

# THE Generation X Report

A Quarterly Research Report from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth

Volume 1, Issue 1 ♦ Fall 2011

## Active, Balanced, and Happy: These young Americans are not bowling alone

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THIS IS THE FIRST OF A NEW SERIES of quarterly research reports that will highlight the experiences, challenges, attitudes, behaviors, and dreams of the group of Americans known as Generation X. It is drawn from the responses of approximately 4,000 members of this generation, surveyed each year from 1987 through 2010. For a more comprehensive description of the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY), see the text box "A Brief History of the LSAY" later in this report or visit [www.lsay.org](http://www.lsay.org).

Generation X refers to American adults now 30 to 50 years of age, 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 House called *Generations*. The book examines generations across centuries and their characteristics, and provides a definition of Generation X that has been used widely in both popular and academic literature. The 84 million Americans who are included in Generation X are the parents of today's school-aged children in the U.S. and members of Generation X will become the members of Congress and the occupants of the White House over the next two or three decades.

Generation X is the first generation to grow up in the Internet Era and it is perhaps the most extensively wired (and now wireless) generation in American history. If Thomas Friedman is right and the world is now flat in regard to economic competition, this generation will be America's varsity team for the next two decades. So it is important to understand their history, current challenges, and future prospects.

The first report in this new series provides a general description of Generation X achievements, attitudes, and behaviors. If we could use only three words to describe them, the most applicable choices would be **active**, **balanced**, and **happy**. These words apply to a large majority – but certainly not all – of the members of Generation X.



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LSAY participants may report change of address information in the participant section of [www.lsay.org](http://www.lsay.org).

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**For additional information about the LSAY,** visit: [www.lsay.org](http://www.lsay.org).



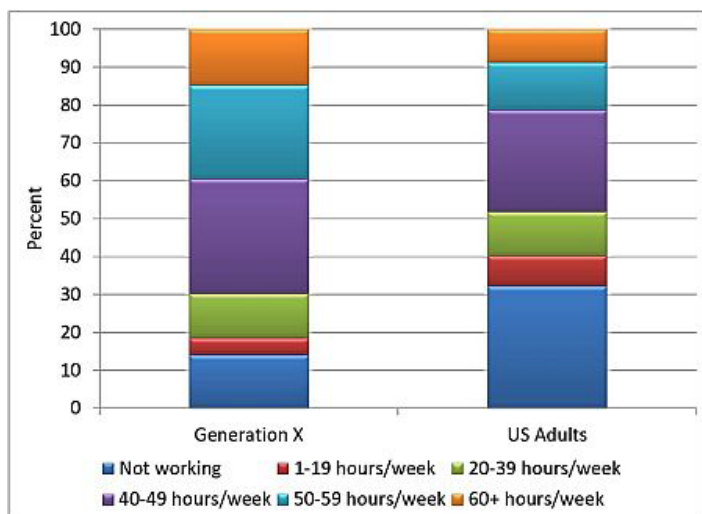
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## EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

Generation X young adults work hard and many continue to pursue additional education. Eighty-six percent of Generation X young adults work part-time or full-time; 70% spend 40 or more hours

working and commuting each week; and 40% spend 50 or more hours each week working and commuting. Compared to a national sample of all U.S. adults in 2008, the young adults in Generation X were more likely to be employed and were working and commuting significantly more hours per week. Young men were more likely to be in the workforce and to work more hours than young women, but 79% of young women were in the workforce and 57% of young women worked 40 or more hours each week.

Figure 1: Mean number of hours of work and commuting time reported by Generation X (LSAY) young adults and a national sample of American adults aged 18 and older, 2010



Generation X young adults with the highest levels of education were more likely to be employed and reported the longest work weeks. A majority of those holding a doctorate or professional degree reported working and commuting more than 50 hours each week, compared to 35% of high school graduates without a post-secondary degree. A third of these young adults who did not complete high school were unemployed or out of the workforce in 2009, compared to 10% of college graduates.

