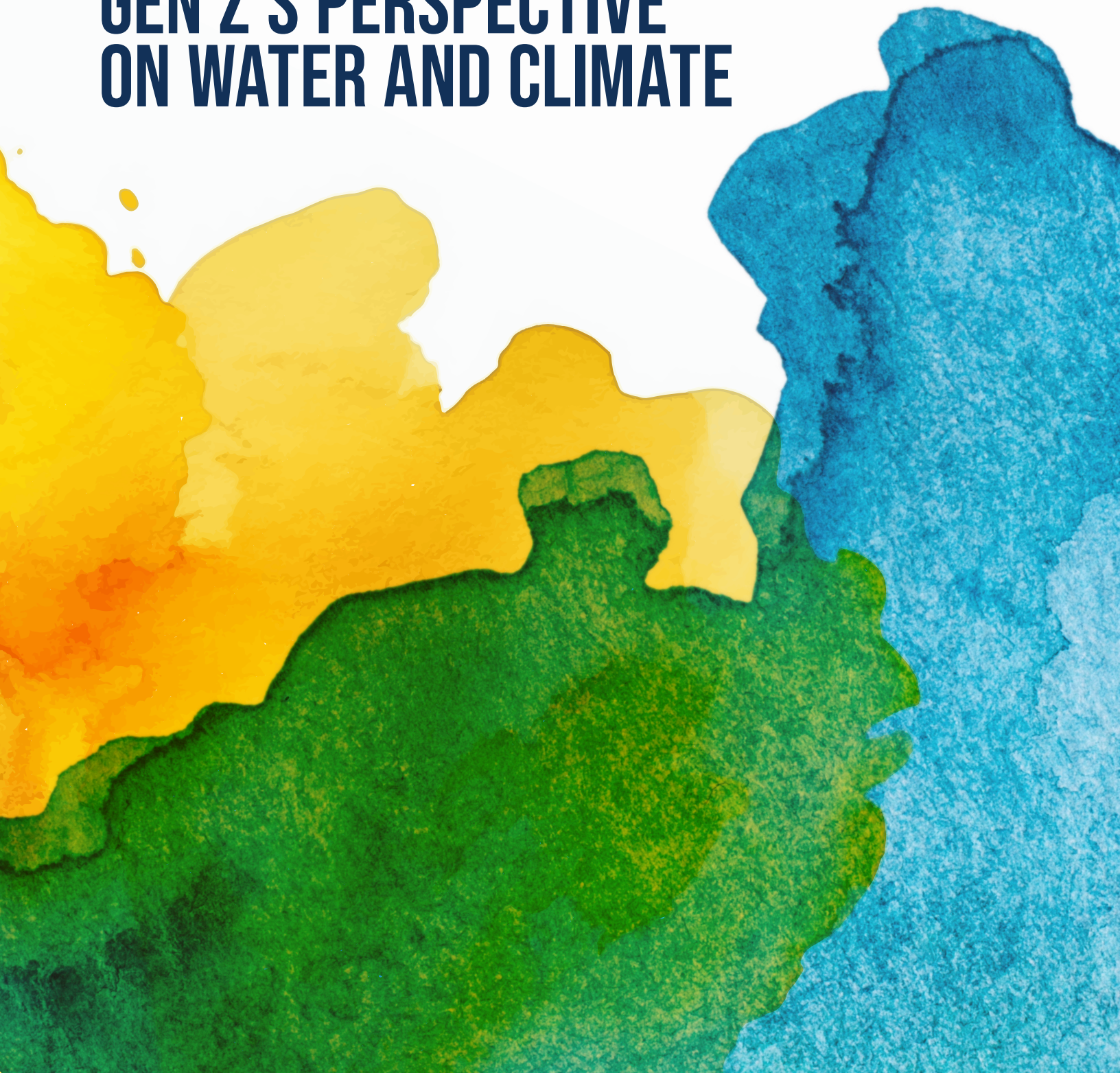


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# THE NEXT WAVE: GEN Z'S PERSPECTIVE ON WATER AND CLIMATE



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## INTRODUCTION

Generation Z, encompassing young people aged 12 to 27, is coming of age at a time when the effects of climate change, including rising temperatures, are increasingly widespread. As these young people grow into adulthood, their views of climate change will shape the nation's response to climate-related challenges. The Walton Family Foundation and Gallup partnered to better understand how these young people experience climate change, their worries about climate effects and their views of their generation's future.

Climate change affects a variety of natural hazards, including flooding, droughts, wildfires and major storm events.<sup>1</sup> Water is a common factor in many of these hazards. As part of their research with Gen Z, the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup explored how water and other climate change-related issues impact young people. In August 2024, 2,832 members of Generation Z shared their experiences and opinions, including over 1,100 tweens and teens (12- to 17-year-olds) and over 1,600 young adults (18- to 27-year-olds) from across the U.S.

As a generation, water issues top the list of Gen Z's climate worries, with water pollution and the health of fish and oceans comprising two of the top three worries for all Gen Z members, regardless of their geographical region. These concerns extend to Gen Z's unified support for preserving clean water, with a majority of Gen Zers saying the U.S. is not doing enough to protect its water resources.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Water quality and the health of fish and oceans are two of the top three climate-related worries for Gen Z across all four regions of the U.S.
- Six in 10 Gen Zers (61%) say they've experienced a water-related problem in the past two years, such as flooding, drought or unsafe tap water.
- Three in 10 young people (31%) foresee not having enough clean water for their generation, and 36% worry "a great deal" or "somewhat" that they'll need to relocate due to climate change.
  - Gen Zers who have had personal experience with climate-related problems are more likely to have concerns about their future.
- Hispanic and Black Gen Zers are more likely to feel the effects of poor water quality: 36% and 34%, respectively, have been told their tap water is unsafe to drink (compared with 27% of White Gen Zers), and 41% and 34%, respectively, believe their generation will not have enough clean water in the future (compared with 24% of White Gen Zers).
- Ninety-three percent of Gen Zers say it is somewhat or very important to protect oceans, lakes and rivers from pollution, and a majority say the U.S. is not doing enough to protect water — including majorities among both major political parties.

