

Center for American Progress



**GENERATION
PROGRESS**



A Fair Shot for Millennial Women and Families

By Sunny Frothingham November 2016

Introduction and summary

For Karen, a 31-year-old living in Bozeman, Montana, financial stability simply feels out of reach. “After the birth of our first child,” Karen says, “we had to use student loans to supplement our income while we tried to finish school. We lived with my husband’s parents for a time, but even with both of us working full time, we couldn’t make it on our own. Having student loan collectors call and tell you that you should find some other way to feed your already-hungry children so that you can pay them instead is an experience I don’t think anyone should ever go through.”¹

As Millennials such as Karen access higher education, launch their careers, and raise their children, we all have a stake in ensuring that they have a fair shot at economic prosperity. But for many Millennials, the majority of whom came of age during the Great Recession, it is a struggle to get by, much less get ahead. Millennials are a huge—and hugely influential—generation spanning the birth years of roughly 1980–2000, or those who are 16 to 36 years old in 2016.² They account for more than a quarter of the national population, one-third of the labor force, and one-third of the eligible voting population.³ Millennials are more educated than previous generations at the same age, and more racially diverse—44 percent of Millennials are people of color.⁴ Because much of the generation came of age during the Great Recession and the subsequent recovery, many Millennials have searched for jobs in a tough labor market, sought higher education as student debt skyrocketed, and started their families in the face of economic uncertainty.⁵

Karen is not alone. Across the generation, Millennials have lower incomes and higher poverty rates compared to previous generations at the same age.⁶ Cleo’s struggles, documented in *Fusion* earlier this year, mirror Karen’s. “I’m resolved to be poor for the rest of my life,” Cleo says.⁷ She is a 26-year-old queer black woman living in Los Angeles who has been working since she was 14. Now, even with a college degree, she struggles to make rent.

It is no surprise, then, that economic stability is the top priority for Millennials, according to polling conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Policy Polling on behalf of Generation Progress. Millennials have lived through the effects of a major recession, and they want an economy that works for everyone—not just the wealthy few. Sixty percent of Millennials believe “we need a strong government to handle today’s complex economic problems,” and more than half say they are extremely concerned with wage stagnation.⁸

As Millennials form households, start their own families, and take on caregiving responsibilities, they need policies that address the realities they face and give them a chance to succeed. Any discussion of working families today is incomplete without a generational analysis, and any discussion of Millennial economic stability is incomplete without a working family analysis—especially because the average age of first birth for women is 26, squarely in the center of the Millennial age range in 2016.⁹

This report examines the economic realities for Millennials in the context of being young adults during the Great Recession and subsequent recovery. It also explores the progressive policy solutions needed to provide Millennial families—especially Millennial families of color—with a fair shot at economic stability. Because in addition to being workers and students, millions of Millennials are also parents and caregivers—like the generations before them, the vast majority of babies are born every year to mothers younger than 36, or Millennials today.¹⁰ At the same time, 34 percent of Millennial adults between the ages of 18 to 34 lived with their parents in 2015.¹¹

Millennials face complicated economic circumstances and need comprehensive, inclusive policy solutions to help keep their families afloat. In order for Millennial workers to have the opportunity to succeed, they need fair pay laws and labor regulations that meet the needs of today’s workers. They need access to higher education that doesn’t come with insurmountable debt, and strong safety nets while they look for work. They need access to health care—including abortion care—to form families on their own terms, on their own timelines. When they take on caregiving roles, they need workplace standards such as paid family and medical leave, paid sick days, high-quality affordable child care, and flexible scheduling. Like the generations before them, parents today struggle to meet work and family obligations and provide both opportunity and stability for their families. But unlike the generations before them, Millennials have the added challenges and pressures of coming of age in the Great Recession.

“Even with both of us working full time, we couldn’t make it on our own.”

—Karen, 31, Bozeman, Montana

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

