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Generation X in Mid-Life: A Summary from the Longitudinal Study of American Life

By Jon D. Miller
and Belén Laspra

From responses to the thirty-year study, this generation would appear to be busy, productive, well-educated, and happy.

Generation X refers to American adults born between 1961 and 1981. The naming of generations and the assignment of age ranges stem from a 1991 book by William Strauss and Neil Howe called *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. The book examines generations across centuries and their characteristics, and provides a definition of Generation X that is used widely in popular and academic literature. The 84 million Americans included in Generation X are the parents of today's school-age children and members of Generation X will become members of Congress and occupants of the White House in future decades.

Generation X is the first generation to grow up in the Internet era, and the most extensively wired (and now wireless) generation in American history. It is important to understand their history, current challenges, and future prospects. Like earlier generations, the young adults in Generation X display a wide range of achieve-

ment, success, failures, and difficulties (see Sullivan, Brown, and Bann [2015] for a discussion of this distribution in Britain).

It is always tempting to apply broad labels to a generation, but it is necessary to recognize that each generation carries forward many of the advantages and disadvantages of previous generations, and that variation within generations is greater than variation across generations. Nonetheless, there are generational patterns that are useful to study and understand.

Longitudinal Study of American Life

This analysis uses data from the Longitudinal Study of American Life (LSAL). The longitudinal study began with a national probability sample of seventh grade and tenth grade public school students throughout the United States. Funded by the National Science Foundation and focused on the development of student interest and competence in science and mathematics, the Longitudinal Study of American Youth

→abstract Building on the thirty-year record of the Longitudinal Study of American Life (LSAL), this article summarizes Generation X's growth over the last three decades—from middle school to the mid-40s. It looks at the attainment of formal education, the development of career plans and pathways, and the assumption of family and community roles. It also looks at the impact of growing up in the Digital Age. In broad terms, the LSAL data and this analysis support a view of Generation X as hard-working, education-oriented, achieving, and family- and community-oriented. | **key words:** *Generation X, longitudinal, developmental, engagement, achievement*

(LSAY) began in the fall of 1987 with a national sample of 5,945 students. During middle and high school years, each fall and spring participating students completed an attitudinal questionnaire and each fall, science and mathematics achievement tests. One parent of each participating student once a year was interviewed by telephone, and each year additional data were collected from each student’s science teacher, math teacher, and principal.

After high school, students were interviewed annually by telephone. Beginning in 2007, students were surveyed each year online, by telephone, or with a printed questionnaire as each respondent wished. This process continues today. The data from the LSAY and LSAL are deposited in the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and are available for secondary analysis. To date, more than forty dissertations and 200 peer-reviewed articles have been written by secondary analysts (see www.lsay.org).

Education

Each generation generally completes more formal education than preceding generations and young adults in Generation X continue that tradition. Forty-four percent of Generation X young

adults completed a baccalaureate or higher degree by their early 40s, compared to 32 percent of their parents. Four percent of Generation X young adults earned a doctoral or professional degree.

Variation within generations is greater than variation across generations.

Following the pattern of cumulative advantage and cumulative disadvantage, Generation X young adults from better-educated families were significantly more likely to exceed their parents’ level of education than were children from less-well-educated households (see Table 1 below). Improvement in educational attainment was not automatic for the young adults in Generation X and 24 percent of Generation X young adults failed to attain the same level of education as their parents by mid-life. Thirty-five percent of Generation X young adults earned more education than their parents by mid-life. There is a strong relationship between parent education and young adult education that accounts for 44 percent of the variation in young adult education.

Reflecting the enrollment and graduation pattern of recent decades, 47 percent of young

Table 1. Education Attainment in Generation X, by Level of Parent Education, 2015–16

Parent Education	Education Attained by Generation X Young Adults						N
	LT HS	HS/GED	AA-AS	Bacc	Master’s	Doc/Prof	
Less Than High School	15%	60%	11%	11%	4%	0%	274
HS diploma/GED	3	55	11	21	9	2	1,936
Some college	3	50	9	25	11	3	595
Baccalaureate	1	25	6	42	19	6	716
Advanced degree	1	22	4	34	27	12	630
Total	3	45	9	26	13	4	4,151

Gamma = 0.44(.016)

Gamma is a proportional reduction of error statistic used with ordinal numbers that is similar to the square of Pearson’s correlation coefficient, both of which reflect the proportion of total variance accounted for in a relationship. See Costner (1965) for a readable explanation of Gamma and similar statistics.