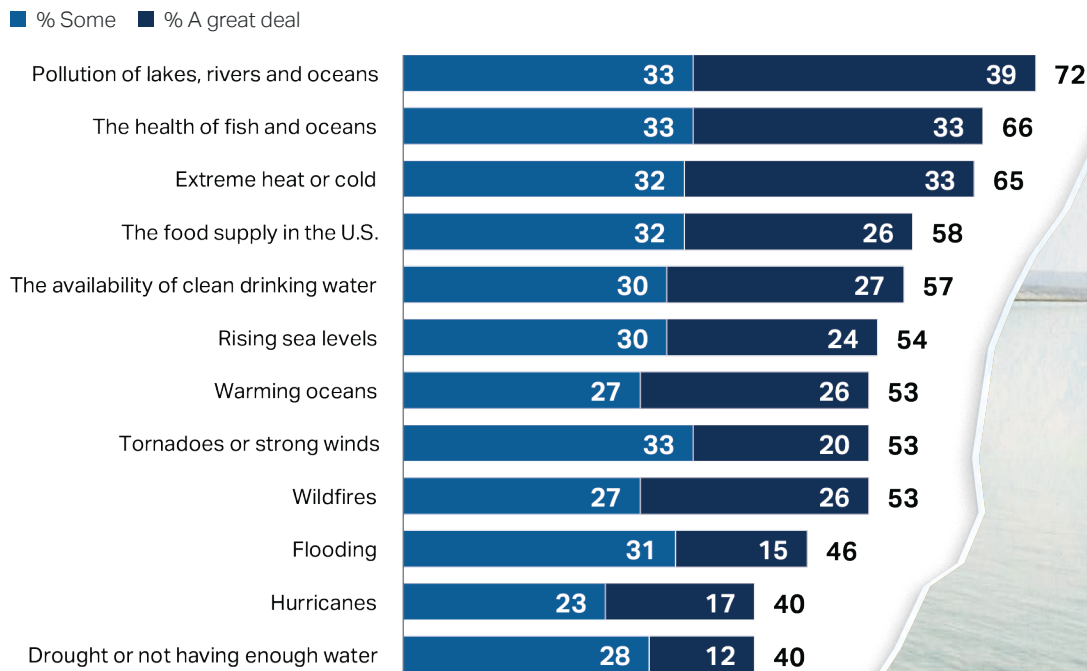
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.noaa.gov/education/resource-collections/climate/climate-change-impacts>

# WATER ISSUES TOP THE LIST OF GEN Z'S CLIMATE WORRIES

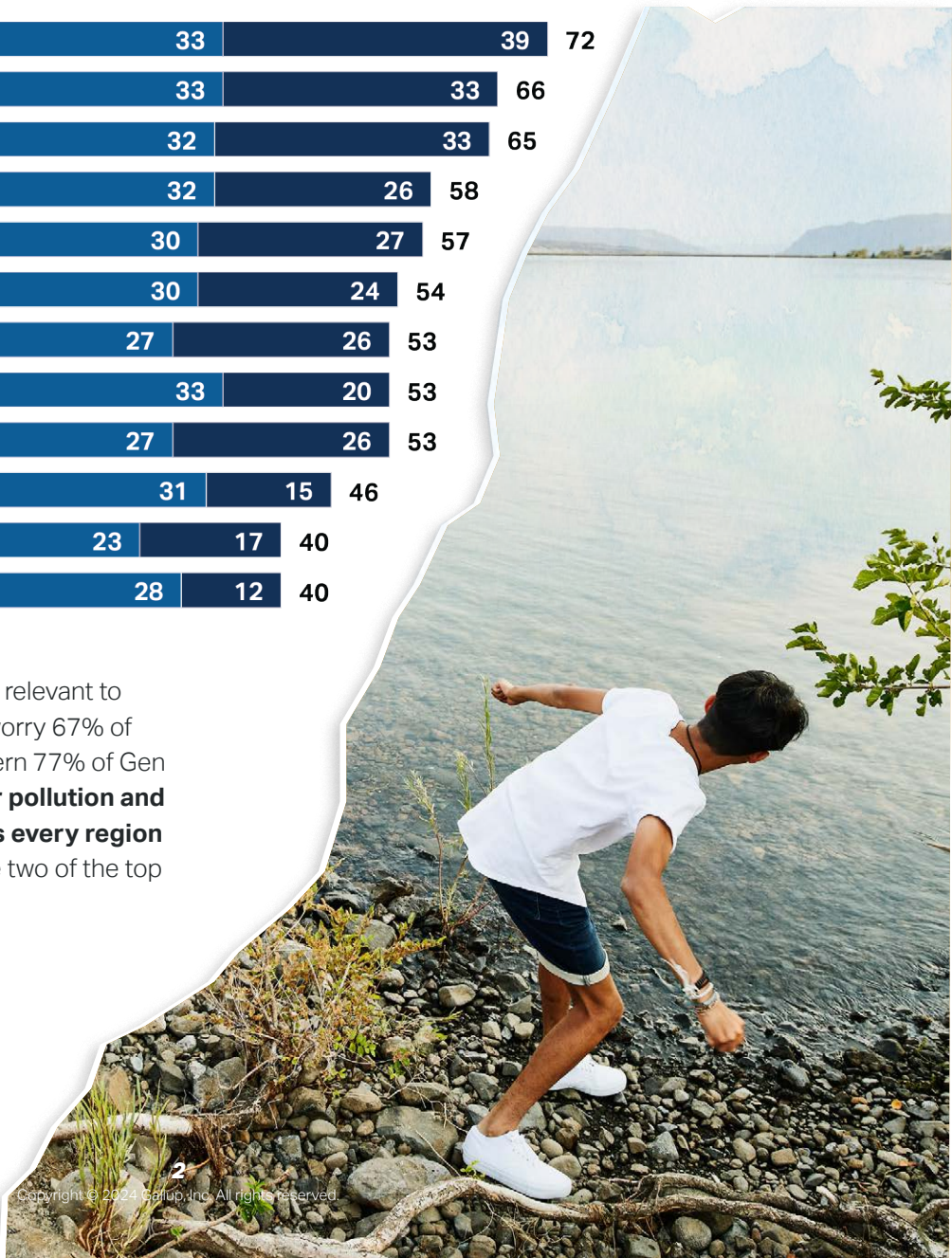
Of 12 climate issues measured in the study, majorities of Gen Zers express “a great deal” or “some” worry about nine, including five that are related to water. Members of Gen Z worry the most about pollution of lakes, rivers and oceans (72%), the health of fish and oceans (66%), and extreme heat or cold (65%). Between 53% and 58% worry about the food supply in the U.S., the availability of clean drinking water, rising sea levels, warming oceans, tornadoes and wildfires. At the same time, less than half of Gen Zers worry about flooding, hurricanes and droughts.

