

GENZ

WHAT  
**DRIVES**  
*THEIR*  
**BELIEFS**



Written by  
Rebecca Abravanel, PHD  
Head of Quantitative Studio

# Over the past couple of years,

**there** have been an increasing number of articles, thought pieces, and research studies focused on Gen Z, many of them centered around this generation's progressive attitudes and activist tendencies. Growing up as digital natives with social media always at their fingertips and recognizing the effects that things like climate change will have on their generation has certainly influenced their worldview, but we also wondered:

**Are their beliefs driven by the fact that they're more diverse (and less white)? Is it because they're young and idealistic? Or is this just the nature of generational change?** We looked at publicly available survey data to help point us towards the answers.

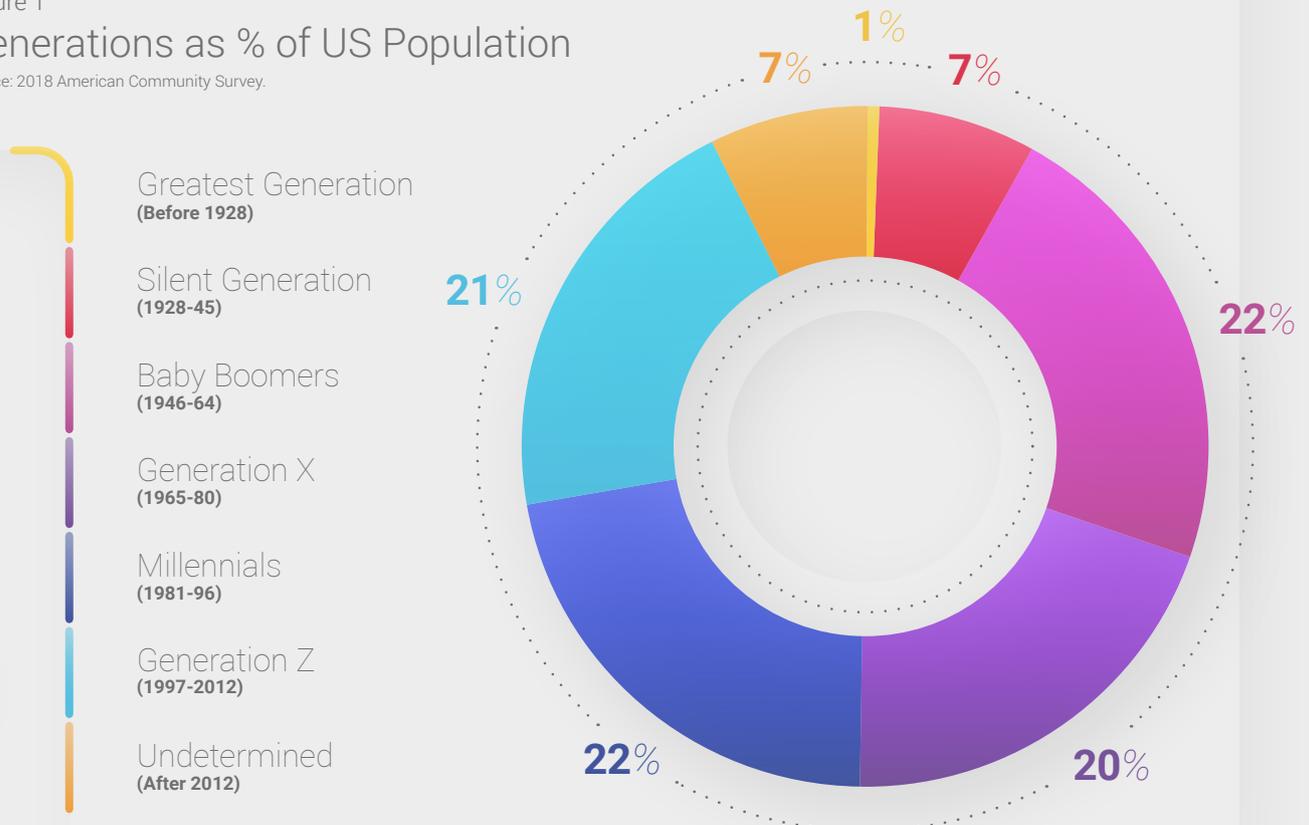
## who is Gen Z?