Cell entries are row percentages showing the percentage of young adults attaining each level of education within levels of parent education. Source: *The Longitudinal Study of American Life*

women have completed a baccalaureate compared to 41 percent of young men. Young men were slightly more likely to complete a doctoral or professional degree (5.0 percent to 3.6 percent), but young women in the LSAL sample were more likely to earn both a baccalaureate and a master’s degree.

Miller and Pearson (2012) used LSAL data to examine the pathways to STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine) professions and the effect of parent education. Only 4 percent of children growing up in households in which neither parent had a baccalaureate entered a STEMM profession by age 40, compared to 13 percent of children from homes in which one or both parents had a baccalaureate or higher degree.

Employment

Higher levels of education often lead to higher levels of professional or technical employment, and this pattern persists in Generation X. In 2014, 97 percent of Generation X young adults with a doctoral or professional degree held professional or managerial positions (see Table 2 below). Seventy-six percent of young adults with

a master’s degree held similar professional or managerial jobs, as did 49 percent of baccalaureate graduates with graduate or professional training. In contrast, only 17 percent of young adults with a high school diploma and having no post-secondary degrees were employed in professional or managerial roles.

Although these occupational clusters are associated with significant differences in pay and related rewards, young adults in the LSAL report a similar level of job satisfaction across these occupational strata. When asked in 2014 to rate satisfaction with their current job on a zero-to-10 scale, with zero reflecting the lowest level of satisfaction and 10 representing the highest level of satisfaction, the median satisfaction score was eight in each occupational cluster.

Adults in the Baby Boom Generation and earlier generations tended to see the life course as divided into three distinct stages—education, work, and retirement. Those life course compartments are breaking down and the experiences of Generation X young adults illustrate this change. For the last decade, the LSAL asked each participant to report whether they are enrolled in any educational program and to list

Table 2. Generation X Education and Occupation, 2015–16

Education	Occupation in Mid-life						N
	Out of workforce	Service/Labor	Crafts	Sales or Clerical	Technical	Professional Managerial	
LT High School	41%	34%	6%	14%	0%	5%	79
HS diploma/GED	19	26	11	23	4	17	1,080
Associate degree	16	17	5	21	20	20	226
Baccalaureate	10	12	2	19	8	49	784
Master’s degree	8	7	1	5	4	76	411
Doctorate/Prof.	2	0	0	0	1	97	152
Total	14	17	5	18	6	39	2,732

Gamma = 0.55(.018)

Gamma is a proportional reduction of error statistic used with ordinal numbers that is similar to the square of Pearson’s correlation coefficient, both of which reflect the proportion of total variance accounted for in a relationship. See Costner (1965) for a readable explanation of Gamma and similar statistics.

Cell entries are the percentage of the total number of young adults in the LSAL that fall into each cell.

Source: *The Longitudinal Study of American Life*

any degrees they had earned since the previous survey. Nine percent report they have earned at least one new degree since age 40, and 15 percent reported they are enrolled in an educational program during the same period. Some of this activity represents the demands of a changing labor market, but a large part of this appears to be related to a desire to improve individual skills and life prospects.

Marriage and Family

Generation X young adults are family oriented. Despite the number of hours of work they report, and the relatively high level of satisfaction they find in that work, most Generation X young adults are married, have children, and engage in a wide array of family activities. Seventy-one percent of Generation X young adults are currently married and 75 percent report having minor children at home.

Generation X parents are actively involved in their children's education. In 2016, 26 percent of the young adults in the LSAL indicated that they were very interested in local school issues and that they were well-informed about those issues. Individuals who are very interested in local school issues and who feel well informed about those issues are referred to as the *attentive public for local school issues*. An additional 20 percent of LSAL young adults were very interested in local school issues, but felt only moderately well- or less well-informed about those issues.

