Commentary

Why Is Generation Z Poorer Than Expected: A Commentary

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Generation Z is coming of age under economic conditions that differ sharply from those faced by earlier generations. Across both advanced and developing economies, rising housing costs, persistent inflation, insecure work, and structural changes in education and labor markets have combined to place young adults under sustained financial pressure. This article examines the global economic position of Gen Z through a comparative, evidence-based lens, moving beyond country-specific narratives. Drawing on data on wages, housing affordability, debt, and employment, it challenges the view that Gen Z's struggles reflect weak work ethic or cultural attitudes. Instead, these difficulties are situated within broader macroeconomic forces, including asset inflation, post-crisis monetary policy, demographic shifts, and the erosion of traditional routes to upward mobility. While wages for Gen Z are rising faster than those of some older cohorts and early homeownership rates appear higher in select contexts, these gains often fail to keep pace with living costs and long-term insecurity. The article argues that Gen Z's economic distress carries wider implications for productivity, social stability, and intergenerational trust, underscoring the urgency of policy attention to a cohort that will soon shape the global workforce and electorate.

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Introduction

"I work two jobs. One pays ten dollars an hour, the other pays twenty-five when the shifts are available. I still can't afford to live." This is not a confession whispered in private. It is a statement increasingly spoken out loud by members of Generation Z across cities, countries, and continents. Young people with degrees, skills, and ambition who are doing what previous generations were told was the formula for stability; work hard, stay employed, live modestly, yet find themselves rationing meals, draining savings, and sharing apartments not as a lifestyle choice but as a survival strategy. The story repeats itself with unsettling consistency. Rent that was once manageable suddenly becomes impossible. A weekly payment of $280 quietly turns into $450, with no corresponding rise in income. A wage that sits well above the legal minimum still fails to cover food, transportation, healthcare, and housing. Living "on your own" is no longer a milestone of independence but a financial risk few can afford to take. And this is not a uniquely American experience.

Across Europe, young adults in cities like London, Paris, Berlin, and Madrid face housing markets where rents rise faster than wages and home ownership drifts further out of reach each year. In parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Gen Z graduates confront a different but equally punishing reality: underemployment, informal work, and degrees that do not translate into stable income[1]. In Australia and Canada, housing affordability has deteriorated so rapidly that even middle-income earners struggle to secure long-term shelter. The geography changes; the anxiety does not. Yet when these realities are voiced, the response is often dismissive. Every generation, we are told, has its struggles. Hardship is a rite of passage. Young people simply need to work harder, spend less, complain less. The implication is subtle but sharp: if Gen Z is poor, it must be because they are irresponsible, entitled, or unwilling to endure discomfort. That explanation is convenient, and deeply inadequate.

The numbers tell a different story. Across multiple countries, surveys consistently show that a majority of Gen Z feel financially insecure, unable to save, and pessimistic about their economic future. In the United States, six in ten Gen Z adults report being unable to save meaningfully for the future. Only a small minority expect to afford a home within the next five years. Among renters, anxiety over rising housing costs is nearly universal. Similar trends appear in the UK, where young adults now spend a significantly higher share of income on housing than previous generations at the same age. In emerging economies, the problem is less about housing ownership and more about stable employment altogether, as automation, informal labor markets, and slow job creation collide.

This generation also entered adulthood under extraordinary conditions. Nearly half of Gen Z globally experienced job loss, reduced hours, or household income shocks during the COVID-19 pandemic, making them the most economically disrupted cohort at a formative stage of life. Many graduated into lockdowns, hiring freezes, and collapsed industries. Entry-level opportunities vanished precisely when experience was most needed. Careers that might have compounded steadily instead began with delay, debt, and instability. Financial strain does not exist in isolation. Around forty percent of Gen Z report ongoing mental health struggles, with economic stress identified as a primary driver. The constant

doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

calculation, Can I afford rent this month? Should I skip this meal? Is it safe to touch my savings? erodes psychological resilience. Poverty here is not just material; it is cognitive and emotional, consuming attention and narrowing long-term thinking.

