

The Power of Connecting the Generations



What role can philanthropy play
in making the most of our increasingly
multigenerational, multicultural world?

By Sarah Murray

encore.org

For two women—one a seasoned philanthropy professional, the other a journalist and social change advocate—living with members of different generations is simply a natural state of affairs. “I was brought up in a typical African-American culture,” says Stacey Easterling, who leads the [Piper Trust’s](#) philanthropic programs. “We lived in multigenerational homes, our elders were around, and there was a reverence and respect for them.”

Age-diverse programs can both solve the unique problems older and younger people face and create new ways of addressing everything from homelessness to climate change.

Similarly, Isabel González Whitaker, whose mother fled Cuba in 1960 after her family was accused of being counter-revolutionary, grew up in Atlanta much as she would have done in Cuba: in a household in which her grandmother played a vital role in family life. “It’s something I’m very grateful for—that I got to be surrounded by love and community, and that I learned so much of our history,” says Whitaker, a senior fellow with [Encore.org](#). “People thought that was peculiar, but it was quite natural for us.”

What seemed natural to these two women was something that, until recently, seemed natural to most members of the human race. In early societies, communities made up of different generations provided support, mentorship, and the exchange of the knowledge and experience needed to get through life in one piece. Nature itself—and the risks we now know reliance on single-crop monoculture pose to the global food system—shows why diversity is critical to this kind of resilience.

Like monocropping in agribusiness, the way our institutions have evolved has not fostered human diversity. We have senior centers for older people and youth clubs for younger ones. Adolescents spend [twice as much time with their peers](#) as they do with parents and other adults. Almost [40 percent of grandparents](#) have a grandchild living more than 500 miles from them. And nearly [four in 10 Americans over the age of 89](#) live alone. But while political polarization, ethnic divisions, class and income divides, and other social disconnects have become the subject of heated debate—attracting philanthropic and public sector dollars in attempts to fix them—the gulf that exists between generations gets far less attention.

Of course, this is an unusual moment to be talking about bringing people closer together. Thanks to a global pandemic, conversations these days often revolve around the need for isolation, physical distancing and separating the most vulnerable (generally older people) from the hardy (generally young people). Yet across generations, the Covid-19 crisis has increased understanding of one thing: Regardless of age, loneliness and isolation are not good for anyone.

Executive Summary

We are at a moment of significant shifts in demographics—shifts in which there are both challenges and opportunities. To explore these, Encore.org commissioned a paper examining what lies behind entrenched generational divides, what potential exists in bridging these divides, and how funders can support the growth of inter-generational innovation.

The research found that:

- Since the 19th century, our institutions have evolved in ways that have not fostered generational diversity.
- Barriers to cross-generational diversity are significant, ranging from the institutional and structural to mindset obstacles such as ageism and a sense of zero-sum competition between generations.
- The siloed nature of philanthropic funding makes it difficult for cross-generational social impact initiatives to secure the resources they need to scale up.
- While hard data is still hard to come by, the positive impact of bringing different generations together is starting to become clear.
- Age-diverse programs can both solve the unique problems older and younger people face and create new ways of addressing everything from homelessness to climate change.
- A growing number of social innovators—both for-profit and nonprofit—are finding ways of bringing generations together to create positive impact.
- Bringing different generations together can spark the innovation and creativity that arise from diverse thinking, increase the exchange of knowledge, build mechanisms that strengthen social and economic resilience, and harness the increasing diversity of younger generations to bridge more than just age divides.
- Breaking down the institutional and cultural barriers that underpin our age-segmented society will take everything from shifting entrenched attitudes and rethinking funding models to seeing all social problems through an intergenerational lens.
- Great potential lies in the service corps model, which provides well-established frameworks and infrastructure that could be replicated by an intergenerational corps.
- Funders need to increase the age diversity of their grantmaking teams, start applying an intergenerational focus to any problem—from the climate crisis to homelessness, and view age diversity as a lens that uncovers previously unrecognized assets.

