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### **What Worries Them? The Societal Concerns of Generation Z**

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### **Introduction**

Generation Z has already emerged as an informed and influential global cohort. Individual role models and activists, such as Greta Thunberg campaigning for action against climate change, and Malala Yousafzai fighting for the human rights of women, are powerful global voices. There are similar role models in each country in the world.

Beyond individual activists, the global Generation Z cohort seems to be concerned about issues that impact society as a whole. At the core of societal concerns is the notion of justice or fairness in the way people are being treated (Collins, 2023) in and by society and include social justice, economic justice, and climate justice. Although social justice has a culturally complex nature conceptualized differently throughout human history, it reflects the need and ability for everyone to participate on equal grounds in social and political life (Thrift & Sugarman, 2019). It is based on recognition of differences and different identities as well as the freedom of individuals to express their views. The concept of social justice is also a counterpoint to human propensity to act unfairly towards particular social groups or individuals, including exert power, discriminate, cause physical and psychologic harm, restrict access to resources and opportunities (Bales, 2018). Economic justice is based on the concept that the economy is more successful if everybody has opportunities to thrive and achieve their full potential (Hayes, 2022). Climate change is a global phenomenon but the range of impacts varies according to geographic

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locations, with the socially weaker sections of society exposed to more severe consequences giving rise to concerns about climate justice (IPCC, 2022).

All justice categories have the interlinked dimensions of intragenerational and intergenerational justice, that is respectively, justice between people from Generation Z, and between people of Generation Z and other generations such as Baby Boomers, or Millennials. Although some government policies, for example, related to inclusion or social mobility, may have intergenerational impacts, the aims of social and economic justice are predominantly intragenerational. Climate justice however is distinctively intergenerational based on the scientific evidence that accumulation of greenhouse gases is causing the planet to warm up triggering extreme weather events, sea-level rise and changing temperature patterns (IPCC, 2022).

### Societal Concerns

Based on findings from the Global Gen Z Study, the ten most prominent societal concerns for Generation Z (see Table 1) fall into the three categories of justice. Not all thirty topics given to the participants to rate were issues of justice. Thus, it appears that justice, in general, was an overarching concern.

*Table 1. Top Ten Societal Concerns of Gen Z*

	<b>Very concerned and concerned</b>	<b>Somewhat and slightly concerned</b>	<b>Not concerned</b>
<i>Social justice</i>			
• Racism	66%	26%	8%
• Sexism	61%	28%	11%
• Limitations on personal freedom	60%	32%	8%
• Homophobia	55%	29%	16%
<i>Economic justice</i>			

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• Education	64%	30%	6%
• Poverty	63%	31%	6%
• Access to healthcare	63%	29%	8%
• Access to viable and affordable housing	62%	31%	7%
• Cost of high education	60%	32%	8%
<i>Climate justice</i>			
• Climate change	60%	31%	9%

The shares of those who were not concerned about the top ten issues were relatively low, varying between 16 percent in the case of homophobia and 6 percent for education and poverty. Hence, the majority of those in Generation Z expressed concern for these pressing issues. Even more so, only a few issues attracted relative low levels of concern such as border security – 25 percent were not concerned, gun rights – 24 percent were not concerned, and national debt – 21 percent were not concerned. The issue about border security may be pre-occupying politicians with commentators seeing it as “a point of obsession of our times” (Longo, 2017, p.2), it is of lower importance to Generation Z compared to the other pressing needs. Levels of concern about gun rights vary amongst countries influenced by existing laws and regulations. For example, there is no legal right to gun ownership in Australia which is in contrast to the position of the United States. Less restrictive gun laws result in higher levels of violence (Everytown Research & Policy, 2023). In the Global Gen Z Survey, gun safety was a concern for 28 percent of the participants in the United States compared to 21 percent in the rest of the world. Although Gen Zers are aware of the challenges surrounding national debts, they are prioritizing other issues over this, resulting in relatively lower concern (Pransky, 2021).

In looking at societal concerns across the not-clear-cut World Values regions (World Values Survey Association, 2022), there are some revealing insights (see Table 2). The issue that falls into the top three for the most regions is racism (four of nine regions), which is the most prominent social justice issue across the globe. Representing all economic justice issues, the

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following concerns were in the top three for three of nine regions: poverty, access to viable housing, cost of higher education, education, and access to healthcare. Climate justice, reflected by the concern “climate change” was in the top three for the Confucian region and Protestant Europe.

