

TRANSCENDING AGE-BASED DIVIDES: The Case for Scaling Intergenerational Solutions



INTRODUCTION

Major demographic changes in the United States are leading to an increasingly multicultural and multigenerational society. By 2030, the percentages of adults aged 65 and older and children under age 18 will be roughly the same, with ethnic and racial minorities constituting the majority of the youth population.¹ While these shifts are accompanied by challenges, they also present an unprecedented opportunity for Americans to reimagine how individuals of all ages and cultures can integrate into a cohesive sociopolitical and economic framework. By intentionally engaging with people across all generations and applying an age-inclusive problem-solving lens to various societal challenges, shared interests and mutual responsibilities emerge for the benefit of all.

Intergenerational strategies—such as relationships and programs that unite multiple generations to enrich communities—foster collaboration and purpose by addressing the evolving psychological, interpersonal, and sociopolitical challenges that people of all ages face. These strategies not only facilitate the exchange of perspectives and develop social connections among different generations but also support health across the lifespan. Studies have identified a myriad of physical and mental health benefits stemming from intergenerational engagement, such as less depression and anxiety, reduced cognitive decline, and improved physical functioning.²

Recognizing that few strategies have wider implications and potential upsides than fostering intergenerational connections, the Milken

Institute Future of Aging has spotlighted this opportunity through event panels featuring experts focused on intergenerational solutions. To build upon these dialogues and drive progress, the [Future of Aging Advisory Board](#)—which brings together leaders in a premier forum to accelerate innovation in aging, scale promising solutions, and champion individual, institutional, and societal preparedness for longer lifespans—convened at the [2023 Milken Institute Global Conference](#). Over 30 leaders across industries gathered and, together, identified opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, investment in intergenerational solutions, and priority issues for action.

Throughout each of these discussions, experts highlighted ways in which purposeful intergenerational strategies enable communities and organizations to adapt to societal demands while also underscoring the challenges in achieving scale. The challenges include the evolution of our age-segregated institutions and communities across the private and public sectors, and the consistent lack of engagement among individuals from different age groups. This division contributes to ageism and hinders opportunities to unify communities around a common social good.

“In a world filled with divisions across race, politics, and religion, intergenerational connection represents a bridge across differences.”

– Eunice Lin Nichols, Co-CEO, CoGenerate

From neighborhoods and cities to workplaces and schools, an immense opportunity exists to bridge persistent age siloes. The following six thematic areas, informed by our previous programming and supplementary research, present areas of opportunity to counter ageist stereotypes, identify shared values, and mobilize generations as



Panelists at “Talking About My Generation: Transcending Age-Based Divides” at Global Conference (left to right): Gadi Schwartz, Wes Moore, Autumn Peltier, John Della Volpe, and Fernando Torres-Gil (not pictured)

valuable community and organizational resources.

- Addressing the Epidemic of Social Isolation and Loneliness
- Strengthening Education Outcomes Through Volunteerism
- Engaging Employers and the Multigenerational Workforce
- Leveraging Creative and Cultural Arts
- Enhancing Housing Options
- Mobilizing Political Engagement and Public Service

INTERGENERATIONAL STRATEGIES TO IGNITE A COMMON GOOD

Addressing the Epidemic of Social Isolation and Loneliness

In 2023, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared loneliness and social isolation an epidemic, calling for public and private sector interventions to address the profound threats to the health and well-being of Americans.³ Poor social relationships have been associated with several adverse health outcomes, including increased risk of heart disease, dementia, and depression.⁴ Underscoring this crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the detrimental impacts of individual and community isolation, necessitating a nationwide call to action.

