

Generation C Has Nowhere to Turn

Recent history suggests young people could see their careers derailed, finances shattered, and social lives upended.

[Amanda Mull](#) is a staff writer at The Atlantic. April 13, 2020



Jamiel Law

When Ananay Arora looks off his balcony, he doesn't see much these days. From his high-rise apartment, which he shared with three roommates before one of them moved back to Taiwan a few weeks ago, he has a view of Arizona State University's campus, where Arora is currently a sophomore majoring in computer science. It's usually full of life, but like most colleges across the country, ASU canceled in-person classes in mid-March. "Everyone's gone home. Nothing is going on," he told me. "It's kind of depressing."

Like a lot of young people waiting out the coronavirus pandemic, Arora is

contemplating his future, which includes a prestigious internship at Apple meant to begin in May. That's why he stayed in his off-campus apartment instead of heading back to live with his parents in India. "If my internship happens and there's a travel ban, I wouldn't be able to get back," he said. It's not just a summer job: In the tech industry, being a good intern is by far the best way to get a coveted job offer after graduation. "Getting an [internship] interview is hard," Arora explained. "If my internship gets completely canceled, I don't know if any company is going to interview me again."

In the face of enormous uncertainty, Arora and his classmates Kaan Aksoy and Devyash Lodha created ismyinternshipcancelled.com, which lets students submit what they know about various companies' plans and keep track of which ones are still planning to bring on new people, and if they are, whether those internships can be done remotely. Arora says that in the few days since he and his friends launched the site, which currently lists more than 300 companies, thousands of people have visited.

[*Read: The real lesson of college closures*](#)

For healthy young people like Arora—who seem much less likely to have severe complications with COVID-19 than their elderly counterparts—living through a months-long quarantine and the deep economic recession likely to come after it will have consequences all its own, most of which, for the moment, are unknowable. It's hard to imagine the future of this cohort in any detail, beyond the fact that their lives will be, in at least some ways, profoundly different from what they might have been. While writing about how the pandemic might eventually end, my colleague Ed Yong [posited](#) that babies born in the post-coronavirus era, who will never know life before whatever enduring changes lie ahead, might be called Generation C.

But Generation C includes more than just babies. Kids, college students, and those in their first post-graduation jobs are also uniquely vulnerable to short-term catastrophe. Recent history tells us that the people in this group could see their careers derailed, finances shattered, and social lives

upended. Predicting the future is a fool's errand even when the world isn't weathering what looks to be an epoch-defining calamity, but in the disasters of the past lie clues that can begin to answer a question vital to the lives of millions of Americans: What will become of Generation C?

Once people are let out into the world to rejoin their lives, the pandemic will continue to harm them for years to come. "Epidemics are really bad for economies," says Elena Conis, a historian of medicine and public health at UC Berkeley, laughing slightly at the understatement. "We're going to see a whole bunch of college graduates and people finishing graduate programs this summer who are going to really struggle to find work." If you're willing to risk your life to mop hospital floors or fetch abandoned carts in grocery-store parking lots, a paycheck, however meager, is certainly in your future.

Related Stories



[The Kids Aren't All Right](#)

[I'm Treating Too Many Young People for the Coronavirus](#)

[How the Pandemic Will End](#)

For Americans who either can't do those jobs or aren't desperate enough to try them, little relief is coming, relative to what other rich nations are doing for their populations. In Denmark, the government is paying [up to 90 percent](#) of employees' salaries to keep businesses afloat and ensure that people have jobs when the pandemic ends. In the United Kingdom, the government will cover [up to 80 percent](#) of workers' wages. In the United

States, onetime relief checks of up to \$1,200 per person are coming in the months ahead for people who had certain income and tax statuses in previous years, as well as expanded unemployment insurance for those who have lost work. But that's only if you can successfully navigate the [glutted, byzantine systems](#) required to sign up for unemployment benefits. No one seems to know how the protections for gig workers are supposed to function or how small-business owners should obtain the loans they were promised. In the meantime, rent is still due.

