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From slackers to squares: What data tells us about Gen X nowadays

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Photo: RNZ / Unsplash

They were cynical, disaffected, and cooler than everyone else. Now they're married with children and probably your boss.

There's a moment in the Gen X classic *Reality Bites* when Ethan Hawke's character Troy Dyer - a coffee-swilling, cigarette-smoking, floppy-haired, guitar-playing man-child who's disenchanted with everything and everyone except Winona Ryder - declares: "There's no point to any of this."

"It's just a random lottery of meaningless tragedy and a series of near escapes. So I take pleasure in the details," he says. "I sit back and smoke my Camel Straights and I ride my own melt."

A child of divorce, refusing to kowtow to The Man by getting a job, Troy encapsulated a generation's worth of tropes.

Here in New Zealand, the details may have differed, but Gen X experienced many of the same cultural touchstones as *Reality Bites'* fictional band of slackers, including the bruising economic realities of a newly free market.

Thirty years later though, Troy and co would be middle-aged, and the oldest Gen X-ers are staring down the barrel of the big 6-0.

So what does the real Gen X look like in New Zealand now?

Using census and other data, RNZ has attempted to get a handle on how life has unfolded for this generation.

The statistics bear bad news for Gen X-ers clinging to a cooler-than-thou image: turns out they went straight after all.

'I think they're the forgotten generation'

Compared to the generations they're sandwiched between, Gen X have had little attention from demographers, Massey University sociologist Professor Paul Spoonley says.

"I think they're the forgotten generation. Nobody talks about them - they don't stand out."

That's down to Gen X's status as a "transitional generation", he says.

"There's such stark differences between the generations either side of them."

There are also fewer of them.

Typically defined as born between 1965 and 1980, Gen X has a smaller generational window than both Baby Boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1964, and Millennials/Gen Y, who were born between the early 1981 and the late 1990s (RNZ has used Stats NZ's definition of 1981-2000).

It's tricky to get a handle on the definitive size of each generation using current numbers, because migration and death means the populations ebb and flow.

But using just the number of live births for the relevant years, there were 935,000 Gen X babies born in New Zealand, compared to 1,065,000 Baby Boomers and 1,060,000 Millennials.