A recent Gallup survey found that older adults experience loneliness with 17 percent of people aged 65 and older reporting feeling lonely,⁵ and with young adults saying that they feel lonely at twice the levels of those over 65. While social isolation and loneliness are pervasive, there is evidence that experiences fostering intergenerational connection, cultivating one's purpose, and enhancing social well-being are a priority at all ages.⁶ In fact, nearly 8 out of 10 older adults express the desire to spend more time with people outside of their age group,⁷ and an astounding 92 percent of Americans believe intergenerational activities can help reduce loneliness across all ages.⁸

Strengthening Education Outcomes through Volunteerism

Intergenerational programs in early and higher education enable children, adolescents, and young adults to learn life skills, enhance academic outcomes, develop respect and empathy for the older generation, and improve mental health and well-being. Research has documented that through intergenerational programs, elementary school students achieve

Spotlight: Eldera

Eldera is a global virtual village where multiple generations can connect, learn from each other, have fun, and create a better future. The platform pairs young people aged 5-18 years with vetted adult mentors aged 60+ for weekly virtual conversations and activities. Eldera can be offered as an employer benefit, and it currently partners with health-care providers, insurance companies, and member associations. The intergenerational platform promotes social connection, learning, and genuine relationships. Outcomes of the program include 94 percent of Eldera pairings talking weekly for 45-90 minutes and 72 percent of participants still talking weekly after 12+ months.

enhanced reading and writing skills, middle school students experience decreased bullying and victimization, and high school students feel empowered to make positive changes in their neighborhoods.⁹ In turn, older volunteers who are engaged in mentorship or academic enrichment learn new skills (e.g., technology and leadership proficiencies), gain a greater sense of self-worth,¹⁰ and experience a decrease in functional decline.¹¹

According to AARP, connecting older adults and school-age children is a “triple win,” helping strengthen communities, improving students’ academic performance, and fostering a sense of purpose for older volunteers.¹² This triple win is embodied through the community-based volunteer program, [Generation Xchange](#), a partnership between the UCLA Department of Medicine (Divisions of Geriatrics and General Internal Medicine in the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA) and the LA Unified School District. Through placing older volunteers in classrooms to provide support and mentorship, the program works to impact health and wellness outcomes for at-risk older adults, while supporting improved academic and behavioral outcomes for children. Programs such as Generation Xchange are utilized across the country and serve a spectrum of ages across the education system, many of which target low-income and marginalized communities.

Engaging Employers and the Multigenerational Workforce

For the first time in history, five generations make up the US workforce (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z). Despite the presence of generational diversity, age discrimination against older workers in the workplace is pervasive. Over 60 percent of workers over age 50 believe that they experience age discrimination,¹⁴ often resulting in internalized ageism, increased risk of cognitive impairment, and higher rates of depression. The annual cost of age discrimination in the workplace amounts to about \$850 billion,¹⁵ with health-care expenditures accounting for \$63 billion.¹⁶

To be considered an “age-friendly” employer in today’s multigenerational workforce, a company must offer opportunities for growth, work arrangements, training, and tools to enable employees of all ages to succeed. Research by the Transamerica Institute indicates that 83 percent of employers consider themselves age-friendly, compared with just 67 percent of workers who feel that way about their employers.¹⁷ Organizations that intentionally build, maintain, and support a multigenerational workforce reap the benefits of a strong talent pipeline, increased resilience, improved workforce continuity, and greater stability and retention of industry and company-specific knowledge.

Leveraging Creative and Cultural Arts

Creative and cultural arts organizations experience significant advantages when they dedicate themselves to cultivating intergenerational connections

Spotlight: Experience Corps

Operating in more than 20 cities across the US, AARP Foundation’s [Experience Corps](#) (EC), co-founded in 1995 by Future of Aging Advisory Board members Linda Fried, dean of the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, and Marc Freedman, founder and Co-CEO of CoGenerate, provides opportunities for adults over age 50 to serve as mentors and tutors to elementary students at risk of reading failure. EC’s structured and evidence-based model has generated data that correlate the presence of EC volunteers in classrooms with improvements in student literacy scores and behavioral problems and fosters a greater sense of purpose among the volunteers. Findings have demonstrated that students benefiting from EC mentorship made statistically greater gains in reading skills over the academic year in comparison to those not enrolled in the program.¹³ Through extensive training, peer networks, and ongoing evaluation with volunteers and program leadership, EC benefits volunteers, schools, and students.