We'll address this question in terms of both demographic composition and attitudes/beliefs, but let's start with the very basics first...how do we define Gen Z in terms of age or birth year?

The birth year/age cut-offs for each generation vary somewhat from source to source, but most are in a similar range. If we define Gen Z as those born between 1997 & 2012, Gen Z comprises **21% of the US population, comparable in size to the Boomer, Gen X, and Millennial generations.**

Figure 1  
Generations as % of US Population

Source: 2018 American Community Survey.



# Importantly,

**Gen Z will almost certainly increase as a proportion of the US population for many years to come.** US population growth has been declining since the early 1990s, driven primarily by a decrease in births. Additionally, since 2010, the death rate has increased, with births continuing to decline (see the purple rectangle in Figure 3 below). This means that as older generations pass on, the younger generations will comprise a higher percentage of the total population. **Further, if births continue to decline, the impact of Gen Z will be even greater because younger generations won't be as large as Gen Z.**

Figure 2  
% Annual US Pop Growth Rate

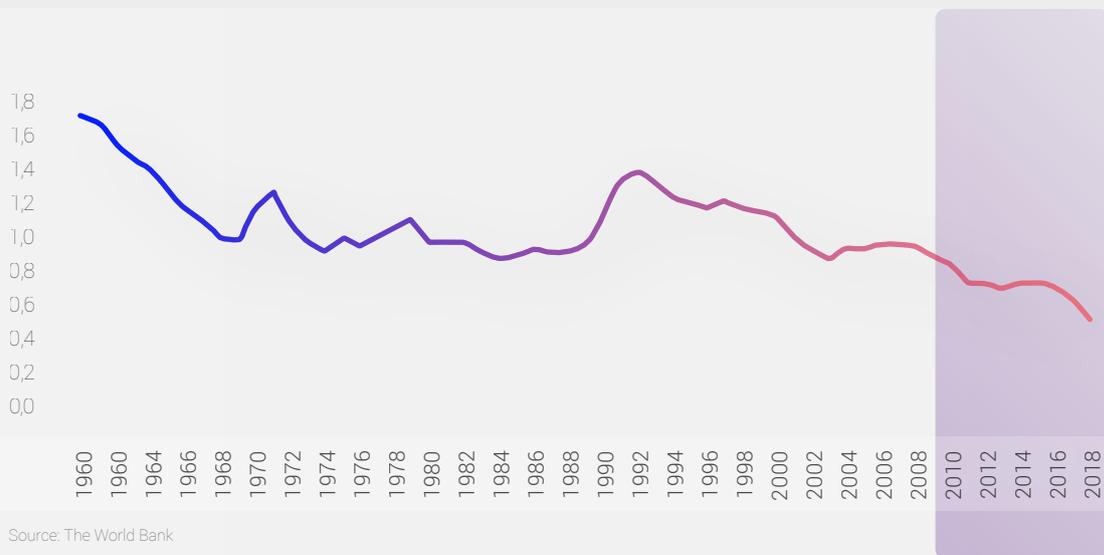
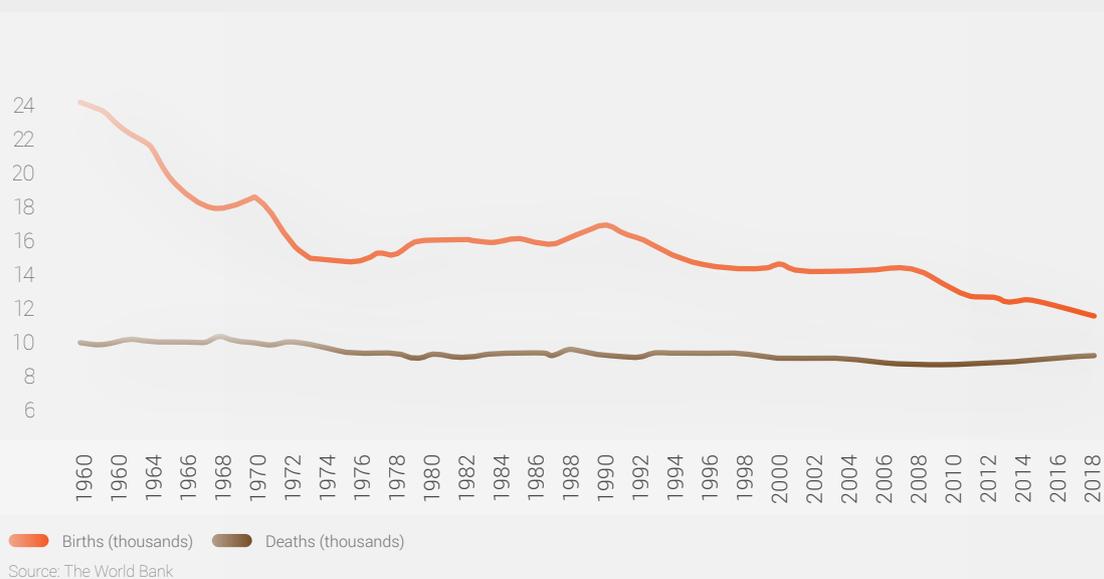


