



## Gen Z: An Inflated Generation

**H**ow can we explain the hypersensitive, poorly educated and highly polarized Gen Z population in America? Numerous studies provide the answers—including “helicopter” parenting, social media, and educational institutions that tell them they are all exceptional people. When they enter the workplace and encounter inevitable criticism, they overreact personally. One consequence is that many employers are trying to avoid hiring Gen Zers (those born between 1997 and 2012).

This is bad, of course, for those in Gen Z, at least some of whom want to work and have high ambitions to succeed. A larger problem for the nation is that not enough of these students have developed math and science skills necessary to be engineers or scientists.

### Gen Z in the Workplace

**T**he results of a coddled generation being told that they are A (or B+) students—when they have not learned much in the way of general education, social skills or an ability to take criticism—are showing up in the workplace.

A 2023 survey by intelligent.com conducted with 1,243 business leaders found that that 40 percent believed recent college graduates were unprepared for the workplace.<sup>1</sup> These business leaders expressed their hesitancy to hire Gen Zers because as a group they lack a strong work ethic, communication skills, and preparedness to handle the technological tasks needed in a modern office.

Some of the employers’ discontent could stem from demands being made by recent grads. For one thing, they ask for unusually high salaries. Half of the candidates (recent grads entering the workplace) ask for a starting salary of \$100,000—even though most starting positions begin at \$70,000 or less.

Then if they are hired, Gen Zers prove difficult to work with. Many business leaders have found that recent grad hires

lack motivation and are unwilling to put in the effort to succeed at the job. Some employers blamed the Covid-19 shutdowns, when students stayed home, taking online classes, and failed to develop social skills.

Social media use led this generation to spend less time with friends in person. Because girls spend more time on social media, they became especially vulnerable to feeling left out. Young girls reported twice the rate of cyberbullying compared to boys. At same time, many female teens developed unrealistic expectations about happiness, body image and alienation.<sup>2</sup>

Members of this generation have high levels of hypersensitivity. This acute sensitivity is correlated with low emotional intelligence, measured in decision-making, navigating feelings, following meaningful values, empathy with others, and feeling connected to something larger than oneself.<sup>3</sup>

### Emotional Sensitivity

**T**he most defining characteristic of Gen Z is its relationship to technology and access to social media. This is the first generation to possess their own smartphones in their school years.<sup>4</sup> Psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt maintain that social media have stunted this generation’s social development and have contributed to increasing rates of suicide and mental illness. While becoming especially attuned to feelings of their peers acting through social media, this generation also became more distant in actual social interactions with their peers. They fear being canceled or doxxed by their peers, yet do not hesitate to attack or make fun of a peer they only know online. Thus, *Gen Zers experience high rates of anxiety and depression.*

*The hypersensitivity of this generation closes their minds to different ideas.*<sup>5</sup> Members of this generation, surveys show, are sensitive about being criticized by their peers, while

they are especially attuned to trendy causes like social justice, gender equality and environmental sustainability that lead naturally to groupthink. Social media amplify sensitivity through fear of cyberbullying, trolling and a culture of constant comparison. The number of followers becomes a measure of self-worth. Users become hypersensitive to criticism, even as they troll others and attack those they disagree with politically.

## Over-Parenting Partly to Blame

**B**laming social media for today's problems, whether cultural, social or political, presents an easy scapegoat. If social media have intensified groupthink and individual hypersensitivity, so has over-parenting.<sup>6</sup> Overly protective parents are well-meaning, but have created overly sensitive, anxious and depressed children.

Often with two parents working, or as an overworked single parent, living in a world of dangers of all sorts for their children, parents have tended to be overprotective. Overprotective parenting is reinforced by a broader culture of overprotection. In one case, parents were charged with "neglect" for leaving their 11-year-old child in their own backyard without supervision.<sup>7</sup>

When asked by psychologist Jonathan Haidt about when their parents started leaving them alone, those over 40 years old say at about ages 6-8, while the under-25 group say about 14-16. In short, Generation Z was not allowed to wander around alone. They grew up in a world of anxiety, fearing predators everywhere.

The days of a parent or teacher telling a crying child called names in school that "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me" are long past. Calling names or making fun of another kid is a "micro-aggression." Being called "ginger" for having red hair, "tubby" for being overweight, or a racially offensive name may all be deemed equally toxic. As a result, many in this generation did not learn how to fight their own battles. They failed to develop thick skins, and they embraced victimhood.

