

# INTERGENERATIONAL ACTIVISM:

In a Divided America,  
A Tonic for All Ages

by Paul Taylor

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## OVERVIEW

Aging and racial diversity – the two great demographic dramas at the root of much of today’s political divisiveness – can also become sources of economic vitality and national renewal, according to a new essay by Encore.org Senior Fellow Paul Taylor. Nearly all Americans, regardless of race, age or ideology, hope that they will. Drawing on demographic data and public opinion surveys, the essay portrays a public that is becoming more polarized and more tolerant at the same time. It also describes an intergenerational social action movement that is gathering momentum in response to one of the most profound changes in modern American society: More older adults are thriving while more children and youth are at risk of falling behind.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
GEN2GEN ACTIVISM.....	3
BRIDGING DIVIDES .....	5
HEALTHY AGING, CHALLENGING CHILDHOODS.....	7
RESEARCH ON IMPACT.....	10
ATTITUDES ABOUT AGING.....	11
INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS.....	12
GAUGING THE FUTURE THROUGH A GENERATIONAL LENS.....	16
END NOTES.....	17

## INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century America is growing older and more racially diverse. These are separate demographic dramas, but they are playing out at the same time, creating identity gaps that are roiling our politics and undermining our social cohesion.

Together they have produced an America that has sorted itself into two political tribes – one that skews younger, more liberal, more diverse, more urban, more cosmopolitan, more secular; the other older, whiter, more conservative, more nationalistic, more religious and more likely to be found in exurbs, small towns and rural communities.

One controls the culture, the other controls the government, which give both endless fodder for grievance. Each has its own news channels and social media universe, which give them wildly different takes on reality. Each is animated, above all, by animus toward the other.

Today's big public policy battles are more often than not proxies for this war over identity. Polls show that most Americans support pragmatic, split-the-difference solutions to difficult issues like health care, tax policy or border control. But most have uncompromising views these days about which political tribe has the right policies, values, attitudes and blood lines to set the nation's destiny in the decades ahead.

In 2016, Donald Trump won the first presidential campaign in modern times waged mainly on the perilous terrain of identity politics. But the trouble didn't start with him. For decades, our changing demographics have exerted a centrifugal pull on our political identities. Trump is both symptom and accelerant. So is today's shout-fest on social media, talk radio and cable news. So is the paralyzing dysfunction in Congress.

If the scourge of negative partisanship was the only big political trend shaping modern America, woe to us all; more so to our children and grandchildren. Happily, it is not. History rarely moves in just one direction at a time.

Here is the more interesting reality: Even as Americans are becoming more politically divided, we're also becoming more comfortable with diversity – by race, gender, religion, immigrant status, family structure, sexual identity and just about every other demographic marker you can name.

Here's a related paradox: The two demographic trends at the heart of so much of our political polarization – aging and diversity – are also sources of economic vitality, national renewal and generational interdependence. This isn't just my opinion. Survey research shows it's how most Americans think.

According to the latest polls, by a ratio of more than two-to-one the public says that immigrants strengthen rather than burden America. A quarter century ago, public opinion was two-to-one the other way. The sea change in attitudes has occurred in an era when nearly nine in 10 immigrants are non-white. And it has come in the teeth of a potent conservative backlash in the voting booth against immigrants, especially those who come illegally.

Our politics cannot be detoxified overnight. But there's a lot we can do in our families and communities to navigate today's demographic storms in a way that – to tweak a phrase – can make America great in a new way. Indeed, there's a lot we're already doing, though even more would be better.

Which brings us to the topic of this white paper – intergenerational activism. This social movement views older adults as they view themselves – as a resource, not a burden. At a time when economic well-being has shifted north in the life cycle, intergenerational activism mobilizes older people to participate in programs that help our growing ranks of underserved children thrive. It's a movement that benefits adults and children alike. And maybe – just maybe – it's one that can point toward an escape hatch from the vitriol of modern politics.