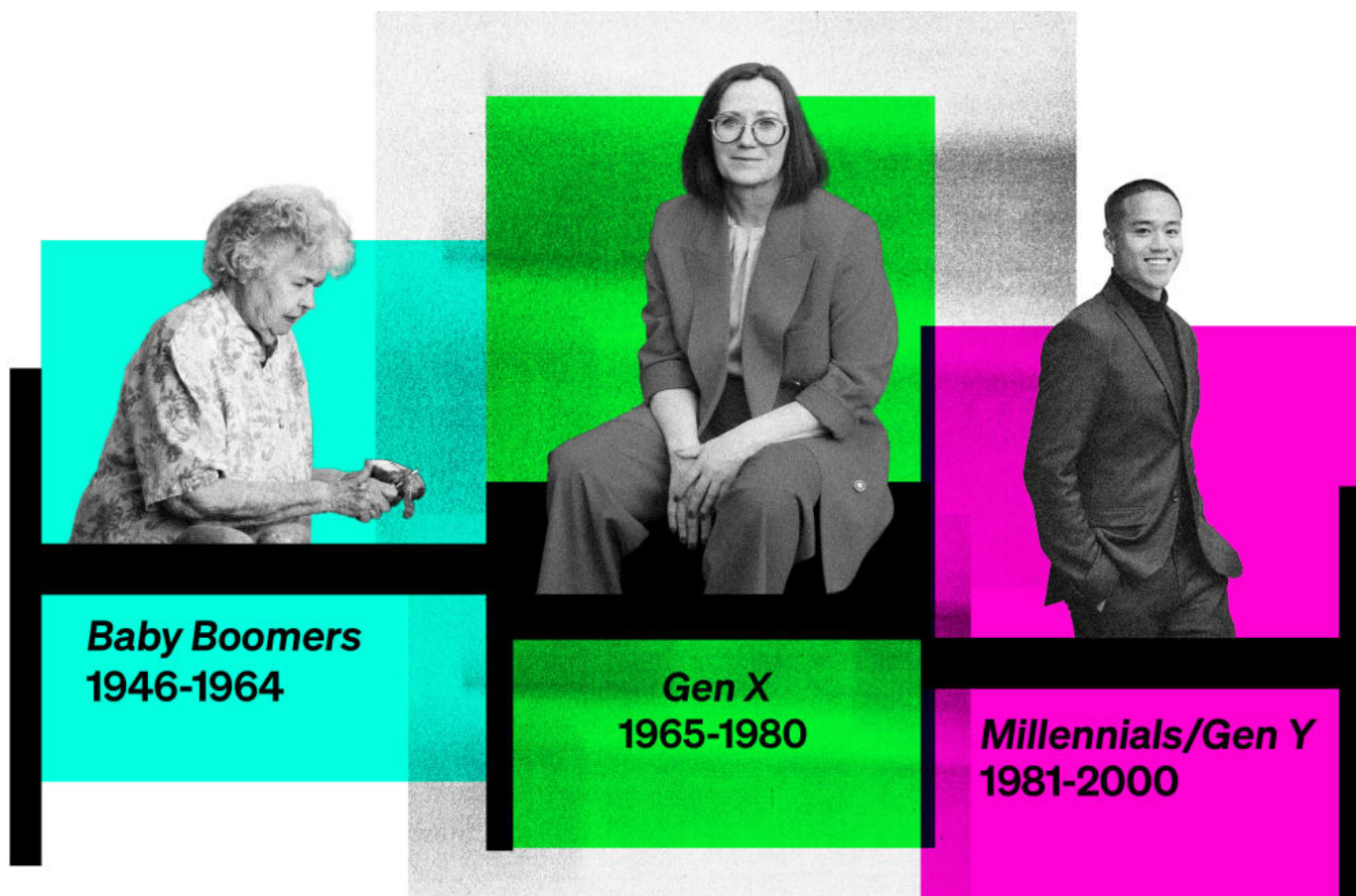


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Stats NZ senior insights analyst Kim Dunstan says the boundaries of where Gen X begins and ends are blurrier than the Boomer generation, which has a proper demographic definition.

"We're able to define [Baby Boomers] on the basis of New Zealand's total fertility rate, which was 3.5 or higher for each of those years."

For Gen X and subsequent generations there's no such definition, and the lines are more arbitrary.

Nowadays, Gen X makes up about a quarter of the population, and don't stick out as being more numerous in one area versus

another.

Ethnically, they look very similar to the population as a whole: 69 percent identify as Pākehā, 14 percent as Māori, 7 percent as Pasifika and 16 percent as Asian.

But there are differences when you zoom out.

They're more urban than Boomers, with about two-thirds of them choosing to make cities their homes, but less so than the Millennials who followed them.

It's hard to pinpoint how many Gen X-ers left New Zealand on OEs and never returned, but of those who returned or remained, they're now well settled.

In 2018, 77 percent said their usual residence was either the same as five years ago or they had moved there from somewhere else in New Zealand, and more than half lived in a house they or a family trust owned.

And rather than drastically departing from their predecessors, the majority of Gen X-ers live in family units similar to the ones many were brought up in: a couple with children.

"As they've proceeded through life they've tended to look much more like Baby Boomers than they do Millennials and Gen Z," Paul Spoonley says.

Dunstan says there are subtle differences when you dig deeper, though.

Between the years Gen X were born and the years they hit the average marriage age, marriage rates in New Zealand halved.

"There's no indication that [Gen X is] less likely to get partnered, but the nature of those partnerships is quite different with de facto relationships much more common than they would have been for the Baby Boomers," Dunstan says.

That could also explain the lower divorce rate, which has declined to levels not seen since the 1970s, when legally it was much more difficult to obtain one.

"That might be evidence that those who choose to get legally married in more recent times have a lower risk of divorce."

Gen X's relative financial stability further cements them in their mid-life status.

One of the most drastic generational breaks that leaps out from census data is their level of further education - more than 60 percent got some kind of additional qualification after leaving school, compared to less than half of Boomers.

That's flowed into the types of careers they've pursued: not only are they working for the Man, nowadays they're also likely to be the Man.

One in five (21 per cent) are managers, and another quarter (26 per cent) hold other professional jobs - and that's reflected in higher salaries. They're the least likely of the working-age generations to be labourers or other unskilled workers.

Gen X's formative years coincided with the huge economic reforms of the 1980s, Spoonley says.

"But some of them got caught by that and some of them didn't - the generation divides up into the lucky ones that got through without incurring a lot of student debt and those born [closer to 1980]."

What the entire generation managed to dodge (though there are always exceptions) was coming of age in an economic downturn.

"They were sufficiently through their career cycles that they missed the big events like the [Global Financial Crisis] - they would have been quite settled," Spoonley says.

"During the GFC, the labour market churn went way, way down and that was likely because Boomers and Gen X were staying put."

Unemployment rates went up across the board during the GFC, but the shift for Gen X was relatively small compared to the rates seen among Millennials just starting out in the workforce.

That's not to say it's always been smooth sailing.

Stats NZ's Kim Dunstan - himself a Gen X-er - says the sheer size of the Baby Boomer cohort that preceded his generation has carried a lot of economic and political heft.

"There's an argument that they've dominated political decisions right from when they were born and the state was building lots of school and hospitals to support their needs," he says.

It's also presented what he calls "some interesting labour market implications".

"For a long time, the ranks of many private and public organisations were filled with Baby Boomers at the managerial levels." It's only in the past decade that they've begun to make way for Gen X behind them.

What's hard to capture in the data is how Gen X's formative experiences have shaped their outlook on life, now the financial and cultural clout has finally shifted in their favour.