Spotlight: iGen at PNC

PNC Financial Services Group (PNC), one of the largest financial services companies in the US, sponsors 10 Employee Business Resource Groups (EBRGs), including [iGen](#), which focuses on intergenerational issues in the workplace and provides opportunities for generations to learn from one another in a professional setting. iGen bridges generational divides in the workplace through programs that generate mutual understanding and facilitate connections among employees of all ages and career stages. Through partnering with PNC’s talent development team, iGen also works to share best practices and bolster employee retention.

and incorporating equity, inclusion, and anti-ageist principles within their programming. Programs such as instruction in painting and sculpture, theatre, and musical performance provide a valuable platform for individuals of all ages to learn from one another and contribute to a vibrant and connected community. Additionally, performance-based programs centered around intergenerational collaboration can reach diverse audiences and transform their perceptions of age-inclusive performances.

Long recognized as a universal language that transcends barriers, emotions, and ages, creative arts hold immense healing power for both emotional and physical health. In addition to fostering empowerment and individualism, participating in creative and cultural arts is associated with decreased feelings of anxiety and restoration of emotional balance.¹⁸ Specifically, music has been proven to offer benefits such as improved brain stimulation, heart rate, motor skills, and even stronger immune responses.¹⁹ Decreased levels of cortisol—the hormone that plays an important role in stress response—have been attributed to listening to relaxing music, demonstrating music’s positive chemical and biological impact on emotional regulation.²⁰

Enhancing Housing Options

Intergenerational home-sharing and housing developments that include older-adult and single-family homes are finding increased favor in the US. Local governments, nonprofits, social-impact investors, and philanthropic organizations are exploring housing models that can be piloted and scaled without burdensome investment, such as [intergenerational home-sharing which addresses affordability](#), and [college students living rent-free](#) in senior housing communities. Such developments often help meet critical needs for affordable housing in areas with low vacancy rates and offer unique support services to tenants. Washington, DC’s affordable intergenerational housing community, [Plaza West](#), provides several on-site programs and services that foster young residents’ healthy development while also supporting their older counterparts. Plaza West also allocates 50 units for “grand families”—grandparents who are raising their grandchildren—catering to a demographic that is otherwise underrecognized among housing developers.

In recent years, the senior housing and care industry has also seen a spike in intergenerational models to foster positive outcomes. Senior housing operators recognize their role at the epicenter of social determinants of health and are leveraging innovative models to address the interlink between housing and well-being. Operators and developers have co-located [senior housing communities on college campuses](#), such as Lasell Village, and opened [community amenities to the public](#), such as Canterbury Woods, to encourage intergenerational cohesion.

Mobilizing Political Engagement and Public Service

While depolarizing politics may not be instantaneous, there is ample opportunity to navigate today’s demographic differences by uniting

Spotlight: Heart of Los Angeles Eisner Intergenerational Music Programs

The Heart of Los Angeles Intergenerational Music (HOLA) programs bring together intergenerational musicians from multicultural backgrounds to share the joy of making music. Community members can participate in the intergenerational choir, orchestra, and band, striving toward a common goal of artistic excellence across a wide range of musical styles. Through its innovative program, HOLA works to bridge cultural and generational divides while creating a deeper sense of social connection and well-being. Additionally, HOLA engages the greater community by hosting free concerts at several venues across Los Angeles.

Spotlight: Bridge Meadows

Bridge Meadows, an intergenerational affordable housing community located in Oregon, uses the power of community to help children heal from the trauma of foster care. The program includes high-quality, affordable housing, therapeutic programs, and intergenerational community support. Older adults live in the community, serving as mentors, friends, and caregivers to the children and each other, which forms a safety net of care and interdependence. Bridge Meadows builds affordable housing with independent townhomes and apartments to support permanency, and the spaces encourage connection and relationship-building while providing safety and security. Clinical staff provide the community with trauma-informed support services and facilitate shared meals and conversations.

generations through activism. The key demographic forces fueling a significant portion of our political polarization—namely, aging and diversity—are simultaneously sources of economic vitality, political strength, and intergenerational reliance. When intergenerational perspectives are recognized as valuable resources in activism, youth and older adults can be perceived as assets, not liabilities. Opportunities are also presented for both generations to reflect upon their internalized assumptions about age-based power and authority, enabling new or unique perspectives to emerge as barriers are broken.