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## GEN2GEN ACTIVISM

Older adults have been involved in the lives of kids for millennia, but today intergenerational social activism is gathering momentum as a record 10,000 baby boomers a day hit retirement age, many driven by a desire to leave the world better off than they found it.

The movement takes assorted shapes and forms – foster grandparenting, volunteering in schools, mentoring in social service or recreational programs. Twentieth century psychoanalyst Erik Erickson coined the term “generativity” to describe the later-life urge to leave something better behind for future generations. Across the country, millions of baby boomers are hearing that call.

“The passage of time brings us inescapably to the realization that humans are designed to pass the torch from generation to generation,” says Marc Freedman, founder and CEO of Encore.org, a two-decades old nationwide nonprofit group that promotes “second acts for the greater good.” Freedman adds that this instinct becomes “more pronounced as we reach the age when there are fewer years ahead of us than behind us.”



Encore.org recently launched Generation to Generation, a campaign to mobilize 1 million adults ages 50 and older to participate in youth-serving programs (or create new ones). The five winners for its first Encore Prize provide a thumbnail tour of the kinds of innovative programs already in operation or being developed. They are:



**Critical Bridge/Office of Mayor Sam Liccardo** (San Jose, CA), which integrates caring, older-adult mentors into the city’s workforce and community-college programs to help youth get on track, discover new opportunities and change the trajectory of their lives.



**Family Promise** (Summit, NJ), which partners with faith-based and secular groups to provide older financial literacy coaches to youth and their families to help them achieve housing stability and financial independence.



**Grandmas2Go/Family Coaches** (Jacksonville, OR), which matches volunteer “grandmas” with vulnerable families with young children (0-5) to help fill gaps in service left by stretched public dollars.



**Hire Autism/Organization for Autism Research** (Arlington, VA), which engages older-adult mentors to help young adults on the autism spectrum find jobs that match their skills.



**Table Wisdom** (St. Louis, MO), which uses technology to pair people 50+ with new immigrants of different generations, cultures, languages and national origins for conversations that support immigrants in improving their lives and keep older people socially and civically engaged.

All of these initiatives are finding creative ways to use the time and talent of older adults to meet the needs of children and families. They are engaging cities as intergenerational innovation hubs, teaching teens financial literacy so they can help their families, recycling skills learned as parents and grandparents to help others outside the family, and using technology to help welcome new immigrants. All of these ideas have the potential to spread nationwide.

## BRIDGING DIVIDES

In some cases, the explicit goal of these and similar programs around the country is to bridge the so-called “gray-brown divide” (a shorthand term used by political analysts) between America’s older adults, three quarters of whom are white, and our nation’s children and young adults, nearly half of whom are black, Latino, Asian-American or mixed-race.

For example, when Hal Garman, a white, retired Methodist minister now in his early eighties, moved into a gated community for seniors in Gaithersburg, Maryland in 2011, he took an immediate interest in “the kids living just outside our fence.” His outer suburb of Washington, D.C. was in the midst of rapid demographic change, driven by an influx of Hispanic, Asian, African and Middle Eastern immigrant families.

Garman has since recruited more than 100 fellow residents of Asbury Methodist Village to serve as after-school mentors to at-risk third, fourth and fifth graders. The children visit the senior center every other Friday afternoon throughout the school year for a dinner and activities such as nature photography, music, art, poetry and conversational English.

“We see our role as helping with their social skills, building up their self-esteem,” Garman said. “The feedback we get from their teachers and parents has been excellent.”

Garman has a kindred spirit in Karen Dubinsky, 67 and also white, an empty-nester from Queens, New York, who was dismayed when she learned that just one in seven students at nearby LaGuardia Community College go on to get four-year degrees. Many come from immigrant families baffled by the complexities of the application process. So Dubinsky created “Pushy Moms,” a program that matches aspiring students with mothers like herself who “have an untapped reservoir of experience” from helping their own kids get into college. “It’s a way to level the playing field,” she said.

