation came of age in the shadows of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and conflicts. And if you look at the political environment that this next generation is going to be aware of and come of age in and participate in, it's going to be quite different from what the Millennials experienced. So those are just some of the things that we take into account in trying to understand where one generation ends and where another one begins.

Dan LeDuc: So let's go into a little more detail. What are some of the distinctive features of this new Generation Z?

Kim Parker: So we've tried to look at this in a couple of different ways. First, we looked at their demographic characteristics using census data. And we could see, again, that they're the most racially and ethnically diverse generation that we've ever seen. And this has obviously been a gradual process. Millennials were more racially and ethnically diverse than Generation X. And so it's not something entirely new.

Also, in terms of their demographic characteristics, we can see that educationally, they're having a different experience. When we look at the older end of the Generation Z group, we can see that they're more likely to graduate from high school than Millennials were at a similar age. And they're more likely to be enrolled in college, significantly more likely than Millennials were, than Gen Xers were at a similar age. So that seemed really interesting to us.

Dan LeDuc: So what are their political views like?

Kim Parker: Their views aren't distinctively different; Gen Z and Millennials both are much more anxious to see government trying to solve problems than they are to see government pulling back. So they want to see a more active role for government. And those two generations together have distinctively different views from older generations. Generation X, Boomers, and Silents.

And they also have different views about America's place in the world. They're more likely than older generations to say that America's not the best country in the world. That there are other countries that are better than America. And so that idea of



American exceptionalism is less prevalent among Millennials and Gen Zers. Which was another interesting thing that we saw.

Dan LeDuc: How is this new generation different from the previous ones?

Kim Parker: Sure, there were a couple of ways in our survey in which Gen Z was really distinct not only from older generations but also from Millennials. And those seemed to me to have a lot to do with the cultural context in which they're growing up. So we asked all of our respondents of all ages whether they know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns or prefers to be called by gender-neutral pronouns. And for Gen Zers, that's a very common experience; 35 percent of them said that they know someone who prefers that others use gender neutral pronouns when referring to them. And that was significantly higher than the share for Millennials and much higher than the share for older generations.

So again I think that speaks to the context in which they're growing up. And their exposure to these types of issues. And one other way in which they were unique was—we had a question that asked whether more people getting news on social media is a good thing or a bad thing for the country. Most older generations thought that that was on balance a negative thing for the country. Gen Zers were less likely to say that. So, and I think that's probably because they get a lot of their news online or through social media. And so, for them it doesn't really seem like a negative. It just sort of seems like that's how you get your news.

Dan LeDuc: And that's what's so fascinating. When you think about generations, you're really talking about where the country is headed. I mean, it's just another way of saying, this is where America is going. Because their attitudes as they get older will be influenced in workplaces and at the ballot box and in their social interactions. This is a window on the future.

Kim Parker: Right, and that's what's so exciting about starting to learn about this next generation. It really does give us a little bit of a window into the future.

Dan LeDuc: And so, how stable, how solid are the findings on Generation Z? They're young, so are they going to change over time?

Kim Parker: I think we have to assume that they'll evolve with time. Particularly because in our survey, a big component of our sample were 13- to 17-year-olds. Teenagers, most of whom would still be living at home. Research on teens suggests that teens that age, to a large extent their views can be connected to if not mirroring their parents' views.



So they have some independent thoughts and views, obviously. But they're still more wedded to whatever the dominant view in their household is, or what they're learning from their parents. Once they hit age 18 or when they go off to college or go get a job or separate from their family more, then they'll start to form their own views. And we did actually see some differences between the teens and the young adults within Generation Z.

Dan LeDuc: Well, let's talk a little bit about methodology. Because people who listen to this program are interested in the data. And you are in this case dealing with teenagers, people who are under age, at home. So talk about how you went after their answers.

Kim Parker: Right; it's not easy to do. It took some careful time and planning. We have to get permission from their parents. So we can't just go to the teens directly because of their age. And we also had to make sure that the survey was very mobile friendly. Because most of the teens would probably be doing the survey on a mobile device. Which a lot of adults do now as well.

Dan LeDuc: So you were able to dive into the attitudes of teenagers today. And what were some of the findings?

Kim Parker: Yeah, so we asked them about what were the major problems among teens in their communities. And the item that topped the list was anxiety and depression. Seven in 10 of the teens we interviewed said that that is a major problem among their peers in their communities. And we also found a lower but still substantial share pointing to bullying, drug addiction, and alcohol consumption. But the anxiety and depression finding definitely stood above the others.

Dan LeDuc: And I also read academic pressure seems to be tough. A lot of these kids are going to be going to school. That's one of the bigger findings, right? That this is an educated generation. They're feeling the pressure of performing in the classroom, it seems like.

Kim Parker: Yes, we found that 61 percent said they feel a lot of pressure to get good grades. And we also found a pretty significant share saying that they plan to attend a four-year college. And also that there's a fair bit of worry about getting into the college of their choice.

So academics are definitely on their mind. In a separate analysis we did of how teens spend their time, we found that teens today, compared to about a decade ago, are spending more time doing homework. So that would be good news for some of the parents out there, I'm sure. But that might also be tied into this pressure that teens are feeling academically.



Dan LeDuc: So we have this new group. We've gotten a first couple of slices of the pie as we try to examine what they're thinking and where they're headed. What do you want to know? What have you've learned so far that is intriguing you for the next time?

Kim Parker: That's a great question. We are going to be doing some research in the future on teens and religion, which we're excited about. We'd like to learn about teens' news consumption habits, the way that they consume the media. And where they get their news and how they distinguish between facts and opinion, those kinds of things.

But the good news is that every year we'll have more Gen Zers in our general public adult samples. So every year we'll have a new crop of 18-year-olds coming in. And so we'll get a bigger and bigger group of adults who are in that generation and be able to start to study them that way. So I think it's really just the tip of the iceberg for us. So we're excited to see going forward what we can learn about this generation.

[Transition music fades in.]

Dan LeDuc: To learn more about Generation Z and see what Pew Research Center has learned about other generations, visit [pewtrusts.org/after the fact](http://pewtrusts.org/after-the-fact).

[Closing "After the Fact" theme music plays.]

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