CHART 1

The next section is about issues related to climate change. How much do you worry about each of the following?



Some climate-related concerns are more relevant to particular regions of the U.S. Tornadoes worry 67% of Midwestern Gen Zers, and wildfires concern 77% of Gen Zers in the West. **Yet, worry about water pollution and the health of fish and oceans pervades every region of the U.S.**, as these two topics comprise two of the top three concerns in each Census region.



## Water Issues Related to Pollution and Ocean Health Are Two of the Top Three Climate-Related Worries Among Gen Zers, Regardless of Region

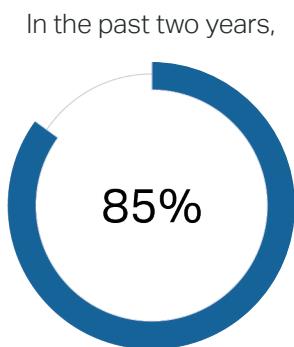
The next section is about issues related to climate change. How much do you worry about each of the following?

% A great deal + % Some

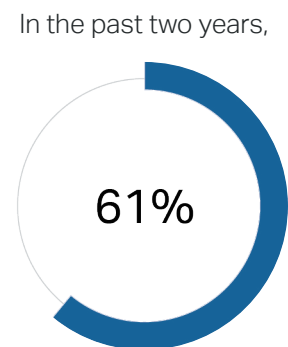
Midwest	Northeast	South	West
<b>74%</b> Pollution of lakes, rivers and oceans	<b>71%</b> Pollution of lakes, rivers and oceans	<b>70%</b> Pollution of lakes, rivers and oceans	<b>77%</b> Wildfires
<b>67%</b> Tornadoes or strong winds	<b>65%</b> The health of fish and oceans	<b>68%</b> Extreme heat or cold	<b>75%</b> Pollution of lakes, rivers and oceans
<b>66%</b> The health of fish and oceans	<b>61%</b> Rising sea levels	<b>65%</b> The health of fish and oceans	<b>69%</b> The health of fish and oceans

## A majority of Gen Zers (85%) have experienced extreme weather or climate-related events in the past two years, including water issues.

Gen Zers have a variety of personal experiences with severe weather or climate-related events such as strong storms, flooding, droughts, wildfires and unsafe drinking water, which are known to be related to climate change.<sup>2</sup> In the past two years, the majority of Gen Zers (85%) have had personal experience with at least one of the climate-related events measured, including 61% who said they have experienced a water-related issue such as flooding, drought or unsafe tap water.



of Gen Zers have personally experienced at least one of the climate-related events measured in this study.



of Gen Zers have experienced at least one water-related problem such as flooding, drought or unsafe tap water.

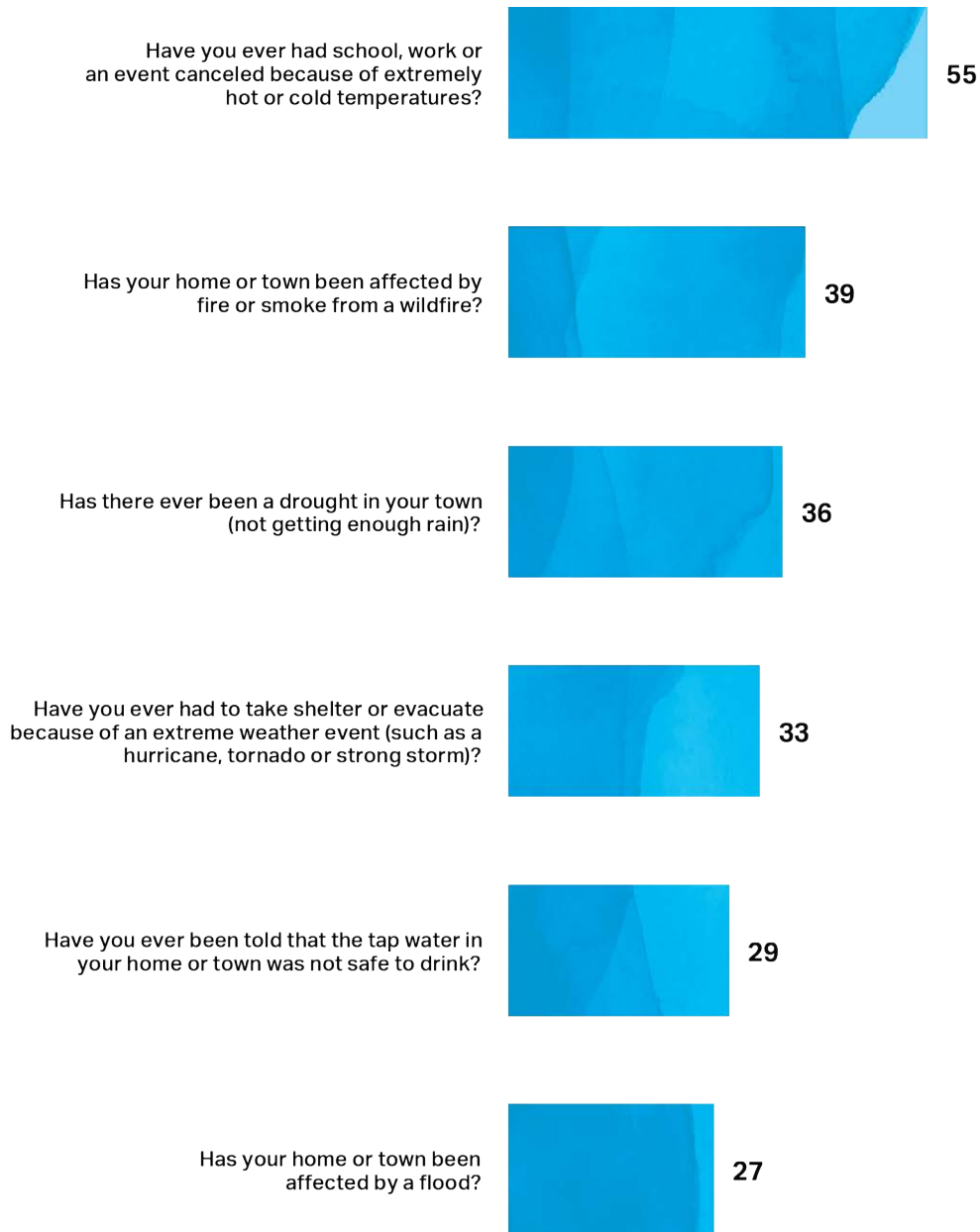
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.noaa.gov/education/resource-collections/climate/climate-change-impacts>