Gen X is a big fan of one of these Photo: RNZ / Unsplash

There are glimpses in the Census data: Gen X is the first generation to start to abandon religion in large numbers, with a majority saying they have no such beliefs.

More than that, Spoonley says - they're less likely to have had any experience of religion.

"[Whereas] Baby Boomers were brought up in households that were much more religious in their beliefs and practices. Even when they become more secular in their practices they tend to have a background of participating in religion."

Some tropes die hard, though - while only 16 percent are current smokers, Gen X's 'ever smoked' rates are far higher than Millennials, who did not grow up with the same fervent cultural belief - a growing body of scientific evidence be damned - that smoking made you cooler.

Gen X seems to be less certain about inhaling these days though. A Vote Compass post-election survey found a slim majority of 40- to 49-year-olds (Gen X) voted in favour of legalising cannabis in the unsuccessful 2020 referendum, versus 68 percent of 30- to 39-year-olds (Millennials).

Pew Research Center, a long-standing US think-tank specialising in generational research, states: "When we see that younger adults have different views than their older counterparts, it may be driven by their demographic traits rather than the fact that they belong to a particular generation." In other words, it seems the drift towards conservatism is inexorable, no matter how oppositional your generation starts out.

Now we are 60

The really good news for older Gen X-ers is that - together with Boomers - "they will prove to be the healthiest and wealthiest generations we see arriving in their 60s and 70s," Spoonley says.

Within the cohort though, there will always be differences.

The world-renowned longitudinal Dunedin Study has tracked more than 1000 people born in Dunedin in 1972 and 1973 - placing the cohort smack-bang in the middle of Gen X.

The study began its latest survey wave in April this year and is beginning to focus on the process and experience of ageing for its participants, who are now turning 52, study director Professor Moana Theodore says.

As part of the assessments in each survey wave, researchers thoroughly assess participants' physical health, including their heart, kidney, lung, dental and cognitive function.

"The chronological age of the study members is 52, but what we've been able to look at over time is their biological age," Theodore says.

"We found that some study members had biological ages that were much younger than other members."

Deprivation in their younger years was hugely important to how healthy these Gen X-ers have grown up to be, she says.

"Those of our study members who grew up with more poverty ... were more likely to have worse health outcomes by the time they reached mid-life."

That difference persisted even when study members grew up to be economically better off. "Their health was still not as good compared to children who did not start off from impoverished backgrounds."

Theodore says another really fascinating finding from the study is that over time, 86 percent of the participants have experienced a diagnosable mental health issue at some stage. For some, it's been temporary, while others have experienced it throughout their teen and adult lives.

The Dunedin Study isn't comparative, so it doesn't show whether its Gen X cohort have had more or less experience with mental health issues with other generations. But it still reveals something important about human experience, Theodore says.

"When you think about what's normal and what's not normal, it reverses that stigma I think we still have ... if we know that nearly all people have had experience of this."

For Theodore - a Gen X-er herself - the trajectory of how the Dunedin Study members' lives have unfolded is as far from Troy Dyer's nihilistic take as it's possible to get.

"People come in from all walks of life [for each survey wave] with the understanding that what they're doing is improving the lives of others but also the next generation."

Generation X: 50 Artworks from the Chartwell Collection, opens at Te Papa on Saturday 27 July and runs until 20 October.

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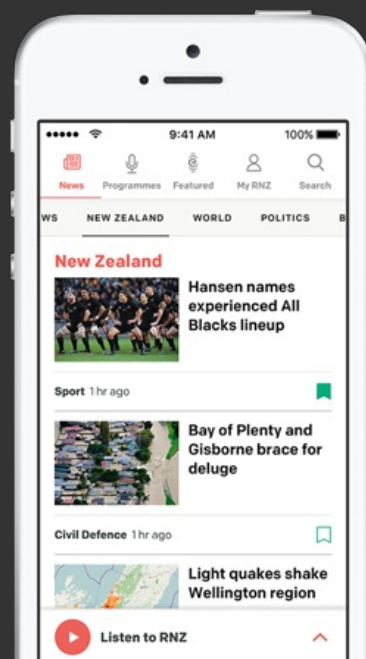
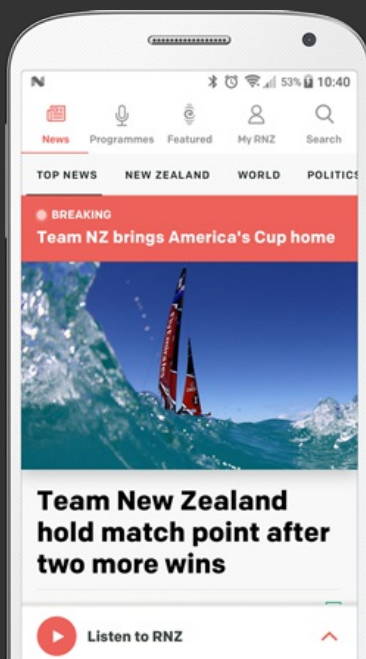
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