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Youth and Opportunity

What Should We Do for Future Generations to Thrive?

The future health and prosperity of the United States will be determined by our actions today.

Several trends threaten the health and prosperity of future generations:

- Younger adults, earning less income and saddled by debt, are not doing as well socially or economically as their parents were at the same age.
- Interest on the skyrocketing national debt is crowding out the ability to invest in programs such as education, infrastructure, and the critical fight against climate change.
- Long-standing economic and social obstacles have for too long denied opportunities to women and to millions of Americans from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Future generations deserve to inherit a stable economy, a cleaner environment, and a more equitable society, but young people worry that these are not priorities for today's policymakers. The US, at its best, created conditions under which each generation left a stronger nation for the next. But now, for the first time in 60 years, Americans aged 35 and younger have less optimism than those aged 55 and older.

For one thing, the US is not adequately preparing young people for the challenges ahead. We are neither providing them the best education nor preparing them with the resilience and advanced training they need in

an unstable job market shaped by the rise of automation. American students lag well behind peers in other developed countries, ranking 30th in math and 19th in science on international tests.

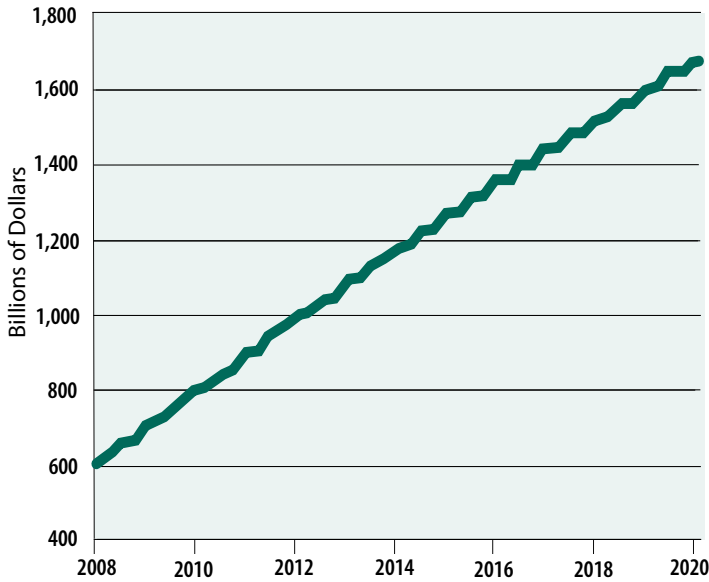
Furthermore, although the US is the world's largest economy, one in six children in the country, nearly 11.9 million young people, live in poverty, making them the poorest age group in the country. Almost 73 percent of poor American children come from non-White racial and ethnic families, according to a 2020 report by the Children's Defense Fund.

And, after decades of borrowing by the federal government and neglect of both the country's physical infrastructure and programs such as Social Security and Medicare, the next generation is inheriting a "fixer upper"—a house in need of much repair. Our nation is on an unstable path, and we must make the necessary reforms to secure its fiscal future.

What Should We Do for Future Generations to Thrive?

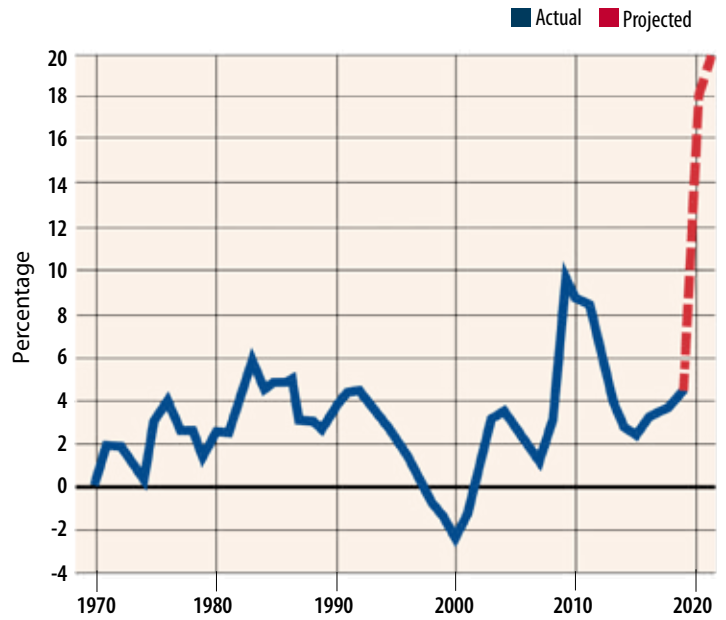
This issue advisory presents three options for deliberating about how to create a better future for all. While the options are not mutually exclusive, they do represent different ways of thinking about the problem. All options offer advantages, along with risks and trade-offs. The advisory does not include every idea or strategy to address this complex matter, but the basic questions raised here can help people think through various proposals.