The irony is difficult to ignore. Gen Z is, by many measures, one of the most educated, technologically fluent, and socially aware generations in history. They were raised with the promise that knowledge is power, that globalization creates opportunity, that digital skills unlock mobility. They were told that the future would reward adaptability. Instead, many find themselves adapting endlessly to a system that no longer guarantees basic economic security. To understand why, we must move beyond moral judgments and generational stereotypes. The question is not whether Gen Z works hard enough, but whether the economic structures they inherited are capable of rewarding effort in the way they once did. The labor market they entered is defined by precarious contracts, gig work, stagnant real wages, and declining labor protections. Productivity has risen in many economies, yet the share of income flowing to workers has not kept pace. Education costs have climbed while returns on degrees have become increasingly uneven. Housing has transformed from a social good into a speculative asset class, pricing younger generations out of stability.

Layered on top of this are forces unique to Gen Z's historical moment. They grew up amid repeated economic shocks: the aftermath of the global financial crisis, rising geopolitical tensions, climate instability, a pandemic, and now the accelerating presence of artificial intelligence threatening to automate entry-level roles before careers even begin. Where previous generations faced one or two defining disruptions, Gen Z has faced several before reaching full adulthood[2]. This raises an uncomfortable but necessary question: to what extent have older generations, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers, benefited from systems that no longer function equitably for those coming after them? This is not about blame in a moral sense, but about structural inheritance. Housing policies, labor norms, corporate governance, and political priorities were shaped in eras when affordability, wage growth, and social mobility followed different rules. The consequences of those decisions are now being felt most sharply by those with the least power to change them.

Calling Gen Z "lazy" ignores the reality that many are working longer hours for less security than their parents did at the same age. It also ignores a deeper truth: when a generation loses faith that effort leads to stability, the problem is no longer individual, it is systemic.

So how did a generation that was seemingly poised for success end up in such widespread financial distress? Why does earning above minimum wage no longer guarantee dignity? Why does full-time work

doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

increasingly fail to cover basic needs? And what happens to societies when millions of young adults delay home ownership, family formation, and long-term investment not by choice, but by constraint? This commentary seeks to answer those questions, not by romanticizing Gen Z, nor by absolving individuals of responsibility, but by examining the economic, political, and social conditions shaping their reality across the globe. Because understanding why Gen Z is struggling is not just about one generation. It is about the future of work, stability, and social cohesion itself.

Who Are Generation Z?

When we talk about Generation Z, we are not talking about teenagers scrolling endlessly on their phones, nor are we talking about a distant future cohort still forming its identity. We are talking about adults. At the time of writing, the oldest members of Generation Z are approaching their late twenties, around 26 or 27 years old; an age at which previous generations were already establishing careers, buying homes, and starting families. Gen Z is no longer "up next." They are already here, quietly carrying the weight of a world that has become more fragile, more indebted, and more unequal than the one their parents inherited.

In countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom, Generation Z now makes up roughly one-fifth of the population, a share comparable to that of the Baby Boomers. This alone makes them a demographic force with economic, political, and cultural significance[3]. But the global picture is even more striking. In Nigeria, Gen Z accounts for approximately 32 percent of the population. In India, the figure is around 27 percent. Across much of Africa, South Asia, and parts of Latin America, Gen Z is not just a cohort; it is the backbone of future labor markets, consumption patterns, and political movements. Any serious discussion about global development, growth, or stability necessarily passes through this generation.

Yet despite their size and potential, Gen Z is entering adulthood under conditions that are historically unusual. Compared to Millennials at the same age, Gen Z, particularly in Western economies, is more environmentally conscious, less likely to drink or smoke, and less likely to be in long-term romantic relationships. They are more attuned to social justice, mental health, inequality, and climate change. They speak openly about anxiety, burnout, and systemic failure in ways earlier generations rarely did. This is not because they are weaker, but because the pressures they face are more visible and less easily ignored. At the same time, Gen Z socializes less in physical spaces than previous generations did at similar ages. Studies suggest that young people today spend roughly 38 minutes per day socializing in person,

doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

compared to about an hour for youth around the year 2000. Digital platforms have replaced many traditional social spaces, but they have not fully replaced the sense of belonging those spaces once provided. The result is a generation that is hyper-connected yet often feels isolated, engaged with the world, but unsure where they truly fit within it[4].

Popular culture often distorts our understanding of Gen Z by focusing on its most visible success stories. Celebrities such as Billie Eilish, Greta Thunberg, Kylian Mbappé, MrBeast, Zendaya, and Naomi Osaka are frequently presented as symbols of Gen Z's power and promise. And indeed, these individuals represent extraordinary talent, influence, and achievement. But they are also statistical outliers. Their success tells us very little about the lived experience of the average Gen Z adult working retail shifts, freelancing online, navigating unstable contracts, or trying to stretch a modest income across rent, food, transport, and healthcare.

