



Generation Give and give and give
From the president of the United States to our national survey to these generational experts, the good news is out: Today's teens are helping others in record numbers.

By Neil Howe and William Strauss

Neil Howe and William Strauss are the authors of "Generations, The Fourth Turning and Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation."

Students at White Knoll Middle School near Columbia, S.C., learned that, back in 1867, a fire company in New York City had sent a fire wagon to counterparts in Columbia who had lost their equipment in the Civil War. Doing a little research, the students discovered that a former Confederate soldier pledged that South Carolina's capital city would return the kindness "should misfortune ever befall the Empire City."

Following Sept. 11, 2001, these 11- to 13-year-old students were determined to honor that pledge. They wrote to New York firefighters to learn how they could help, then launched a campaign to raise \$354,000 to purchase a new fire engine for New York City. Within two months, the students achieved that goal, making good on their ancestors' word.

USA WEEKEND asked us, the authors of "Generations" and "Millennials Rising," to look at the results of the magazine's Teens & Volunteering survey and evaluate how the statistics fit in with our analysis of this young Millennial generation. Suffice it to say, these numbers reflect the can-do spirit we have been seeing in this population.



Experts note a cultural shift from "I" to "we" with this generation of community-minded young people.

[Student editors meet the president and first lady](#)

Born since 1982 (its oldest members have just recently entered the workforce), this generation has a growing reputation for service that's making waves across the nation. A higher share of high school students are community volunteers today (more than 65%) than ever before measured, going back

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half a century. According to a recent study by the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE) at the University of Maryland, teens and collegians are one-third more likely to volunteer their time than are older Americans.

"This generation of young people are serving more than any generation before them," Robert Bisi, director of communications and outreach for Youth Service America, said earlier this year. "They really care about their community."

Many Americans find such positive news difficult to grasp. If you were to believe the newspapers and TV shows, you'd suppose our schools are full of kids who are illiterate, shoot one another in the hallways, spend their loose change on tongue rings and couldn't care less who runs the country.

How depressing. And how wrong. The truth is, this generation is a trend-turner. **Here are four of the biggest misconceptions about today's teens:**

MISCONCEPTION: Kids are becoming more violent and risk-prone. **FACT:** Over the past 10 years, serious violent crime by teenagers has fallen by 70%. Teen pregnancy is down by 33% (to the lowest level ever measured). High school sexual activity is down by 14%. Rates of teenage alcohol and tobacco consumption have fallen to all-time lows.

MISCONCEPTION: Kids are messed up emotionally. **FACT:** Teen suicide rates have been declining for the past 10 years. Nine of 10 teens describe themselves as "usually happy."

MISCONCEPTION: Kids are beyond the control of their parents. **FACT:** More than 90% of teens now say they "get along" with their parents, and nearly 80% say they get along "very well" or "extremely well." One survey found 82% of teens reporting "no problems" with any family member vs. just 48% who said that back in 1974, when

parents and teens were far more likely to argue over basic values.

MISCONCEPTION: Kids are having trouble in school.

FACT: Eight in 10 teens now say it's "cool to be smart," and the average SAT score is the highest it's been in 30 years.

Adults who work directly with today's teens know about these new trends, especially the growing attachment to parents and teamwork. College admissions counselors now talk about the prevalence of "helicopter parents" who "hover." So do military recruiters. And the military brass have noticed something else: "We're seeing a huge cultural shift away from the word 'I' to the word 'we' in this new generation of young people coming in," U.S. Marine Corps Gen. James Jones, head of U.S. forces in Europe, observed in a speech at the U.S. Naval Academy.

What explains them? The Millennials' leading edge arrived at a time (the early 1980s) when our attitudes about children began to shift toward a greater emphasis on protection and structure -- in families, schools and communities. These "babies on board" have been regarded as special since birth, and they have been more obsessed-over at every age than the Gen Xers (born mainly in the 1960s and '70s) who came along before them.

Gen Xers became known as a "baby bust" generation, the small demographic product of an America that simply had lost interest in kids. Millennials are sometimes called a "baby boomlet" or "echo boom" generation, the large product of a birth-rate reversal. In stark contrast to Gen Xers, they arrived in an era of "family values" and of gradually declining divorce and abortion rates.

Forget what talking heads say to boost their ratings and what politicians say to push their agendas. This is the real news about today's young people in America. They're smart, teaming up, doing well -- and volunteering at a level and intensity we haven't seen since the 1940s. Millennials -- America's new "Junior Citizens" -- are destined to be a political powerhouse of a generation in our not-too-distant future.