Children of overprotective parents are coddled. Real self-esteem comes from being tested: learning to fall, fail and get back up.<sup>8</sup> Instead of letting their children take the bruises that come with life, overprotective parents tend to insert themselves into difficult or potentially stress-provoking situations.<sup>9</sup>

Over-parenting, while well-intentioned (and obviously parents should parent their children), created a fragile generation. In fairness, there were many good results. This generation is less prone to criminality and substance abuse. Still, it is more susceptible to depression and suicide. At the same time, Gen Zers are more politically intolerant, especially females.

Educators from primary schools to universities contributed to the coddling of Gen Z.<sup>10</sup> There are multiple reasons for educators to coddle students. Teachers were told not to discourage students by giving them low grades. In fact, most students were given As and Bs. They not only passed but passed with high marks. Grade inflation escalated in K-12 education and in universities. Teachers and professors acted not only out of kindness, or misplaced pedagogy, but also out of self-interest.

Grade inflation in our colleges and universities is well documented. Grade inflation is also apparent in primary schools as well as high schools. Two researchers, Michael Hurwitz, senior director the College Board testing organization, and Jason Lee at the University of Georgia, have documented rising grade point averages (GPAs) in U.S. high schools.<sup>11</sup>

Some grade inflation can be attributed to the push for "equity" in American schools. This movement for equity—racial equity—through grading "reform" began in the early 2000s and took off in the next two decades. The Covid-19 pandemic helped accelerate grade inflation, but the trend continues even today.

## 'Equity Grading'

**M**eredith Coffey and Adam Tyner at the Thomas Fordham Institute released an extensive report in February 2023 that traces the accelerating rate of grade inflation in secondary schools.<sup>12</sup> They attribute much of the problem to "equity grading," which prohibits teachers from giving students bad grades for late assignments, cheating or failing to turn in assignments. Equity grading has been implemented in many school districts since the Covid-19 shutdowns.

Coffey and Tyner concluded that "lowering expectations is bad public policy, *as it reduces learning and undermines the capacity of schools to help students succeed in the long run.*" Grade inflation actually decreases student learning.

The researchers acknowledged that truly excessive academic pressure can be harmful to students, but, as

international studies have shown, “*moderate levels of stress can actually lead to greater student motivation and achievement.*”<sup>13</sup>

Joe Feldman’s *Grading for Equity* (2018) first raised concerns about equity grading, but the Coffey-Tyner study provides extensive empirical proof that grade inflation has promoted a decline in learning.

In late 2023, the North West Education Association analyzed the results of its student assessment test, which the organization conducts each spring with about 3.5 million public school students in third through eighth grades. The study found that despite billions of dollars spent by the federal government to make up for learning losses during Covid, reading and math scores still fell short of pre-pandemic trends.<sup>14</sup>

## Inflated College Grades

If grade inflation has been on the rise in K-12 schools, it is on jet fuel in American universities. The average college GPA increased from 2.81 in 1990 to 3.15 in 2020, a 12 percent rise. The median college GPA increased even more, by 21.5 percent.<sup>15</sup>

Grade inflation from 1990 through 2020 was highest at four-year public universities (17 percent), followed by private nonprofit schools such as Harvard, Stanford and so forth. Over the same 30 years, two-year community college grades experienced 8 percent inflation, while private for-profit schools had the lowest rate of inflation at 2 percent.<sup>16</sup>

Are students getting smarter? Does this explain the higher grades? The answer is emphatically “No.” Multiple studies show that students learn less if they do not have to work hard for their grades. This should not surprise us. What should disturb us is that teachers and universities are asking students for higher and higher tuition, while not giving them a high-quality product.

Grade inflation benefits universities and teachers. Facing demographic problems and many young people deciding college is not worth the cost, college administrators are intent on student retention. “Success counselors” are the new buzzwords at most colleges. Online students are especially vulnerable to dropping out. As a result, success counselors are there for any student, in-person or online, with poor grades. As these success counselors see it, bad grades are a reflection of factors other than just

performance. These factors might be time management, family problems, not knowing how to study, or whatever.

College instructors are encouraged to minimize dropout rates. High numbers of students failing the class or dropping out are seen as indications of bad teaching. This becomes a problem with courses such as a General Education required math course. It is hard to water down an algebra course.

High grades help retain students for cost-conscious university administrations. This reality encourages classroom instructors to develop less-rigorous courses. Moreover, high grades mean better student evaluations. Psychologist Wolfgang Stroebe in a massive 2020 study showed that student evaluations encouraged poor teaching and contributed to grade inflation.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, student evaluations have become the central instrument in measuring instructor performance in the classroom. Predictably, grade inflation is higher among younger professors coming up for tenure or instructors coming up for annual job renewal.