What makes Gen Z's position particularly precarious is the broader economic environment into which they are emerging. The world they are inheriting is heavily indebted. Public debt levels in many advanced economies are historically high, while workforce growth is slowing due to aging populations and declining birth rates. Slower population growth means slower GDP growth, which in turn makes it harder for governments to service existing debt without painful trade-offs[5]. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, one of the primary responses to these structural challenges has been the expansion of money supply, what economists often describe, more delicately, as monetary easing, and less delicately, as currency debasement. This matters deeply for Gen Z, even if it is rarely framed in generational terms. The immediate assumption is that money printing leads to inflation in consumer prices, and sometimes it does. But the more corrosive effect has been subtler: wages stagnate while assets, especially housing, stocks, and land, rise sharply in value. For those who already own assets, this is a windfall. For those trying to acquire them for the first time, it is a trap. Currency may buy less over time, but income does not rise fast enough to compensate. The future, quite literally, becomes more expensive than the present.

Nowhere is this more visible than in housing. For Gen Z globally, housing has become the single most powerful symbol of what feels out of reach. In the United States, a typical home now costs roughly six years of average income. For Baby Boomers, the figure was closer to two or three years. For Generation X, three to four. For Millennials, four to five. For Gen Z, six to seven, and climbing. In Australia, the situation is even more extreme. The average house price in Sydney is around 1.6 million Australian dollars. On a single income, it would take approximately fourteen years of earnings to buy a home, assuming, unrealistically, that one could save every dollar earned. In practical terms, that would require a level of sacrifice bordering on the absurd.

In the United Kingdom, the average house now costs around nine times average annual earnings. The last time housing was this unaffordable relative to income was in the late nineteenth century, around 1876. In Canada, housing costs have become so detached from income levels that one student famously calculated it was cheaper to fly between cities for classes than to rent accommodation near campus. In Sydney, only about 0.1 percent of properties are considered affordable for the average household. These are not anecdotes; they are signals of systemic distortion.

Unsurprisingly, Gen Z is delaying independence. Young adults are staying at home longer, not because they prefer it, but because rent consumes too much of their income. In the United States, the number of young adults living with parents has increased by nearly 87 percent over the past two decades. In Australia, the increase since 2016 alone is around 177 percent. For many, moving out is no longer a rite of passage, it is a financial gamble.

And yet, there is a twist in the Gen Z story that complicates the narrative of total exclusion. Despite a global shortage of affordable housing and rising property prices, a notable minority of Gen Z has managed to enter the housing market earlier than expected. In the United States, around 30 percent of 25-year-olds owned homes in 2022, slightly higher than the share of Gen X at the same age. This was not because the system suddenly became fairer, but because of a narrow window of opportunity. Record-low mortgage rates during 2020 and 2021 reduced borrowing costs dramatically. Remote work allowed some young buyers to move away from expensive urban centers. Digital platforms and access to information lowered barriers to entry in ways previous generations did not enjoy[6].

As Ben Miller, CEO of Fundrise, observed, every generation faces new forms of economic pressure, but Gen Z possesses something earlier cohorts did not: unprecedented access to information. They understand markets earlier. They compare options faster. They adapt quickly. Ironically, Millennials often assumed to be better positioned, were hit hardest by the 2008 financial crisis at precisely the moment they would otherwise have entered the housing market, leaving lasting scars on their wealth trajectories.

On a societal level, the consequences of housing insecurity extend far beyond property ownership. When stable shelter feels unattainable, long-term planning becomes risky. Marriage is delayed. Childbearing is postponed or abandoned. Entire life paths are restructured around economic uncertainty. For Gen Z, the question is no longer “Where do I want to live?” but “Can I afford to belong anywhere at all?”

So when we ask who Gen Z is, the answer is not simply demographic. Gen Z is a globally significant, socially aware, digitally fluent generation coming of age in an era of constrained opportunity. They are not poor because they lack ambition. They are struggling because the ladders that once connected effort to security have been pulled higher, narrowed, or removed altogether.