In the top three for both Asian regions (Confucian and West and South Asia) was Internet security, which did not appear for any other region. Sexism was in the top three for Catholic and Protestant Europe, but no other region of the world. Limitations on personal freedom was a top three concern for Confucian region and Orthodox Europe.

*Table 2. Top Three Societal Concerns for Each Region*

World Values Survey Regions	Societal Issue	Percent (Concerned or Very Concerned)
Confucian	Climate Change Internet Security Limitations on Personal Freedoms	45% 44% 43%
Orthodox Europe	Access to Healthcare Limitations on Personal Freedoms Education	67% 66% 66%
African-Islamic	Racism Poverty Access to Healthcare	74% 74% 72%
Latin America	Education Access to Healthcare Poverty	93% 88% 85%
West and South Asia	Access to Viable Housing Cost of Higher Education Internet Security	80% 76% 61%
Catholic Europe	Racism Access to Viable Housing Sexism	70% 70% 69%

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English-Speaking	Cost of Higher Education Education Racism	69% 67% 66%
Protestant Europe	Climate Change Racism Sexism	80% 75% 70%
Africa*	Poverty Access to Viable Housing Cost of Higher Education Unemployment	87% 87% 87% 87%

\*Not included in the World Values Survey

### Social Justice

The issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia are among the most concerning societal issues for Generation Z. It appears that this demographic cohort is much more attuned to reacting against social injustice and protecting its own identity, respect and equality as they aspire to create a better society (Svetaz et al., 2020).

Generation Z believes in the quest for better and more humane, fair, and honest treatment. Being aware and seeing what is happening in the world around them, the young people do not want to build self-protection, anger or hostility, but instead want to generate an environment of sympathy and equality where differences are welcomed. One participant in the Global Gen Z Study wrote: “If everyone was kinder, we wouldn’t have sexism, racism, wars, etc. We’d be able to come together and love one another and find a solution for issues like climate change. We can challenge each other’s beliefs and show different perspectives, which helps unite us. If someone feels heard, they’re more likely to be kind”.

Personal freedom is highly important in Generation Z’s quest for social justice. Generation Z’s personal freedom and freedom of speech are often manifested through engagement with the social media, including Twitter, TikTok and Instagram. There has always

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been an ambivalent relationship between generations as the socio-cultural, economic and technological environments change (Törőcsik, Kehl, & Szűcs, 2014); however, Generation Z's sensitivity towards social justice appears to be unprecedented (Hayek, 2021). It is not surprising that Generation Z poses challenges to established institutions within society, such as religious and political systems. For example, previous research describes the American Generation Z as typifying the post-Christian world (White, 2017) where many values associated with personal freedom and beliefs previously influenced by the church are now being redefined and re-interpreted. For example, the notions of family and marriage include gay marriage, polyamorous relationships and three-parent children. The largest “religious” group for people under 30 (36 percent) in the United States, is that of those without a religious identity (White, 2017).

### **Economic Justice**

Creating opportunities for everyone within the economy is the essence of economic justice (Hayes, 2022). Education is a prerequisite for participation in the economy and is a major societal concern for Gen Zers. Their concerns center on both the quality of education and the cost of higher education. In a hyperlinked world where information is readily available, this generation demands instant answers, a different interactive and hands-on educational approach and learning requirements compared to previous generations (Chalk, 2022). Statistically, Generation Z will become the most educated human generation that has ever lived on this planet (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). However, in some countries such as the United States and Australia, these young people are amassing student debts higher than those of previous generations (Bareham, 2023). This is manifested as a concern – one of the top ten societal concerns is the cost of higher education (see Table 1), and may potentially impact education-related decisions.

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Concerns around poverty mirror those related to education; however, while education indicates opportunities, poverty expresses apprehensions about a growing gap between the richest and the poor, financial and economic outlooks as well as job security (Perna, 2022). Possible reasons for worries about poverty are increased costs of living, earnings not keeping up with inflation, disappearance of the middle class and globalization that enhances poverty worldwide (Gecsoyler, 2022). Ranked ninth on the list of societal concerns, access to viable and affordable housing is in line with previous evidence that the cost of living, including housing affordability and expenses, unemployment and uncertainty about the future are already causing mental health unease for Generation Z (Garnham, 2022).

