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The Go-Nowhere Generation

By TODD G. BUCHHOLZ and VICTORIA BUCHHOLZ

AMERICANS are supposed to be mobile and even pushy. Saul Bellow's Augie March declares, "I am an American ... first to knock, first admitted." In "The Grapes of Wrath," young Tom Joad loads up his jalopy with pork snacks and relatives, and the family flees the Oklahoma dust bowl for sun-kissed California. Along the way, Granma dies, but the Joads keep going.

But sometime in the past 30 years, someone has hit the brakes and Americans — particularly young Americans — have become risk-averse and sedentary. The timing is terrible. With an 8.3 percent unemployment rate and a foreclosure rate that would grab the attention of the Joads, young Americans are less inclined to pack up and move to sunnier economic climes.

The likelihood of 20-somethings moving to another state has dropped well over 40 percent since the 1980s, according to calculations based on Census Bureau data. The stuck-at-home mentality hits college-educated Americans as well as those without high school degrees. According to the Pew Research Center, the proportion of young adults living at home nearly doubled between 1980 and 2008, before the Great Recession hit. Even bicycle sales are lower now than they were in 2000. Today's generation is literally going nowhere. *This is the Occupy movement we should really be worried about.*

For about \$200, young Nevadans who face a statewide 13 percent jobless rate can hop a Greyhound bus to North Dakota, where they'll find a welcome sign and a 3.3 percent rate. Why are young people not crossing borders? "This generation is going through an economic reset," said John Della Volpe, who directs polling at Harvard's Institute of Politics, which surveys thousands of young people each year. He reports that young people want to stay more connected with their hometowns: "I spoke with a kid from Columbus, Ohio, who dreamed of being a high school teacher. When he found out he'd have to move to Arizona or the Sunbelt, he took a job in a Columbus tire factory."

In the most startling behavioral change among young people since James Dean and Marlon Brando started mumbling, an increasing number of teenagers are not even bothering to get their driver's licenses. Back in the early 1980s, 80 percent of 18-year-olds proudly strutted out of the D.M.V. with newly minted licenses, according to a study by researchers at the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute. By 2008 — even before the Great Recession — that number had dropped to 65 percent. Though it's easy to blame the high cost of cars or gasoline, Comerica Bank's Automobile Affordability Index shows that it takes fewer weeks of work income to buy a car today than in the early 1980s, and inflation-adjusted gasoline prices didn't get out of line until a few years ago.

Perhaps young people are too happy at home checking Facebook. In a study of 15 countries, Michael Sivak, a professor at the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute (who also contributed to the D.M.V. research), found that when young people spent more time on the Internet, they delayed getting their driver's licenses. "More time on Facebook probably means less time on the road," he said. That may mean safer roads, but it also means a bumpier, less vibrant economy.

All this turns American history on its head. We are a nation of movers and shakers. Pilgrims leapt onto leaky boats to get here. The Lost Generation chased Hemingway and Gertrude Stein to Paris. The Greatest Generation signed up to ship out to fight Nazis in Germany or the Japanese imperial forces in the Pacific. The '60s kids joined the Peace Corps.

But Generation Y has become Generation Why Bother. The Great Recession and the still weak economy make the trend toward risk aversion worse. Children raised during recessions ultimately take fewer risks with their investments and their jobs. Even when the recession passes, they don't strive as hard to find new jobs, and they hang on to lousy jobs longer. Research by the economist Lisa B. Kahn of the Yale School of Management shows that those who graduated from college during a poor economy experienced a relative wage loss even 15 years after entering the work force.

Perhaps more worrisome, kids who grow up during tough economic times also tend to believe that luck plays a bigger role in their success, which breeds complacency. "Young people raised during recessions end up less entrepreneurial and less willing to leave home because they believe that luck counts more than effort," said Paola Giuliano, an economist at U.C.L.A.'s Anderson School of Management. A bad economy can boost a person's weighting of luck by 20 percent, Ms. Giuliano found.

Notice how popular the word "random" has become among young people. A Disney TV show called "So Random!" has ranked first in the ratings among tweens. The word has morphed from a precise statistical term to an all-purpose phrase that stresses the illogic and coincidence of life. Unfortunately, societies that emphasize luck over logic are not likely to thrive.

In the mid-'70s, back when every high school kid longed for his driver's license and a chance to hit the road and find freedom, Bruce Springsteen wrote his brilliant, exciting album "Born to Run." A generation later, as kids began to hunker down, Mr. Springsteen wrote his depressing, dead-end dirge, "The Ghost of Tom Joad." We need to reward and encourage forward movement, not slouching. That may sound harsh, but do we really want to turn into a country where young Americans can't even recognize the courage of Tom Joad?

Maybe it's time to yank out the power cords, pump up the flat bicycle tires or even reopen Route 66 — whatever it takes to get our kids back on the road.

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