

New Study Reveals a Growing Struggle for Meaning and Purpose Among Many Gen Zers

Data shows young people want careers focused on helping others, but face massive economic and burnout barriers

WASHINGTON D.C., June 24, 2026 – Over half of Gen Z adults (51%) say their life lacks meaning or purpose, or both, according to a [new national survey](#) released today by Gallup and Making Caring Common, a program of the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The study, conducted in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation, reveals a critical gap in young people's emotional well-being.

The *Voices of Gen Z* research surveyed more than 2,400 young people nationwide. It found that 34% of Gen Z disagree that their life is meaningful, while 39% report a lack of daily purpose. This detachment markedly increases for older Gen Z adults (ages 19-28) compared to middle or high school students, both in their lack of meaning (40% vs. 22%) and lack of purpose (43% vs. 30%).

Find Meaning by Making a Difference

One of the strongest predictors of the extent to which Gen Zers feel a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives is whether they feel like they make a positive difference in the lives of others. Those who agree or strongly agree they make a positive impact on others are about three-to-four times more likely to have felt a sense of purpose or meaning in their lives. Among those who disagree that they positively impact others, only 22% say their life felt meaningful over the past month and 18% say they felt a sense of purpose.

Purpose vs. Reality in the Workplace

This desire to do good translates directly into their professional aspirations, with roughly eight in 10 (79%) Gen Zers stating they want a career focused on helping others. Across Gen Zers' age, race, gender and subjective household income, the priority to make a positive difference through their job is high and fairly similar across groups. However, just over half of employed adult Gen Zers (56%) who want such a job say they currently work in one. Women are more likely to be in these jobs than men (63% vs. 48%), while those who are struggling the most financially are less likely to be in these roles, despite expressing similar levels of interest as their more financially secure peers.

"Contrary to the popular stereotype that Gen Z are selfish, Gen Zers report an inspiring amount of interest in doing work that helps others," says Richard Weissbourd, the Faculty Director of Making Caring Common. "That interest is very important for our collective future, but it may also be key to Gen Zers livelihood in an age when AI is spreading rapidly. AI may shift our economy from a knowledge economy to a care economy that requires from workers caring and interpersonal skills."

When asked about the potential barriers that would prevent them from pursuing a job that helps others, pay and stress are the most frequently named issues. Nearly half of Gen Zers say concerns regarding insufficient pay (49%) or that these jobs are hard or emotionally draining (46%) may prevent them from having such a job in the future.

"Young people overwhelmingly want work that helps others, but only about half of those who want such jobs are in them," said Stephanie Marken, senior partner at Gallup. "Many assume these careers won't pay enough or will be too emotionally draining, and those perceptions are holding them back before they ever step into the field. Helping young people see that meaningful work can also be sustainable is a real opportunity for employers and educators."

Parents Shape the Path Toward Helping Careers

Parents play a significant role in shaping Gen Z's career aspirations, particularly their desire to pursue work that helps others. A majority of Gen Zers (53%) agree that their parents talk to them about the importance of helping or positively impacting others through their work. This is especially true among Gen Zers who are still enrolled in K-12 school (66%) compared with their adult peers (45%). Among K-12 Gen Zers who say their parents talk to them about the importance of a career that positively impacts others, 86% say they want such a job in the future — compared to just 51% of those whose parents do not convey that message.

Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted December 15-22, 2025, with a sample of 2,436 13- to 28-year-olds living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones.

Within the overall sample, 1,087 13- to 18-year-old children were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child 18 or younger living in their household. The remaining 1,349 18- to 28-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the sample of 1,087 parents of Gen Z children, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.8 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the total sample of 2,436 Gen Z respondents, the margin of sampling error is ± 2.7 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,029 Gen Z respondents still enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,407 Gen Z youth who are no longer enrolled in K-12 school, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

About Making Caring Common

Making Caring Common, a program of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, supports educators, parents, and caregivers in cultivating in children and young adults the capacities to care for others, to act with decency and integrity, and to pursue justice and the common good.

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 90 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of the world's constituents than any other organization.

About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit waltonfamilyfoundation.org and follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [X](#).