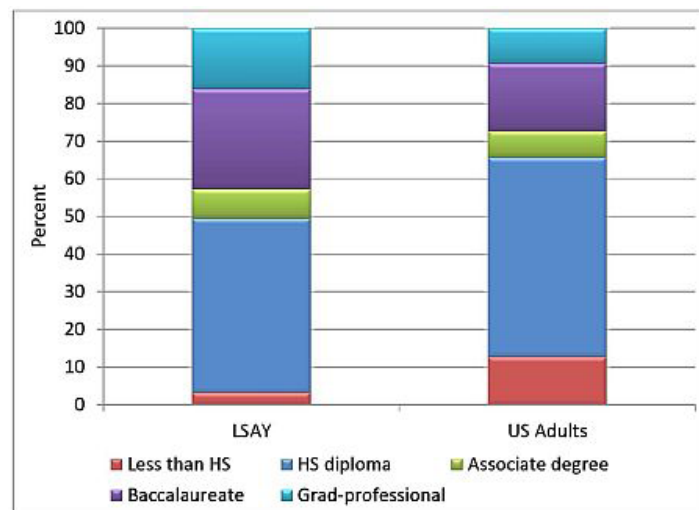
Two-thirds of Generation X young adults are satisfied with their current job. In 2010, each participant was asked to rate how satisfied they were with their current job on a zero-to-10 scale, with zero representing the highest level of dissatisfaction and 10 representing the highest level of satisfaction. The mean

level of job satisfaction was 7.0 and the median (middle score) was 7. Twenty-four percent of these workers rated their job at a 9 or 10 on the satisfaction scale and only 8% ranked their job satisfaction as three or lower.

Half of the young adults in Generation X have completed a post-secondary degree and 43% have earned a baccalaureate. Forty-six percent of young women have completed a baccalaureate compared to 40% of young men – a pattern that is continuing in the generations after Generation X. A high proportion of young adults who did not complete a formal degree in post-secondary study have earned certificates and licenses in numerous technical occupations (we will provide a more detailed discussion of education and certification in a future Generation X Report).

Nine percent of Generation X young adults are currently enrolled in an educational program, mostly on a part-time basis. Some are completing an associate degree program, some are seeking a baccalaureate, and some are seeking graduate or professional degrees. In 2011, the LSAY annual survey will ask LSAY participants for more detailed information about the kinds of programs in which they are enrolled.

Figure 2: Educational attainment of Generation X (LSAY) and a national sample of American adults aged 18 and older



## MARRIAGE AND FAMILIES

Generation X young adults are family-oriented. Despite the number of hours that they work each week 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. Two-thirds of Generation X young adults are currently married and 71% report having minor children at home. Seventy-seven percent of young women have minor children at home.

In 2007, the LSAY asked each of its participants to indicate how much importance they attached to various life goals, including family-related goals, job and career related goals, and political and social goals. The young adults in Generation X placed very high importance on family objectives: 83% said that “finding the right person to marry and having a happy family life” is very important, 66% said that “having children” was very important, and 80% said that it was very important to be “able to give my children better opportunities than I have had.” Eighty percent of Generation X parents expect their children to earn at least a baccalaureate and 39% indicate that they expect their children to earn a graduate or professional degree.

## PARENTING

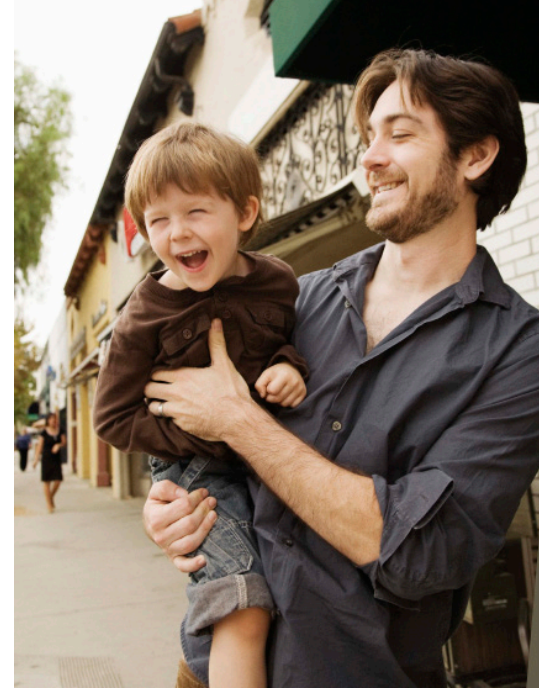
Beyond verbal assertions, Generation X young parents report a high level of involvement with their children and high expectations for their future. In a special 2010 survey of child-related hopes and activities, LSAY participants who were parents reported having 1,693 pre-school children living at home, 1,726 elementary school children, and 1,049 secondary school children. These populations of children are sufficiently large to allow statistically significant profiles of parent-child activities in Generation X.