Student Loans Outstanding



SOURCE: US Federal Reserve System

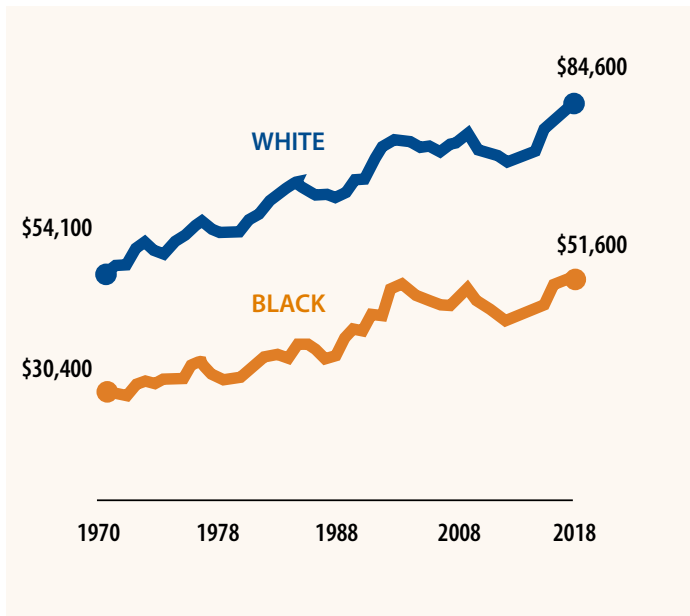
US Deficit as a Percentage of GDP



SOURCE: Congressional Budget Office; April 2020 projections

Black-White Income Gap since 1970

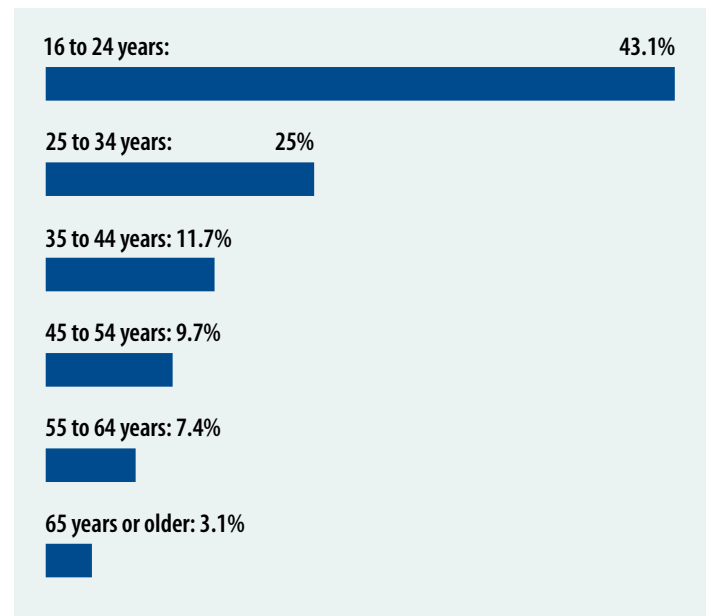
Median US Household Income, in 2018 Dollars



NOTE: Income is adjusted for household size and scaled to reflect a three-person household.

SOURCE: Pew Research Center analysis of 1970 to 2019 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements

Age Breakdown of US Workers at or below Minimum Wage (2019)



SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics

Option One: Equip People to Succeed

Many young people need more education and training to realize their full potential and lead successful lives. This option says that we must rethink what it means to prepare young people for a vastly different social and economic landscape through the rest of this century. The global economy is fueling competition, while automation is shrinking the number of jobs. A greater share of the jobs that remain will require a college degree or other advanced training.

A Primary Drawback

This does too little to teach self-reliance, personal responsibility, and a good work ethic and assumes that all challenges can be overcome with more services. But even the best preparation doesn't ensure success in life. There are many forces that determine our individual and collective futures.

Things We Might Do	Drawbacks and Trade-Offs
Boost K-12 student achievement by reducing class sizes and providing extra support to students who need it.	This would require more teachers and increases in school district budgets and property taxes.
Allow students to have student loan debt canceled if they complete a year of national service in underserved communities.	More affluent young people will bypass national service while middle- and working-class students lose a year in the pursuit of their career goals.
Greatly expand mentorship and internship programs in which engaged adults expose young people to the work skills that jobs require or encourage them to complete their schooling.	Companies rarely design high-quality internship programs, and internships, which often pay little or nothing, typically go to children of privileged families who can afford them.
Increase services and resources for mental health and well-being to increase chances that young people can take advantage of their opportunities.	If we medicalize every problem, we won't be teaching young people how to be resilient and self-sufficient.
What else could we do?	What's the trade-off if we do that?