Across the country, the older volunteers who are part of the intergenerational movement come from all racial groups. And no matter what their background, they all seem to know one thing well: The benefits of these programs do not flow only to the children they serve.

“I always seem to get more out of my volunteer activities than those I set out to help,” says Wiley Huff of Miami Shores, Florida, a retired African-American teacher who now works as a mentor for Best Buddies International. “[Young people] are a window to the future. And they remind us of the beauty of our own youth.”

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## HEALTHY AGING, CHALLENGING CHILDHOODS

Garman, Dubinsky and Huff are part of the biggest, healthiest and wealthiest American generation ever to grow old. Today there are 48 million Americans age 65 and older, a 41 percent increase just since 2000. By 2060, according to Census Bureau projections, this number will more than double – to 98 million. Due to longer life spans and declining birth rates, by 2060 the share of the population 65 and older is projected to rise to 24 percent, from 15 percent now.

Today's generation of older Americans is in the best shape of any in our history. According to self-reports, a 69-year-old man today is as healthy and active as a 60-year-old reported being in 1970. (So, yes, 70 really is the new 60!) And a nationwide survey by Encore.org in 2016 found that three quarters of adults ages 60 and older say the later stage of life for them has been a time of freedom, growth and giving back.

One explanation for these good vibrations has to do with a long-term rise in the financial security of older adults. In 2016, the median wealth of households headed by someone 65 or older was 92 percent greater (in inflation-adjusted dollars) than it had been for their same-aged counterparts in 1983, according to Federal Reserve Board data.

By contrast, the median wealth of households headed by adults under age 35 in 2013 was 30 percent below what it had been for their same-aged counterparts in 1983.

For most of American history, older adults have been the poorest age cohort. Now they're the least likely to be poor – in 2016, just 9.3 percent of adults ages 65 and older lived in poverty, thanks largely to Social Security and Medicare, without which nearly half would be poor.<sup>1</sup>

America's children are now our poorest generation. Some 18 percent are officially classified as poor, and another other one in five are near-poor, according to Census data. Many are the offspring of a generation of young adults who've had trouble getting started in an era of digitization and automation that has wiped out whole categories of middle class jobs.

Throw in the millstone of student loan debt, the economic hardships linked to the cultural shift away from marriage, and the social and economic challenges that come with being a member of a racial minority and you wind up with a rising generation of young adults and children that's the first in American history to be downwardly mobile.

To be clear, most older adults aren't living on Easy Street, just as most children aren't in poverty. Also, racial wealth gaps remain as wide as ever and persist into old age, with the median white family possessing 10 times more net wealth than the median black family and eight times more than the median Hispanic family, according to Federal Reserve Board data.

Nevertheless, the migration of economic well-being toward the latter stages of the human life cycle is one of the more important – if least noted – shifts in the economy of 21st century America.

Because of this shift, the diverging economic fortunes of young and old now line up like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Intergenerational projects reach across boundaries of age by connecting supply with demand, resources with need, old with young.

The remainder of this paper will take a closer look at the impact of this social activism on both children and older adults. In addition, it will examine public attitudes on topics related to aging and diversity; explore how generational relations have changed in families, communities and the nation; and speculate on the potential of intergenerational programs to mitigate today's divisiveness in our politics and culture.

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## AGING IN THE US: THE DOUBLING OF THE 65+ POPULATION



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## RESEARCH ON IMPACT

Decades of social science research affirms that intergenerational programs have a beneficial impact on young and old alike.