Solving Problems, Bridging Divides

While hard data is still difficult to obtain, the positive impact of cross-generational connection is becoming clearer. It's at work in projects such as Oregon's [Bridge Meadows](#), a residential community that mixes families adopting foster children with low-income older people. Older adults living in a Bridge Meadows community regularly help support their neighbors in a variety of ways, including mentoring children, babysitting and sharing meals. Results so far have been encouraging. Community members experience increased resiliency, health and well-being. Ninety percent of Bridge Meadows youth, parents and elders maintain stable housing. Eighty percent of youth report increased resilience to manage challenges. And 80% of elders report finding meaning and purpose through intergenerational relationships. So far, 67 percent of Bridge Meadows children have been adopted or have legal guardians. Nearly all graduate from high school.

While the solutions to different challenges might once have resided in one camp or another, they now need to be sought across communities, geographies, sectors—and generations.

The numbers are easier to find in business, where more and more companies see diversity in all its guises not only as a moral imperative but also as something that's good for the bottom line. "Age diversity appears to boost productivity at the team level, likely because of 'knowledge spillover,'" [writes Heather Tinsley-Fix](#), a senior advisor at AARP. "Team members share knowledge gained from past experiences, which in turn sparks new solutions to problems."

Similar conclusions emerged from research by the American Psychological Association. Using workplace survey data from the Society for Human Resource Management, [the APA found](#) that age diversity was positively associated with organizational performance.

For companies, the "knowledge spillover" Tinsley-Fix refers to is worth its weight in gold—literally. [Recent research by Panopto](#), a provider of video management systems, found that, for large organizations, delays in knowledge transfer represent up to \$40.6 million a year in productivity losses.

Numbers like this, along with impact metrics from communities such as Bridge Meadows, point to an unequivocal conclusion: When different generations come together, the connection sparks innovation and creativity, facilitates knowledge exchange, helps tackle social isolation and exclusion, and establishes mechanisms that build social and economic resilience. In short, it erects the scaffolding that supports healthy, productive societies.

Generational Siloes, Missed Opportunities

Yet today, many of the opportunities that emerge when bridging generational divides are being missed. [According to consultancy Deloitte](#), though 70 percent of organizations say multigenerational workforces are important or very important to their success, only 10 percent are well prepared to address the trend.

So why is this potential going untapped? One answer, says Marc Freedman, CEO and founder of Encore.org, lies in the way we have organized society: in generational siloes. “We’re becoming more multiracial and because of longevity, we’ve got more generations living simultaneously,” he says. “But we’ve structured society in a way that makes it really hard to navigate the changes.”

Freedman is talking about the way the institutions we’ve built, the regulatory frameworks we’ve established, and the societal norms that guide our behavior have evolved around an age-segmented view of life. “We’ve pushed all the education into the beginning of life, all the work into the middle, and all the leisure is at the back end,” he says. How, he asks, can anyone learn how to steer a steady path through the different stages of life when they get so little exposure to those outside their own particular stage? “As individuals, it leaves us poorly suited to getting a whole picture of life and to navigating these transitions,” says Freedman. “And as a society, it creates age-based interest groups that are told to be sure to get theirs cause it’s a zero-sum game.”

All this is precisely the opposite of what’s required right now. The world’s problems are becoming ever more complex and interconnected. So while the solutions to different challenges might once have resided in one camp or another, they now need to be sought across communities, geographies, sectors—and generations. There’s a parallel in what were once two distinct issues areas: environmental protection and economic development. Recognition that they are not mutually exclusive has in recent years led funders that once focused only on nature to include community development in their strategies, helping strengthen ecosystems such as forests and mangrove swamps while providing incentives for local communities to become effective stewards of natural resources.

Similarly, while work in support of young people once had little to do with helping improve life for older people, it’s becoming increasingly clear that connecting these two communities pays dividends, particularly given the increasing diversity of younger generations, for whom differences of all kinds (racial, ethnic, gender and sexual identity and orientation) are far more expected than for their older peers. This means that, when we bring older and younger people together, we bridge more than just the age divide. What’s more, given evidence of diversity’s ability to drive innovation, huge potential lies in harnessing the energies, ideas and experience of different generations to tackle everything from global poverty and homelessness to climate change.

