

Cultural Research Center



Millennials Establish Their Need for Purpose and Lifestyle Changes

Dr. George Barna, Director of Research, [Cultural Research Center](#)

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The world is in chaos. Why would anyone get out of bed each morning without a clear and compelling sense of purpose? That disconcerting question challenges a large majority of Millennials with each passing day, according to newly released survey data from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

The data are described in a report, [*Millennials in America: New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence*](#). The research and report from Dr. George Barna, Director of Research at the Cultural Research Center, was commissioned by Foundations of Freedom to better understand Millennials, the nation's youngest adult generation, and to identify ways the country can better support their development.

Searching for Purpose

According to the survey findings, tens of millions of young adults are stuck at the starting gate of adult life. The nationwide survey among Millennials—defined as people born between 1984 and 2002, ages 18 to 36 at the time of the survey—revealed that three out of four Millennials (75%) said they are seeking to identify their purpose in life.

It is very possible that the historically high suicide rate of the generation is related to this striking new statistic, with lack of meaning and purpose leading to a directionless, seemingly random life.

Suicide rates in 2020 reportedly jumped 5% among 25- to 34-year-olds, despite declines in most other groups, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Suicide remains the second-leading cause of death among Millennials.

Some have blamed that on their adoption of the nihilistic notion that life is not worth the struggle. Others point to difficulties Millennials have with mental health and emotional stability. Still others blame their rejection of the Christian faith.

In fact, outcomes first reported in the Cultural Research Center's annual [American Worldview Inventory](#) show that Millennials are the adult generation most likely to question the very reason for living. Fewer than one out of five Millennials (22%) contend that life is sacred, while half of the generation (50%) argues that "life is what you make it; there is no absolute value associated with human life." In comparison, just one-third of adults from older generations—32%—hold that same view.

These profound doubts about the purpose and value of human life echo the ambivalence of Gen X, the preceding generation well known for its inner angst and aimlessness. However, Gen X did not push the boundaries of doubt and arbitrary living to the extent that Millennials have. These uncertainties and deep skepticism left Gen X a generation defined by despair and pessimism.

In contrast, Millennials have embraced a more optimistic approach, reflecting greater self-confidence, uplifting sloganeering (such as "be the change," "be kind," "live the life you imagine," "follow your passion, not a paycheck," "do what makes you happy," "you can make a difference," "you got this"), heightened social consciousness, and a diminished emphasis upon economic success (with its accompanying pressures).

Is There Something Worth Dying For?

This perplexing hopefulness of the Millennials helps to explain why seven out of 10 of them (69%) believe that there are people or conditions they would be sacrifice their life to preserve.

What would they be willing to die for? Slightly more than half of them (53%) said they would be willing to die to protect their family. Of the six possibilities evaluated, family was the only thing that a majority of Millennials were willing to sacrifice their life to protect.

Four out of 10 said they would sacrifice their life in defense of their freedom. One-third claimed they would go to their grave in order to protect their friends. Fewer than three out of 10 Millennials said they would sacrifice their life for their religious faith (29%), their country (26%) or their most cherished possessions (24%).

What Is Definitely Worth Sacrificing Your Life For?	
Family members	53%
Your freedom	41
Friends	32
Your religious faith	29
Your country	26
Your most cherished possession(s)	24
Source: <i>Millennials in America</i> , a report from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. Research conducted in August 2021 among a national sample of 600 Millennials, ages 18 to 36.	

Engagement among Millennials

Some observers have posited that a viable avenue to identifying purpose is through engagement with the world. Millennials, like most young-adult generations, have been widely involved in religious, political and community activity.

A majority of Millennials indicated that they participate in various forms of political or civic engagement on a regular basis. About half (47%) admitted to boycotting the products or services of companies because of positions held on matters of importance to the individual. More than four out of 10 (44%) had engaged in persuasive dialogue with others regarding points of view related to moral, social or political issues. One-third (33%) had personally participated in some type of civil protest activity, such as a march, rally or demonstration, during the prior month.

Meanwhile, roughly one-half of the generation claims to be active within their community in a typical month, either through volunteering their time to a local community organization (51%) or by donating money to such an organization. Almost half (48%) reported giving money to a local organization other than a church or religious organization.