Here is a sampler of studies on the impact on youth:

- **AARP Foundation Experience Corps:** Founded in 1995, this intergenerational initiative recruits, trains and places people 50+ as tutors and mentors for K-3 students in more than 20 cities across the country. Data from its Baltimore program, in which older adults spent at least 15 hours per week in schools that have a high share of low-income students, showed a 30 to 50 percent decline in the number of children referred to the principal's office for behavior problems. [Read more.](#)
- **AARP Foundation Experience Corps:** A Washington University study examining the performance of almost 900 second and third graders in three cities found that elementary school students supported by Experience Corps achieved 60 percent more progress in reading comprehension and sounding out new words than comparable students not in the program. [Read more.](#)
- **Big Brothers Big Sisters:** The involvement of a Big Brother or Big Sister in a young person's life for a single year reduced first-time drug use by 46 percent, cut school absenteeism by 52 percent, and lowered violent behavior by 33 percent. [Read more.](#)
- At-risk youth who have a mentor in their lives are 55 percent more likely than those without a mentor to enroll in college and more than twice as likely to take on a leadership position in later life. [Read more.](#)
- **"Don't Quit on Me,"** a 2015 study commissioned by America's Promise, found that young people with a web of adult support in their lives and their communities are more likely than those without such a support system to graduate from high school. [Read More.](#)

**Here are some findings about older adults who volunteer:**

- Retirees who give – either through financial contributions or volunteering – are more likely than those who don't to say they feel "a strong sense of purpose," "have high self-esteem," and are "happy and healthy." [Read more.](#)
- Some 85 percent of retiree volunteers reported that they have developed important new friendships through giving and volunteering. [Read more.](#)
- Johns Hopkins/Columbia/UCLA + Washington University research found that Experience Corps volunteers improved significantly in physical activity and mental health compared to similar adults over an eight-month period. [Read more.](#)
- Foster Grandparents: 71 percent of Foster Grandparents reported never feeling lonely. [Read more.](#)

(All research findings cited above should be taken with the following caution: Those who participate in these programs are typically a self-selecting group. The same traits and values that led them to take part are also independently correlated with positive social outcomes. In other words, they may be more likely than others in their peer group to succeed even without the programs. Even so, the fact that such programs provide an outlet for their ambitions, idealism and drive is a value in itself).

## ATTITUDES ABOUT AGING

In our era of polarized politics, changing demographics, rising inequality and declining mobility, the public is in broad agreement about at least one feel-good tenet of the American Dream: We are in a golden age of extended midlife.

Seven in 10 young and middle-aged adults say they expect life after age 60 to be good for them personally, and nearly two-thirds say that the growing number of older adults will have a positive impact on society as a whole, according to the nationwide survey conducted by Encore in 2016.<sup>2</sup>

Older adults are even more upbeat. Three-quarters of survey respondents ages 60 and older say that this later stage of life has been a time of freedom, growth, and giving back for them rather than a period of decline and dependence.

Older adults also report having more financial security, a more purposeful life, more pervasive feelings of gratitude, and greater sense of upward mobility than do younger and middle-aged adults.

These positive assessments of aging are shared by all groups no matter what their age, race, income, gender, immigrant status, party or ideology, making it one of the rare realms of modern life about which a sour and divided public finds itself both upbeat and in accord.

On the other hand, no one has quite figured out yet how to repeal the famous Bette Davis dictum that “getting old ain’t for sissies.” Old age still brings with it an eventual decline in physical and mental abilities. And age discrimination, while arguably a diminishing feature of modern life, has by no means disappeared.

Overall, the public is much more concerned about group conflicts by race, income and immigrant status than by age. Three quarters of survey respondents say they see strong conflicts between the rich and the poor. A similar share sees strong conflicts between racial groups. And nearly as many say the same about immigrants and the native born. By contrast, just one third say there are strong conflicts between old and young.

## INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS

Throughout most of human history, the basic generational compact within families has been: I take care of you when you're young; you take care of me when I'm old. But in modern times, as the economic fortunes of old and young have shifted, so too has the pattern of intra-family support during the later stage of the life cycle. Consider:

- Nearly six in 10 Americans (57 percent) live in families in which an older adult is providing some of assistance (be it financial, housing, or caregiving) to a younger adult. Just a third (34 percent) live in families in which support flows the other way, according to the [nationwide survey](#) by Encore.org.
- A third of Millennials (ages 18 to 35) are [still living with a parent or older relative](#), a 50 percent increase over the share of their same-aged counterparts who did so a generation ago. Overall, 61 million Americans are living in a multi-generational family household, more than double the number and 50 percent more than the share who did so 30 years ago.
- The United States now has a record 70 million grandparents, who comprise a record 22 percent share of the population. About six in 10 provide financial help to their grandkids and four in 10 help care for their grandchildren on a regular basis. A growing share of grandkids – 10 percent -- reside with a grandparent.

These downward-flowing, intra-family exchanges typically persist until the oldest family member is into his or her eighties. The shift has occurred among all racial groups and social-economic strata. It's a nimble adaptation to the changing economic, demographic and cultural patterns of family life in the 21st century.

Perhaps because of these exchanges, the bonds between older parents and adult children are stronger now than in previous generations. The Encore survey found that that six in 10 millennials describe their relationship with their parents as "loving and close." By contrast, fewer than half of older adults say the same about their relationship with their own parents back when they were the age millennials are now.

What could possibly be wrong with this happy picture? Just one thing: For society as a whole, this new pattern of intra-family support widens the already sizable rich-poor gap in America – then thrusts it forward onto a new generation. As Richard V. Reeves argues in his new book, [Dream Hoarders](#), the ticket to the American Dream isn't supposed to be punched in a parent lottery. Increasingly, it is.

Meantime, government spending priorities haven't kept pace with the changing economic circumstances of young and old. Since 2010, [federal spending on basic supports for children](#) – housing, nutrition, early education and child care – has declined by 11.6 percent in inflation-adjusted dollars. Likewise, in the past decade, [state spending on higher education](#) has declined by an average of 18 percent on a per-student basis.

In short, older adults today are more inclined than ever to support their own kids, but less willing through their tax dollars to support other people's kids.

One explanation for this dichotomy is the decades-long [decline in the public's confidence in government to spend their tax dollars wisely](#). Just 20 percent of Americans now say they trust the federal government to do what is right most of the time, down from 78 percent who felt this way in half a century ago.

In addition, there are significant perception gaps between old and young about which generation faces the most economic difficulties in today's economy. According to the Encore.org survey, a plurality of older adults say it is the old; a majority of millennials say it is the young. Notably, the views of older adults on this question stand in tension with their own self-reports about their economic well-being.

Another source of this dichotomy is the so-called gray-brown divide. Studies show that states that [invest the least in public education and other programs supporting children and youth](#) tend to be the states with the biggest disparities in the racial makeup of their younger and older populations.



Nevertheless, attitudes and behaviors related to racial and demographic change are not as stark as those patterns suggest. As noted earlier, America is becoming more polarized and more tolerant at the same time. Consider:

- Half a century ago, interracial marriages were illegal in a third of our states and a gasp-inducing taboo everywhere else. They accounted for just 2 percent of weddings. Today 17 percent of all new spouses marry someone who is a different race from them, be they white, black, Hispanic or Asian. In fact, these interracial or interethnic marriages are almost twice as common as new marriages between Democrats and Republicans (9 percent). As racial barriers have come down, partisan walls have risen higher. Sweeping demographic change always produces political backlashes. We're in the thick of one now. But backlashes also create resistance movements. We're in the midst of that, too.
- In [a nationwide Pew Research Center survey](#) taken in 2016, during a presidential campaign notable for the biting anti-immigrant rhetoric of the winning candidate, 59 percent of Americans said immigrants mostly strengthen our country, while 33 percent said they mostly burden our country. When the same question had been asked in 1994, these numbers had been reversed: Sixty-three percent said burden; 31 percent said strengthen.
- By a lopsided margin of 58 percent to 7 percent, Americans said in a 2015 Pew Research survey that having more people of different races, ethnicities and nationalities makes their country a better, not worse, place to live. (The remainder said it makes no difference). By contrast, publics in all major European countries tilted negative when that same question was posed to them in 2015.