The parents of pre-school children hold high educational expectations for their children – 88% expect their child to earn at least a baccalaureate and 46% expect their child to

**Table 1: Frequency of LSAY parent expectations and behaviors with their children by grade level.**

	Level of Child in School		
	Pre-school	Elementary School	Secondary School
Expect child to earn a baccalaureate	88%	84%	66%
Expect child to earn advanced degree	46	39	29
Reads with child 3 or more hours/wk	72	--	--
Watched 3+ hrs of educational TV/wk	54	--	--
Play music or sing with child 1+/wk	79	60	40
Helps child with homework	--	76	83
Helps with homework 5+ hours/wk	--	43	66
Talks to child about school 1+/month	--	95	96
Talks to child about school 1+/week	--	76	78
Talks to child about college 1+/month	--	--	90
Attends school event 1+/month	--	91	75
Attends school event 1+/week	--	46	32
Visited zoo/aquarium with child	80	81	55
Visited science museum with child	55	62	40
Visited natural history mus. with child	37	47	33
Visited planetarium with child	19	27	15
Visited art museum with child	22	30	21
Visited public library with child	70	85	71

earn a graduate or professional degree. To encourage these outcomes, 72% of the parents of pre-school children reported that they read to their child three or more hours each week. Half of the parents of pre-school children report that their youngsters watch “Sesame Street” or similar programs three or more hours each week. Nearly 80% of the parents of pre-school children help their child play with Lego’s 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 pre-school children took their child to a zoo or aquarium during the preceding year and a majority of pre-school parents took their child to a science museum or botanical garden or arboretum during the preceding year. Seventy percent of these parents also reported taking their child to a public library periodically.



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The parents of elementary school children hold equally high expectations of educational achievement, with 84% saying that they expect their child to earn at least a baccalaureate and 39% expect their child to earn a graduate or professional degree. And, like the parents of pre-school children, they work to make it happen. Three-quarters of the parents of elementary school children reported that they help with homework and 43% 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% 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% say that 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% reporting a visit to a zoo or aquarium in the previous year, 62% to a science museum, 47% to a natural history museum, and 27% to a planetarium. Eighty-five percent of the parents of elementary school children took their child to a public library periodically.

LSAY participants reported having more than a thousand children in secondary (middle or high) school and these parents also demonstrated a high level of expectation and involvement. Parent expectations for educational attainment moderated some for secondary school students, with 66% of parents expecting their child to earn a baccalaureate and 29% expecting a graduate or professional degree. Some of this decline in educational expectations may reflect the performance of the child in school during the preceding years.



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But the level of parental involvement remains high among the parents of secondary school students – 83% reported helping with homework and 66% 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 32% said that they attended at least one school event each week. Ninety-six percent of parents reported talking to their secondary school student at least once a month about school problems, and despite lower educational expectations, 90% of secondary school parents said that they talked to their child about going to college at least once a month.

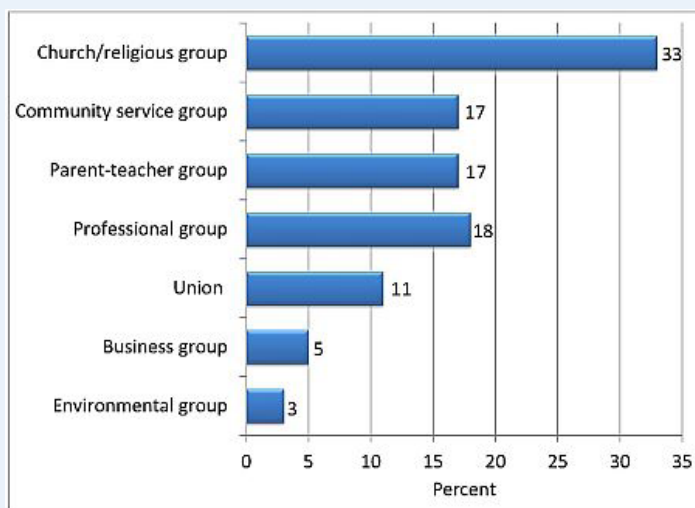
Secondary school parents also reported using a wide array of community resources to enhance their child's learning, but at a slightly lower rate than the parents of elementary school children. Fifty-five percent of secondary school parents reported taking their student to a zoo or aquarium and 40% indicated 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 parents of children at all grade levels, these results show a high level of expectation and an equally high level of involvement. There is a 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 clearly do not support the view that American parents have lost faith in education.