Conservatives rightfully complain that students are not learning the basics of civics. But civics is not the only subject where U.S. education is shortchanging students. *A long-term decline in math, quantitative and science skills is becoming a threat to national security.* American students’ test scores in math are dropping, as is enrollment in STEM majors (science, technology, engineering and math).

## A Worrisome Math Deficit

By 2019 college enrollments had increased more than 50 percent since 1985, but the absolute number of math and statistics majors had barely budged (15,496 vs. 15,009 in 1985). In fact, in 2019 more students were studying the visual and performing arts than computer science, math or chemical engineering combined. And the *STEM degrees increasingly go to foreign, not American, students.*

STEM leadership is essential to national security, especially as U.S. defense relies more and more on advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, robotics, directed energy and hypersonic weapons.<sup>18</sup>

Hopes that math scores for K-12 students might improve after the Covid-19 pandemic have been dashed by a 2024 report that math scores among teenagers are the worst since they have been since the 1970s. While math scores plummeted globally, in the U.S. there was a 13-point drop

among 15-year-olds. This was a much sharper drop than in any other industrialized country in Europe, Singapore or South Korea. American students are doing far worse in math than students in Estonia.<sup>19</sup>

This should concern all Americans. For a half-century or more, conservatives have called for educators to return to the basics—reading, writing and arithmetic. Political leaders can play a critical role in setting educational standards in K-12 and public university education. More important, though, is the role of parents. They can demand more of their children and their teachers. Cultural change begins in the grassroots—and it *has* begun, with more conservative parents running for local school boards and taking advantage of expanding school choice options and homeschooling.

These are good signs. But the fight for our children has just begun.

### Happy Thanksgiving to Our Readers

As we approach the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States, we are thankful for the blessings of liberty and the abundance of this country. Let us not forget that the English Pilgrims, who sailed from Europe on the *Mayflower* in 1620 in search of religious freedom, settled in Massachusetts and endured *a failed experiment with socialist principles which necessity compelled them to abandon*.

A little more than a year after they celebrated the first Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims wisely decided to divide up the land they had farmed in common, so that everyone had a share and could grow and keep what he wanted. Productivity increased and the colony prospered, attracting a great migration from England. The rest is history.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.techspot.com/news/99693-business-leaders-gen-z-unprepared-workforce-they-have.html>.

<sup>2</sup> [https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_teens\\_today\\_are\\_different\\_from\\_past\\_generations](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_teens_today_are_different_from_past_generations).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.6seconds.org/2024/04/17/gen-z-state-of-the-heart-research/>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <https://medium.com/raising-a-beautiful-mind/why-this-generation-has-become-so-sensitive-7961c2c7a8e9>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://thunderbird.asu.edu/thought-leadership/insights/why-generation-z-so-depressed-overprotective-parents>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2018-11-08/why-you-shouldnt-coddle-your-kids>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mental-health-nerd/202408/the-paradox-of-helicopter-parenting>; and <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/escaping-our-mental-traps/202205/the-dangers-overprotective-parenting>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-personal-rennaissance/201508/why-are-today-s-college-students-so-emotionally-fragile>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/07/17/study-finds-notable-increase-grades-high-schools-nationally>.

<sup>12</sup> <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/think-again-does-equitable-grading-benefit-students>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/11/us/reading-math-test-scores-education-nwea.html>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.bestcolleges.com/research/grade-inflation-trends-and-causes/>.

<sup>16</sup> Grade inflation is examined in multiple studies including an early 2010 investigation,

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227372228\\_Real\\_Costs\\_of\\_Nominal\\_Grade\\_Inflation\\_New\\_Evidence\\_from\\_Student\\_Course\\_Evaluations](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/227372228_Real_Costs_of_Nominal_Grade_Inflation_New_Evidence_from_Student_Course_Evaluations);

followed by a longitudinal study <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-22137-007>; and more recent studies, including a 2022 study at

<https://docs.iza.org/dp15556.pdf>. and 2023 studies including

<https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/grade-inflation-locking-learning-loss-part-1>; and

<https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/commentary/grade-inflation-locking-learning-loss-part-2-solutions>.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01973533.2020.1756817>.

<sup>18</sup> <https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2019/02/americas-stem-crisis-threatens-our-national-security/>.

<sup>19</sup> <https://thehill.com/opinion/education/4443710-america-is-facing-a-stem-and-data-education-crisis/>.

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