Even though half of the generation describes themselves as “deeply committed to practicing their religious faith,” engagement in the religious behaviors evaluated is less robust. Just four out of 10 said they had attended a Christian church service or event in the past month; four out of 10 said they had spent at least an hour reading the Bible;

and four out of 10 claimed to have donated money to a church or other religious organization.

Life Satisfaction

Social scientists note that purpose in life is sometimes connected to a person’s level of life satisfaction. The survey found that Millennials are only moderately satisfied with most aspects of their life.

Two-thirds of them (66%) said they are satisfied with their life overall, divided between those who are very satisfied (29%) and those who are somewhat satisfied (37%). The other one-third claim to be either not too (20%) or not at all satisfied (11%).

Of the seven specific aspects of life studied, there is not one area of life for which a majority of Millennials claims to be “very satisfied.” But a solid majority reports being either “very” or “somewhat satisfied” with six of the seven dimensions, with those combined measures ranging from 56% to 67%.

Satisfaction with Life Elements				
	How satisfied you are			
	Very	Somewhat	Not Too	Not at All
Your life, overall	29%	37%	20%	11%
Your personal health	30	37	20	10
Your friendships	35	31	17	12
Your spiritual life	31	34	19	6
Your intimate relationship(s)	38	25	15	15
Your community	23	40	20	11
Your career	27	32	20	15
Your personal finances	22	34	23	19
The nation	15	28	28	22

Source: *Millennials in America*, a report from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. Research conducted in August 2021 among a national sample of 600 Millennials, ages 18 to 36.

The highest levels of satisfaction (“very satisfied”) came from their interactions with other people—i.e., intimate relationships (38%) and friendships (35%). The next dimensions providing the broadest degree of high satisfaction related to their spiritual life (31%), personal health (30%) and career (27%). The lowest levels of high satisfaction were awarded to their community (23%), personal finances (22%) and the state of the nation (15%).

Millennials are generally dissatisfied with the state of the nation. Half (50%) reported being dissatisfied, while just 43% expressed some degree of satisfaction. That was the only life dimension for which a larger share of the generation held a negative rather than positive perspective.

Life Improvements

Millennials desire significant improvement in their lives. Overall, just 5% of them thinks their life is great with no need for any significant changes.

The type of change most desired by Millennials revolves around money and personal finances. They desire greater financial ease or comfort (mentioned by 37% of the generation); having a better-paying job (17%); and having less debt to repay (15%).

They also long for improved relationships. Developing better, deeper relationships was mentioned by nearly three out of 10 Millennials (28%). Experiencing less discrimination and tension related to their race, ethnicity, gender, age or sexual orientation was listed by one out of every eight young adults (13%). The same proportion (12%) desire being included in communities that know, appreciate and respect them for who they are. About one out of 10 young adults long for a wider circle of reliable friends.

Most Desirable Changes in Your Life	
Greater financial ease/comfort	37%
Better, deeper friendships	28
A better-paying job	17
Better physical health	17
Better mental and emotional health	16
Less debt to pay off	15
Few tensions with others regarding your race, ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation	13
Inclusion in a community that knows, appreciates and respects you	12
Higher self-esteem	10
A better relationship with your spouse/significant-other	10
Source: <i>Millennials in America</i> , a report from the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University. Research conducted in August 2021 among a national sample of 600 Millennials, ages 18 to 36.	

Ranking third among desired changes was health and well-being. Having better physical health, better emotional and improved mental health were named by one out of every six Millennials as highly desirable life changes. One out of 10 listed the hope of experiencing higher self-esteem as an issue of choice.

Improving in spiritual matters was also among desired changes. The major spiritual need was having a better relationship with God (14%). Family issues were the fifth-ranked category of concerns, led by young adults wanting a better relationship with their spouse or significant other (10%).

Solving the Crisis of Purpose

The fact that a large majority of young adults admit to lacking a clear sense of purpose and meaning helps explain some of the other unexpected, unpredictable, radical and novel exploits of the generation. You might expect to see this among younger children, or even teenagers. But something is amiss when lack of purpose and meaning characterizes most people in their 20s and 30s.

Veteran researcher Dr. George Barna, who developed and directed the research, noted that Millennials have largely failed in their pursuit of purpose because of their turbulent worldviews.