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Student editors meet the president and first lady

"Thanks for making a difference. We need leaders like you to be role models for other students." That was President Bush's message to USA WEEKEND's teen survey guest editors on a visit to the White House this month. Sheldon Schwartz, 18, of Amarillo, Texas, and Olivia Nathan, 18, of Columbus, Ohio, filled out our Teens & Volunteering survey last fall and were chosen to guest-edit this issue.

Both students are impressive volunteers: Schwartz, a senior at River Road High School, spends nearly 200 hours a year performing community service (including tutoring elementary school students and helping supply clothes to the needy), while Nathan, a senior at Columbus School for Girls, volunteers about 300 hours a year (including mentoring younger students and interpreting for the deaf community).



We shared these stats, and the results of our survey, with our associates at USA Freedom Corps (usafreedomcorps.gov), the president's volunteer-coordinating office and one of USA WEEKEND's supporters on Make A Difference Day. They arranged for a special meeting with President and Mrs. Bush in the Oval Office, during which these two teens were presented with the President's Volunteer Service Award. The president pointed out his favorite painting, W.H.D. Koerner's A Charge to Keep, and talked baseball with third baseman Schwartz.

Two other teens also won prizes for taking the survey. Michael Davis, 12, a 7th-grader at Green Fields Country Day School in Tucson, received an iPod. Elaine McCarthy, 15, a 9th-grader at Bishop Chatard High School in Indianapolis, received a Canon digital camera. Both prizes were courtesy of Key Club International.

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Teens & Volunteering survey highlights

[Full results: Teens & Volunteering 2005](#)

Here are some highlights from the results of our survey. Our partners were [YouthNoise.com](#) and Key Club International.

Last fall, more than 21,700 students in grades 6-12 took USA WEEKEND's 18th annual teen survey in the magazine, at our Web site or through our survey partner [YOUTHNOISE.com](#).

About how many hours a year do you volunteer?

Fewer than 20 hours: 15%
20 to 39 hours: 35%
40 to 59 hours: 13%
60 to 80 hours: 7%
More than 80 hours: 30%

What kind of volunteering do you do? (Pick all that apply.)

Volunteer through school: 64%
Volunteer through church/temple/mosque: 50%
Volunteer through community groups: 47%
Volunteer through Scouts: 14%
Other: 31%
I don't volunteer: 4%

Which of the following examples of volunteering appeals to you the most? (Pick only one.)

Visiting with sick kids in the hospital: 22%
Feeding the homeless: 17%
Tutoring: 16%
Helping to build affordable houses: 12%

Soliciting pledges and walking, running or biking to raise money for a charity: 12%

Cleaning up a park: 10%
Visiting one-on-one at a nursing home: 8%
Stuffing envelopes for a charity: 3%

Do you expect to volunteer as an adult?

Yes: 93%
No: 7%

In general, would you characterize your volunteering efforts as ...

Highly rewarding: 44%
Rewarding: 39%
Somewhat rewarding: 14%
Somewhat unrewarding: 1%
Unrewarding: 1%
Highly unrewarding: 1%

Do you belong to an organization that requires volunteering?

Yes: 54%
No: 46%

Do you feel pressured to volunteer?

Yes: 17%
No: 83%

DEMOGRAPHICS

Sex:

Male: 31%

Female: 69%

Race:

White: 76%

Black: 8%

Hispanic: 6%

Asian: 4%

Multiracial: 3%

Other: 3%

Grade in school:

6th grade: 7%

7th grade: 11%

8th grade: 15%

9th grade: 16%

10th grade: 15%

11th grade: 17%

12th grade: 19%

*For USA WEEKEND: Cover and cover story photographs by
Cameron Davidson*

Amanda Bynes on volunteering

"It's really a fulfilling feeling when you know you've helped somebody," says Amanda Bynes, star of the WB's "What I Like About You." Volunteering is a way of life for the 19-year-old, who has incorporated "doing good" into her day-to-day activities. Like 74% of the teens who took our survey on volunteering, she was encouraged to volunteer by her parents, with whom she joined as a kid to feed the homeless during the holidays. At 11, she joined her Nickelodeon family for the eight-hour Big Help-A-Thon, where she helped raise money and rebuild local parks. She and her kids' variety show "All That" castmates also visited children's hospitals to play games and take pictures with patients. By 13, she began working with the Make-A-Wish Foundation, fulfilling the desires of sick children who wanted to visit her on the set of Nickelodeon's "The Amanda Show" (a relationship that continues today).

Bynes agrees with most of our 20,000-plus survey-taking teens, who say volunteering should begin by age 14. "If you start young, you'll always have a love for it." She recommends teens contribute their time and energy to activities that naturally interest them. Her most recent project with the Animal Rescue Foundation is one that is dear to her. Her Australian Shepherd mix Betty passed away soon after the two posed for a 2005 calendar, where all proceeds go to the foundation. "I've always loved dogs. So any way I can help them I always do." She also makes financial contributions to the Minneapolis organization Chrysalis, where the homeless can receive food, clothes and tips on applying for a job. "I feel bad," she laments.