Option Two: Give Everyone a Fair Chance

Not everyone in the United States has an equal chance to succeed. Entrenched biases toward race, religion, gender identity, and sexual orientation have created an uneven playing field. This not only unjustly creates serious barriers for millions of young people but also deprives society of the contributions many of them would have made if they had had access to the same opportunities enjoyed by their more fortunate peers. This option says that if we want to harness the potential of the next generation’s creativity and diversity, we need to safeguard people against unfair treatment.

A Primary Drawback

Even policies that mandate equitable treatment cannot eradicate bias or change the hearts and minds of citizens. Affirmative action policies intended to help level the playing field have often been seen as “reverse racism” that limits opportunities for White Americans.

Things We Might Do	Drawbacks and Trade-Offs
Increase the minimum wage to improve household incomes and reduce child poverty.	This will put some small companies out of business, reducing jobs rather than increasing them.
Eliminate standardized testing, which disadvantages minority students, and instead, assess students through teacher evaluations.	Standardized tests give essential information about students’ reading, math, and other knowledge levels. Individual teachers may have low standards or favor students they like.
Make community college free, and guarantee that students could then enter four-year colleges.	Not everyone who completes community college is ready for a four-year institution. This will make some colleges less selective.
Make K-12 US history curricula more inclusive by acknowledging the contributions and experiences of slaves, immigrants, and indigenous peoples.	This will require lots of retraining and will be a major change, possibly at the expense of other important American concepts. History teachers can barely get through the basics as it is.
What else could we do?	What’s the trade-off if we do that?

Option Three: Focus on Economic Security

Deep-rooted problems in our society have not been addressed, putting the next generation at risk. Our rising national debt has put our country on an unstable footing, limiting our ability to invest in future growth or tackle present challenges. This option holds that we cannot make progress on other fronts if we don't address the problems that threaten to bankrupt us. We need to increase and sustain our efforts to leave a more secure economy for future generations.

A Primary Drawback

Partisan gridlock often hinders efforts to craft and pass legislation that addresses perennial problems. By the time these things are attended to, today's youth will be retirement age.

Things We Might Do	Drawbacks and Trade-Offs
End deficit spending and begin containing the federal debt.	This would require across-the-board cuts in needed programs and force tax hikes that will extend the current economic recession rather than shorten it.
Local utilities should invest in switching to renewable energy sources to combat climate change and create opportunities for clean jobs.	Utilities will likely have to raise consumers' rates, which hurts low-income families and small businesses.
Invest in building and repairing roads, bridges, and other infrastructure.	Major investments like this would add to our national debt, require higher taxes to fund projects, or divert funds from other needed programs.
Cities and counties, as well as consumers, should do business only with companies that hire American workers and build factories in the US. It's time to end the outsourcing of jobs and production to foreign countries.	This will increase prices on food and consumer goods, limit buyers' choices, and could lead to shortages and less international trade.
What else could we do?	What's the trade-off if we do that?

About This Issue Advisory

A year beleaguered by crises, 2020 has left many Americans concerned about what lies ahead for future generations. This advisory is designed to help people deliberate together about what we should do to ensure that future generations can succeed in a greatly changed world.

The three options presented here reflect different ways of understanding what is at stake and shed light on the critical tensions in what we hold most valuable. Each option is based on a shared concern and poses a distinct strategy for addressing the problem. Equally important, each option presents the drawbacks or trade-offs inherent in each action.

Ground Rules

- Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.
- Consider all options fairly.
- Listening is just as important as speaking.
- No one or two individuals should dominate.
- Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.
- Everyone is encouraged to participate.

Holding a Deliberative Forum

1. Introduction

Review ground rules.
Introduce the issue.

2. Connect to Issue

Ask people to describe how the issue affects them, their families, or friends.

3. Consider Each Option

Consider each option one at a time.
Allow equal time for each.

- What is attractive?
- What about the drawbacks?

4. Review and Reflect

Review the conversation as a group.

- What areas of common ground were apparent?
- What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?
- Whom else do we need to hear from?

Launched in 2012, **Up to Us** is a rapidly growing, nonpartisan movement of young people who recognize that, when it comes to securing their future opportunities, they have no better advocates than themselves. Amid high-profile debates over jobs and the economy, social mobility, health care, and tax reform, **Up to Us is the only nationwide, campus-based campaign focused on building a sustainable economic and fiscal future for the next generation.** This unique program provides emerging leaders a platform for facilitating a collaborative dialogue on the country's most vexing challenges.

Founded in 1927, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio (with an office in Washington, DC), is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute that studies the public's role in democracy. It provides issue guides and other research for the National Issues Forums. For information about the Kettering Foundation, please visit www.kettering.org or contact the foundation at 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459.



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ISBN: 978-1-946206-73-2