Among all climate-related events, Gen Zers most commonly have experienced extreme temperatures, wildfires and droughts. Just over half have had school, work or an event canceled due to extreme temperatures, 39% have been affected by wildfires, and 36% say they've experienced a drought. These numbers likely include only the young people who were affected to a point where they could identify the issue, as a majority of the U.S. experienced drought conditions at some point during 2023.<sup>3</sup>

CHART 2

In the past two years ... ?

% Yes



3 [https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/drought/202313#:~:text=On%20a%20national%20scale%2C%20large,Affiliated%20Pacific%20Islands%20\(USAPI\).](https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/monthly-report/drought/202313#:~:text=On%20a%20national%20scale%2C%20large,Affiliated%20Pacific%20Islands%20(USAPI).)

## Experience with climate-related events differs by geography.

Of course, many severe weather events occur regionally, with some regions hit harder than others. Gen Zers in the West are the most likely to say their community has been affected by wildfires, and those in the Midwest are the most likely to report extreme temperatures. **Water-related problems are more commonly reported by Gen Zers in the Central and Western U.S.**

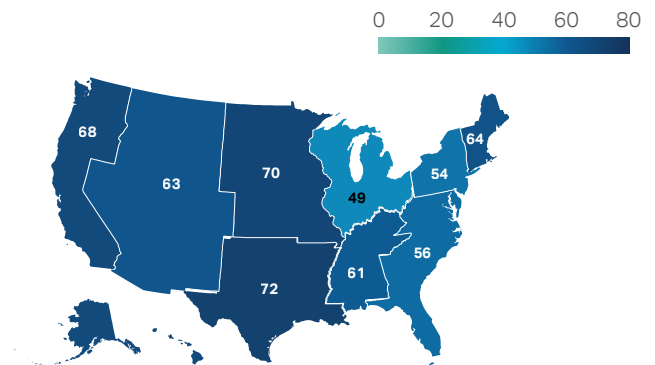
Still, many of these climate-related incidents are common throughout the U.S. In the past two years:

- 72% of Gen Zers in the West South Central division have experienced at least one of three water-related issues.
- 73% of Gen Zers in the Pacific division and 66% of those in the Mountain division have been affected by wildfires.
- 64% of Gen Zers in the West North Central division have had to take shelter or evacuate due to extreme weather.

### % Yes to any of the following:

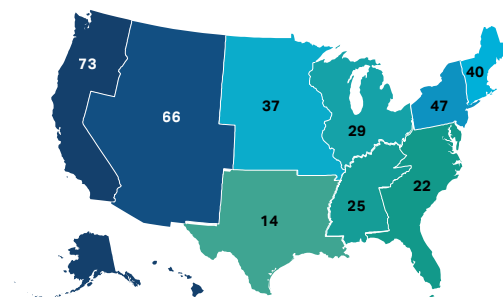
In the past two years ...

- Has your home or town been affected by a flood?
- Has there ever been a drought in your town (not getting enough rain)?
- Have you ever been told that the tap water in your home or town was not safe to drink?



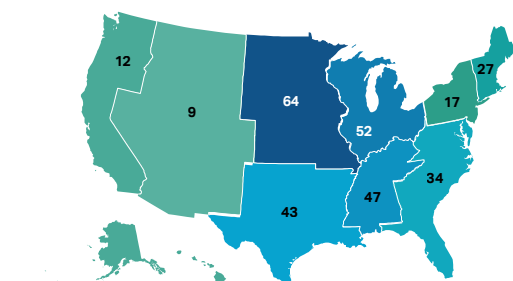
### % Yes to the following:

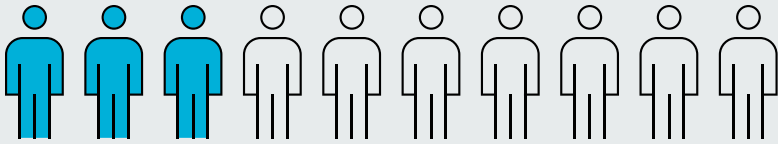
In the past two years, has your home or town been affected by fire or smoke from a wildfire?