Evidence and Reasoning

The economic strain facing Generation Z is often discussed in personal terms; low wages, high rent, unstable work, and delayed milestones[7]. But when examined carefully, the evidence points to something much larger than individual hardship. What Gen Z is experiencing is not merely a difficult phase of youth; it is a structural shift with long-term consequences for productivity, social cohesion, demographic stability, and economic growth. The reasoning is simple but unsettling: when an entire generation struggles to gain economic footing, the effects do not stop with that generation. They ripple outward, shaping the future of societies that depend on their labor, creativity, and willingness to invest in the long term.

The first and most visible body of evidence lies in income and cost dynamics. Across advanced and emerging economies alike, wages for young workers have not kept pace with the cost of living. Even in sectors requiring education or specialized skills, entry-level pay has lagged behind inflation-adjusted housing, transport, and food costs. This is not a matter of lifestyle inflation or poor budgeting. In many cities, rent alone now consumes 40 to 60 percent of a young worker's income. Historically, that figure hovered closer to 25 or 30 percent. When the basic act of securing shelter becomes financially destabilizing, saving, investing, or even planning becomes nearly impossible.

Housing data reinforces this point. As discussed earlier, the number of years of income required to purchase a home has risen steadily across generations, reaching unprecedented levels for Gen Z. Homeownership has traditionally served as a primary vehicle for wealth accumulation and intergenerational stability[8]. When access to this asset is delayed or denied, wealth inequality hardens. Those who already own property benefit from rising values, while those locked out fall further behind, regardless of effort or education. Over time, this creates a two-tier society: asset holders and perpetual renters, with diminishing mobility between the two.

Employment patterns provide further evidence. Gen Z is more likely to work in fragmented labor markets; short-term contracts, gig work, platform-based employment, and part-time roles without

doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

benefits. While flexibility is often framed as a benefit, the trade-off is insecurity. Irregular hours, unpredictable income, and limited access to healthcare or pensions make it difficult to plan for the future. This instability also reduces workers' bargaining power, keeping wages suppressed even as productivity expectations rise. From an economic standpoint, this is inefficient. Societies benefit when workers feel secure enough to invest in skills, take entrepreneurial risks, and commit to long-term projects. Chronic insecurity does the opposite.

The reasoning becomes even more compelling when demographic trends are considered. Economic precarity among Gen Z is closely linked to delayed family formation. Across Europe, East Asia, and parts of North America, declining birth rates are already straining pension systems and shrinking workforces. When young adults postpone or abandon decisions about marriage and children due to financial stress, the long-term fiscal implications are severe. Fewer workers must support more retirees, placing pressure on public finances and social safety nets. In this sense, Gen Z's economic distress is not just a private concern, it is a demographic and fiscal issue that affects entire nations.

Mental health data adds another layer of evidence. Financial insecurity is one of the strongest predictors of anxiety, depression, and burnout among young adults. Gen Z reports higher levels of psychological distress than previous generations at the same age, and financial stress consistently ranks among the leading causes. From a societal perspective, this matters because mental health is directly linked to productivity, creativity, and civic engagement. A generation operating in survival mode is less likely to innovate, participate in democratic processes, or invest emotionally in institutions they perceive as failing them.

There is also a political dimension that cannot be ignored. History shows that prolonged economic exclusion among young populations often leads to disillusionment with established systems. When hard work does not translate into stability, trust in institutions erodes. This can manifest as political apathy, radicalization, or susceptibility to populist narratives that promise quick fixes or assign blame. In regions where Gen Z forms a large share of the population, such as Africa and South Asia, the stakes are particularly high. Economic frustration, if left unaddressed, can translate into social unrest or mass migration, with global consequences.

Crucially, Gen Z is not disengaged or indifferent. Evidence suggests they care deeply about social issues, climate change, fairness, and accountability. What they lack is not motivation, but confidence that the system will reward participation. When societies fail to convert that concern into opportunity, they waste human potential on a massive scale. Innovation slows. Entrepreneurship declines. The social contract weakens.

The reasoning, then, is clear. Gen Z's economic distress matters because this generation will soon dominate the workforce, drive consumption, and shape political outcomes. Their ability or inability to build stable lives will influence productivity growth, tax bases, demographic balance, and social cohesion for decades. Addressing their challenges is not an act of charity or generational favoritism. It is an investment in the future capacity of societies to function, adapt, and thrive. If Gen Z remains economically constrained, the cost will be paid not only in lower living standards for them, but in slower growth, deeper inequality, and greater instability for everyone else.

