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Young Adults' Security Perceptions: Troubling, but an Opportunity for the Response Field

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Abstract:

While today's young adults are often vilified as hypersensitive and narcissistic, it is important to understand how the life experiences of the current generation of 18- to 25-year-olds has shaped their worldviews. This research indicates that growing up in the post-9/11 world has exposed them to a reduction in liberty, increased prejudice and mistrust, and a general sense of fear and insecurity. However, it has also helped them understand that disasters can impact anyone, and instilled a strong belief that people should help each other in times of need. These are characteristics that emergency managers and response professionals should view as strengths to be capitalized on among entry-level hires are who drawn to the field.

Keywords: disaster, employment, safety, security, young adult

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The US is home to approximately 36 million young men and women aged 18–25. While this generation is often vilified – unfairly, I believe – for its alleged narcissism and hypersensitivity, virtually no published research to date has examined its sense of safety and security. This is particularly surprising given the environment in which these young adults grew up.

Take a current 21-year-old, born in 1996. She was 5 years old during the attacks of 9/11 and the start of the war in Afghanistan, and 6½ at the beginning of war in Iraq, which lasted throughout her childhood and adolescence. She was 3 years old during the Columbine high school shooting and 16 when the Sandy Hook massacre occurred; part of her school experience involved practicing lockdown drills just in case an active shooter selected her classroom next. She was 9 during Hurricane Katrina, old enough to recognize the class and racial disparities of those who were its victims and to understand the failure of her government to protect children and families in need. And throughout her life she has been conscious of the escalating effects of climate change on her future, and of the limited options she may face in accessing education and pursuing a satisfying career due to lingering effects of the recession.

I have surveyed hundreds of young adults about their lives and beliefs, and it is clear that their perceptions of the world as unsafe and unfair reflect their actual experiences. Even though they were young children at the time, three-quarters of respondents to one survey that I conducted about disaster experiences and safety perceptions agreed that the 9/11 attacks directly affected their lives. Write-in answers included the following themes:

A reduction in liberty:

- “The attacks totally changed life and legality throughout the country from the way citizens interact with police to the nation's geopolitical stance.”
- “They've made me really skeptical of the world I live in, especially the government.”

Increased prejudice and mistrust:

- “Culture has changed, more Islamophobia.”
- “More hatred towards my religion.”

A general sense of fear and insecurity:

- “As a culture, it's made us all more vigilant, more hypersensitive to terrorism. Everyone's life is different because the culture is different.”
- “Increased my fear of flying, increased my anxiety of crowds and acts of random violence, made me feel less safe in general.”

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- “It has made me realize that random disasters can happen at any time and that we should not think we are never going to experience something like that.”

The result appears to be a global sense of unease: Almost three-quarters of these young adults (72.7%) were moderately, very, or extremely concerned that they or their community will be affected by a disaster, and while 82% described themselves as safety conscious, most felt ill-prepared to handle a human-caused disaster. Asked to rate their agreement with the statement “I believe the world is generally safe,” 29% agreed, 10% were neutral, and 61% disagreed. Asked if the world is generally fair, 11% agreed and 77% disagreed. Yet not a single participant disagreed with the statement “We should help each other out in times of need.”

Why should this matter to emergency managers and response professionals? Members of this generation comprise the next cohort of entry-level hires, and I believe that their intimate understanding of the consequences of terrorist attacks, school shootings, and other disasters give them the potential to be the most compassionate generation of responders to date. I may have a biased view since I’ve spent the past decade teaching disaster psychology to eager undergraduate and graduate students at the State University of New York at New Paltz, but I never fail to be impressed by my students’ earnest desire to help those in distress. Our minor in Disaster Studies is one of the most popular programs on campus, and students complete their internships in county emergency management offices and Red Cross chapters charged up and ready to change the world. But far too often, that fire gets doused not only by a lack of job opportunities that would capitalize on their strengths, but also by their sense of being stereotyped as incompetent without ever having the chance to demonstrate their capacity for hard, smart work.

In the words of another young adult I surveyed, “If our generation can make this world a better, safer, more accepting, and loving and less capitalistic place in spite of the tragedies across the planet, then the world is going to be better off for a couple generations.”

I sometimes look at my students and think it is a miracle that they are functioning at all. They are conscious not only of the real threats to existence and barriers to opportunity they face, but also of the judgments of older adults who do not bother to understand their perspectives but instead label them as thin-skinned and overly anxious. I encourage readers to look beyond the stereotypes that seem to get applied to every generation of emerging adults. (Any fellow Gen-Xers remember being called “slackers” when we were young?) The group currently entering the workforce has grown up in a uniquely stressful environment, but many of them have been strengthened by their experiences rather than crippled by them. They’re a tougher bunch than they might seem, with a lot to offer the emergency response field if given the chance.