In an era when economic prosperity has shifted towards the later stages of life, intergenerational activism can galvanize youth and older adults to engage in convergent policy interests, such as access to “age-friendly” infrastructure responsive to changing needs across the life course, employee-sponsored caregiving benefits and supportive services, and lifelong education programs. Over a decade ago, the United Nations identified intergenerational solidarity as critical to addressing pressing societal issues, with a continued focus on the intersection of equality, sustainability, and intergenerational equity.²¹ Several organizations across the nation are working to ignite this solidarity around a common good, with intergenerational activist groups focusing on issues such as [gender equity](#) and [racial justice](#). They work to arm activists, community leaders, students, educators, and older adults with resources that foster inclusive and intersectional discussions across issue areas.

Spotlight: UPROSE

Established in 1966, [UPROSE](#) is Brooklyn’s longest-standing Latino community-based organization. As an intergenerational, multiracial entity of national renown, UPROSE champions sustainability and resilience within Brooklyn’s Sunset Park neighborhood through a blend of community organizing, educational initiatives, Indigenous and youth leadership cultivation, and artistic expression. Centered around fostering meaningful community involvement and intergenerational collaboration, UPROSE organizes the NYC Climate Justice Youth Summit, where cultural narratives and legacies are celebrated in unity to foster young minority leaders who are inspired by the generations before them. Through various other campaigns and events at the intersection of economic, racial, social, environmental, and climate justice, UPROSE creates opportunities for advocates of all ages to learn from one another.



NEXT STEPS

A rapidly aging population impacts all societal structures, and requires individuals, communities, institutions, and governments to adapt. In the face of such a profound demographic shift, the public and private sectors have an opportunity to realize benefits stemming from increasing diversity by employing intergenerational strategies to galvanize action toward a common social good.

Several intergenerational strategies continue to produce positive health and well-being outcomes across age groups but have yet to achieve scale. During the previously mentioned Future of Aging Advisory Board convening, experts noted that communities and organizations that have not achieved scale are often “pigeonholed” into defined private and public funding categories, leading to age-segregated programs that would benefit from unification. This suggests a role for both sectors to coordinate on broadening the parameters for funding models.

“Intergenerational programs are one of the most effective and efficient ways to solve multiple challenges at once.”

- Trent Stamp, CEO, The Eisner Foundation

By explicitly incorporating intergenerational strategies and unlocking resources, innovators can create more inclusive, effective, and sustainable solutions that consider the diverse needs and strengths of all age groups within a community or organization. Whether employed in schools, activism efforts, or housing models, intergenerational programs and relationships create a bridge between age groups to cultivate a more resilient and adaptable society that leads to longer and healthier lives. Holding the transformative power to foster a sense of belonging, purpose, and mutual understanding, intergenerational solutions’ upside is significant.

KEY RESOURCES

For additional information and ideas, watch the following panels from recent Milken Institute events:

[Talking About My Generation: Transcending Age-Based Divides](#)

[Harnessing the Power of Human Connection](#)

[Mending the Social Fabric of Our Nation: The Loneliness Epidemic among Older Adults](#)

ENDNOTES

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ABOUT US

ABOUT THE MILKEN INSTITUTE

The Milken Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank focused on accelerating measurable progress on the path to a meaningful life. With a focus on financial, physical, mental, and environmental health, we bring together the best ideas and innovative resourcing to develop blueprints for tackling some of our most critical global issues through the lens of what's pressing now and what's coming next.

ABOUT THE FUTURE OF AGING

The Milken Institute Future of Aging advances healthy longevity and financial security for all through research, convenings, multisector partnerships, and the elevation of impactful policies and practices.

We thank our [Milken Institute Future of Aging Advisory Board members](#) for their ongoing partnership and are grateful for the sustaining support of our Leadership Council.

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