Labour Markets, Inflation, and the Myth of the "Lazy" Generation

When discussions about Gen Z's financial struggles surface, employment is often presented as the counterargument: *"At least jobs are plentiful."* On paper, that claim appears defensible. In reality, it collapses under closer scrutiny. Once we move beyond headline unemployment figures and examine wages, inflation, job quality, and cost pressures together, a far more sobering picture emerges, one that explains why economic anxiety persists even when official statistics suggest improvement.

Start with housing, because it anchors everything else. In California, the median home price now exceeds $770,000, placing ownership far beyond the reach of most young workers, even those with stable employment. This is not an American anomaly. Across much of the world, young people face a double bind: weak job prospects in some regions, and inadequate purchasing power in others.

Youth unemployment remains alarmingly high in several economies. Among those aged 15–24, unemployment stands at 28% in Spain, 27% in Sri Lanka, 25% in Greece, and 23% in Italy and Sweden. In China, the situation is particularly striking. Despite massive investments in higher education, more than one-third of degree holders are unemployed, the result of economic uncertainty colliding with an oversupply of graduates. For young people who followed the prescribed path; study hard, earn credentials, join the middle class, the promise has not materialised.

By contrast, richer economies appear healthier. Across advanced nations, youth unemployment averages around 13%, its lowest level since the early 1990s. Yet this "rosy" picture feels disconnected from lived experience. Gen Z and younger millennials are not celebrating a golden age of opportunity. The reason is straightforward: the numbers we are shown do not tell the whole story.

doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

In the United States, a critical methodological shift occurred in 1994, when unemployment statistics stopped counting discouraged workers, those who gave up searching and underemployed individuals stuck in part-time roles despite wanting full-time work. Many other countries adopted similar approaches. When these groups are excluded, unemployment looks artificially low. To make meaningful historical comparisons, today's broader U-6 unemployment should be compared with the narrower U-3 figures of earlier decades. When this adjustment is made, today's labour market looks far less exceptional. In fact, during the 1950s and 1960s, there was not a single year in which effective unemployment was as high as it is now.

This context matters because job quantity is only one dimension of economic wellbeing. Job quality, income adequacy, and purchasing power matter just as much and this is where Gen Z runs into trouble.

Paradoxically, wages for Gen Z are rising faster than for older cohorts. According to *The Economist* and *Business Insider*, Gen Z workers who change jobs frequently earn up to 30% more than those who stay put. In the United States, hourly pay for workers aged 16–24 rose 7% year-on-year, compared with 4–5% for workers aged 25–54. In the UK, pay for those aged 18–21 increased by 15% in a single year. Similar trends are visible in New Zealand, Croatia, and Slovenia, where some Gen Z workers already earn close to national averages.

At first glance, this seems encouraging. But the explanation reveals the catch. Gen Z entered the workforce with the lowest base wages. Employers could grant proportionally large increases while still paying less than the cost of retraining or retaining older staff. Relative gains look impressive; absolute incomes remain modest. Rising pay, in short, does not automatically translate into financial security, especially when inflation is doing most of the work in the opposite direction.

Inflation sits at the core of Gen Z's predicament. Most of this generation began their working lives during the sharpest global inflation surge since the 1970s. In 2022, inflation reached a 40-year high, driven by pandemic-related supply chain disruptions and aggressive monetary expansion aimed at preventing economic collapse. The strategy stabilised economies in the short term, but the side effects were brutal: food, fuel, rent, transport, education, and travel all became significantly more expensive.

For older generations, inflation was often episodic. For Gen Z, it has been formative. Many have never experienced prices rising so rapidly, and some researchers argue the effect has been psychologically scarring. Crucially, inflation does not reverse itself. When inflation slows from 8% to 3%, prices do not fall, they simply rise more slowly. The higher cost base becomes permanent.

History offers a warning. During the inflationary period of the mid-1970s to early 1980s, stagnant wages forced households to adapt by sending more members into the workforce, accelerating the long-term rise of dual-income households. Inflation reshaped social norms and labour structures. Today, Gen Z is facing a similar adjustment, but without the same prospects of asset accumulation that cushioned earlier generations.

There is also growing debate over whether inflation is even being fully captured. Economists such as argue that official inflation measures systematically understate real cost pressures by excluding housing price growth or substituting cheaper goods for those consumers actually buy. Whether or not one accepts the strongest version of this critique, the lived reality is undeniable: a dollar buys far less than it once did, and young workers feel the squeeze first.