The need for new sources of innovation has never been more acute. The world faces both short-term crises such as the global pandemic and longer-term challenges that range from income inequality to climate change. And, like it or not, the unstoppable force of demographics is moving the global population into multigenerational mode. In this unique moment, the imperative is not just to tackle the negative impact of these trends, but also to explore the ways in which we could tap into their inherent opportunities.

How Did We Get Here?

To understand what created today's age-segmented society, we need to look back in time—quite far back as it happens. The seeds were sown in the 19th century through attempts to address the appalling conditions in America's poorhouses. As laws appeared on the books preventing the confinement of children in poorhouses, young residents were moved into orphanages. Meanwhile, poor older adults lucky enough to escape the lunatic asylum became beneficiaries of a growing number of charities and religious groups. Wanting to save them from the indignity and squalor of the poorhouse, these groups built the homes for the aged that laid the foundations for [today's \\$443 billion US elder-care industry](#).

Another tool of segmentation was also born of the best intentions: the high school. Nineteenth century industrialization pushed millions of children into employment, a phenomenon that persisted in the early 20th century. In 1920, [one in 12 American children](#) between the ages of 10 and 15 were still working in conditions that were grueling at best, dangerous at worst. High school was designed to relieve adolescents of these burdens and give them an education. It succeeded. More and more children started attending school, particularly after the Great Depression wiped out millions of jobs.

What they lost along the way, however, was regular contact with the adult world. In their book, *Escaping the Endless Adolescence*, psychologists Joseph and Claudia Worrell Allen [put a number on this loss](#): These days, they write, teenagers interact with their peers for 60 hours a week and with adults for just 16 hours a week.

“There are ways in which we've shifted from what used to be a more age-integrated society to one that has put up barriers to intergenerational connection,” says Jon Gruber, strategy lead at [Einhorn Collaborative](#), where he is spearheading a funder collaborative aimed at bridging divides and strengthening a culture of pluralism. Added to this, he says, is a “sense of zero-sum competition” between generations. “It's not just perception—we're in a moment of increased scarcity and competition for resources that is real—but there's also a mindset that exacerbates this challenge.”

Generational separation also breeds ageism. “It's an understanding problem,” says Mary O'Donnell, president of the [RRF Foundation for Aging](#). “Like so many social divides, if we

don't understand each other we fall into the us-versus-them mentality." And as Easterling points out, lack of interaction between different generations comes at the expense of empathy and compassion. "Young people don't think of older people as worth caring for," she says. "And older people sometimes forget that young people are important and not just troublemakers."

Whether we're talking about race, gender or age, when everyone unites across the divides, everyone benefits.

This calls for a fundamental shift in the way different age groups see each other, says Trent Stamp, CEO of [The Eisner Foundation](#), a grantmaker that focuses exclusively on intergenerational programs. "If you're a young person worried that Social Security is not going to be there when you're older, you could blame old people—or you try to help more seniors work longer so that they're paying into the system," he says. "And if you're an older person worried about selling your house some day, having a vibrant high school, junior high and grade school in your community would mean young people are matriculating and getting good jobs—so they can buy your house. We have to figure out how to tell the story that we're all in this together and that your success doesn't preclude my success."

There is a moment to be seized here. For telling this story sooner rather than later could pay dividends if we connect it to the conversations taking place around diversity and the growing recognition that advantages conferred on one ethnic or racial group do not have to mean losses for another. Whether we're talking about race, gender or age, when everyone unites across the divides, everyone benefits.

Funding Follows Suit

Another effect of society's age segmentation has been that our problem solvers—philanthropy and government—have evolved in similar ways. In government, the US has its Administration on Aging, a federal agency that's part of the Department of Health and Human Services. And while oversight of education and youth is more of a matter for US states, they too have developed specialized agencies. New York State has its Office of Youth and Young Adult Services, for example. Tennessee has a Department of Children's Services, and Oregon has a Youth Development Council.

As executive director of Bridge Meadows, Derenda Schubert has seen how this can hamper cross-generational approaches to social impact. "Housing is siloed from child welfare and aging," she says. "If each of them blended some funding for housing that was dedicated to intergenerational living, we'd see an incredible return on investment. But the challenge is that there's no intergenerational funding."

