

Gen Z seeks safety above all else as the generation grows up amid constant crisis and existential threat

January 30 2025, by Yalda T. Uhls



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After many years of partisan politics, increasingly divisive language, finger-pointing and inflammatory speech have contributed to an environment of fear and uncertainty, affecting not just political dynamics but also the priorities and perceptions of young people.

As a [developmental psychologist](#) who studies the intersection of media and [adolescent mental health](#), and as a mother of two Gen Z kids, I have seen firsthand how external societal factors can profoundly shape young people's emotional well-being.

This was brought into sharp relief through the results of a [recent survey](#) my colleagues and I conducted with 1,644 young people across the U.S., ages 10 to 24. The study was not designed as a political poll but rather as a window into what truly matters to adolescents. We asked participants to rate the importance of 14 personal goals. These included classic teenage desires such as "being popular," "having fun" and "being kind."

None of these ranked as the top priority. Instead, the No. 1 answer was "to be safe."

What was once taken for granted

The findings are both illuminating and heartbreaking. As a teenager, I did countless unsafe things. My peers and I didn't dwell on harm; we chased fun and freedom.

Whereas previous generations may have taken safety for granted, today's youth are growing up in an era of [compounded crises](#)—school shootings, a worsening climate crisis, financial uncertainty and the lingering trauma of a global pandemic. Even though our research did not pinpoint the specific causes of adolescent fears, the constant exposure to crises, amplified by [social media](#), likely plays a significant role in fostering a pervasive sense of worry.

[Despite data](#) showing that many aspects of life are safer now than in previous generations, [young people just don't feel it](#). Their perception of danger is further shaped by events like the recent fires that devastated Los Angeles, reinforcing a belief that danger, possibly caused by global crises like climate change, lurks everywhere.

This shift in perspective has [profound implications](#) for the future of this generation and those to come.

Especially vulnerable time

[Adolescence](#), like [early childhood](#), is a pivotal period for brain development. Young people are particularly sensitive to their surroundings as their brains evaluate the environment to prepare them for independence.

This developmental stage—when the capacity to regulate emotions and critically assess information is [still maturing](#)—makes them especially vulnerable to enduring impacts.

Studies show that [adolescents struggle to put threats into context](#). This makes them particularly vulnerable to fear-driven messaging prevalent in both traditional and social media, which is further amplified by political rhetoric and blame-shifting. This vulnerability has implications for their mental health, as prolonged exposure to fear and uncertainty has been linked to [increased rates of anxiety](#), depression and even physical health issues.

So when the media that Gen Z consumes are dominated by fear—be it through headlines, social media posts, [political rhetoric](#) or even storylines in movies and TV—it could shape their worldview in ways that may reverberate for generations to come.

Enduring generational impact

Historical events have long been shown to shape the worldview of entire generations.

For instance, the [Great Depression](#) primarily impacted the daily lives of the Silent Generation, those born between 1928 and 1945. Moreover, its [long-term effects](#) on financial attitudes and security concerns echoed into the Baby Boomer generation, influencing how those born between 1946 and 1964 approached money, stability and risk throughout their lives.

Similarly, today's adolescents, growing up amid a series of compounded global crises, will likely carry the imprint of this period of heightened fear and uncertainty well into adulthood. This formative experience could shape their mental health, decision-making and even their collective identity and values for decades to come.

In addition, feelings of insecurity and instability can make people [more responsive to fear-based messaging](#), which could potentially influence their political and social choices. In an era marked by the rise of [authoritarian governments](#), this susceptibility could have far-reaching implications because fear often drives individuals to prioritize immediate safety over [moral or ideological ideals](#).

As such, these dynamics may profoundly shape how this generation engages with the world, the causes they champion and the leaders they choose to follow.

Room for optimism?

Interestingly, "being kind" was rated No. 2 in our survey, irrespective of

other demographics. While safety dominates their priorities, adolescents still value qualities that foster connection and community.

This finding indicates a duality in their aspirations: While they feel a pervasive sense of danger, they also recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships and emotional well-being.

Our findings are a call to look at the broader societal context shaping adolescent development. For instance, the [rise in school-based](#) safety drills, while intended to provide a sense of preparedness, may unintentionally reinforce feelings of insecurity. Similarly, the apocalyptic narrative around climate change may create a sense of powerlessness that could further compound their fears and leave them wanting to bury their heads in the sand.

Understanding how these perceptions are formed and their implications for mental health, decision-making and behavior is essential for parents, [storytellers](#), policymakers and researchers.

I believe we must also consider how societal systems contribute to the pervasive sense of uncertainty and fear among youth. Further research can help untangle the complex relationship between external stressors, media consumption and youth well-being, shedding light on how to best support adolescents during this formative stage of life.

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