

“It feels like your whole life is a constant crisis”

US millennials describe life on the brink

By Genevieve Leigh
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The following article is the second part of a two-part series examining the conditions facing working class youth born into the millennial generation (1981-1996) in the US. Part two contains fuller versions of the interviews previewed in Part one.

Emma, a 30-year-old from Massachusetts, is a college graduate who works as a singer and performer.

“I chose to be a performer. I knew that there would be a certain level of insecurity with that decision, but the fact of the matter is that these conditions now exist for most everyone I know. I could choose to do something that I hate and be unstable, stressed out, broke and miserable. Or I could choose to do something I love and be unstable, stressed out, broke but at least proud of my work.

“I have held so many jobs it is hard to keep track. Once I worked on a decommissioned battleship that was turned into a museum (in the food court). I was a hostess at Hurleys, a counter clerk at an oatmeal restaurant, a ticket salesman for shows, a theme park performer, and a cruise ship performer. I’ve done gigs with bands, been a waitress and other side jobs.”

“Working on cruise ships is alright. You are able to save up a little money sometimes because you don’t have to pay for housing. But you are still forced to live contract to contract. None of the employees are ‘full time.’ I know three people who have been with the same cruise ship companies for 10 plus years. They work all the time, but they are still considered part-time employees. Legally, the standard shift can’t be over 14 hours a day with a six-hour break, but I have no doubt that culturally there are things that happen on ships where people are working far more than that. I have seen some terrible sights: suicides, employees just jump off the ship. There is a lot of desperation.”

Emma explained that not having consistent work means that her health is a major concern.

“When something hurts or I am sick, I wait a while and see if it will go away because I am scared to spend a bunch of money to go see a doctor and have him tell me: ‘drink more fluids.’ But two summers ago, I got pretty sick, and after a few days it became clear I had something that was not going to go away. I needed antibiotics. I ended up going to the doctor and spending \$1,200 to treat what turned out to be strep throat. At the time I was between two contracts with the same company. If I had been in their facilities, I would have been able to go to a doctor as an employee. But on the break in between, I am no longer something they need to worry about.”

“Once I had a job with a children’s theater, a union job, which paid \$425 a week and a \$15 per diem for food. For jobs with my union I get health insurance, but they make it quite difficult to use. The health insurance is like a barter system. You don’t get health insurance when

you start the job because you need to accrue weeks. And not every week counts as a full week of health insurance. For this show they counted 9 performances as one ‘health week.’ But you can only trade it in for health insurance once you’ve worked 11 weeks. And to top it all off, they expire after a year.”

“I think for working class millennials, it feels like your whole life is a constant crisis. The idea of owning a house or buying a new car seems so far away. You might as well be suggesting I buy my own private island.”

Luis is 26 years old, born in 1992, and lives in Southern California. His parents are both from Mexico. His father is a truck driver and his mom works in customer service.

“My first job as a kid was doing tile work, mixing cement, when I was 15. I’ve had a job ever since, and I am 26 now. I’ve worked for electrical engineering companies, Sea World, at Vans shoe store, in warehouses, at restaurants as a busser and a waiter, in landscaping, construction, selling motocross parts, as a service salesman, in shipping and receiving, making aluminum cast molds for bombshells, and in catering.

“I have held countless jobs, and none of them pay enough to live. I couldn’t see myself doing any of them for the rest of my life. Some were miserable, or there was no room to move up with the company, or they just did not pay enough to cover my bills.

“For people my age, we have to find a job at least over \$16 or \$17 just get by. Most jobs start you off at maybe \$11 or so, if that.

“It is pretty difficult to make it on your own. I was out living on my own for about two years renting with a roommate. But then my roommate came up short on rent two months in a row. I felt bad—I know how it goes—so I covered him. But it set me back. With the money we make and the jobs we have, it’s just not enough to deal with any minor emergency or unexpected bill that comes up. I kept having to switch jobs and keep moving apartments, trying to get by.

“I finally landed my most recent job, which is underground construction, about two years ago. It is a city job—a prevailing wage job. I was finally making pretty good money. On a low day I would get \$28 to \$29 an hour. I thought ‘finally after all these jobs and all these years trying to figure out what I was going to do, I can start making a life.’ My plan was to get my own place, get a new car, and save some money finally.

“But then just two or three months in I got hurt, because of my boss. He was in a moving vehicle which had a poles hanging out. The poles had cables in them, and they can weigh a couple hundred pounds each. I got hit by the cables so hard they knocked me down.

“At first they sent me to Urgent Care. But my shoulder kept hurting, something was wrong. Again and again, they kept sending me back to

Urgent Care. I finally told them I need to be seen properly, by a doctor in the ER, to get an x-ray. Finally, a month later I got the x-ray, and it turns out I have a torn labrum in my shoulder. I think it's completely messed up how they handled the injury. When someone gets hurt like that they should go straight to the ER.