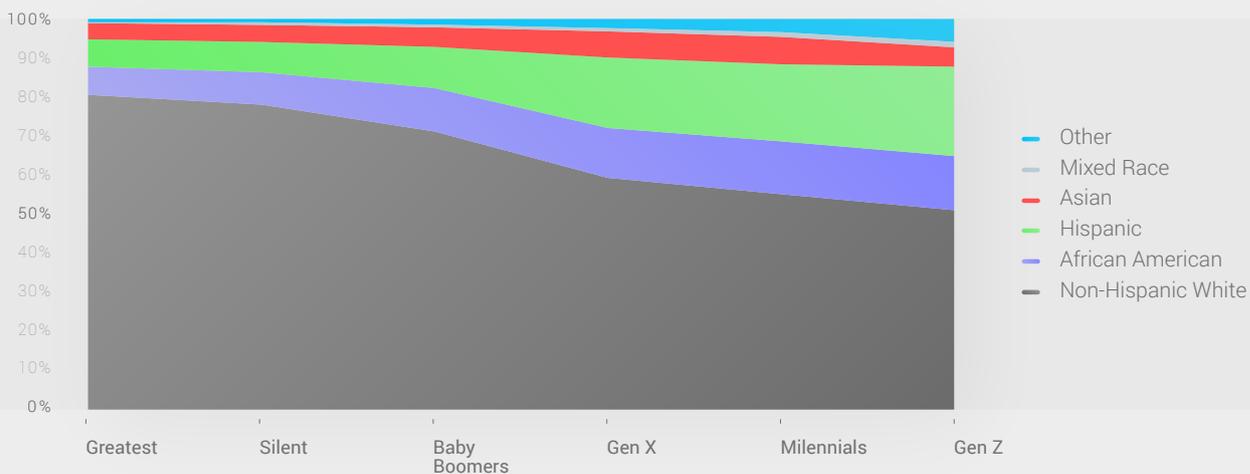
Figure 3  
US Births & Deaths (thousands)



# Who is Gen Z Demographically?

**Beyond** their youth (for now, at least) and their importance as 21% of the population and growing, Gen Z really stands out when for its racial/ethnic composition. **Gen Z is the most diverse generation in US history.** Figure 4 below shows the racial/ethnic composition of each generation. Generation after generation, the proportion of the US population that is non-Hispanic white has decreased over time, with Gen Z's composition having the lowest proportion of non-Hispanic whites. The proportion of Hispanics has also grown over time, as has the proportion of African Americans/Blacks and "other".