In recent decades something similar has been happening to philanthropy. Many foundations have, for good reasons, embraced a more rigorous, less scattergun, approach to funding. Yet this has come with unintended consequences. “It’s very positive that philanthropy became more strategic,” says Carol Larsen, who spent three decades at the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#), 16 of them as its president. “But one of the side effects is you tend to focus more. So over this period of time, you had a whole bunch of foundations, including Packard, that focused not on the wellbeing of the community or children and families but rather on, say, making sure kids were ready for kindergarten or that they could read by third grade. And with that, you tend to narrow your gaze with respect to who you’re funding.”

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Miriam Leuchter knows all about this. She is executive director of the [Josephine Herrick Project](#), a New York City-based nonprofit that gives disadvantaged populations—from pre-teen schoolchildren and seniors to people with disabilities—a voice by teaching them photography and displaying their work in public spaces. Leuchter understands the tremendous power in uniting generations through creative work. “In one project, we brought together teens and seniors in the community,” she explains. “It gave them a chance to talk across the generations and photograph together. They made portraits of each other and bonded over their neighborhood and what they were photographing. It was really cool.”

What’s not so cool is the work Leuchter needs to do to pay for these kinds of programs. “The siloing of funding makes it really difficult,” she says. “I’m applying for a minimum of two grants a month. These are incredibly complicated and because so few cover the breadth of what we do, I have to show a different project each time, whether it’s work with seniors or with kids.” Moreover, focusing funding on one generation or another has another effect: “It makes it very hard to create projects that bring people across generational lines,” she says.

It’s not that funders are deliberately trying to discourage these types of programs. Becoming more focused and strategic has enabled philanthropy to do more with less. However, the side effects need to be acknowledged. “One of the ways we got to where we’re at now is through spectacular, creative and well-intentioned social innovation,” says Freedman. “We solved a lot of problems but in a narrow way. What we need now is the social innovation that prepares us for long lives and multigenerational societies.”

Proximity and Purpose

In 1995, a San Francisco-based company called Electric Classifieds launched a website designed to spark a social revolution while making large sums of money for its founders. By allowing users to browse the site looking for people with whom they might have things in common, what became Match.com (and the many sites that emerged in its wake) transformed the business of finding a romantic partner. But what if that same matchmaking power could bring together people whose very differences are what make the match a success?

More than a quarter of a century after the Match.com launch, social innovators are starting to see how this could work. Joy Zhang and Madeline Dangerfield-Cha combined their backgrounds in healthcare (Zhang had spent time volunteering in hospice and dementia care settings) and education (Dangerfield-Cha had worked in education and digital marketing) to bring together older people with Bay Area college students via an app called Mon Ami. Since launching, the Mon Ami model has shifted considerably. While initially, families would pay for students to spend time with their older relatives, [Mon Ami](#) no longer provides direct companionship services. Instead, it offers the software it developed for the app to publicly funded agencies that provide vital services to older adults. This has allowed Mon Ami to extend its geographic reach beyond San Francisco to the state of Utah, counties in Pennsylvania and Oregon, and nonprofits like SAGE, which provides advocacy and services for older LGBT people.

When developing the business, Zhang noticed that money was not the only motivation for young people to engage. After the initial response—hundreds in the first 24 hours—students were asked what motivated them to sign up. “People cited their own grandparents and wanting to continue a relationship like that when they were far from family,” says Zhang. “Others wanted to connect with someone who had wisdom and perspective when they were going through a time of extreme change and sometimes loneliness.”

It was another kind of loneliness—in the workplace—that sparked New York-based Charlotte Japp’s idea for a bridge between the generations. Japp had seen ageism in the workplace first hand: Both her parents had been forced from their jobs in their fifties. But also, while working at Vice, the media group, she saw what happened when an organization’s staff was made up entirely of people below the age of 40. “There was a palpable lack of training and mentorship,” she says. “But I felt this could be solved with a bit of experience in the room.”