Against this backdrop, accusations of laziness or entitlement begin to look intellectually thin. Yes, Gen Z reports lower job satisfaction around 44%, compared to 67% among older workers. Yes, terms like *"quiet quitting"* and *"bare minimum Monday"* have entered the cultural vocabulary[9]. Similar movements exist elsewhere: *tang ping* ("lying flat") in China reflects the same withdrawal from relentless effort without reward.

But context matters. Surveys show that overall employee morale is low across all generations, not just Gen Z. Moreover, nearly 40% of Gen Z workers have a side hustle alongside their main job. This is not disengagement; it is adaptation. They are willing to work but increasingly on their own terms, aware that corporate loyalty is rarely reciprocated. Many entered the workforce already knowing they could be laid off at any moment if profits dip. That knowledge changes behaviour.

Education further complicates the picture. In South Korea, nearly 70% of young adults hold tertiary degrees, the highest rate in the OECD, yet more than half face asset poverty, unable to cover basic expenses for three months. In the United States, tuition costs have risen faster than healthcare, housing, or childcare, leaving many graduates burdened with debt that now carries higher interest rates. Between 2022 and 2023, Gen Z's debt grew by 15.4%, the fastest of any generation. In response, some Gen Zers are turning away from traditional university pathways, opting instead for trades, community colleges, or more targeted degrees. This is not a rejection of education, but a recalibration based on risk.

So are Gen Z lazy? The evidence suggests otherwise. They are navigating a labour market shaped by inflation, asset inflation, insecure work, and weakened social contracts. Their attitudes toward work reflect rational responses to diminished returns, not moral failure. They work, but they question. They strive, but they hedge.

Addressing Counterarguments and Alternative Views

Any serious discussion of Gen Z's economic distress must contend with a familiar rebuttal: *every generation thinks it has it worse*. This argument is not without merit. History is full of cohorts that came of age during wars, depressions, oil shocks, and political upheaval. Baby Boomers faced stagflation in the 1970s. Generation X entered a labour market reshaped by deindustrialisation. Millennials were hit head-on by the 2008 financial crisis. From this perspective, Gen Z's difficulties appear less exceptional simply the latest turn in a recurring cycle of generational hardship.

Yet this framing risks flattening crucial differences. The question is not whether previous generations struggled, but *how* they struggled and what recovery pathways were available. Earlier cohorts faced cyclical downturns in economies that still offered relatively affordable housing, lower education costs, and clearer links between effort and reward. Gen Z, by contrast, is confronting what looks less like a temporary storm and more like a structural shift: permanently higher asset prices, slower productivity growth, and labour markets that reward flexibility without guaranteeing stability.

Another common counterargument holds that Gen Z is, in fact, advantaged armed with technology that levels the playing field. Remote work, digital entrepreneurship, and global platforms have undoubtedly lowered barriers to entry. A teenager with a laptop can now build an audience, a business, or a skillset that once required institutional backing. Some commentators predict an unprecedented entrepreneurial boom driven by this generation's fluency in digital tools[10]. This view contains an important truth, but it often overstates scale and accessibility. Technology creates *opportunity*, not *security*. For every Gen Z success story, there are countless others navigating algorithmic precarity, unstable gig work, or oversaturated online markets. Digital platforms reward a small minority disproportionately while exposing the majority to income volatility. Moreover, technological advantage does little to offset structural costs such as rent, healthcare, or education expenses that cannot be optimised away with better apps.

A more critical line of argument suggests that Gen Z's struggles stem partly from inflated expectations. According to this view, younger workers demand flexibility, purpose, and rapid advancement without first proving themselves. Employers frequently echo this sentiment, pointing to shorter attention spans, weaker resilience, and higher sensitivity to stress. Surveys showing lower job satisfaction among Gen Z

 doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

are often cited as evidence of entitlement rather than hardship. But this critique assumes a static definition of work ethic, one shaped by industrial-era norms. Gen Z is not rejecting effort; it is rejecting *misaligned effort*. Many are unwilling to sacrifice mental health, personal time, and long-term wellbeing for jobs that offer neither loyalty nor upward mobility[11]. This is less a moral failing than a rational recalculation in a world where the traditional trade-off; hard work in exchange for security has eroded.