Figure 4  
Racial/Ethnic Composition by Generation in the US: 2018

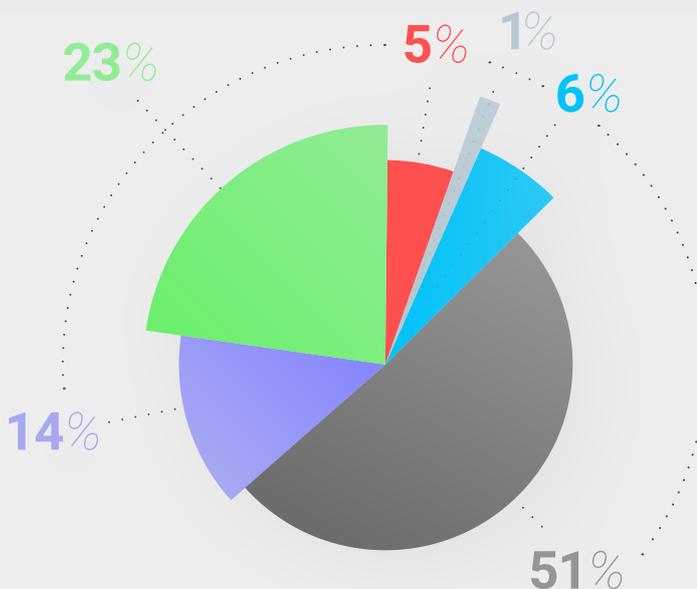


Source: 2018 American Community Survey.

Figure 5  
Racial/Ethnic Composition of Gen Z

Source: 2018 American Community Survey.

- Asian
- Mixed Race
- Other
- Non-Hispanic White
- African American
- Hispanic



# Who is Gen Z Attitudinally?

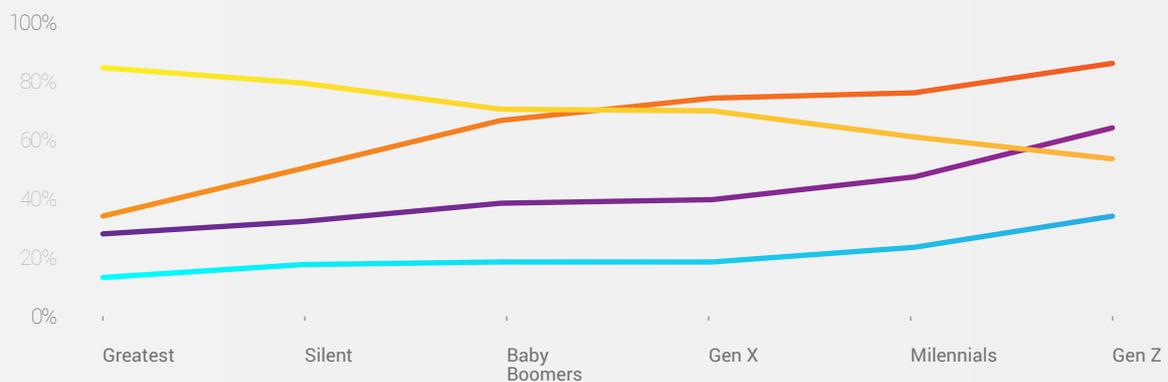
## Racial Justice

**Attitudinally, members of Gen Z are much more progressive on race issues.** Gen Z-ers are the most supportive of affirmative action, non-racially discriminatory housing laws and are more likely to say that the US spends too little on improving the conditions faced by African Americans/Blacks. On all three of these indicators, responses that indicate greater support for racial justice have increased progressively in each generation. In addition, younger generations –and Gen Z most of all—are the most likely to believe that racial inequities are systemic.

The percentage who agree or agree strongly that “Black Americans can overcome prejudice without any favors” has decreased with each generation, and is lowest for members of Gen Z.