Her answer was [CIRKEL](#), which enables older and younger professionals to connect, exchange knowledge, and figure out tough career and workplace problems together. Members pay a monthly fee and each month are introduced to someone from a different generation and an industry that’s relevant to their career. “It’s a one-to-one intergenerational networking service,” Japp says. “And it doesn’t exist anywhere else.”

The Chance Meeting of Generations

But while online matchmaking and networking services are effective ways of bringing together generations, it's important not to overlook the power of serendipity, the chance meeting in a beautiful place. This is an idea Whitaker is exploring in Atlanta through the [Sara J. González Park](#), which she founded in honor of her mother, a business and Latina leader. Unlike other parks in the area, it has an all-abilities playground and is wheelchair accessible. There is also a children's soccer field, a community plaza and the first permanent education nook (a custom-built education area) in an Atlanta park. "It's an ultimate statement of inclusion," says Whitaker, who says her cultural background strongly influenced the layout. "I designed it as a circular plaza rather than something that's angular and divides people," she says. "The idea of a central, round meeting space where people come together is endemic in Latin culture."

Place-based generational matchmaking is also flourishing through the sharing of accommodation. And technology can facilitate the connections. The [Nesterly](#) app, for example, matches homeowners with graduate students who need affordable housing. In exchange for doing household chores, the students get discounted rent. But the impact of the app—created by two graduates of MIT's city planning program, Noelle Marcus and Rachel Goor—goes further, by enabling relationships to flourish between people from different generations who might otherwise never have met.

In one residency, a shared love of music was the catalyst for new relationships between older and younger people. Since 2010, [Judson Manor](#), a home for highly educated retirees in Cleveland, Ohio, has welcomed a small number of younger residents. In return for rent-free accommodation, the graduate music students perform for the older residents. And while free entertainment is one outcome, along the way, students and retirees have formed deep friendships based on a shared love of music.

In some cases, the matchmaking makes these kinds of connections while providing essential services. For example, [AARP Foundation's Experience Corps](#) engages older volunteers to tutor children who are struggling to read at grade level so that, by the end of third grade, they are reading with ease. Nor is reading the only skill they acquire. AARP Foundation [recently tracked the progress of students](#) at nine schools as measured by the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment system, which evaluates students' social-emotional learning. Between fall 2018 and spring 2019, students' DESSA scores rose significantly. This means that children who started their school year at far higher risk of developing social-emotional problems than their peers nationally finished the year close to the national norms.

O'Donnell has seen the impact this has. Before becoming president of the RRF Foundation for Aging, she worked at the [Greater Boston Experience Corps](#). "We saw literacy skills improve," she says. "But we also saw older adults feel more connected to their

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community, feel more in partnership with their peers (because Experience Corps calls for teams of older people to work together) and, through that, we also saw their health and wellbeing improve. So everybody wins—the teachers win, the school wins, the community wins, the older adults win, and the kids win.”

What's so elegant about these kinds of solutions is that, in one fell swoop, more than one problem is being solved. It might be affordable housing for students or musical performances that enrich retirees' lives. It might be the provision of educational services while giving a meaningful occupation to older people looking for purpose. But what they all have in common is that, along the way, new forms of companionship are emerging between people of different ages who might otherwise never have found each other.

When Ideas Meet Experience

The trouble with the way we've organized society is that today's problems don't come in neat packages. Take the wildfires that raged across the US West Coast in 2020. Beyond the immediate need to re-house affected families and mitigate the effects of fire and smoke on human health, long-term challenges include increased difficulty for residents in obtaining homeowners' insurance, declining quality of life and falling property values. These prompt rising out-of-state migration, which reduces tax revenues, making it harder for local governments to provide essential services such as healthcare and education. As the wildfires demonstrate, disasters that ripple through society and the economy affect many generations, and so do not lend themselves to traditional, top-down, paternalistic approaches. What's needed is innovation from multiple sources—including the individuals and communities facing the problems—and solutions developed using a diversity of ideas and resources.

Fortunately, thanks to increased longevity, generational diversity is more present in society than at any other time in history. “I love the fact that for the first time in families there's five generations alive at the same time, in some cases six,” says Cinny Kennard, executive director of the [Annenberg Foundation](#). “The question is how to bring them together to create new models of change as relates to critical issues of our time such as climate change, food security, and economic inequality. Because without working together these things are not going to get fixed.”

