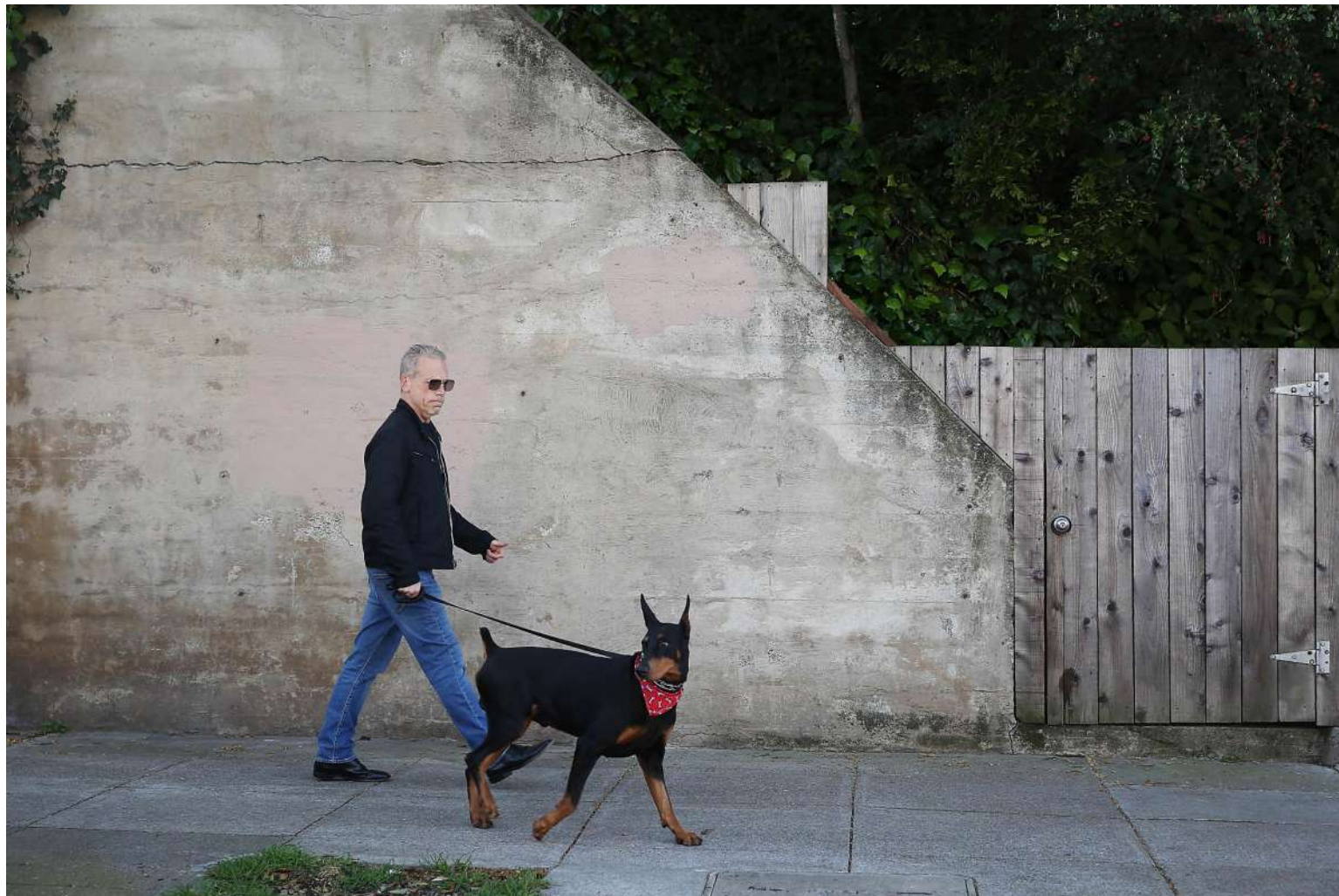


HEALTHY LIVING // HEALTH

Coronavirus sets off 'generational shaming' across Bay Area and nation

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Scott Herbst takes his dog, Phoenix, for a solo walk along 19th Street in San Francisco. Herbst is distressed that some people are shrugging off the need for social distancing.

Photo: Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Long before “Don’t trust anyone over 30” was a 1960s mantra, Peter the Hermit in 1274 A.D. supposedly intoned: “The young people of today think of nothing but themselves. They have no reverence for parents or old age.”

In other words, intergenerational disdain has deep roots. And when you add an economically ruinous pandemic to the already simmering mix, it’s no surprise that nationwide concern over the coronavirus is fueling yet more intergenerational strife.

“Generational shaming is a time-honored tradition,” said Michael North, a business professor at New York University who has researched the recent spat of media standoffs between Baby Boomers and Millennials. “What’s taking place now is a symptom of our inherent generational divide, not a cause.”

Stereotypes abound — be it Millennials who would rather meet up with their friends than practice social distancing, or Boomer parents who disregard health warnings that they’re not as young as they feel and may be more susceptible to the virus. Both groups recoil at the sight of Gen Z college students flocking to beaches for spring break.