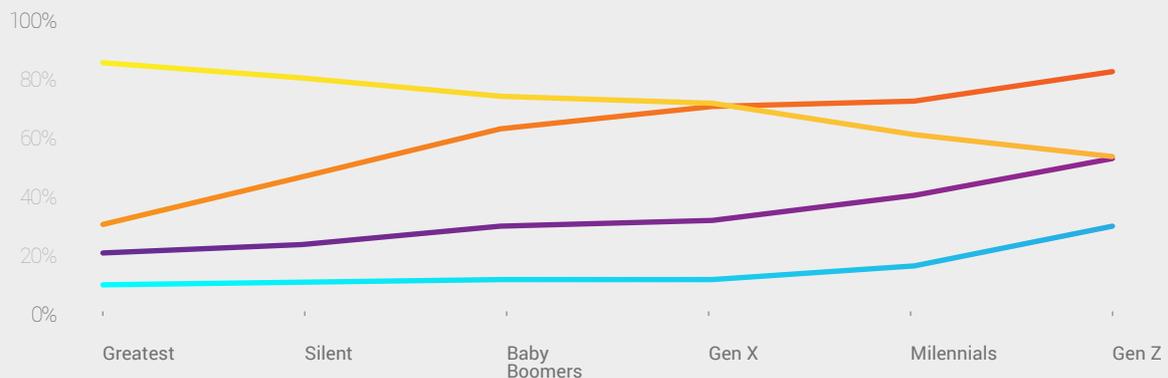
**Importantly, the same pattern of generational change is seen among whites; Gen Z is not more progressive on racial justice issues because it is more diverse (see Figure 6A below).** The greater likelihood of Gen Z to have a diverse social network, having grown up with the first Black president, and growing awareness of racial disparities over time are all likely contributing factors.

Figure 6  
Attitudes on Racial Justice by Generation



- Support/Strongly Support Hiring Preferences for Blacks
- Would Vote for A Law Prohibiting Discrimination Against Blacks
- Spending Too Little on Improving the Condition of Blacks
- Agree/Agree Strongly that Blacks Can Overcome Perjudice Without Any Special Favors

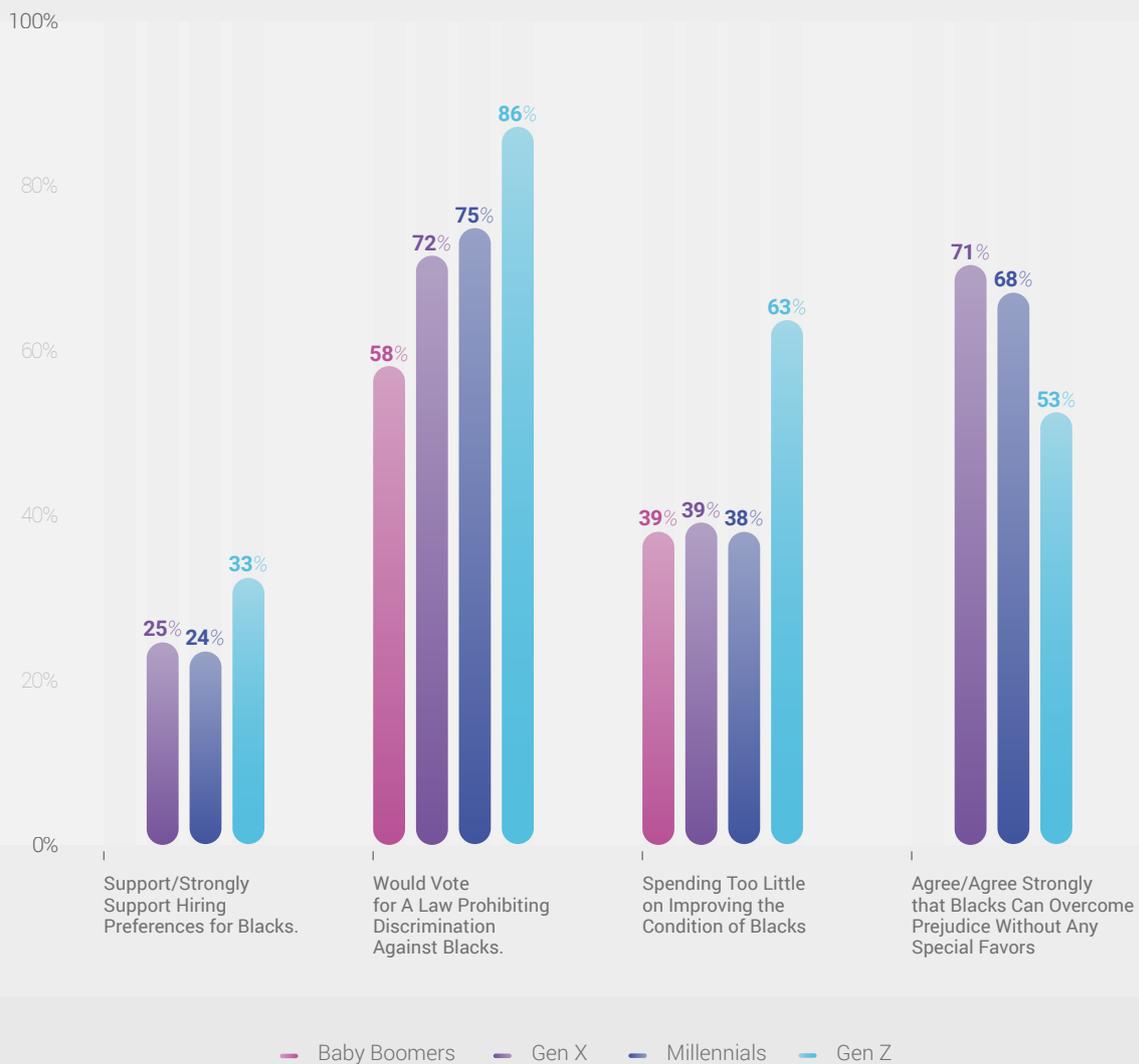
Figure 6A  
Attitudes towards Racial Justice by Generation, White Only