"Since then, my hours have been cut drastically. It's just getting worse and worse. I am in pain every day. I just got off my dad's insurance, but now my job won't allow me to get on the company insurance even though they offered it to me when I started. They say it's because I am only making 30 hours a week. But they won't give me more hours because I am injured. And I can't fix my shoulder until I get insurance.

"From my point of view, I am in a rut. If I quit, I'll have to fix my shoulder on my own, and I don't have that kind of money. It is crazy. They injured me, and they won't help me out.

"Everything I saved I've now spent because of the injury. And it took me years to try to save anything. Now my only focus is just getting fixed and going from there. I didn't get an attorney for any extra money or anything. I just want my surgery covered so I can get better and work.

"We workers all strive to find that decent job so that we can just make enough to live comfortably. We are working Friday to Friday for a paycheck, slaving away. I think most people don't even like what they do, they just do it for the check. They are trapped, just trying to survive.

"And it's not just my generation. I have family friends and relatives who are older than me, and they can't hardly make it either. And they have kids too, I can't even imagine.

"My financial situation affects every part of my life. My friends and I were just talking the other day about our parents and how they all had kids at our age. I'd love to travel and do things—things people my age are supposed to do. But instead I am worried: Am I going to have enough money for next week? Am I going to be able to pay for just the basics?

"I am not a really political person. But I think everything that has to do with any type of law is all made up by people who have never been on the other side. The people in office never have to figure out what they are going to eat that night and if they are going to pay their bills. It is pretty messed up. I don't think it can just keep going like this."

John is 27 from Detroit, Michigan, born 1991. His mom worked for an insurance agency and his father at a print shop. John graduated from college in 2015 with a degree in Communications.

"Just like everyone in my generation, I've had tons of jobs. I was a DJ, and a radio host for a local station, and I actually made a fair amount of money that way. But the royalties ran out, and I had to sell my music equipment because I couldn't afford my bills. I worked at Subway for a couple of months, as a janitor for a paint company, and some other things.

"It's crazy because my mom had the same job for thirty years, which paid decently. But jobs aren't really like that anymore. I've never had a job longer than a year or so. Anything can happen. Everyone is expendable. They can get rid of you for anything.

"In communications it is difficult to get a job, especially if you have anything important to say politically. There is a narrow window of political opinions that are allowed to be aired. I have sort of given up on my major. I realized that most of the people in my graduating class and in my major gave up on the field because they couldn't find jobs. My experience looking is that it was never about what you know, it was about who you know.

"And now I am going to be paying anywhere from \$280 or so a month [to pay off debt] for an education I am not using, plus food and other bills. The student loans take up most of my costs. The last couple months have been hard. I had to get a wisdom tooth pulled, but I basically couldn't afford it. It was 'impacted' so it cost more than usual. I had to choose to take care of it or to pay other bills. I have to decide each month how much I am willing to spend on the necessities.

"I don't think I'll get married or have kids anytime soon. I can barely afford to support myself. I can't afford to go out even like I used to. I don't really get a chance to meet a lot of new people because all my time is working or looking for work.

"I know there are tons of people in my generation who suffer from depression and anxiety. It's not surprising. What makes it even worse is when you go see a doctor, they make it so individualized. They make it out like it's only you, or there is something wrong with you and not with the world. 'Take these pills' and it'll be fine or whatever, but this is a social issue. They make you turn inward, to think 'maybe it's just me, maybe it's my problem.'

"I feel like that this generation really feels that life can't go on like this much longer. We look at the politicians who say, 'everything is great, everything is going to be fine.' And we look at our conditions—unemployment, massive poverty, and there is a real dissatisfaction. So many kids that are just angry, and rightfully so. If that anger is politically mobilized, then it's game over for the ruling class."

Andréa is a 25-year-old nonprofit worker from California who graduated from a university in 2016.

"I didn't go to Columbia or Harvard. I got a *basic* education. I was responsible and stayed local to pay in-state tuition. Now, tens of thousands of dollars in debt, the lowest my monthly bill can possibly be is \$200 a month.

"My student debt has an impact on every decision I make. Any extra bill matters. I can't think about buying a car or getting sick. In the winter, I had to go to the emergency room. I spent no more than an hour in the ER. Two months later I got a bill in the mail saying they were charging me \$9,000. I had to spend countless hours on the phone trying to get it lowered. My friends and family had to send in letters. I had to apply for all these waivers and such. It was a nightmare.

"Nowadays your money is split so many ways. I feel like all my life decisions are made in the shadow of my debt. It affects decisions about starting a family, where and how to live. I honestly feel that there is not really even room to dream of things like owning a home."

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