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND RELIGION

Generation X young adults demonstrate the ability to balance work, family, and community. The data from Generation X young adults in their 30's indicate that most of these busy mothers, fathers, and workers are able to balance those responsibilities and still find time to engage in numerous professional and community activities. In 2000, Harvard University Professor Robert Putnam wrote an influential book, *Bowling Alone*, in which he argued that Americans were increasingly isolated and that social capital – the social linkages and bonds that individuals establish with other adults outside their own family – was declining. He looked at membership in several community-based organizations such as the Elks, Moose, Knights of Columbus, and similar organizations and found that most were dwindling into obscurity. The data from the LSAY 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 community-based luncheon clubs, they are vigorous participants in parent-teacher organizations, local soccer and other sports clubs for youth, book clubs, and other community organizations.

Figure 3: Percent of Generation X (LSAY) active in selected organizations and groups



One in three Generation X young adults is an active member of a church or religious organization and almost all of these young adults report attending one or more church or religious activities or events each week. 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. Seventeen percent of all LSAY young adults are active members of a parent-teacher organization and 24% of the parents of minor children indicated that they are active in a school-based parent-teacher organization. Seventeen percent of



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Generation X young adults say that they are active in one or more community service groups and 29% report that they do some hours of volunteer work in their community each month. Four percent were active members of a book group and 3% indicated that they were active members of an environmental group.

These young adults appear to be very active in their jobs, churches, and communities, but do these reported activities reflect just a small number of hyper-active individuals or does it represent a broad level of engagement with other people for various purposes? Looking at the reported levels of active membership across work, church, and community organizations, the responses of LSAY young adults indicates that fully 44% of this generation was engaged actively in at least one of these groups and activities and that 22% were active in two or more of these organizations. There is some clustering of activity – as we would expect – but these results suggest that a significant portion of Generation X young adults are engaged in active social networks outside their immediate family.

## SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

The young adults in Generation X maintain an active social network outside formal groups and organizations. Ninety-five percent of LSAY young adults report that they talk to friends or family by telephone at least once each week and 29% say that they talk to friends or family on the phone once a day. Ten percent indicate that they have at least two telephone conversations with friends or family each day. Slightly more than 80% of young adults report visiting a friend or relative each week and 29% say that they make three or more visits to friends or family each week. Clearly, these young adults are engaged in continuous communication and interaction with other members of their family and their social network.

One of Putnam's indicators of social capital was the frequency of inviting friends into one's home for dinner, and he found this kind of social interaction to be diminishing. Generation X young adults in the LSAY report a substantial level of social interaction over food. Two-thirds reported that they entertain friends for dinner in their home or engage in group cooking activities with other adults at least once each month and 35% say that they entertain or participate in group cooking two or more times each month.

## RECREATION AND LEISURE

Beyond a high level of interactivity and communication, the young adults in Generation X report a diverse set of activities that demonstrate substantial balance in their lives. As noted earlier, these young adults spend a high number of hours working and commuting to and from work and they still find time to help their children and to socialize and interact with other adults. In addition to this impressive schedule, Generation X young adults report a high level of engagement in outdoor sports and frequent attendance at cultural events and sports events.

The 2009 LSAY questionnaire asked each participant about their involvement in a wide range of outdoor activities, recognizing that some individuals prefer one kind of activity and other individuals may prefer other activities. For example:

- 74% of young adults reported doing at least one nature hike in the preceding year and 54% reported three or more nature hikes,
- 65% reported going swimming or scuba diving at least once in the preceding year and 56% reported swimming or scuba diving three or more times,
- 41% reporting boating or sailing at least once in the last year and 23% reported three or more boating or sailing outings,
- 35% reported going hunting or fishing during the preceding year and 24% reported going hunting or fishing three or more times during the preceding year,
- 20% reported engaging in bird watching at least once in the preceding year and 11% reported bird watching three or more times in the preceding year,
- 13% reported skiing or snowboarding at least once in the preceding year and five percent reported doing it three or more times, and
- 12% reported that they had engaged in mountain climbing at least once in the previous year and five percent indicated that they had climbed a mountain three or more times in the preceding year.

Only 13% of Generation X young adults did not engage in any of these activities and 40% engaged in an average of two or more per month during the preceding year.

This level of interest in outdoor activities was paralleled by a strong interest in attending sporting events at both the amateur and professional levels. Fifty-three percent of LSAY young adults reported that they attended at least one amateur sports event during the preceding year and 34% said that they attended three or more amateur sports events. Fifty-six percent of Generation X young adults indicated that they attended at least one professional sports event during the preceding year and 25% attended three or more professional sports events during that period.

