



## A Snapshot of American High School Seniors across Four Decades: 1976; 1985; 1994; 2001\*

### WHAT HAS CHANGED

#### Demographics and College Aspirations

- High-school seniors have become more diverse. 80.4% of the 1976 seniors were white compared with 65.5% of the 2001 seniors.
- Expectations to graduate from a four-year college have steadily increased, jumping from 27% in 1976 to 40% in 1985 to 56.7% in 2001.

#### Intimate Relationships

- More youth today believe that cohabitation before marriage is a good idea (to discover whether they get along): 21.5% in 1976, 34% in 2001
- Fewer youth believe that monogamy is too restrictive: 27% in 1976, 20% in 2001

#### Goals for Life and Work

- Importance of wealth on the rise. Being wealthy was important to 45% of seniors in 1976, 61% in 1985, and 63% today.
- High-prestige jobs more important. Having a high-prestige job was important for 56% of seniors in 1976, and 67% in 2001.
- Greater Focus on helping: In 1976 64% of seniors believed it was important to have a job where they could be directly helpful to others. In 2006, more than 80% believed this was important.
- Upward mobility: In 1976, 83% considered it important to give one's children better opportunities. In 2001, 91% did.
- Making a contribution to society was important to 52% in 1976 and 59% in 2001.

- Importance of being a leader in one's community jumped from 21% in 1976 to 40% in 2001.

### **Attitudes toward Self**

- A sense of personal control over one's fate has declined: In 1976 64% disagreed that "planning makes for unhappiness since plans usually don't work out" whereas 54% disagreed in 2001. In 1976, 55% disagreed that "every time I try to get ahead, something stops me," but 48% disagreed in 2001.

### **Attitudes toward Others / Social Trust**

- Trust in others declining. The percentage who believed that most people can be trusted declined from 31.5% in 1976 to 19.7% in 2001.
- The belief that people try to be helpful declined from 32% to 23%.

### **Anxiety/Perceptions of Change**

- More youth in the 1980s and 1990s held pessimistic world views. Pessimism increased throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, but has lately leveled off.
- Youth have become less committed to a political orientation over time: In 1976 25% were unsure whether they were conservative, moderate, liberal, or radical, whereas in 2001, 36% were unsure.

## **WHAT HAS REMAINED THE SAME**

### **Leaving Home**

- The majority of youth are eager to leave home and live on their own: 62% in 1985 and 64% in 2001 (item was not on 1976 survey).

### **Intimate Relationships**

- Youth continue to be committed to marriage, family, and relationships. High school males in 2001 believed that fatherhood and raising children is one of the most fulfilling experiences a man can have, and this sentiment has changed little, from 68% in 1976, to 73% in 2001. Likewise, having a good marriage and family was extremely important to 72% in 1976 and 76% in 2001. Having strong friendships is more important today: 58% in 1976 said it was extremely important compared with 66% in 2001.

### **Goals for Life and Work**

- Importance of steady work: 91% believed steady work was important in 1976, and 94% thereafter.
- Importance of job with opportunities for promotion: 88% believed it was important in 1976; 91% in 2001.
- Importance of job that allows a person to establish roots and not relocate: 71% in

1976; 73% in 2001.

- Working to correct inequities: important to 32% in 1976; 34% in 2001.

### **Attitudes toward Self / Life Satisfaction**

- Self-esteem has remained high: in 1976, 80% in 2001 85% agreed that a “he or she was equal in worth to others.” In 2001, 85% believed such. In 1976, 89% believed they “did things as well as others” vs. 88% in 2001.
- Satisfaction with life remains steady: 62% in 1976 reported that they were “satisfied with my life as a whole.” In 2001, 65% reported such satisfaction.

### **Social Support**

- High school seniors generally believe there is someone to whom they can turn (83% in 1985, 83% in 2001) and talk with (87% and 86%) (item missing in 1976).

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\* Network analysis of **Monitoring the Future** data, an ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American secondary school students, college students, and young adults. See: <http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/>

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