

They're new parents, retail workers, teachers. And they're fed up with all young people being labelled covidiot

Karon Liu

By now we've all seen videos and photos of packed house parties, [beaches](#) and [even concerts](#) full of young people not physically distancing as if the [pandemic](#) is over.

In July, Ontario Premier Ford [made a plea to young people to "rein it in"](#) and to think of their grandparents after a spike in COVID-19 cases — more than half of which were people 39 and under. In the U.S., health officials have also been [imploring young people to take the outbreak more seriously](#).

But rather than lumping all millennials and Gen Z members into one monolith, it's important to remember that just because someone under 40 gets infected, it's not always via a crowded house party, says Dr. Colin Furness, an infection control epidemiologist and assistant professor at the faculty of information at the University of Toronto.

"The way we answer that question is learning from contact tracing. It will tell you about occupations, who they were in contact with, whether they have a service job or are really rich and bored," he said.

Furness says the more data is collected about those infected, the better understanding we will have of who and how the virus affects people within these age groups. New data released last week, for example, revealed COVID-19's [disproportionate impact on Toronto's racialized and low-income groups](#).

"It's more complicated than kids going to parties," Furness said. "I have students and recent former students and they're all uniformly cautious."

Canadian millennials and Gen Z members have already been feeling the brunt of the pandemic. [Between a quarter and a third of them have lost their jobs](#), many of which are in the retail and food sector, which doesn't allow for working from home.

When thinking about [outbreaks in bars and restaurants](#) something to consider beyond young patrons, is that the people working in those jobs tend to skew younger. [The 2016 Census found the median age of food and beverage servers was 26](#), the median age of people working in retail was 33 and the median age in the overall service sector was 36.

"I find it frustrating when it isn't taken into consideration that (young people) are working in minimum wage jobs, can't afford to quit, are taking care of elderly family members, don't have a car, working in the gig economy and live with our roommates in a tiny condo with no privacy and no windows that open," said Ruth Collings, 30, a Cabbagetown resident whose roommate is a nurse. "As long as certain people want their groceries delivered to minimize their own COVID-19 risk, someone has to

deliver them and take on that risk.”

Collings adds that as a person living with a chronic illness, she's already aware of the risks of infection and frustrated by the stereotype that young people feel “[invincible](#)” to the virus.

To Collings' point, when the Star [posted a Twitter call-out](#) to millennials and Gen Z members in the GTA asking whether they still exercise precautions during the pandemic, more than 150 responses from people who are parents, educators, students, immunocompromised and living with family say viral videos of young people in crowded beaches and bars don't paint a complete picture of how people under 40 are behaving during the pandemic.

Chanele McFarlane, 28, gave birth to her daughter Eden this past April and has been extra careful about outings. She says her and her husband Chris, 31, do curbside pickup for groceries, wipe down everything that comes into the house and wash their hands before holding their daughter.

“Other than doctor appointments, I haven't stepped foot inside anywhere,” said the Brampton resident who works in marketing. “When I see crowds on TV, you couldn't pay me to be reckless like that and we don't know the effects the virus has on newborns.”

McFarlane adds that they're not only being extra cautious for their newborn, but also McFarlane's grandmother who is 80. She wants their daughter to be able to spend as much time with her great-grandmother as possible.

Another new parent, Kevin Hulbert, a 37-year-old recruiter living in Mississauga, has been having discussions with his wife Christine Bottomley, a 37-year-old nurse practitioner, about who within their family can see their 10-month-old son, Benjamin.

While Hulbert hasn't been participating in most of the Stage 3 activities, he says the provincial government's emphasis on reopening the economy means more people have to go back to work, and people are being given the green light to eat, drink and work inside restaurants.

“We're being criticized for not being cautious, but are [encouraged to go to areas](#) that seem like a recipe for disaster and greater spread,” he said. “That's the frustrating part, the mixed messaging.”

Members [of Gen Z have also grown tired](#) of being [branded covidiot](#)s.

Robyn Matuto is a 22-year-old working from her home in digital marketing. The North York resident says it's not unusual for immigrant families to live in multi-generational households that include grandparents, one of the reasons why she and her friends continue to restrict social interactions to Zoom calls and the occasional park meetup.

“For a 22-year-old it might not be a big risk to go out, but if we're coming back to our lolo (grandfather in Tagalog) we don't have the luxury of going out.

“I feel like people are seeing the [King West crowd](#), which tend to be better off and maybe have different life circumstances,” Matuto said. “I live with my mom, but so

many of my friends live with others and can't buy into the idea of partying when there are six other people at home."

Nishat Chowdhury, 19, is a Ryerson journalism student and has been working part-time at a clothing store in Scarborough Town Centre since the end of June.

She was first asked to go back to work in April to help process online orders, as malls weren't allowed to open yet, but she didn't feel ready at the time. She currently takes the bus and the LRT to get to work from her home, which she shares with her family of five.

"I do know people who go party and not wear masks and it's frustrating, but it's also unfair (to only blame young people) because there is a large number of people like me who are following public health guidelines," she said, adding that there are [plenty of viral videos of older people](#) starting fights in stores because they didn't want to wear a mask.

"I have a group of seven to eight friends that I barely see because we live in different parts of the city, but when I do we're in a field where no one is around and we don't hug. People think we're dumb and not empathetic, but we have people at home who are vulnerable, and I have older coworkers to think about."

It may be [tempting to put the blame solely on young people](#). The "millennials are ruining everything" headline has [become a meme](#) at [this point](#). Among the things millennials have been blamed for in the last 10 years: [the end of the NFL](#), the [declining housing market](#), the [unpopularity of McDonald's](#), [falling yogurt sales](#) and [falling pet food sales](#).

"The trope of millennials ruining everything has followed all the stages of our lives," said Mira Dineen, a 31-year-old social worker who provides counselling to young women with anxiety. "It's frustrating because there's so much more going on."

Dineen said COVID-19 has been a topic with many of her clients and they've been taking extensive caution.

[Lockdown fatigue](#) has also been attributed to why younger people are more out and about.

Lucia Hernandez, a 34-year-old translator working from her home in Roncesvalles, acknowledges the challenges young people have when circumstances make it harder to stay at home.

"I know for me, [living without AC](#), [not having a backyard](#), some part of me gets it to some degree," she said. "And then there are people who have no choice and have to go to work."

Still, Hernandez says she's not venturing out much out of concern for her husband's parents.

Anne-Marie Longpre, 37, says she and her 33-year-old partner only go out for groceries and distanced gatherings at the park in their Little Italy neighbourhood. Longpre is a high school teacher, and come September, she will be back in the classroom.

"I feel like being a teacher makes you an expert on how viruses spread," she said. "I

got strep throat twice last year. When you're in an enclosed space with poor ventilation, that's just how it works."

Longpre says she wants to make sure she stays healthy when she goes back to school, and that returning to work will also mean ending visits to her mom's backyard. "It's something we've already discussed," she said. "I won't see my mom for a while once school starts because my contact with others will go up."

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