On the cultural side, 45% of LSAY young adults reported that they attended at least one play, symphony, opera, or ballet performance during the preceding year and 13% indicated that they attended three or more cultural events during the last year. A third of all Generation X young adults visited an art museum at least once during the preceding year and six percent visited an art museum three or more times during the last year. Reflecting the culture of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, 79% of LSAY young adults reported visiting a science museum, natural history museum, zoo, aquarium, botanical garden, or arboretum during the preceding year and 49% indicated that they had visited three or more of these institutions during the preceding year.

Figure 4: Percent of Generation X (LSAY) event attendance and reading



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% read a newspaper every day. Sixty percent of these young adults read one or more magazines each month (print or online) and 31% read three or more magazines each month. Fully 80% of LSAY young adults reported buying and reading at least one book during the preceding year and 47% said that they read six or more books during the preceding year.



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## DIGITAL LIFE

The young adults in Generation X have grown up in the Internet Era. Many of these individuals 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 that they reached their 20's, the Internet was becoming a part of modern life and they have experienced the extraordinary growth of the Internet and of wireless communication during the two decades since high school. By 2009, 97% of Generation X young adults reported that they regularly used the Internet. Ninety percent indicated that they used the Internet to obtain maps and directions and 88% reported that they obtained weather information from the Internet. Eighty percent indicated that they used the Internet to obtain health and medical information, and 75% of young adults said that they paid bills and managed their bank account online. Approximately 40% of these young adults reported buying books, clothing, and electronics online. It is clear that they are comfortable in the Internet Era and are making extensive use of this resource.

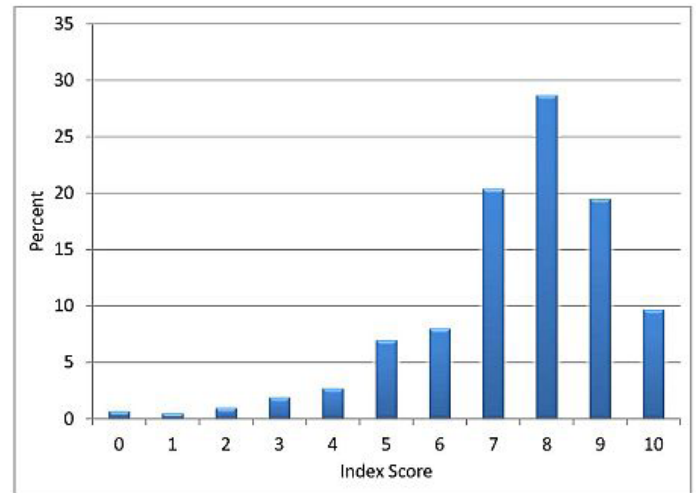
In the same 2009 LSAY survey, Generation X young adults indicated that they make extensive use of a variety of social networking sites and services. Sixty-two percent of young adults said that they have a Facebook page and 23% had a MySpace account. Twelve percent had a Twitter account and 10% reported having a YouTube account. Seventeen percent had a Skype account and six percent operated their own blog. The impact of the use of social media will be explored in a future quarterly Generation X Report, but these results indicate that the volume of use is relatively high.

In recent decades, a number of scholars have asked whether the Internet (and now wireless communication) would increase sociality and interaction or whether it would foster social

Table 2: Generation X (LSAY) use of the Internet in a typical month

Internet uses	Percent
Get directions or a map	90%
Get weather forecast	88
Get health or medical information	80
Pay bills	76
Manage bank account	75
Buy clothing	47
Buy a book	43
Buy electronics	38
Have Facebook account	62
Use Skype	17

Figure 5: Distribution of happiness in Generation X (LSAY)



isolation. Some early media reports of young people becoming addicted to online usage fostered this image, but these data portray a generation of young adults who have used emerging electronic technologies to expand their range of social interaction with friends and family and have encouraged 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

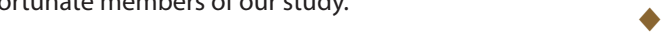


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X as a busy generation, but they report that they are also happy with the way that their lives are developing. In 2009 and 2010, the LSAY asked each participant the following question: "Thinking about all aspects of your life, how happy are you? If 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 four percent of Generation X young adults indicated a great deal of unhappiness (a score of three or lower). Twenty-nine percent of Generation X young adults were very happy with a score of 9 or 10 on the scale.