Recent research on workplace age diversity tells us why. The American Psychological Association has found that while older employees possess valuable job-specific and social knowledge, younger colleagues bring in scientific and technical knowledge from outside work. While older people can navigate informal rules and complex relationships, younger peers can be better at harnessing technology to obtain new information

and ideas. And with their more fluid intellectual abilities, younger people can thrive in dynamic, ambiguous and complex environments. “Age-diverse employees thus complement each other and together render a more comprehensive and varied set of KSAs [knowledge, skills, and abilities] that address a wider range of tasks and contingencies facing an organization,” [wrote the APA in its study](#).

Psychologists are not the only ones to have recognized this. [Can You Hear Us?](#)—a grassroots environmental campaign launched to accompany the “I Am Greta” Hulu documentary—has produced [a conversation guide](#) that sets out compelling reasons why age-diverse collaboration will be needed to save the planet. “Intergenerational conversations are an important aspect of both understanding climate change and helping inform others about how their practices may affect our planet,” the campaign says on its website. “They allow the sharing of ideas and information across groups with differing generational perspectives, educational backgrounds, and personal experiences.”

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Younger people, it argues, may have passion and drive, but they need more than that. They need the support of older people, partly to gain access to financing and to the policymakers and institutions that can bring about systemic change, but also because older people tend to have more experience in managing complex institutional systems. And while older people may control traditional media, younger people can make their voices heard through channels such as social media.

These arguments could be applied to any social or environmental problem, says Eunice Lin Nichols, head of innovation at Encore.org. “I am a true believer in the intergenerational ethos,” she says. “There’s no topic that you couldn’t apply an intergenerational lens to, and make it better.”

It was with this in mind that last year the World Economic Forum for the first time invited [10 teenage changemakers](#) to its annual meeting in Davos, the Swiss mountain resort where global leaders, corporate chiefs, academics and other influentials gather to talk about everything from trade tensions and climate change to the future of capitalism. The idea of including this young cohort was to foster intergenerational collaboration and to have young voices heard in the meeting’s discussions.

This approach resonates with Susan Gianinno. “Younger people’s ideas break through with novelty and risk. Older people’s experience can help these ideas get to impact. We need each other,” says Susan Gianinno, an Encore.org board member and senior advisor for [Publicis Groupe](#), one of the world’s largest advertising and communications companies. “In an idea company like Publicis, diversity of ideas and experiences leads to greater

creativity and innovation and greater impact,” she says. “We need older and younger people. We need diversity. We need everyone bringing their ideas and experience.”

This is age-diversity’s secret sauce. While different generations can together solve some of their own problems, there is an even bigger prize: a solutions engine fueled by a mixture of innovation, energy, and enthusiasm—and the knowledge and experience needed to put ideas into action.

Making It Happen

As the case for bridging the intergenerational divide becomes clear to a growing number of funders, the question is how to harness this potential. Given the institutional and cultural barriers behind our age-segmented society, reversing the tide will not be easy. It will take everything from rethinking funding models to seeing all social problems through an intergenerational lens and using advocacy to shift entrenched biases and ageist attitudes.

Changing minds is something Kennard sees as a critical first step. A former journalist with a deep understanding of the power of mass communications, she believes an important starting point in eroding age barriers would be to raise national awareness of the potential benefits. “The images and perceptions of aging are completely outdated, particularly in the US,” she says. “It sounds trivial, but in this world we’re living in, there needs to be a campaign to promote this.”

Current language doesn’t always help. While many philanthropic issue areas have labels that are easily understood—environmental preservation, animal welfare, access to healthcare, economic equality, social justice, women’s rights—this is one that’s harder to pin down in a few words, and can even be tricky to pronounce. “It took me five years to say ‘intergenerational’ without stumbling over it,” says The Eisner Foundation’s Stamp.