These economic conditions are dangerous for nearly all Americans, but older people are [more likely](#) to have stable professional lives and finances to help cushion the blow. People just starting out now, and those who will begin their adult lives in the years following the pandemic, will be asked to walk a financial tightrope with no practice and, for most, no safety net. Fewer of them will be able to turn to their parents or other family members for significant help: Even in the relative boom times of the past few years, [40 percent](#) of Americans didn't have the cash on hand to weather a \$400 emergency expense. With the financial losses and medical debt millions of American families will accrue over the course of the pandemic, even that modest flexibility will likely be lost for many.

[*Derek Thompson: The coronavirus will be a catastrophe for the poor*](#)

Because American life has changed so much in the past generation or two, as Conis notes, it's hard to draw neat comparisons between what's happening now and how polio or the Spanish flu affected the country's workers. Much more of the American labor force is college-educated than in the past. The kinds of work Americans do have shifted away from manufacturing and physical production and toward the service and digital realms. Labor unions have been [gutted](#) and workplace protections [rolled back](#), exposing individuals to risks they might not have had to worry about a generation ago, when it would have been harder, for instance, for a company to convert a full-time worker into an "independent contractor" to avoid providing health care or paid time off. Resources are [more concentrated](#) among a slender share of the ultra-wealthy than they have been in generations. "There are aspects of history that repeat themselves, but what's more true is that every epidemic takes place in its own context," Conis told me. "This is a unique viral agent and a unique social and cultural context, and economic context, too."

To gauge what's in store for job-seekers, it might be most useful to look to a different, more recent kind of disaster: the 2008 financial collapse. More

than a decade later, its effects are widely understood to have been catastrophic to the financial futures of those who were in their teens and 20s when it hit. Not only did jobs dry up, but federal relief dollars mostly went to large employers such as banks and insurance companies instead of to workers themselves. Nearly [10 million people](#) lost their homes, and investors picked off dirt-cheap foreclosures to flip them for wealthier buyers or turn them into rentals, which has helped rising housing prices [far outpace American wage growth](#). Millennials, many of whom spent years twisting in the wind when, under better circumstances, they would have been setting down the professional and social foundations for stable lives, now have less money in savings than previous generations did at the same age. Relatively few of them have bought homes, married, or had children.

Just as the nation's housing stock moved into the hands of fewer people during the Great Recession, small and medium-size businesses might suffer a similar fate after the pandemic, which could be a nightmare for the country's labor force. Local pharmacies, mom-and-pop restaurants, and other small businesses have been [struggling to stay open](#) for years, and now many of them could disappear, leaving people with few choices but to get their lunches and prescriptions from giant corporations. Amazon's vast logistics network and labor pool have already given the company a [decided advantage over smaller or regional retailers](#). With many local businesses closed or viewed as potential vectors of disease, pandemic conditions have already [funneled more money](#) to Amazon and its large-scale competitors, including Walmart and Costco.

[*Annie Lowrey: This is not a recession. It's an Ice Age.*](#)

American restaurants, which employ millions, have been devastated by quarantine restrictions, but national chains such as Papa John's and Little Caesars are running television ads touting the virus-murdering temperatures of their commercial ovens, and some of them intend to hire [thousands of workers](#) to meet increased demand. The private-equity

behemoth Bain Capital is [making plans](#) to gobble up desirable companies weakened by the pandemic. The effect could be a quick consolidation of capital, and the fewer companies that control the economy, [the worse the economy generally is for workers and consumers](#). Less competition means lower wages, higher prices, and conglomerates with enough political influence to stave off regulation that might force them to improve wages, worker safety, or job security.

This outcome isn't a foregone conclusion. America is still in the early days of crisis response, and can still avoid some of the mistakes the country made during the Great Recession. Unfortunately, the people in power don't seem to have the will to help workers or small businesses. Even New York City, which relies heavily on hotels, bars, restaurants, and tourists to keep its local economy humming, has provided few resources to keep those businesses afloat and their workers paid until people can once again meet for happy hour or line up to attend Comic Con.