"When you're sitting at home eating your meal, getting stuffed and unbuttoning your pants, there are people who literally have nothing to eat. Just to get them (homeless) back on track, sometimes it's harder than you think."

Since wrapping her upcoming film "Lovewrecked" (due out in 2006) and readying for a fourth season on "What I Like About You, Bynes plans to involve her friends in community service. "It's more fun if you go with your friends," she says. "I really love giving families and homeless food on Thanksgiving. So this year I'm trying to get some friends to do it."

-- Tameka L. Hicks

Full Survey Results: Teens & Volunteering

1. About how many hours a year do you volunteer?

Fewer than 20 hours per year 15%

20 to 39 hours per year 35%

40 to 59 hours 13%

60 to 80 hours 7%

More than 80 hours 30%

2. Which of the following best captures your attitude about volunteering? (Pick only one.)

I have found a way to volunteer that combines my interests and my talents. 38%

I enjoy all kinds of volunteering and expect to do it all my life. 36%

I have had mixed experiences volunteering. 11%

I volunteer because it looks good to college admissions officers. 10%

I volunteer because it's required. 4%

I think volunteering is a waste of time. 1%

3. Many schools require volunteering. How many hours of volunteering a year do you think schools should require?

10 to 20 hours a year 32%
21 to 30 hours 23%
31-40 hours 13%
More than 40 hours 12%
Should not be a requirement 20%

4. Do you feel pressured to volunteer?

Yes 17%

No 83%

4a. If yes, from whom do you get the most pressure to volunteer?

My teachers/counselors 39%

My parents 29%

Myself 13%

Other 9%

My friends 6%

My church/temple/mosque 4%

5. What percentage of your peers do you think volunteer?

Less than 25% 47%
Between 25% and 50% 40%
More than 50% 12%

6. At what age do you think volunteering should begin?

10 years old 22%

12 years old 16%

13 years old 14%

7. Do your parents volunteer?

Yes 74%

No 26%

8. Do you belong to an organization that requires volunteering?

Yes 54%

No 46%

9. What kind of volunteering do you do? (Pick all that apply.)

Volunteer through church/temple/mosque 50%

Volunteer through school 64%

Volunteer through community groups 47%

Volunteer through Scouts 14%

Other 31%

I don't volunteer 4%

**10. Which of the following examples of volunteering appeals to you the most?
(Pick only one.)**

Visiting with sick kids in the hospital 22%

Feeding the homeless 17%

Tutoring 16%

Helping to build affordable houses 12%
Soliciting pledges and walking, running or biking to raise
money for a charity 12%
Cleaning up a park 10%

Visiting one-on-one at a nursing home 8%
Stuffing envelopes for a charity 3%

11. What do you think is the primary purpose of volunteering?

It opens me up to new experiences and new people. 32%
It could highlight and develop my talents. 3%
There's a social need for people to pitch in. 13%
It's a moral responsibility to help others. 22%
It makes me look good. 1%
It makes me feel good. 22%
Other 6%

**12. If you don't volunteer on a regular basis, it's because ...
(Pick only one.)**

I'm too busy with other activities 60%
I haven't had opportunities to volunteer 14%
Volunteering doesn't interest me 3%
I've had a bad experience volunteering 1%
I don't know how to get started volunteering 6%
Other 16%

13. Do you expect to volunteer as an adult?

Yes 93%

No 7%

14. In general, would you characterize your volunteering efforts as ...

Highly rewarding 44%
Rewarding 39%
Somewhat rewarding 14%
Somewhat unrewarding 1%
Unrewarding 1%
Highly unrewarding 1%

14a. If it was generally rewarding, it was because ... (Pick all that apply.)

It was well organized and efficiently run. 42%
I believed in the overall effort. 52%
I could see the immediate impact of my efforts. 53%
I made friends and met interesting people. 51%
I discovered I had a talent for something. 29%

15. Have you ever had a dissatisfying experience volunteering?

Yes 32%

No 67%

16. Looking back on your volunteering experiences, how often, in general, would you characterize your experience as dissatisfying?

Zero percent of the time 56%
25% of the time 34%
50% of the time 4%
75% of the time 4%
All of the time 2%

DEMOGRAPHICS:

Sex:

31% Male
69% Female

Race:

76% White
6% Hispanic
3% Multiracial
8% Black
4% Asian
3% Other

Grade in school:

7% 6th-grade
11% 7th-grade
15% 8th-grade
16% 9th-grade
15% 10th-grade
17% 11th-grade
19% 12th-grade