There is also the argument that Gen Z will "grow out of it." As careers progress, incomes rise, and priorities shift, today's anxiety may give way to stability. This may prove true for some. But relying on generational maturation as a solution avoids the deeper issue: the ladder itself has become harder to climb. If wages continue to lag behind housing and asset prices, time alone will not close the gap. Ultimately, counterarguments serve an important purpose. They remind us that Gen Z is not uniformly doomed, nor uniquely fragile. But they also highlight a critical distinction. Previous generations struggled within systems that still worked, however imperfectly. Gen Z is testing whether those systems still function at all. Dismissing their concerns as exaggeration risks missing a more uncomfortable possibility, that what looks like generational pessimism may, in fact, be a realistic appraisal of a changing economic order.

Conclusion

Gen Z occupies an unusually complex moment in history. There are multiple stories unfolding at once, and any honest conclusion must hold them together without forcing a simple verdict. On one side, the pressures are undeniable: inflation that arrived just as many were stepping into adulthood, rents rising faster than wages in most major cities, asset prices drifting further out of reach, and a sense of economic instability that feels constant rather than episodic. For millions of young people across continents; whether in Lagos, London, Los Angeles, Colombo, or Kyiv, adulthood has begun not with possibility, but with constraint.

Yet there is another story running alongside this one. Wages for Gen Z, in relative terms, are rising faster than those of older cohorts. In several countries, early homeownership rates, though still modest, are higher than what Millennials achieved at the same age. This generation is more mobile, more digitally fluent, and more willing to experiment with alternative paths to income, from side hustles to remote work to entrepreneurship. These gains do not cancel out the hardships, but they complicate the narrative of unbroken decline.

doi.org/10.32388/NRTJKD

What makes Gen Z's situation especially consequential is not just the economics, but the timing. This is the generation now entering the workforce in large numbers, forming households, shaping consumption patterns, and crucially engaging politically. History shows a clear pattern: when young adults feel locked out of economic progress, they become politically restless. They vote differently. They protest differently. They question the legitimacy of institutions that appear indifferent to their struggles. Governments that ignore this do so at their own risk, particularly given that Gen Z is already among the most politically active and socially vocal cohorts in modern history. At the same time, it is important to widen the lens. Gen Z's experience is not uniform. Beyond the debates in wealthy economies lie millions of young people living in countries that were stable a decade ago and are now scarred by conflict, displacement, or economic collapse. For them, the challenges extend far beyond housing affordability or career progression. Any global assessment of Gen Z must acknowledge this uneven terrain, where opportunity is shaped as much by geography as by effort.

Perspective also matters. If one asks which generation truly had it worst over the past century, the answer is rarely Gen Z. That grim distinction likely belongs to the so-called Lost Generation; those born in the late nineteenth century, who came of age during the First World War, lost their savings in the Great Depression, and then watched their children march off to fight the Second World War. Their suffering does not diminish today's struggles, but it reminds us that history moves in cycles of hardship and recovery. Economic pain is real, but it is not destiny. This perspective should not be used to dismiss Gen Z's challenges. Their frustrations are grounded in data, not entitlement. Housing costs relative to income are historically extreme. Education is more expensive and more uncertain in its payoff. Stable, long-term employment is harder to secure, even for the well-qualified. These are structural problems, not personal failures. At the same time, the world is not beyond repair. Policy choices matter. So does innovation. So does how societies choose to distribute risk, reward, and opportunity.

Perhaps Gen Z's greatest advantage is not financial, but temporal. Time, when paired with even modest resources, can be powerful. Small investments made early can compound dramatically. Skills developed now can mature into resilience later. The same technologies that disrupt jobs also lower barriers to creation, collaboration, and enterprise. Gen Z's comfort with side hustles, portfolio careers, and non-linear paths may yet prove to be an asset in an economy that no longer guarantees linear progress.

None of this happens automatically. Societies must decide whether to treat Gen Z as a problem to be managed or a potential to be cultivated. Supporting affordable housing, rethinking education pathways, protecting mental health, and aligning work with dignity are not acts of generosity; they are investments in stability. A generation that feels seen and supported is far more likely to build, innovate, and contribute than one that feels ignored. In the end, Gen Z is not sinking, but neither is it swimming freely. It is treading water in turbulent conditions, learning to stay afloat while scanning the horizon. What happens next depends not only on their choices, but on the systems they inherit and the reforms societies are willing to make. They are, quite simply, the near future. And how that future unfolds will say as much about our collective priorities as it does about their resilience.

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Declarations

Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.