

Gen Z Is Cynical. They've Earned It.

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Cameron Kasky had just gotten off the phone with his grandfather when I talked to him on Wednesday, the day after the [massacre at an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas](#), that left 19 children and two teachers dead. Kasky, who is 21, was a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., when [17 people were killed](#) there in 2018 by a teenager with an AR-15 rifle. Kasky said his Pop Pop “was giving me the post-mass-shooting-how-you-doing call,” which, we both noted, happens with pathetic, maddening, horrifying regularity.

By pretty much any measure, it has been a dispiriting few years for America’s teenagers and young adults. As Kasky put it, you open up the door on any day, and either there is an invisible virus that could make you incredibly sick, or the threat of gun violence. “Parkland was a formative shock for my generation. And then Covid comes and completely pulls the curtain aside and shows us there have been no inner machinations to help us if everything comes to a boiling point.” Our conversation reinforced what I already hear from Gen Z — that it’s clear to many of our younger citizens that our institutions, and the older adults who run them, aren’t going to save them.

As Alex Pareene pointed out [in his newsletter](#) this week, the disaffection Kasky describes is fairly widespread:

According to [the Spring 2022 Harvard Youth Poll](#), a majority of Americans under 30 now believe “politics today are no longer able to meet the challenges our country is facing.” Harvard also reports “a sharp increase in youth believing that ‘political involvement rarely has tangible results.’”

There is evidence, too, that Covid's emotional toll has been particularly hard for young adults. The American Psychological Association does a regular survey called Stress in America, and in October 2020, the APA was already sounding the alarm:

The potential long-term consequences of the persistent stress and trauma created by the pandemic are particularly serious for our country's youngest individuals, known as Generation Z (Gen Z). Our 2020 survey shows that Gen Z teens (ages 13-17) and Gen Z adults (ages 18-23) are facing unprecedented uncertainty, are experiencing elevated stress and are already reporting symptoms of depression.

In a more recent Stress in America survey from earlier this year, 77 percent of 18- to 25-year-olds said that "the COVID-19 pandemic has stolen major life moments they will never get back."

I called two adolescent mental health providers, both of whom have been working with teens for about two decades, to see if they have detected any changes in the past five years or so. Lisa Damour, a psychologist based in Ohio who has contributed to The Times and is the author of "Under Pressure" and "Untangled," books about the challenges facing girls, in particular, in our society, said, "I think I've watched teens become more cynical, and raise more pointed questions than ever about the decisions adults make, which of course plays to one of the true strengths of adolescents. They are designed to question authority, and they are built to point out painful realities."

Josh McKivigan, a behavioral health therapist in Pittsburgh who works with middle school and high school students, said the students he counsels are more jumpy and anxious, waiting for the other shoe to drop, because they've had so much disruption to their typical milestones. Many of them truly just want a normal graduation and a normal prom, McKivigan said.

But at the same time, both McKivigan and Damour said, this group of teens is extremely politically aware and active around issues ranging from racial injustice in the wake of George Floyd's murder to climate change to LGBTQ+ rights. "If you want to have a more hopeful angle," Damour said, "teenagers are incredibly skilled at organizing, incredibly skilled at using media networks to communicate with one another and to develop arguments and messaging. The teenagers I talk to are very clear about the sense that it will fall to them to try to make things better."

It guts me completely that teenagers have this weight on them. They shouldn't have to step out their front doors afraid, though Kasky, very sweetly and empathetically, said he felt badly for millennial parents like me, who have to fear for our young children's safety in this moment. He wasn't overly optimistic that his generation would be any better than the ones before it, and, of course, it's impossible to accurately generalize about millions of young people with very different life circumstances.

But like Damour, I remain impressed with Gen Z. I felt that when I interviewed a group of pro-choice activists who were using social media and humor to push their message on the front lines back in 2020. By contrast, when I was in my teens, I was politically

disengaged, and barely any national events broke through my adolescent myopia. I was cynical, sure — lots of teenagers are mini Holden Caulfields. But I didn't do anything about it. We had the luxury back then of being cynical and doing nothing to improve things, or at least we thought we did. I think fewer teenagers subscribe to that cynical-and-also-apatetic model now.

Just this morning, I saw that March for Our Lives, a movement founded by students who lived through the Parkland massacre, has planned another protest. It's scheduled for June 11 in Washington, D.C. The fact that these "kids" are still working to change gun laws in the face of years of inaction gives me solace and hope during a week that mostly gave us despair and disgust.