**Some** may suspect that Gen Z's progressive attitudes about race are just due to age, rather than a real, permanent change in mindset. Since the members of Gen Z surveyed in the data shown here (from the GSS), are all 18-21 years of age, perhaps they are more progressive because younger people are more progressive in general. However, further analysis shows that this is not the case. Since the GSS has data on these indicators from 1972 to 2018, we can actually look at these measures among 18-21 year old Millennials, Gen X-ers, and, for two of the measures, Boomers.

This analysis shows Gen Z to be the most progressive generation *even when we compare them to other generations when they were 18-21 years old themselves.*

Figure 7  
Racial Tolerance Among Whites Age 18-21 by Generation



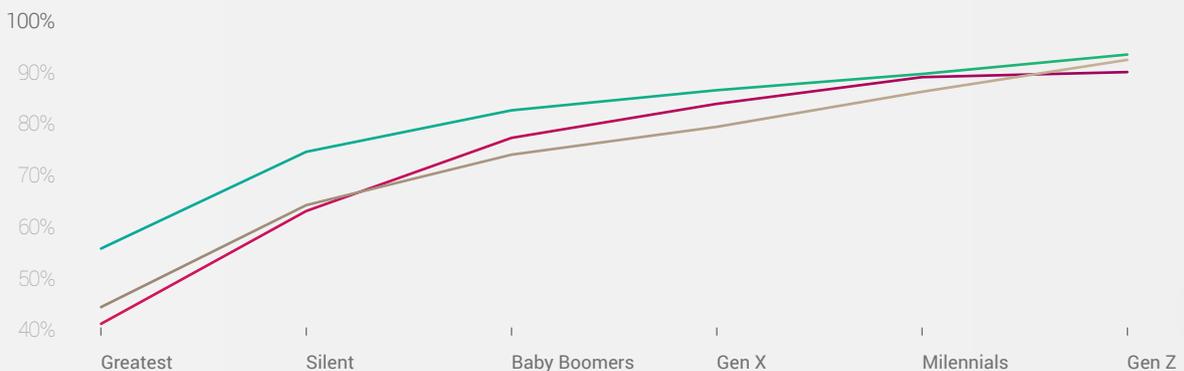
Source: US General Social Survey, 1972-2018 combined data file.

# rights

## Gay Rights

**Gen Z also have the most progressive attitudes about homosexuality as well, but they don't stand out as much from Millennials on these issues as they do on racial justice attitudes.** The big generational shift on these issues occurred earlier –from the Greatest to the Silent generation, and then again to the Baby Boomers. While attitudes have continued to be more progressive, the generational gains are much smaller among the youngest 3 generations. The greater openness for gay rights is not due to age; Baby Boomers had lower levels of openness when they were the same age as Gen Z is now – and the same goes for Gen X and Millennials.