When an economic downturn hits and few professional opportunities exist, one of modern America's most reliable post-disaster patterns begins to emerge: [People go to school](#), whether to learn a trade or get a doctorate. It [can be tempting](#) to hope that education will solve problems of economics, and that people will simply gain enough skills to get better jobs and earn more money. But as with virtually all problems, grad school is not the answer to whatever the coronavirus might do to your future.

Even so, Reggie Ferreira, a social-work professor and the director of the Disaster Resilience Leadership Academy at Tulane University, told me he expects there will be "definitely an increase" in people seeking education post-quarantine, taking advantage of loan availability to acquire expertise that might better position them to build a stable life. Millennials did the same thing in the aftermath of the 2008 crash, taking out loans in record numbers to deal with the soaring cost of things like law school. They couldn't have known it at the time, but those decisions have since [worsened their](#)

[economic strain](#), while not significantly improving professional outcomes.

But that uptick in education for young Americans is probably a year or two in the future, once it's safe to venture into classrooms once again; for right now, much of that pursuit is on hold. Ferreira said that Tulane's admissions for next year are down, part of a squeeze being felt across higher education because of the coronavirus. Many more incoming freshmen are considering [taking a "gap year"](#) before beginning college than is typical in the United States, according to a survey last month that also found that as many as 80 percent of high-school students don't feel confident that they'll be able to enroll in their first-choice school. Private universities may suddenly be too expensive, and frequent plane rides to faraway colleges might seem much riskier. Mass delays will affect things like school budgets and admissions for years, but in ways that are difficult to predict. As Conis, the historian, explained, there is no precedent for a life-interrupting disaster of this scale in America's current educational and professional structures.

Ananay Arora, stuck in his apartment at Arizona State, is able to take classes and work at his on-campus job from home, but he says that everyone he knows is worried about how their grades will suffer, including him.

Schoolwork, it turns out, is hard to focus on during a slow-rolling global disaster. Many types of classes don't work particularly well via videochat, such as chemistry and ecology, which in normal times often ask students to participate in lab work or go out into the natural world. Some of Arora's work-study responsibilities involve computer hardware that he just can't access right now. "Unless we figure something out, I don't think we can stay working like this or living like this for long," he told me. "I just hope recruiters understand the situation and cut us some slack, but I'm not sure they will."

The future toll for kids in earlier stages of education, who are also part of Generation C, could be significant too. The value of school isn't just in reading textbooks and doing homework, but in learning how to be a person: making friends and playing with classmates, celebrating playground

victories and learning to accept disappointment, developing first crushes and experiencing first heartbreaks. For kids with unstable home lives, going to school also offers affection and support from trustworthy authority figures and friends, as well as hot meals or a respite from abuse. A Zoom video call with 20 6-year-olds might sound cute, but [research has found](#) that even in situations where distance learning is well planned and well funded, it doesn't produce nearly the same results as in-person instruction. Now, given that systems have been set up on the fly, parents are expected to both work and supervise lessons, and many children are without home internet access or computers, the outcomes are likely to be much worse.

[Read: How parents can keep kids busy \(and learning\) in quarantine](#)

"People with a resource base and finances and so forth, they're going to get through this a whole lot easier than the families who don't even have a computer for their children to attend school," says Steven Taylor, a psychologist at the University of British Columbia and the author of *The Psychology of Pandemics*. Disasters, he told me, tend to illuminate and magnify existing disadvantages that are more easily ignored by those outside the affected communities during the course of everyday life.

Disasters also make clear when disadvantages—polluted neighborhoods, scarce local supplies of fresh fruits and vegetables, risky jobs—have accumulated over a lifetime, leaving some people far more vulnerable to catastrophe than others. In Michigan, the victims of COVID-19 are [disproportionately black people](#). In Chicago, black residents are dying from the disease at a rate nearly [six times](#) that of their white counterparts. In New York, the [hardest-hit neighborhoods](#) are where poor and working-class people, many of them immigrants, live in greater numbers. Children in those communities already have a harder time accessing quality education and getting into college. Their future prospects look dimmer, now that they're faced with technical and social obstacles and the trauma of watching family members and friends suffer and die during a pandemic. Many people who

ended up in SARS quarantine in the early 2000s, Taylor noted, had [symptoms](#) of post-traumatic stress disorder when they were released. Kids who survived Hurricane Katrina experienced [rates of PTSD](#) similar to those of military veterans.