The word might be a mouthful, but some are using the concept liberally. The recently published [California Master Plan for Aging](#), for example, is full of references to intergenerational programs and initiatives that range from all-access parks and inclusive public spaces to multigenerational housing, healthy aging and wellness initiatives. This intentionality is something philanthropic funders could learn from. Setting intergenerational goals doesn’t guarantee that they will be met, but words matter.

The next step is steering funding in the right direction. One interesting idea is to create smart incentives that foster intergenerational living. This is something Singapore’s government is doing to help manage its rapidly ageing population. Any resident wanting to buy a DBSS flat (public housing built by private developers) for the purpose of living with or near their parents or child can apply for a cash subsidy known as a Proximity

Housing Grant. “In Singapore, there has been a top-down recognition that to make any progress on aging it must be intergenerational,” says David Hsu, author of “Untethered: A Primer on Social Isolation” and an [Omidyar Network](#) fellow focused on emerging areas for investment.

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For one philanthropic funder, the need to get a bigger bang for its buck was what led it to an age-diverse focus. During the financial crisis of 2008, The Eisner Foundation—which then had two distinct portfolios: one focused on children, the other on seniors at risk—started looking for opportunities to have the same impact with half as many grants. “We just found that whatever organizations were trying to do—whether improving third graders’ reading scores or cleaning up the environment or reforming the judicial system—the most effective were those with an intergenerational approach,” says Stamp.

Eisner’s creation of a dedicated focus area has enabled it to support cross-generational initiatives that are tackling many problems. In 2020, for example, the foundation awarded its Eisner Prize (including a \$150,000 cash gift) to [ARECMA](#), a Puerto Rican organization that provides the community of Mariana in Humacao with summer camps, health and job fairs, recreational activities, and an annual festival, all of which are designed to bring together residents of any age. The ARECMA model shows that when all generations are active participants in the community, it not only fosters collective solidarity—it also builds resilience. In 2017, after Hurricane Maria left the community with no water or power, it was able to recover quickly, despite being relatively isolated, with volunteers distributing food and students working to address mental health problems.

Lessons from National Service

The good news for funders is that there is an existing model that could be used to scale up such approaches: the service corps. Organizations such as AmeriCorps, its National Civilian Conservation Corps, and FEMA Corps (a joint AmeriCorps-FEMA partnership) provide well-established frameworks and infrastructure that an intergenerational corps could replicate.

Unlike informal volunteering, people in service make significant personal time commitments to work on addressing social problems and, in return, receive stipends or other forms of financial support. The model has proved highly cost effective. In 2013, the [Aspen Institute’s Franklin Project did the math](#): For every dollar taxpayers invested in national service, it found that more than two dollars was being returned to them in savings.

In California, one organization has demonstrated how expanding the service corps concept can unite different age groups. With \$12 million in funding over six years from California Volunteers, which oversees the state's volunteering and civic action, the [Stockton Service Corps](#) is on a mission to scale up the number of AmeriCorps fellows serving in Stockton. The idea is to boost educational results and reduce social inequities while enabling those serving to acquire the workplace and leadership skills needed to succeed in the local economy.

Setting intergenerational goals doesn't guarantee that they will be met, but words matter.

About a quarter of its members are now over the age of 55, says the former director of Stockton Service Corps Sonali Nijhawan, now the state and national director of AmeriCorps. "The fact that we are an intergenerational corps wasn't intentional, but it's an ideal position to be in," she says. "There's a perspective to be gained by being an intergenerational corps." During the Covid crisis, she says, the connections have been particularly welcome. "For many people, but particularly for an older community, it's been a very isolating time," she says. "So having opportunities to serve and engage with young people—or anyone, honestly—gives such meaning and purpose to seniors. And their younger counterparts get so much out of it, too."

Intergenerational service can be used when working on any social problem, says Phyllis Segal, a former board member of the [Corporation for National and Community Service](#) (now known as AmeriCorps) and a senior fellow at Encore.org. As an example, Segal and her colleague, Dr. Gerald Bourne, are working with the White House, AmeriCorps and Federally Qualified Health Centers to launch and expand the Encore Intergenerational Vaccine Corps. The Corps enlists retired medical personnel and other volunteers of all ages to vaccinate 300,000 people at under-resourced health clinics in the Bay Area. The former use their skills to provide the shots and monitor patient reactions; the latter work on community outreach, public information, administrative tasks and logistics.