“Millennials have largely bought into worldviews that teach ‘life is about me,’” the Arizona Christian University professor explained.

“As possessors of syncretistic worldviews, they contend that life is most likely to have meaning when we experience maximum happiness, thought to be the result of personal accomplishments or comfort.” Barna explained. “The confusion is multiplied by believing that we are ‘basically good’ people and that our purpose will emerge through dialogue and voluntary acts of good will.

“Unfortunately, that combination of perspectives only leads to emptiness,” Barna continued.

“Life is *not* about us, and purpose is not buried within us,” he explained. “Life is about knowing, loving and serving a gracious, mighty, forgiving and supportive Creator.”

“God alone determines our purpose in life—the purpose for which He created and gifted each of us, and the life to which He calls us. We extract meaning from life by relating to and serving Him,” he said. “Anything less is bound to result in frustration and despair. God, rather than us, must be at the center of our life in order to grasp and fully experience genuine purpose and meaning.”

According to Barna, the embrace of false worldviews leads to untold damage in our nation’s youngest adult generation.

“Our obsession with happiness—perceiving it to be the height of success, the mark of a life well-lived—is one of the significant obstacles to appreciating life and seeing our purpose,” he explained. “God has ordained a superior alternative to happiness for us: joy. By prioritizing happiness we miss out on the real treasure.”

Barna described happiness as an emotional state that is fleeting and circumstantial. It is dependent on our ability to facilitate that emotion, based on who we are and how we respond to situations and people. It comes and goes, sometimes unexpectedly or seemingly without reason. Even the definition of happiness is a moving target: what makes us happy today may not be enough tomorrow.

He contrasted that with joy, which he portrayed as a lasting state of being, based on our connection with God and His principles. Joy, he noted, is dependent upon our willingness to accept God's sovereignty over our lives, giving Him control and adopting His perspectives and purposes as our own. Joy is a more consistent state of well-being, providing a deeper sense of strength and assurance. It is the realization that things are well with your soul.

"Most young adults do not realize that joy is most efficiently derived from obedience to God," Barna concluded. "While few Millennials perceive success to be founded on obedience to His principles, my past research has shown that those who have pursued that route—sometimes out of the sheer desperation, lacking any other remaining alternatives—typically discover that the obedient life is, indeed, a more fulfilling and fruitful existence."

He continued, "Research shows us that people who are intensely committed to living for and with God more often experience high levels of life fulfillment in life. They come to see that giving to others is more important than a commitment to getting from others"

"The data from this study confirms that most Millennials are open to serving others. That gives us hope that this distressed and unfulfilled generation may yet find their true purpose and experience deeper meaning by blessing other people," Barna explained.

About the Research

This survey was developed and implemented during August 2021 by the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University for Foundations of Freedom. The online survey was conducted among a national sample of 600 Millennials, defined as people born from 1984 through 2002 (ages 18 to 36 at the time of the survey). The survey questionnaire contained 71 questions, resulting in a median survey length of 17 minutes. Survey respondents were promised anonymity and confidentiality. Some of the questions and data appearing in this study originated in the *American Worldview Inventory*, an annual nationwide assessment of worldview conducted by the Cultural Research Center. That information was used with the permission of the Center.

About the Cultural Research Center

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University is located on the school's campus in Glendale, Arizona, in the Phoenix metropolitan area. The institute annually conducts the *American Worldview Inventory*, a nationwide assessment of the worldview of American adults. CRC also developed the ACU Student Worldview Inventory (SWVI), a survey administered to every ACU student at the start of each academic year, plus a final administration undertaken among students just prior to their graduation, tracking the worldview development of its student body. The Cultural Research Center also conducts nationwide research studies to understand the intersection of faith and culture and shares that information with organizations dedicated to facilitating the positive transformation of American culture with biblical truth.

The Cultural Research Center is guided by George Barna, Director of Research, and Tracy F. Munsil, Executive Director. Like ACU, CRC embraces biblical Christianity. The CRC works in cooperation with a variety of Bible-centric, theologically conservative Christian ministries and remains politically non-partisan. Access to the results from past surveys conducted by CRC, as well as additional information about the Cultural Research Center, is accessible at www.culturalresearchcenter.com. Further information about Arizona Christian University is available at www.arizonachristian.edu.