If disasters of the past have anything to teach us about the future, it's that in moments of great despair, people's understanding of what's possible shifts. For that to translate to real change, though, it's crucial that the reactions to the new world we live in be codified into policy. Clues to post-pandemic policy shifts lie in the kinds of political agitation that were already happening before the virus. "Things that already had some support are more likely to take seed, because those ideas had already been circulating, and there may already be policy or program ideas that have been developed and were either waiting in the wings or looking for traction," Caela O'Connell, an environmental anthropologist at the University of North Carolina, explains.

This is where young people might finally be poised to take some control. The 2008 financial crisis appears to have [pushed many Millennials leftward](#) as its effects dashed their hopes of the stable, successful future they had only just begun to create. When housing prices soared, wages stagnated, and access to basic health care became more scarce, many young people looked around at the richest nation in the world and wondered who was enjoying all the riches. Policies such as Medicare for All, debt cancellation, environmental protections, wealth taxes, criminal-justice reform, jobs programs, and other broad expansions of the social safety net have [become rallying cries](#) for young people who experience American life as a rigged game. For current high-school and college students, who were already broadly friendly to these ideas, the pandemic's quick, brutal explication of the ways employment-based health care and loose labor laws have long hurt working people might make for a formative disaster all its own.

[*Read: The stunning rise of single-payer health care*](#)

"There's a possibility, particularly with who you're calling Generation C, that

their experience of the pandemic against a backdrop of profoundly fragmented politics could lead to some very necessary revolutionary change," Monica Schoch-Spana, a medical anthropologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, told me. In particular, she notes a potential changing of the electoral guard. The seeds of that change might have already been planted in the 2018 midterm elections, when young voters [turned up in particularly high numbers](#) and helped elect a group of younger, more progressive candidates both locally and nationally.

Younger people "aren't saddled with Cold War imagery and rhetoric. It doesn't have the same power over our imaginations," Schoch-Spana said. That doesn't mean young people favor Soviet authoritarianism. It just means a subset of young voters believes that some American conservatives have cried wolf, deriding everything from public libraries to free doctor visits as creeping socialism until the word lost much of its power to scare.

If the broad support among young people for the leftist presidential candidate Bernie Sanders is any indication, the one-two punch of the Great Recession and the coronavirus pandemic—if handled poorly by those in power—might be enough to create a future America with free health care, a reformed justice system, and better labor protections for working people. But winds of change rarely kick up debris of just one type. The Great Recession opened the minds of wide swaths of young Americans to left-leaning social programs, but its effects are also at least partially responsible for the Tea Party and the Trump presidency. The chaos of a pandemic opens the door for a stronger social safety net, but [also for expanded authoritarianism](#).

Beyond politics and policy, the structures that young people have built on their own to endure the pandemic might change life after it, too. Young Americans have responded to the disaster with a wave of volunteerism, including Arora's internship-information clearinghouse and [mutual-aid groups](#) across the country that deliver groceries to those in need. The

impulse to help out in a crisis is a hallmark of [community resiliency](#), and this is likely the first opportunity many people in Gen C have had to devote much time to serving others. Learning firsthand about the value of sharing resources and caring for your neighbors could help the next generation of adults reverse some of the trends toward loneliness and alienation that have [quietly devastated](#) millions of people in recent decades.

As strong as people's reactions are in the middle of a crisis, though, people tend to leave behind the traumatic lessons of a disaster as quickly as they can. "Amnesia sets in until the next crisis," Schoch-Spana said. "Maybe this is different; maybe it's big enough and disruptive enough that it changes what we imagine it takes to be safe in the world, so I don't know. Who knows? We have to get on the other side of the tunnel to find out." Eventually, when America reemerges into the light of day, the work of creating the future will begin in earnest.

3 more free articles this month

[Sign in](#)