



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on March 16, 2012

Study: Young Americans Are Less “Green” Than Their Elders

Jean Twenge, who wrote the book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled — and More Miserable Than Ever Before*, has spent much of her professional life researching the challenges that young people face today and how such challenges reflect on their overall beliefs. "I was shocked," [asserted](#) Twenge, a professor at San Diego State University and one of the study's authors. "We have the perception that we're getting through to people. But at least compared to previous eras, we're not."



The study, entitled "Generational Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation," begins with a quote describing today's young Americans as a "civic-minded" generation, followed by another quote that suggests the contrary:

"People born between 1982 and 2000 are the most civic-minded since the generation of the 1930s and 1940s," say Morley Winograd and Michael Hais, co-authors of *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, You-Tube, and the Future of American Politics...* "Other generations were reared to be more individualistic," Hais says. "This civic generation has a willingness to put aside some of their own personal advancement to improve society." — *USA Today*, 2009

College students today show less empathy toward others compared with college students in decades before. With different demands at work — hours answering and writing e-mail — people have less time to care about others. — *USA Today*, 2010

Twenge and her colleagues analyzed two national surveys of high-school seniors and college freshmen and found that over the past 40 years young people's interest in social programs and government policy has declined. But most significant was a free-fall in environmental-consciousness.

The study reported that, in a survey conducted decades ago, a third of young baby boomers believed it is important that people embrace programs that target environmental concerns. Conversely, only a quarter of Gen Xers and a mere 21 percent of Millennials believe the same.

Furthermore, 5 percent of baby boomers said they had neglected to help the environment, compared with 8 percent of Gen Xers and 15 percent of Millennials. Meanwhile, 78 percent of baby boomers said they had cut back on the use of heating fuel, while 71 percent of Gen Xers and 56 percent of Millennials affirmed the same.

Some observers predict that young Americans' interest in environmental activism may only diminish, particularly if the economy persists in its fragile state. Moreover, the rising pain at the pump has made young Americans more aware of U.S. energy policy. According to a 2011 [poll](#) by Generation Opportunity, 70 percent of young adults (ages 18 to 29) support increasing the production of domestic energy sources such as oil, coal, and natural gas. Paul T. Conway, president of Generation Opportunity



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and former Chief of Staff of the U.S. Department of Labor, expounded on the poll's findings:

Gas prices are a one-two punch to young people in this poor economy. Rapidly rising gas prices are hitting young people across the country particularly hard, exponentially increasing the cost of most activities they engage in and adding to their costs in finding a job or getting to work. Young Americans are very savvy — they know that in addition to impacting their day-to-day lives, dependency on foreign energy jeopardizes our national security. Young parents, small business owners, those in the trades, and college students are united in their frustration by what appears to be a complete lack of national leadership on the issue and a failure by the President and his allies in Congress to put forward policies that better utilize America's own energy resources.

Mark Potosnak, an environmental science professor says there seems to be skepticism among his students about climate change, and environmental "preaching" has burned many of them out. "It's not so much that they don't think it's important. They're just worn out," the professor asserted. "It's like poverty in a foreign country. You see the picture so many times, you become inured to it."



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