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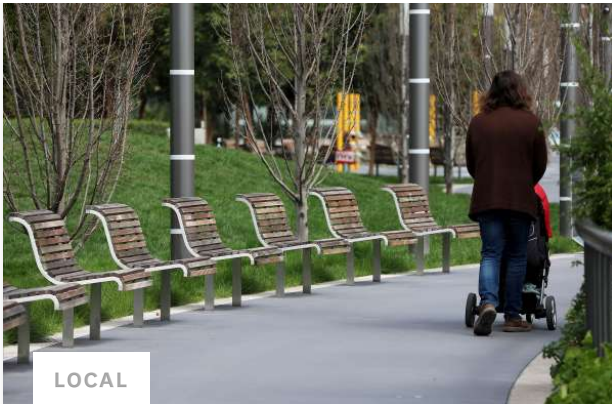
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The finger-pointing is made easier by the way that Americans in the decades since World War II increasingly have been lumped into brackets of roughly 15 years — from Baby Boomers to Gen X, to Millennials, to Gen Z, and soon to whatever tag gets attached to the cohort born after 2012.

“The idea that Americans are born to a particular generation is a postwar phenomenon,” said Martha Lincoln, an assistant professor in anthropology at San Francisco State University. “That’s when the idea of a ‘youth culture’ becomes significant.”

Simplistic or not, such characterizations are found everywhere from social media memes to the conversations now taking place online instead of at work or a favorite bar. The spark is a virus that four months ago was unknown, but people familiar with generational dynamics say they throw light on a deeper truth — that when times are stressful, many of us start looking for someone else to point the finger at.



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A local angle to this frustration among age groups played out this month on CNN, as news anchor Jake Tapper and senior medical correspondent Sanjay Gupta watched a live feed of people in San Francisco relaxing along the Embarcadero on the day that the Bay Area's shelter-in-place order went into effect. Some kept their social distance from other strollers. Many did not.

"People out there who are Millennials or younger ... who the hell are you to be walking around just giving this to old people?" fumed Tapper, 51.

"How I behave affects your health. How you behave affects my health," agreed Gupta, 50.

A variation of that message comes from Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House's Coronavirus Task Force. In a video prepared for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, she asks Millennials to help older family

The frustration travels in the other direction, as well, though sometimes expressed in ironic tones.

“I know what you’re thinking: ‘My children and grandchildren are saying they can’t visit because of science and public health now? How convenient,’” Eli Pariser, 39, former executive director of Moveon.org, wrote in a CNN opinion piece this month. “But it’s not an excuse, we swear, and we’re happy to triple down on FaceTime to prove it.”

“

Great op ed....@FoxNews@CNN

Opinion: Hello, Boomer? It's Millennials. We need to talk about
coronavirus<https://t.co/evxkkaTYHe>

— tegantay99 (@tegantay991) March 14, 2020

”

Younger Bay Area adults tell of parents who see no reason to set aside their daily routines, even though people above 60 are found to be the age group most liable to die from COVID-19 if they become infected.

Amy Thomson, for instance, is a master’s student at UC Berkeley’s College of Environmental Design who these days does her socializing via virtual cocktail parties. In these online gatherings, a recurring topic is parents who shrug off calls to shelter in place and avoid social gatherings.

not changing his plans.

When older people lose patience with younger ones, the prod can be reports such as Tapper's on CNN. Or multiple stories about defiant spring break revelry. Or snippets like the young adult in Dolores Park who last weekend told KRON-TV, "I know it's not what people advise, but at the end of the day, I just wanted to go out and have some fun."

“

"I'm like prime age... not a lot of people my age are dying." #SanFrancisco youth ignore stay-at-home order to spend time with friends, @DanThorn_ reports:
<https://t.co/v3k1ofmG3u> pic.twitter.com/hqvncdn5QI

— KRON4 News (@kron4news) March 23, 2020

”

Among those dismayed by that attitude is Scott Herbst, 55, a retired lawyer who moved to San Francisco in 2001 and lives in the Castro. His daily rounds are now limited to walking his dog on nearby steep streets or brief stops at corner markets, and he's distressed to see the reports of other generations not taking the threat to heart.

"The stories tend to be about younger folks, like at Miami Beach," Herbst said. "They feel they're invincible. I get it. But we're talking about making sacrifices for three weeks or three months, not three years. There are real health concerns."

A key factor in all this, suggests one sociologist, is that so little is known about how deadly the pandemic might be, or how long it might last. Instead of answers, there's anxiety.

This trait plays out in other ways in the Bay Area — as when Boomers fighting development proposals in their communities are depicted as a cause of the Bay Area's housing crisis.

“When we have a belief that the Bay Area sucks, or that a certain group sucks, then we'll see things that reinforce that,” suggested Tess Brigham. She's a life coach in El Cerrito who has been speaking with younger clients in the past weeks about their loneliness and uncertainties related to the coronavirus. “The reality is, when we look around, it's members of all different generations who are taking this seriously or not.”

Jon Rich is an Inner Richmond District resident who took to Twitter the week before the shelter-in-place order to express his dismay that on a walk down Clement Street, “the bars were packed wall to wall with people. I know we Millennials are young, but our coworkers, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles are not.”

“

Just walked down Clement St. in the Inner Richmond district of SF for some exercise:

The bars were packed wall-to-wall with people.

I know we millennials are young, but our coworkers, parents, grandparents, aunts,

We're better than this. Go home. [#covid19](#)

— Jon Rice (@JonFRice) March 15, 2020

”

Though his tweet dissed peers for ignoring the requests of officials at the time to observe social distance, “it’s not so much about age,” Rich said this week. “It’s more about informational literacy. I emphasized the Millennials I saw because that’s my age group.”

Thomson agrees. At Cal she was frustrated to hear other students downplay the likely spread of the coronavirus, while she and her friends were careful to practice social distancing before any orders came down.

“I’d see friends on Instagram, going on trips or to big events, and it really worries me,” Thomson said. “The majority of my friends, though, they understand the importance of this.”

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