Segal argues that because national service is a proven approach to solve a wide set of social problems, it could be a rich source of the human capital foundations rely on to advance their missions. "Ninety-nine percent of what philanthropy funds requires people to deliver it," she says. However, she adds, to reap the greatest value of service, foundations should include people of all ages and connect them with each other in ways that bridge generational and cultural divides. "There are lots of compelling reasons to do this," she says. "But the most timely is the unity we desperately need to strengthen our democracy."

Internally, too, foundations may need to engineer mindset shifts. The first step would be to increase the age diversity of those making funding decisions so that these professionals are equipped with the ability to see the perspectives of grant applicants of any age. With age-diverse grantmaking teams in place, it will be easier to take another important step: to start applying an intergenerational focus to any problem—from

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the climate crisis to homelessness—much as many funders already do when considering their programs in light of how they promote ethnic diversity or reduce income inequality. “There’s an argument,” says Freedman, “that age diversity can be a lens foundations can apply, like applying any other lens.”

The age-diverse lens can do more than uncover problems. It can also be a window through which to see new assets. Rather than talking about at-risk youth, why not talk about opportunity youth instead? Why not describe vulnerable older people as older people with insights and experience? While pressing needs must still be met and vulnerabilities addressed, a shift in focus to identify the strengths in individuals and communities could make it easier to mobilize those strengths. And through such an approach every member of society, rather than being a deficit, becomes a valuable asset.

The Age Diversity Dividend

When you consider its many-pronged possibilities, age-diverse social innovation starts to look irresistible. First, there’s the idea that two generations can solve each other’s problems: young people needing mentors or somewhere to live and older people in need of companionship or a renewed sense of purpose. Then there’s the power in using age-diverse idea generation to develop cross-disciplinary solutions to complex problems. But there’s also a potent side benefit to all this: the bridging effect.

When older and younger come together to solve problems, the very act of collaboration helps them get to know each other in different ways, each learning about how the other thinks. Moreover, the “feel good” purpose-driven nature of the work creates strong relationships—something companies have long seen in their corporate volunteering programs. In a [2013-2014 UnitedHealth Group study](#), for instance, 81 percent of respondents agreed that corporate volunteering activities strengthened relationships with colleagues.

That strength is what we now need to build across all domains in society, from the care sector to philanthropy, government and the workplace. It’s something that is eminently possible. For unlike the political or religious schisms that seem so intractable or the economic and social gulfs that generate so much misunderstanding, those of us with families have at least some muscle memory of intergenerational mixing. It will require effort to break down structural and emotional barriers that have been erected between the generations. But at this moment, when people are so divided and seem to have such a hard time building empathy, age difference is one bridge that is surely not too far to cross.

Recommendations for Funders

- **Work to change minds.** Individually or with other foundations, work externally to shift generational biases in society, as well as to promote the potential benefits of inter-generational problem solving.
- **Rethink funding strategies.** Consider more flexible grantmaking that bridges the barriers between traditional issue areas and can support social innovators working on cross-generational initiatives that don't fit into traditional funding boxes.
- **Apply an intergenerational lens.** Just as income inequality and racial diversity are considered in program design, ensure that all programs and philanthropic strategies are designed with intergenerational connections in mind.
- **See challenges as opportunities.** Rather than focusing only on the difficulties faced by different age groups, develop ways of identifying the assets these groups bring to both solving their own problems and addressing broader societal challenges.
- **Develop a new focus area.** Create an inter-generational pillar to support initiatives and nonprofits that are bringing together different age groups in their models for social change.
- **Harness service.** Consider creating a service corps through which to scale up inter-generational initiatives or form funding and thought partnerships with existing service corps organizations.
- **Help ideas take root.** Consider creating or funding an intergenerational incubator or fellowship program to help age-connecting start-ups and social entrepreneurs to access not only funding but also networks and mentors as well as technical assistance and office space.

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About Encore.org

Encore.org brings older and younger change-makers together to solve problems, bridge divides, and create a better future for all. Encore.org commissioned this paper.

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