### % Yes to the following:

In the past two years, have you ever had to take shelter or evacuate because of an extreme weather event (such as a hurricane, tornado or strong storm)?





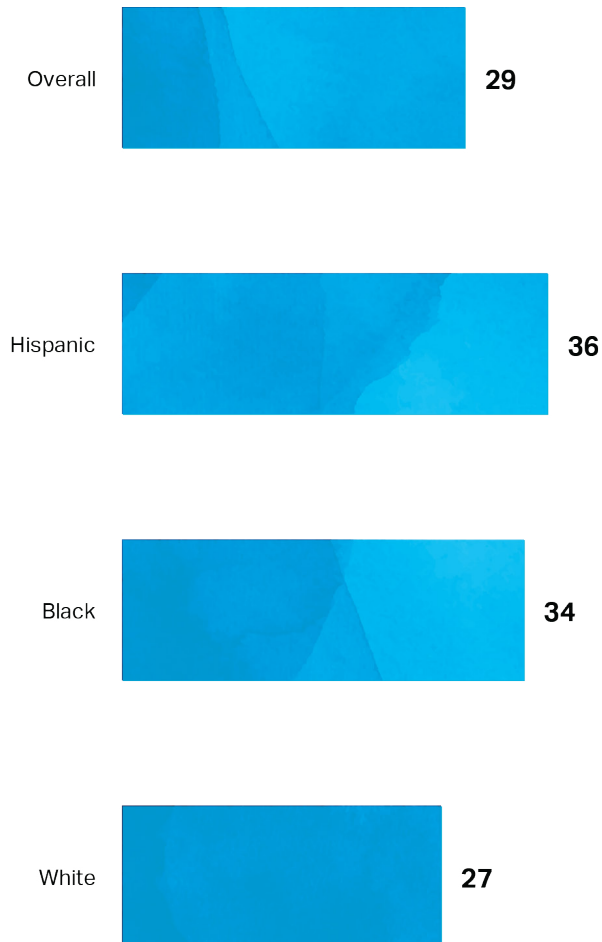
**Three in 10 Gen Zers have been told their tap water is not safe to drink, with water safety issues more common for Hispanic and Black Gen Zers.**

Nationwide, 29% of Gen Zers have been told their tap water is unsafe to drink within the past two years. Hispanic and Black Gen Zers are more likely than their White peers to report this concern.

CHART 3

**Have you ever been told that the tap water in your home or town was not safe to drink?**

% Yes



Water quality can also be affected by climate change. When there are increased flooding events, heavy downpours or droughts (which require more water for agriculture), runoff and soil erosion worsen, which is one way that increased pollutants make it into U.S. waterways.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.noaa.gov/education/resource-collections/climate/climate-change-impacts#water>

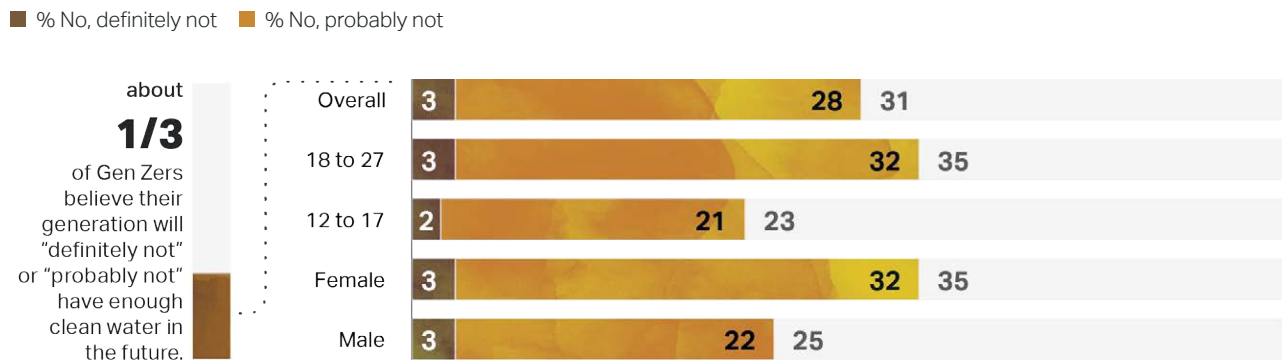


# ABOUT THREE IN 10 GEN ZERS FORESEE NOT HAVING ENOUGH WATER FOR THEIR GENERATION AND ARE CONCERNED ABOUT NEEDING TO RELOCATE

Three in 10 Gen Zers (31%) believe their generation will “definitely not” or “probably not” have enough clean water in the future. Adult members of Gen Z and female Gen Zers are both more likely than their counterparts to hold this belief.

CHART 4

Looking ahead, do you think your generation will have enough clean water in the future to live?

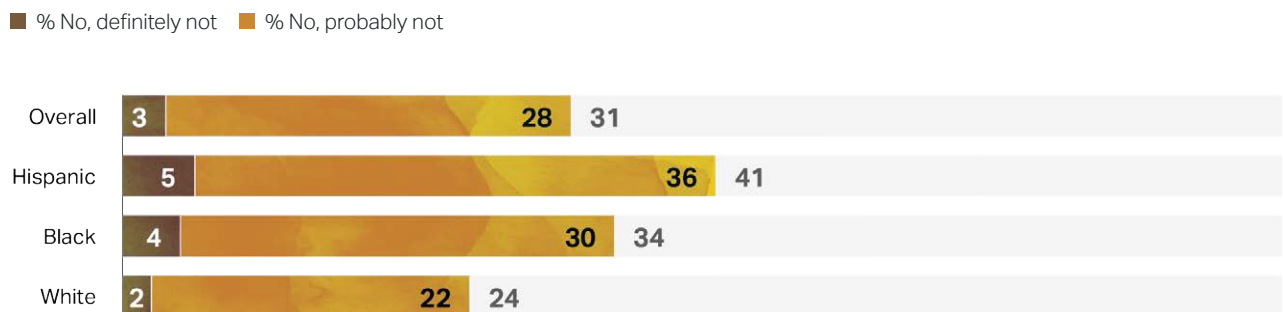


Among 18- to 27-year-old women, 41% think their generation will probably or definitely not have enough water, compared with 27% of 18- to 27-year-old men and 25% of 12- to 17-year-old girls.

