

Why Gen Z Is Right to Feel Betrayed

By Gwyn Morgan

Older Canadians sometimes complain about the so-called “Gen Z stare.” It is the flat, inscrutable look many twentysomethings give in everyday interactions—at the counter in a café, behind a hotel desk or across a retail checkout. To older generations accustomed to smiles and small talk, the expression can feel unsettling. Theories abound. Some say it reflects social awkwardness caused by smartphones and social media. Others blame pandemic lockdowns and years of disrupted schooling. Still others see it as an ironic reaction to the exaggerated positivity of earlier online culture.



That Gen Z Stare: The flat, inscrutable gaze adopted by many teens and twentysomethings may, the author speculates, signal their resignation to the economic and social wreckage they are about to inherit. (Sources of photos: (top left) @CBCNews/YouTube; (top right) @snarkymarky/tiktok; (bottom) Shutterstock)

But lately I've been wondering whether the look might mean something else. Perhaps the message behind it is quieter and more pointed: *You broke the system we're inheriting.*

If so, Gen Z may have good reason to feel that way.

For most of North America's baby-boom generation, the basic pathway of life was relatively clear: education, a job, marriage and, usually quite soon, homeownership. That path was not effortless, but it was broadly attainable. For many young Canadians today, however, it has become increasingly difficult to navigate. Wages have stagnated while the cost of living has surged, particularly for housing. A central milestone of

adulthood—owning a home—now feels unattainable for millions of young people.

The numbers are striking. [According to recent survey data](#), only 26 percent of Canadians aged 18-34 owned a home in 2024 (corresponding roughly to Gen Z, aged 11-27 that year). Just three years earlier, the figure was 47 percent—a shocking change in such a short time. Even among that shrinking minority of young homeowners, many relied on financial help from their parents to make a down payment. For most young Canadians, homeownership has shifted from expectation to distant aspiration. Surveys suggest nearly nine in every ten Canadian Gen Z's are uncertain whether they'll ever be able to buy a home.

Housing is only the most visible sign of a deeper economic malaise. Youth unemployment in Canada remains stubbornly high at [more than 14 percent](#). Across the broader Gen Z cohort, unemployment is estimated at roughly 9-10 percent. Meanwhile, the rising cost of essentials, from groceries to rent, has left many young adults under constant financial pressure. [Nearly half of Canadians aged 18-34](#) report persistent anxiety about money. No wonder: just this month it was reported that Canada has the [highest food inflation rate](#) among G7 countries.

Commentators have begun to describe this environment as a “youth-cession.” The phrase captures an uncomfortable reality: while the broader economy may appear stable, many young people feel they are living through an economic downturn of their own.

How did Canada reach this point?

There are many contributing factors, particularly in housing policy and supply constraints. But one thread runs through nearly all of them: years of fiscal and economic policies that have weakened the country's long-term growth prospects while leaving younger generations with mounting fiscal obligations.

When the Liberal government took office in 2015, Canada's finances were in comparatively strong condition, thanks to the solid work of former Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper. The federal budget was essentially balanced and total federal debt stood at roughly \$1 trillion. In the ensuing decade of Liberal rule, Ottawa embarked on sustained deficit spending that has more than doubled that figure. Canada's federal debt now exceeds \$2.2 trillion and continues to grow.

Servicing this debt alone will cost Ottawa roughly \$55 billion this year—money that cannot be spent on infrastructure, tax relief or other priorities. Instead, it goes toward paying interest on accumulated borrowing.

The burden ultimately falls on future taxpayers. When governments finance current spending through deficits, they shift the cost onto the next generation of workers. Estimates suggest that today's Canadian teenagers could pay tens of thousands of dollars more during their working lives simply to service the debt accumulated during the past decade.

[The consequences extend beyond taxes](#). Persistent deficits increase overall demand for borrowing across the economy, pushing interest rates higher. That makes mortgages, car loans and credit-card debt more expensive for consumers. It also discourages private-sector investment—the investment that creates new businesses, jobs and rising wages.

Before the current period of heavy deficit spending began, capital investment per Canadian worker averaged roughly \$18,000 annually. Within a few years, it had dropped to about \$14,700. When businesses invest less in equipment, technology and expansion, productivity slows and wage growth stagnates. Job creation weakens as well, while housing becomes less affordable, wages fail to keep pace with living costs, and the tax burden required to sustain government spending continues to grow.

None of this is the fault of Gen Z. Yet they are the ones who must navigate the consequences.

When older Canadians encounter that expressionless stare across a counter or service desk, it may be tempting to interpret it as indifference or poor manners. But it might equally represent a quiet recognition that the economic landscape ahead looks far less promising than the one previous generations inherited.

Gen Z is not wrong to feel uneasy about the future they are inheriting. In many ways, they are simply acknowledging a reality that the rest of us would prefer not to confront.

The [original, full-length version](#) of this article was recently published in [C2C Journal](#).