Although these results describe most of the members of Generation X as active, balanced, and happy, we know that some members of this generation are less happy and suffering in various ways. Some are unemployed or have been forced into jobs at lower levels than their education or expectations. Some have disabling illnesses and some are in prison.

In this and in future quarterly reports, we will present the results from the 4,000 LSAY participants as they report them to us. Our descriptions of the success of numerous of our participants does not diminish our concern for the less fortunate members of our study.



Generation X Reports. This report is the first of a new series of quarterly reports that will write the history and monitor the future of Generation X. For the reasons outlined at the beginning of this report, the members of Generation X will provide the leadership for the United States in the decades ahead. The citizens and voters in Generation X will be required to know more about public policy issues than any previous generation and to make difficult decisions. We hope these quarterly reports will contribute to Generation X's understanding of itself and to the larger society's understanding of Generation X.



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# A Brief History of the LSAY

Today, the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY) is the longest and most comprehensive longitudinal study of a national sample of public school students ever conducted in the United States.

To provide a more intensive longitudinal examination of the development of student achievement in middle school and high school (and the relationship of those patterns to career choices), the National Science Foundation (NSF) funded the LSAY in 1986. After a year of pilot testing of instruments, the LSAY began collecting data from a national sample of 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade students in 50 U.S. public school systems in the fall of 1987. During the next seven years, each of approximately 5,900 students in the two national probability cohort samples were given mathematics and science achievement tests (based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress item pools) each fall and were asked to complete attitudinal and self-report questionnaires each fall and spring.

In addition, one parent of each of the LSAY students was interviewed each spring by telephone, and all of the mathematics and science teachers who served one or more LSAY students were asked to complete a questionnaire for each course, including information about the objectives of the course, the textbook used, and the allocation of time and effort in the course to various kinds of instructional activities. The principal of each of the participating schools was asked to complete a school inventory and questionnaire periodically. The initial period of data collection ended in the spring of 1994 when the 7<sup>th</sup>-grade cohort was one year beyond high school and the 10<sup>th</sup>-grade cohort was four years beyond high school.

With support from the NSF STEP program in 2005, the LSAY was able to locate or account for more than 95% of the original sample of students. Data collection was resumed in 2007 and four additional cycles of data collection have been completed with NSF support. The

LSAY participants in the two cohorts are now 36 and 39 years of age, respectively. Because of its extraordinary longitudinal record of these young adults – who represent the core of Generation X – the LSAY is committed to continuing an annual program of measurement and analysis in future decades.

During the years in which students were enrolled in middle school and high school, data were collected primarily through the use of printed questionnaires and tests administered in school by a local school staff member employed part-time by the LSAY. Teacher questionnaires were printed and collected by a combination of mail and the use of a local in-school coordinator. During the in-school years, one parent of each participating student was interviewed by telephone once each year. Currently, approximately 75% of participating young adults complete an annual questionnaire online and the remaining 25% use a printed questionnaire and a postage-paid return envelope. Current participants are offered a small payment in appreciation for their time and effort.

All of the data collection and data management procedures used by the LSAY are approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board. In earlier years, LSAY data collection procedures were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Boards at Michigan State University, Northwestern University, and Northern Illinois University. The data are deposited (in a blinded format to protect the identity of individuals) in the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan and are available for secondary analysis according to ICPSR rules. Over the last two decades, LSAY data have been used in approximately 40 dissertations and more than 200 articles in refereed journals.

A more comprehensive description of the LSAY is available at [www.lsay.org](http://www.lsay.org).

**The Generation X Report** is based primarily on data from the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY). The LSAY has been funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) since 1986 (NSF awards MDR-8550085, REC96-27669, RED-9909569, REC-0337487, DUE-0525357, DUE-0712842, DUE-0856695, DRL-0917535, DUE-1118625, DUE-1118626).

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF.

We acknowledge the continuing cooperation and support of the more than 4,000 LSAY participants who have voluntarily

completed questionnaires, telephone interviews, and data forms over the last 24 years and thank them for their continuing support. Without their active involvement, the LSAY would not be possible.

We also acknowledge and thank the parents of LSAY students and the teachers, principals, and administrators in public school districts throughout the U.S. who contributed their time and energy to this study.

And, we acknowledge and thank the several hundred staff who have worked on the LSAY over the last two decades to make this study possible.