**Hispanic and Black Gen Zers are less likely than White Gen Zers to believe there will be enough clean water for their generation in the future.** This may be related to their experiences with drinking water, as Hispanic and Black Gen Zers are also more likely than their peers to have been told their tap water was not safe to drink.

CHART 5

Looking ahead, do you think your generation will have enough clean water in the future to live?

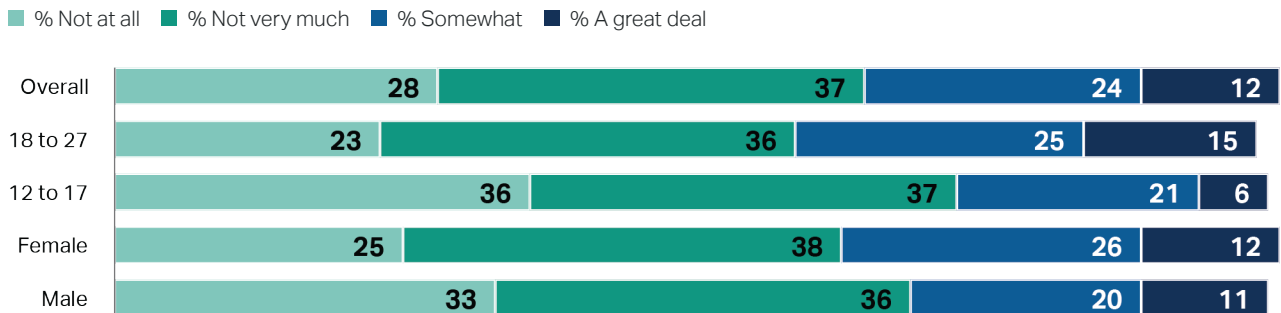




Over one-third of Gen Zers — representing an average 25 million young people — worry they'll need to move away from their current community due to climate change. Among those, 12% worry about this possibility a great deal. Adult Gen Zers are significantly more likely than younger Gen Zers to worry a great deal about needing to move.

CHART 6

**Thinking about the future, how much do you worry, if at all, that you may need to move from your current town/city because of climate change?**



Note: Row totals may sum to 100% ± 1 percentage point due to rounding.

Gen Zers who want to stay in their community also worry they'll have to move. About half of Gen Zers say they wish to continue living in their current town or city in the future — but among them, 32% still worry they'll need to move away because of climate change.

# GEN Z'S EXPERIENCE WITH CLIMATE CHANGE MAY BE AFFECTING THEIR FUTURE OUTLOOK

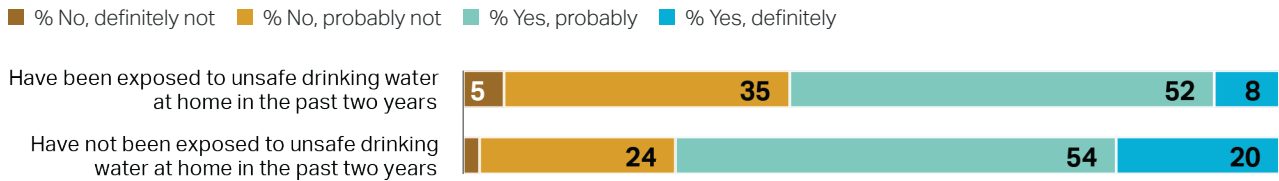
Gen Zers who have experienced the effects of climate change have a more dire outlook on the future for their generation, holding heightened concern about water quality and needing to move in the future.

## Gen Zers with unsafe tap water are more concerned than their peers about the future availability of clean water.

Forty percent of young people who have recently experienced unsafe drinking water think their generation may not have enough clean water in the future, compared with 26% of those who have not experienced unsafe tap water.

CHART 7

Looking ahead, do you think your generation will have enough clean water in the future to live?

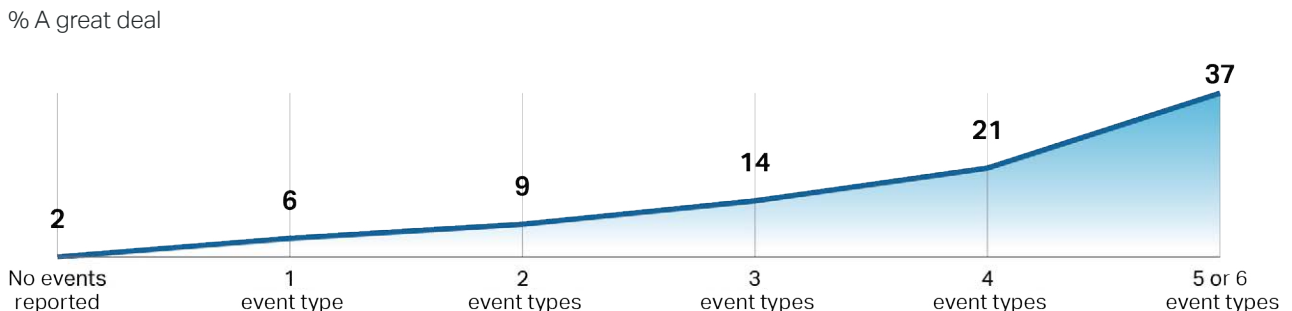


## Gen Zers who have experienced more climate-related events are more likely to worry about needing to move from their community in the future.