The Generation X parents of preschool children hold high educational expectations for their children—88 percent expect their child to earn at least a baccalaureate and 46 percent expect their child to earn a graduate or professional degree. To encourage these outcomes, 72 percent of the parents of preschool children reported that they read to their child three or more hours each week. Half of the parents of preschool children report that their youngsters watch *Sesame Street* or similar programs three or more hours each week. Nearly 80 percent of

the parents of preschool children help their child play with Legos or similar toys at least once each week and the same proportion report that they play music or sing with their child at least once a week. Eighty percent of the parents of preschool children took their child to a zoo or aquarium during the preceding year and a majority of preschool parents took their child to a science museum, botanical garden, or arboretum during the preceding year. Seventy percent of these parents also reported taking their child to a public library periodically.

The parents of elementary school children hold equally high expectations of educational achievement, with 84 percent saying that they expect their child to earn at least a baccalaureate and 39 percent expecting their child to earn a graduate or professional degree. And, like the parents of preschool children, they work to make it happen.

Three-quarters of the parents of elementary school children reported that they help with homework and 43 percent said that they provide five or more hours of homework help each week. Sixty percent of the parents of elementary school children play music or sing with their child at least once a week and 91 percent of these parents report that they attend at least one school event with their child each month. Ninety-five percent of the parents of elementary school children indicated that they talk to their child at least once a month about school problems and 76 percent say they talk to their child once a week about school problems.

The parents of elementary school children use a wide array of community resources to enhance their child's education, with 81 percent reporting a visit to a zoo or aquarium in the previous year, 62 percent to a science museum, 47 percent to a natural history museum, and 27 percent to a planetarium. Eighty-five percent of the parents of elementary school children took their child to a public library periodically.

LSAL parents' expectations for educational attainment moderated some for secondary

school students, with 66 percent of parents expecting their child to earn a baccalaureate and 29 percent expecting a graduate or professional degree. Some of this decline in educational expectations may reflect the performance of the child in school, but the level of parental involvement remains high among the parents of secondary school students—85 percent reported helping with homework and 66 percent reported spending five or more hours (about an hour per night during the school week) on homework help. Forty percent reported singing or playing music with their child at least once a week. Three-quarters of secondary school parents attended at least one school event each month, and 90 percent said that they talked to their child about going to college at least once a month.

Secondary school parents also reported using a wide array of community resources to enhance their child's learning, but at a slightly lower rate than the parents of elementary school children. Fifty-five percent of secondary school parents reported taking their student to a zoo or aquarium and 40 percent indicated that they had visited a science museum with their child. A third of these parents took their child to a natural history museum or a botanical garden or arboretum during the preceding year.

Looking at LSAL parents of children at all grade levels, these results show that there is broad recognition of the value and importance of education and a parallel willingness to invest time and resources to enrich and enhance the education of their children. These results do not support the view that American parents have lost faith in education.

Social Relationships and Community Involvement

Generation X young adults demonstrate the ability to balance work, family, and community. The data from Generation X young adults indicate that most of these busy mothers, fathers, and workers are able to balance those responsi-

bilities and still find time to engage in numerous professional and community activities. In 2001, Robert Putnam wrote an influential book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, in which he argued that Americans were increasingly isolated and that social capital—the social links and bonds that individuals establish with other adults outside their own family—was declining. The data from the LSAL indicate that the young adults in Generation X are not bowling alone—they have extensive social, occupational, and community networks. Although they may be less likely to join the Elks, the Moose, and similar community-based luncheon clubs, they are vigorous participants in parent-teacher organizations, local youth sports clubs, book clubs, and other community organizations.

Nine percent of Generation X report they have earned at least one new degree since age 40.

One in three Generation X young adults is an active member of a church or religious organization. Thirty percent of Generation X young adults indicated that they are active members of a professional, business, or union organization, which provides additional opportunities for social interactions. Twenty-four percent of the parents of minor children indicated that they are active in a school-based parent-teacher organization. Seventeen percent of Generation X young adults say that they are active in one or more community service groups and 29 percent report that they do some hours of volunteer work in their community each month.

