

Part I: Baby Boomers—Just Another Generation?

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Is the Baby Boom generation really that different from any other? The short answer is probably “no,” but they are distinguishable from all previous generations in some important ways. The term “Baby Boom” refers to the highest birthrate in U.S. history, spanning an 18-year period following World War II. The Baby Boom generation, consisting of about 76 million people born between 1946-1964 and 2 million immigrants, is the largest in American history. The uniqueness is not just in the numbers but, also, in the values, life choices, and longevity of this generation. Following are some facts that set the Baby Boom generation apart from all others. The Baby Boom generation is:

- the single largest generation in American history;
- the first generation to be raised on television (called by some a “surrogate parent”);
- the first generation to be raised on rock ‘n roll, comics, movies, soft drinks and fast food;
- the first generation to be raised largely in the suburbs;
- the first generation to be targeted aggressively and consistently by the advertising world, helping create a sense of identity and difference from all others in the U.S. during the last 60 years;
- the primary generation to both fight in and protest the Vietnam War, question authority, experiment with drugs and alternative lifestyles, and lead both the Civil Rights Movement and Women’s Rights Movement; and
- the most affluent consumer group that has ever existed (e.g., own 78 percent of America’s financial assets, 80 percent of all money in savings accounts), amassing \$41.5 trillion in wealth.

Pretty darn impressive, but there’s more. There are also some Boomer confusions that should be cleared up.

First, the media image of the typical boomer as an affluent, aging hippie with silver hair who drives a BMW is simply not accurate. There actually is considerable diversity within this generation. Leading Edge Boomers, as they are called (born 1946 – 1955), lived with the nuclear threat but the Vietnam War was their defining point in history. They also experienced unprecedented periods of economic growth and prosperity, in addition to The Mickey Mouse Club and Leave It To Beaver, Elvis Presley, The Drifters, Bob Dylan, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones (and many other musical groups). There were the political and environmental protest, recreational drugs, as well as the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy. Trailing Edge Boomers, born between 1956 - 1964, had a somewhat different cultural experience consisting of the messy ending of the Vietnam conflict, followed by Watergate and the resignation of Richard Nixon, a Cold War, oil embargo, high inflation, more music (including disco, pop, heavy metal, punk), astronauts and moon shots, other civil rights movements (awareness of women, disability, gay rights), personal computers, and “fast” everything.

Second, Boomers are not all white, married with children, and affluent. Although Boomers represent 27 percent of the U.S. population and 48 percent of all households over half live in only nine states (California, Texas, New York, Florida, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Ohio, Michigan and New Jersey), with the largest concentrations in California, Texas, and Florida.

percent are minorities, 13 percent of Boomers never married (higher than any other generation) and have a higher divorce rate than previous generations.

Trailing Edge Boomers have larger families, but still considerably smaller than the previous generation, and 69 percent own their own homes. Leading Edge Boomers spend more on new clothes, hotels, and vacation homes (76 percent own their own homes), but are more likely to vote than younger Boomers (69 percent vs. 56 percent). About 7.3 percent of all Boomers live in poverty, lower than any other segment of the population. But most Boomer families fall into the middle-income range, making about \$58,000. Some are very wealthy. According to the General Accounting Office, the top one quarter of Boomer households own 86 percent of an estimated \$7 trillion in stocks, bonds, mutual funds and other assets; the top 10 percent own two-thirds of these assets.

Third, Boomers are not retiring at the traditional age. A recent AARP survey found that 79 percent of Boomers plan on working at least part-time during the so-called “retirement years.” At first, this may seem odd but there are several good reasons. Boomers are not “ready” to leave the playing field; their health, energy, and productivity levels are unprecedented. The cost of maintaining their current standard of living and health benefits, generally higher than their parents, will force many Boomers to continue working in some capacity in order to “live the good life” or at least maintain the one they currently enjoy. Some Boomers are caught in an expensive “sandwich dilemma,” that is, supporting their own “boomerang” children at some level, while caring for aging parents with various life issues (social security, transportation, health care, financial challenges). These unique generational issues consume valuable resources, take time, and have an emotional cost.

Today, Baby Boomers are the mainstream of American life. They are better educated, more productive, and healthier than all prior generations. There are an estimated 1.1 million residing in the San Diego region alone (37 percent of the population base). They dominate the cultural, academic, economic, and political worlds across the nation, in California, and in San Diego. With their “generational gift” of longevity -- living two or even three decades beyond the arbitrary retirement age of 60 -- they will remain a powerful social force well into the 21st Century. Twenty-five years from now, when the oldest Boomers reach 85 years in age and the youngest are 65, there will still be 61.4 million residents in the U.S. who are connected with and identify themselves as Baby Boomers. Demographics are destiny!

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San Diego State University offers a series of short course designed exclusively for Baby Boomers and their generational issues. These courses are open to the public, meet Thursday evenings, and cost between \$45 - \$90, depending on length. For more information call (619) 594-8806 or go to <http://www.interwork.sdsu.edu>