Despite the healthcare sector viewing the digitally native Generation Z as bringing a new set of expectations (Halton, 2020), this generation indisputably worries about healthcare access. This is particularly evident in relation to people of color, minorities or Indigenous populations, many of whom are often let down by the existing healthcare systems (CDC, 2022). Related to their strong sense for social justice, many of Generation Z are already experiencing issues of mental health, increased stress, anxiety and depression (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021) contributing to their concerns about access to healthcare.

Lived experiences can further impact Generation Z's health and opportunities for a just participation in the economy. For example, in the United States, "Gen Z faces chronic stress from many factors including school shootings, student debt, joblessness and even politics" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021, para. 4). In countries which are already experiencing the immediate effects of global warming, such as the Philippines, climate change anxiety becomes a contributing factor in triggering mental health problems (Reyes et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further fueled anxiety with the effect on young people being more pronounced (Garnham, 2022).

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Young people need a trusted adviser who can provide them with guidelines for holistic health and wellness and a consumer-centric healthcare experience (Halton, 2020). However, the affordability and accessibility of such services can become barriers driving down preventative measures and help-seeking for mental-health services (McKinsey & Company, 2022).

### **Climate Justice**

Climate justice emerged from the environmental movement with a focus on “local impacts and experience, inequitable vulnerabilities, the importance of community voice, and demands for community sovereignty and functioning” (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014, p. 359). This was in response to overwhelming evidence that human-induced climate change is the biggest threat of our times, impacting the natural environment but also human communities across the globe (United Nations, 2022). Climate change is the biggest injustice imposed on the poorest countries and the weakest sections of society whose rights to a safe environment, along with clean air and water are being compromised. The global challenges related to climate change are further linked to nature’s wide range of ecoservices. As Rouf and Wainwright (2020, p. e131) explain, the hierarchies of social inequality and economic vulnerability are replicated in any environmental disasters: “Individuals who are hardest hit by climate change are often already vulnerable and have the least resources”.

The essence of climate change however is very much intergenerational when it comes to Generation Z. These young people already understand the importance of protecting the natural environment and that responding to climate change is critical for the planet and their own future (World Economic Forum, 2022). However, they also know that these problems have been accumulating through the activities (or lack thereof) of previous generations since industrialization, including those of their parents and grandparents. The intergenerational



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perspective on climate justice is broadly voiced. Concerns about climate change are part of the top ten list in the Global Gen Z Survey. Sixty percent indicate being very concerned, which is higher than the results obtained by the 2022 Deloitte survey (Deloitte, 2022) where 24 percent of Generation Z indicated being deeply concerned about climate change. While the results differ, what is known is that young people are strongly concerned about the environment.

Members of Generation Z have been extremely active in calling politicians, industrialists and other influencers for genuine action on climate change by holding climate strikes, boycotting unsustainable products or companies, participating in active disruptions (e.g. the protests of Extinction Rebellion). While young people no longer focus on political parties, they are seeking to engage in the democratic processes through alternative means that deliver direct and fast outcomes (Carnegie, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

From an intergenerational perspective, Generation Z believes that it has been betrayed by society and previous generations by being poorer, having to deal with depression and the prospects of runaway climate change (Gecsoyler, 2022) and hence, raises strong concerns. With previous research showing that 70 percent of Generation Z is involved in a social or political cause (Cooper, 2021), it is not surprising to see these young people speaking up for social, economic, and climate justice. They believe that society will become better when action is taken to address inequality and opportunities are provided to everyone to thrive.

With the optimism and enthusiasm of youth, Generation Z needs to resolve the layers of social, environmental and economic problems being inherited from previous generations. These tasks are complex. Educators, parents and supervisors need to provide platforms and opportunities not only for Generation Z's voices to be heard but also for new creative and

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leadership skills to be developed. The long journey ahead starts with the strong manifestation

that Generation Z cares about justice. These young people need to be encouraged and supported

to clarify their concerns and find ways for addressing them.

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