

Study: Today's youth aren't ego-driven slackers after all

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A research paper co-authored by Brent Donnellan, associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University, contends that today's youth aren't the antisocial slackers that previous research has made them out to be. Credit: Michigan State University

Today's youth are generally not the self-centered, antisocial slackers that previous research has made them out to be, according to a provocative new study co-authored by a Michigan State University psychologist.

In a scientific analysis of nearly a half-million high-school seniors spread over three decades, MSU's Brent Donnellan and Kali Trzesniewski of the University of Western Ontario argue teens today are no more egotistical - and just as happy and satisfied - as previous generations.

"We concluded that, more often than not, kids these days are about the

same as they were back in the mid-1970s," said Donnellan, associate professor of psychology.

The study appears in the research journal [Perspectives on Psychological Science](#). Donnellan acknowledges that many people will be surprised by the findings, which refute previous studies classifying today's youth as selfish loafers with extremely high levels of self-esteem.

But while much previous research has relied on "convenience studies" of relatively small samples of [young adults](#), Donnellan said, the current study analyzes the psychological profile data of 477,380 high school seniors from 1976 to 2006. The data comes from the University of Michigan's federally funded Monitoring the Future survey, which each year tracks the behaviors, attitudes and values of American students.

In other findings:

- Today's youth are more cynical and less trusting of institutions than previous generations. But Donnellan said this is generally true of the broader population.
- The current generation is less fearful of social problems such as race relations, hunger, poverty and energy shortages.
- Today's youth have higher educational expectations.

Ultimately, Donnellan said, it's common for older generations to paint [youth](#) in a negative light - as lazy and self-absorbed, for example - which can perpetuate stereotypes. It can be easy, he added, to forget what it's like to grow up.

"Kids today are like they were 30 years ago - they're trying to find their

place in the world, they're trying to carve out an identity, and it can be difficult," Donnellan said. "But lots of research shows that the stereotypes of all groups are much more overdrawn than the reality."

Provided by Michigan State University

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