Figure 8  
Attitudes Toward Homosexuality by Generation



- Homosexuals should be allowed to make a speech in your community
- Homosexuals should be allowed to teach
- Homosexual books should be allowed in libraries

**Note:** The topics and wording of these research questions may seem odd today, in a world where gay marriage is legal. We used these indicators because there are many, many years' worth of data for them, allowing us to observe generational changes.

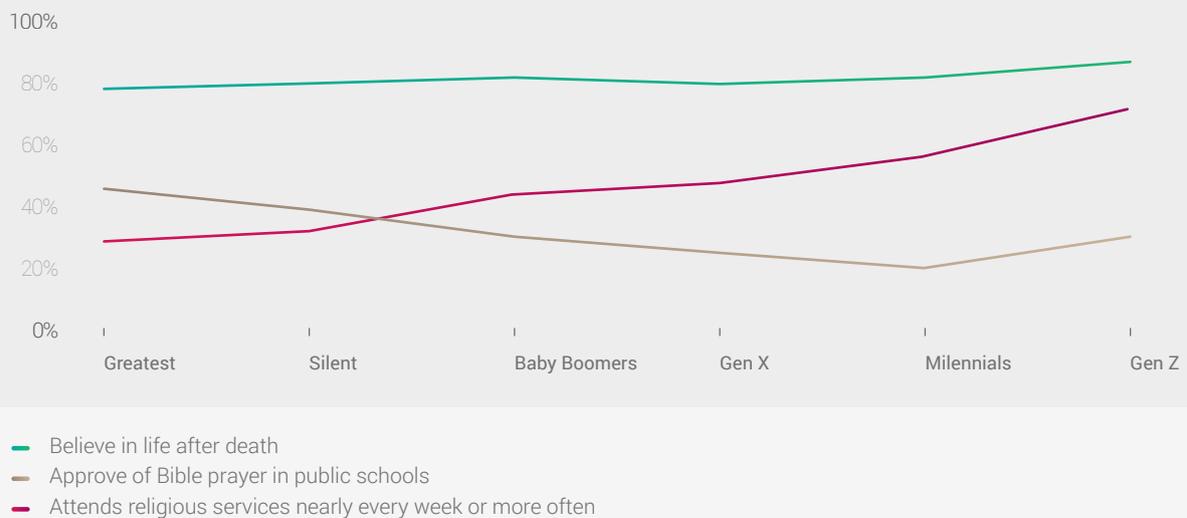
Figure 9  
Attitudes Toward Homosexuality by Generation Among Those Age 18-21



# Religious Beliefs

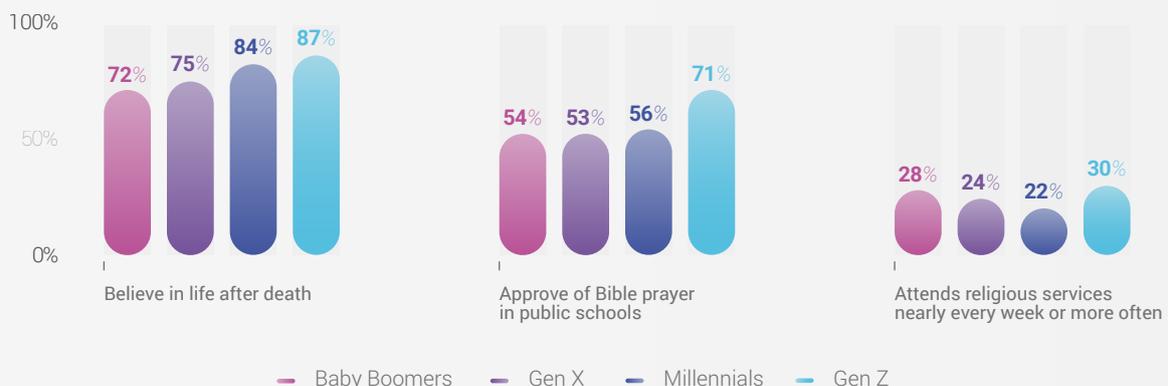
Several academic studies have shown a strong negative relationship between religiosity and social tolerance<sup>1</sup>, but interestingly, **Gen Z is both more progressive on racial & gay issues and more religious.** Surprisingly, this generation is the most likely to believe in an afterlife and approve of prayer in public schools. While Gen Z-ers do not attend religious services most frequently, they are significantly more likely to do so than Millennials. Weekly attendance of religious services declines steadily by generation until Gen Z, as Figure 10 below shows. **Interestingly, the reason for the higher level of religious belief among this young generation is not driven by the racial/ethnic make-up of Gen Z; the same pattern over time is observed within racial/ethnic groups, with non-Hispanic white Gen Z-ers also being more religious than non-Hispanic white Millennials.**