It's possible that these positive responses are inflated to some degree by "social desirability bias" (the survey researcher's term for political correctness). But they almost certainly also reflect a gut-level understanding of the importance of the modern immigration wave to the American economy.

Demographers project that between 2010 and 2030, as our giant pig-in-the-python baby boom generation migrates from work to retirement, America's prime-age labor force will lose 15 million whites. But at the same time, it will gain 26 million non-whites — a kaleidoscope of Hispanic, Asian, black and mixed-race young Americans, many of them immigrants or their grown children.

This modern immigration wave, 60 million-strong (and counting) since 1965, has arrived "just in time," says Brookings demographer [William H. Frey](#), to rescue an aging, low-fertility white America from economic stagnation. Surely it's in boomers' self-interest to fortify new immigrants with the tools and training to be productive workers in a knowledge-based economy.

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## GAUGING THE FUTURE THROUGH A GENERATIONAL LENS

Despite the so-called gray-brown divide, Americans of all ages, races and political persuasions, by overwhelming margins, very much want the next generation to prosper. Indeed, most say this is essential to America's continued greatness as a nation. But most are uncertain that it will come to pass.

The harsh economic trends since the turn of the century — including the shrinking of the middle class, the stagnation in median household income, and the rise of income and wealth inequality — have led to an uncharacteristic pessimism among the American public about the wellbeing of future generations.

According to the Encore.org survey, fewer than one in six adults of all ages say that today's children will grow up to have a better standard of living than most adults have now. About half say that today's children will wind up doing worse and a third say they will do about the same.

(Some of this pessimism falls away when survey respondents are asked about their own children. About three-quarters say their children's future standard of living will be the same (36 percent) or better (37 percent) than their own is now. Just a quarter say it will be worse.)

The survey also finds that nine in 10 survey respondents say that the opportunity for future generations to prosper is a “very important” (50 percent) or “important” (41 percent) ingredient of American greatness, putting it near the top of a list that includes individual freedom, work ethic, democratic governance, a strong military, economic security for older adults, border security, religious values, free enterprise and diversity.

The most hopeful finding from the survey is that most Americans are optimistic about our society's ability to navigate its generational differences. Two-thirds of respondents say the growing diversity of the population can be a source of national strength as long as Americans keep in mind the obligations that old and young have for one another and for future generations.

That finding is probably best understood as describing an aspiration rather than an assessment of our current state of social and political upheaval. But it's the right aspiration for a changing America.

Today's hyper-partisanship and identity politics make it hard for these aspirations to get traction in public policy. But while we wait for a change in the political winds, there's still plenty that older adults can do to help children and youth thrive.

We're already doing a lot in our families. We can do more in our communities. The record is clear: Intergenerational relationships are good for children and adults. Who knows, maybe they can even be an antidote to the raging disunity of our times. Most Americans would like that very much.

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Paul Taylor, a senior fellow at Encore.org, is the author of *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown*. He is the former executive vice president of the Pew Research Center and a former Washington Post politics reporter.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The official Census poverty measure looks only at pre-tax money income. The Bureau also publishes a “supplemental measure” which includes the value of in-kind government benefits, such as food and housing assistance and refundable tax credits, and also calculates the cost of necessary expenses, such as child and medical care. By this measure, the poverty gap between young and old has been much smaller in recent years. In 2016, it was 15.1 percent for children versus 14.5 percent for seniors.

<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults 1,510 adults 18 years of age or older interviewed online April 7-20, 2016.

**Encore.org is an innovation hub that taps the talent of the 50+ population as a force for good. Generation to Generation is Encore.org’s five-year campaign to mobilize adults 50+ to help young people thrive.**

Encore.org is pleased to publish this paper to start and inform conversations. The opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the opinions of Encore.org.

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