Young people who have experienced more climate-related event types such as flooding, cancellations due to extreme temperatures or needing to evacuate due to strong storms are more likely to say they worry a great deal about needing to move away from their community. The largest increases in worry are seen among those experiencing three or more event types in the prior two years. While 14% of Gen Zers who have experienced three climate-related event types worry a great deal about needing to move, this jumps to 21% among those who have experienced four event types and 37% among those who have experienced five or six.

CHART 8

Thinking about the future, how much do you worry, if at all, that you may need to move from your current town/city because of climate change?



## Gen Z is unified around protecting water resources: 93% say protecting water from pollution is important.

Gen Zers report strong support for protecting water quality. Seventy-four percent of Gen Zers say it is very important to protect oceans, lakes and rivers from pollution, and another 19% say it is somewhat important. A smaller majority say the same about protecting bodies of water from being overused, with 57% of Gen Z overall saying it is very important and 28% somewhat important.

CHART 9

**How important or not important is it to protect oceans, lakes and rivers from pollution?**

■ % Not important at all ■ % A little important ■ % Somewhat important ■ % Very important

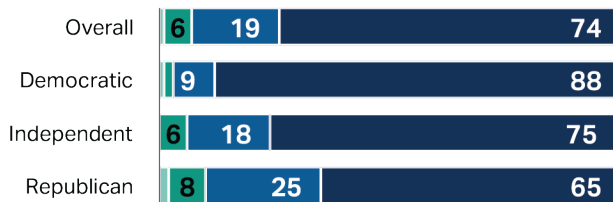
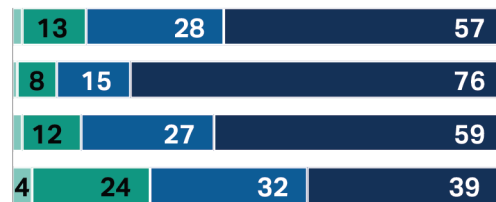


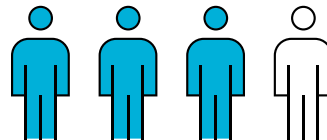
CHART 10

**How important, if at all, do you think it is to protect lakes and rivers from running out of water or being overused, such as overfishing or using too much water for farming?**



Note: Political party subgroups include Gen Zers who are of voting age. Row totals may sum to 100% ± 1 percentage point due to rounding.

Among adult Gen Zers, majorities of both Republicans and Democrats agree it is very or somewhat important to protect water from pollution and overuse. The bipartisan support for protecting water is notable, as Republican Gen Zers are less likely than their Democratic counterparts to show concern for climate change-related issues such as worry about climate change (38% vs. 89% worry at least "some," respectively), expecting the effects of climate change to get worse (51% vs. 85%), or believing their generation will not have enough clean water in the future (21% vs. 43%).



### Three in four young people believe climate change affects the quality of their water.

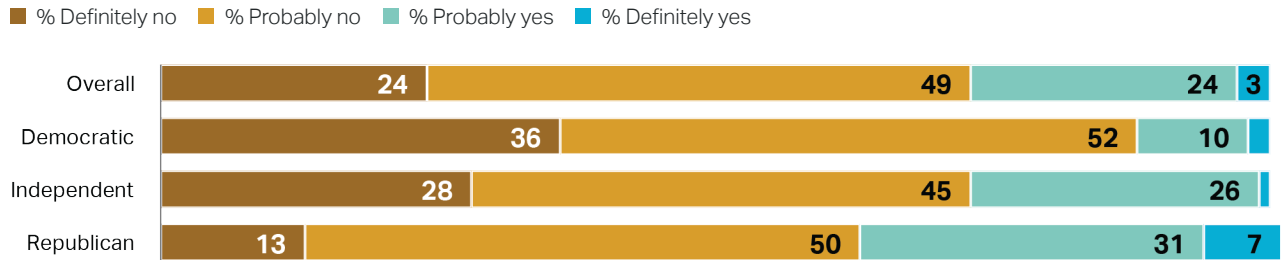
Seventy-four percent of Gen Zers say climate change impacts the amount of clean water available in the U.S. "somewhat" (47%) or "a great deal" (27%). Belief that climate change affects clean water is higher among adults aged 18 to 27 (79%) and Democrats (94%). Among adult Gen Zers who are Republican, 52% say climate change affects the amount of clean water available at least somewhat.

## Majorities of Gen Z members across political parties think the U.S. is not doing enough to protect water.

While intensity varies, majorities of Democratic (88%) and Republican Gen Zers (63%) think the U.S. is probably or definitely not doing enough to protect water.

CHART 11

### Do you think the U.S. is doing enough to protect water?



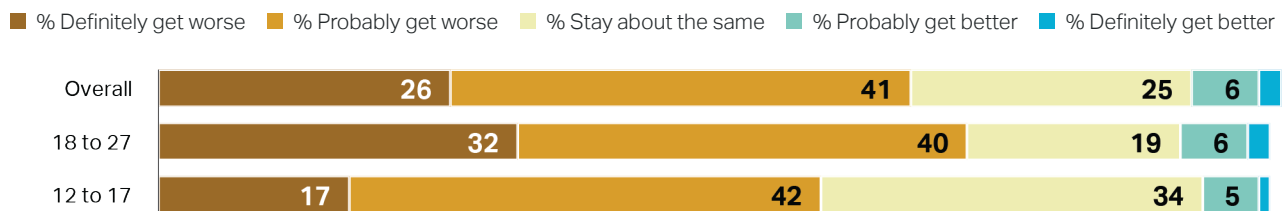
Note: Political party subgroups include Gen Zers who are of voting age. Row totals may sum to 100% ± 1 percentage point due to rounding.