The young adults in Generation X maintain an active social network outside formal groups and organizations. In 2014, 92 percent of LSAL young adults reported that they talk to friends or family by telephone at least once each week and 21 percent say that they talk to friends or family on the phone once a day. Seventy-six percent of young adults report visiting a friend

or relative each week and 23 percent say that they make three or more visits to friends or family each week.

On the cultural side, 54 percent of LSAL young adults in 2014 reported that they attended at least one play, symphony, opera, or ballet performance during the preceding year and 26 percent indicated that they attended three or more cultural events during the last year. Slightly more than 40 percent of Generation X young adults visited an art museum at least once during the preceding year and 10 percent visited an art museum three or more times during the last year. Reflecting the culture of the late twentieth century, 74 percent of LSAL young adults reported visiting a science museum, natural history museum, planetarium, zoo, aquarium, botanical garden, or arboretum during the preceding year and 51 percent indicated that they had visited three or more of these institutions during the year (Miller, 2010).

Although these reports portray a generation of adults who are hardworking, family oriented, and actively engaged in cultural and athletic events and activities, the young adults in Generation X are serious readers and active information seekers. Seventy-two percent of Generation X young adults read a newspaper (print or online) at least once a week and 26 percent read a newspaper every day. Sixty percent of these young adults read one or more magazines each month (print or online) and 31 percent read three or more magazines each month. Fully 80 percent of LSAL young adults reported buying and reading at least one book during the preceding year and 47 percent said that they read six or more books during the preceding year.

Digital Life

Many young adults in Generation X had computers at home or in school during their high school years, and almost all of the young adults who enrolled in a college or university experienced an increasing level of computer use. By the time they reached their twenties, the Internet was a

part of modern life and they experienced the extraordinary growth of the Internet and wireless communication during recent decades. By 2014, 98 percent of Generation X young adults reported that they regularly used the Internet. Eighty-six percent indicated that they used the Internet to access maps and directions and 93 percent reported that they obtained weather information from the Internet. Seventy-eight percent indicated they used the Internet to obtain health and medical information, and 84 percent of young adults said that they paid bills and managed bank accounts online. Approximately 45 percent of these young adults reported buying books, clothing, and electronics online. It is clear that these young adults are comfortable on the Internet and are making extensive use of it.

‘Generation X young adults demonstrate the ability to balance work, family, and community.’

In recent decades, a number of scholars have asked whether the Internet and wireless communication would increase sociality and interaction or whether it would foster social isolation. Early reports of young people becoming addicted to online usage fostered the image of isolation, but the LSAL data portray a generation of young adults who use emerging electronic technologies to expand their range of social interaction with friends and family, and to support a wide array of information-seeking activities.


Happiness and Life Satisfaction

Generation X young adults are happy with their lives. Given the array of activities discussed in this report, it would be appropriate to think of Generation X as a busy generation, but they report that they are also happy with the way that their lives are developing. In 2016, the LSAL asked each participant the following question:

“Thinking about all aspects of your life, how happy are you? If zero means that you are very unhappy and 10 means that you are very happy, please rate your happiness.” The mean level of happiness was 7.5 and the median (middle score) was 8. Only 5 percent of Generation X young adults indicated a great deal of unhappiness (a score of 3 or lower). Thirty-one percent of Generation X young adults were very happy, with a score of 9 or 10 on the scale.

A Final Word

It is important to re-emphasize that there is more variation within generations than across generations. The happiness data illustrate this point, as do many other findings described in this article. Nonetheless, there are some distinctive patterns for each generation that make it useful to think about the circumstances surrounding how children are socialized and grow

into middle age and beyond. The study of generations is inherently a study of differences in distributions and patterns across generations. It is a mistake to think that all members of any generation share identical values or characteristics, and we hope that this brief discussion of the distribution of values, experiences, and aspirations among the members of Generation X is helpful in providing a general framework for the other analyses of Generation X that appear in this issue of *Generations*. 

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