Figure 10  
Religious Attitudes & Religiosity by Generation



And the higher level of religiosity, belief in the afterlife, and approval of prayer in the public schools observed for Gen Z is not due to being young – this generation stands out as more religious even when we compare them to other generations at age 18-21.

Figure 11  
Religious Attitudes & Religiosity Among Those Age 18-21 by Generation



# Implications

Gen Z is young, so we're still formulating an understanding of this generation, but the data so far indicates that they are racially/ethnically diverse, socially progressive, and religious – and not just because they're young and diverse. **This suggests that companies and brands that want to connect to Gen Z consumers need to be transparent on where they stand on issues relating to race and LGBTQ issues. Brands will need to show they understand and support this generation's racial/ethnic diversity and their progressive stances on both race and sexual orientation, both in the talent they use in their advertising and marketing, and just as importantly, in the composition of their workforce and leadership.**

Importantly, brands that want to reach this consumer need to **authentically reflect Gen Z's reality & beliefs.** For example, if a streaming provider is developing a new show set in Montana, the main characters should not proportionately reflect Gen Z's composition; doing so would seem disingenuous, since it would fly in the face of Montana's reality. Similarly, a show set on Chicago's southside with all white characters would be just as unreal.

## how will COVID-19 impact Gen Z?

There is another critically important issue that will undoubtedly leave a permanent mark on Gen Z: COVID-19 and the accompanying 2020 recession. This generation is likely to be most impacted by the pandemic and associated economic crisis both economically and mentally; they are coming of age in a strange new reality. The lifelong impact of entering the job market in a recession is well documented; Gen Z-ers will likely face similar economic challenges to those Millennials faced during and after the 2008 recession. As a result of their Great Recession experience, Millennials:

- ▪ ▪ Deferred decisions about major purchases, such as cars and homes
- ▪ ▪ Delayed marriage
- ▪ ▪ Have incurred high student debt, which further exacerbates delaying major purchases and household formation<sup>2</sup>

The current economic crisis is likely to have similar effects on Gen Z. The long term impact of the pandemic on this generation is harder to gauge –with no recent historical precedent. However, it seems likely that Gen Z's COVID-19 experience may result in the following:

- ▪ ▪ ▪ Greater epidemiological awareness (i.e., of diseases and how they spread) and caution
- ▪ ▪ Diminished trust in and usage of the US healthcare system
- ▪ ▪ An increase in remote work
- ▪ ▪ Lessened appeal for urban life<sup>3</sup>

In reaching the Gen Z consumer, it will be important to keep in mind not only their diversity and socially progressive values, but also the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 crisis, which will affect Gen Z's beliefs and behaviors for their lifetime.

<sup>1</sup> Amy Katnik (2002) Religion, Social Class, and Political Tolerance, International Journal of Sociology, 32:1, 14-38

<sup>2</sup> Scott Berridge (2014), Millennials after the Great Recession in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Monthly Labor Review

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bloomberquint.com/business/young-join-the-rich-fleeing-america-s-big-cities-for-suburbs>

**Written by**  
Rebecca Abravanel, PHD  
Head of Quantitative Studio

**Contact**  
Miguel Gomez Winnebrenner  
Principal  
312.860.3191  
miguel@ahzul.com



[www.ahzul.com](http://www.ahzul.com)