## Gen Zers report a bleak outlook on climate-related issues being resolved.

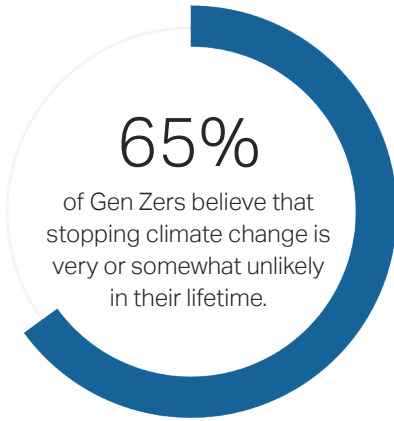
Most young people believe the effects of climate change will get worse or stay the same during their lifetime, with few believing circumstances will get better. The youngest members of Gen Z — those aged 12 to 17 — are more optimistic about the future. However, this age group is also less likely than older Gen Zers to say they are knowledgeable about climate change overall. Sixty-two percent of 12- to 17-year-olds say they know “some” or “a great deal” about climate change, compared with 72% of 18- to 27-year-olds.

CHART 12

### During your lifetime, do you expect the effects of climate change to get worse, stay about the same or get better?



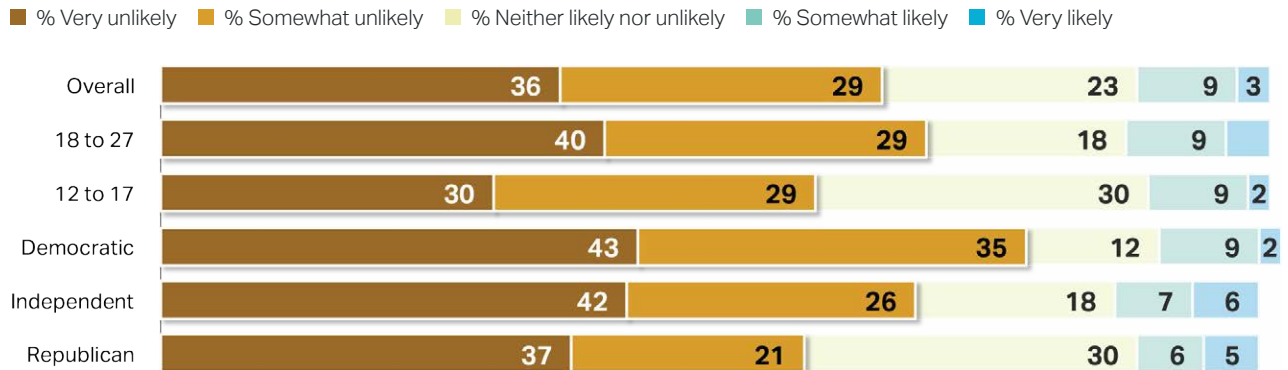
Note: Row totals may sum to 100% ± 1 percentage point due to rounding.



Members of Gen Z are similarly pessimistic about whether climate change will be halted in their lifetime, with 36% saying it is very unlikely and 29% somewhat unlikely. Younger Gen Zers report more neutral expectations, as 30% believe it is neither unlikely nor likely that climate change will be stopped, compared with 18% of adult Gen Zers. Among voting-age Gen Zers, majorities of both political parties believe it is very or somewhat unlikely that climate change will be stopped.

CHART 13

**How likely or unlikely do you think it is that climate change will be stopped in your lifetime?**



*Note: Political party subgroups include Gen Zers who are of voting age. Row totals may sum to 100% ± 1 percentage point due to rounding.*

## CONCLUSION

Concerns about water are a common denominator for Generation Z in the Walton Family Foundation-Gallup study. In a list of diverse environmental issues, water-related problems emerge as two of the top three climate-related worries for Gen Z. In such a geographically diverse country, only portions of young people might be exposed to hazards like wildfires or hurricanes, but clean water resources are something Gen Zers across the U.S. relate to and worry about.

However, not all Gen Zers are affected equally. Hispanic and Black members of Gen Z report being told their tap water is unsafe to drink at much higher rates than White Gen Zers. Water issues such as flooding, drought or unsafe tap water are highest among Gen Zers in the Western and Southern U.S., with as many as seven in 10 young people in those areas reporting one of these hazards within the past two years.

Thinking about their future, Gen Zers are largely pessimistic about whether climate change will continue to impact them. Majorities believe the effects of climate change will get worse and that the U.S. is not doing enough to protect water. As more members of Gen Z enter adulthood, many bring a shared desire for clean and healthy water resources.

## METHODOLOGY

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted Aug. 6-14, 2024, with a sample of 2,832 12- to 27-year-olds from across the U.S. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults. Data were weighted to match demographic targets of age, gender, education, race, Hispanic ethnicity and Census region for 12- to 27-year-olds, using the most recent five-year population estimates from the American Community Survey.

Twelve- to 17-year-old children, as well as some 18-year-olds, were reached through adult members of the Gallup Panel who indicated they had at least one child aged 18 or younger living in their household. The remaining 18- to 27-year-old respondents are members of the Gallup Panel.

For the total sample of 2,832 respondents, the margin of sampling error is  $\pm 2.9$  percentage points at the 95% confidence level. Margins of error for subgroups are higher; selected subgroups are reported below. All margins of error reported are adjusted to account for the design effect.

Group	Category	Sample Size	Design Effect	Adjusted Margin of Error
Overall	Overall	2,832	2.4	2.9
Age	12 to 17	1,146	2.2	4.3
	18 to 27	1,686	2.5	3.8
Gender	Female	1,461	2.5	4.0
	Male	1,230	2.3	4.3
Race recoded	White	1,705	2.5	3.8
	Black	305	2.0	7.9
	Hispanic	475	2.0	6.4
Census region	South	1,026	2.3	4.6
	Midwest	711	2.6	6.0
	West	605	2.3	6.1
	Northeast	490	2.4	6.8
Political party (aged 18 to 27)	Democratic	672	2.9	6.5
	Independent	481	2.5	7.0
	Republican	259	2.4	9.3
	Don't know	158	1.8	10.6

*Note: Adjusted margins of error are calculated using unrounded design effects, although design effect and MOE are rounded numbers as written here.*





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