INTERGENERATIONAL SOLIDARITY: THE PANDEMIC'S SILVER LINING

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We are almost a year into the pandemic, and cases have spiked again in several provinces across Canada. The second wave is upon us, there is no doubt. Who is getting sick this time has shifted from the spring, with young people[1] taking the place of the elderly, for now. But what hasn't changed is that the narrative surrounding young people throughout this pandemic has predominately been a negative one. Shifting our views of young people and basing these views on facts rather than sweeping generalizations has upsides for all of us.

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic the narrative that young people are to blame for the spread has been consistent, from spring breakers[2] to warnings about partying[3], painting young people with a broad brush has been a go to. Of course, this type of narrative about young people is not new. As Jon Savage writes in his 2007 book *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*, young people in the West over the last 200 years, have often been viewed as a problem to be solved; of danger to both themselves and to society at large. This narrative has only been reinforced in recent years as millennials came of age, with an entire generation being blamed for killing multiple industries from beer to napkins[4] and, of course, ruining their own future by eating avocado toast.

These narratives paint a one-dimensional picture

1 We can "own" this pandemic if young Canadians step up: Dr. Theresa Tam, Daily Hive

2 'Like, we're here': Spring breakers defy coronavirus fears to party, Global News

3 Ontario premier warns young people to stop partying as COVID-19 cases spike, CTV News

4 Someone Rounded Up All The Industries Millennials Are 'Killing,' And Here's How Millennials Responded, Bored Panda

of young people, one that tends to focus on a far-off unruly mob, very much disconnected from the young people we know and love in our own lives.



Youth Advisory Council members, Youth & Innovation Project, University of Waterloo. photo: Nima Latifpour

In fact, research[5] tells us that even when our interactions with family and friends across age groups are positive, we still maintain our ageist stereotypes about the young people we do not know. This gulf between our own interactions and the stereotypes we are so intent on holding on to has only intensified in recent years as our interactions with family have become increasingly positive. As Paul Taylor writes in his book *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown*, Millennials and their parents are getting along better than previous generations of parents and kids, with research confirming that Millennials have great respect for their elders.

> **"But a silver lining in this challenging time has been the fact that within our own families, generations have come together to face these challenges united."**

The research conducted during COVID-19 has continued to bear out these trends. A poll by Common Sense Media[6] in the United States found that forty percent of young people felt more connected to their families during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic and a poll[7] in the UK reported similar results. An Abacus Data poll[8] in March found that young people are just as worried about the pandemic as their elders, with a 37% of young people between the ages of 18 and 34 are worried about COVID-19 while 36% of those over 60 years of age were worried. Experts[9] also remind us that young people are also often on the frontlines of this pandemic through their work in retail and food industries and as such the reasons why young people might be contracting COVID-19 in higher numbers are complex.

5 The Social Separation of Old and Young: A Root of Ageism, Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI)

6 Common Sense Media | SurveyMonkey Poll: How Teens Are Coping and Connecting in the Time of the Coronavirus, commonsensemedia.org

7 Quarantine Quality Time: 4 In 5 Parents Say Coronavirus Lockdown Has Brought Family Closer Together, studyfinds.org

8 COVID-19 and Canadians' State of Mind: Worried, lonely, and expecting disruption for at least 2 to 3 months, abacusdata.ca

9 The Dose Podcast, CBC Listen

Our research at the Youth & Innovation Project at the University of Waterloo has detailed the unique value that young people have to offer, especially in the context we are now living in. In a time of rapid change and increasing complexity, the neuroscience tells us[10] that young people's unique abilities are an essential part of what is needed if we hope to find solutions to the complex social, environmental and economic we all face. Our research[11] has also identified the importance of intergenerational collaboration in achieving positive social and environmental change.



Youth Advisory Council members, Youth & Innovation Project, University of Waterloo. photo: Nima Latifpour

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed endless challenges to our society and our economy, and a second wave will no doubt continue to both intensify these challenges as well as pose new ones. But a silver lining in this challenging time has been the fact that within our own families, generations have come together to face these challenges united. If we can find ways of translating this intergenerational solidarity more broadly, focus on the facts about young people not the stereotypes, and work towards intergenerational collaboration in our workplaces and our communities, there is no doubt that we will be much more equipped to face whatever challenges the pandemic presents in the months to come.

10 Wired for Innovation: Valuing the unique innovation abilities of emerging adults, University of Waterloo

11 Youth-led social change: Topics, engagement types, organizational types, strategies, and impacts, Sciencedirect.com