

The Bridger Generation Thom S. Rainer

Introduction:

Who Are the Bridgers?

- The bridger generation was born between 1977 and 1994.
- There are seventy-two million bridgers, the second largest generation in America's history.
- The bridgers come from a different world than previous generations in terms of race, families, economy, and religion.

Meet the Bridgers

- The bridgers are only slightly smaller than the baby boomer population.
- Some writers have referred to them as "the next boom," "the echoboomers," "the new boom," and "the vava boom."
- I have named this generation "the bridgers" because they will *bridge* two centuries and two millennia.
- The bridger generation is already being cited as a "religious" generation.

The Generations Before

- The Builders (Born 1910-46)
- The Boomers (Born 1946-1964)
- The Busters (Born 1965-1976)
 - The busters are sometimes called slackers, but the critics are typically condescending boomers.
 - The busters are stereotyped as pessimists, perhaps with some justification.

And Now – The Bridgers

- The Bridger's Share of the U.S. Population, 1995:

	<u>Number (thousands)</u>	<u>% of Total Population</u>
Total (all age groups)	262,754	100.0
Bridgers (1977-94)	72,176	27.5
Busters (1965-76)	44,603	17.0
Boomers (1946-64)	77,587	29.5
Builders (before 1946):		
Swing (1933-45)	30,728	11.7
World War II (before 1933)	37,662	14.3

- The Bridgers will not fit the molds nor the expectations of the boomers.
- Two Different Worlds

<u>Boomers</u>	<u>Bridgers</u>
Cold War	regional wars
nuclear threat	terrorist threats
economic prosperity	economic uncertainty
mother's care	day care
"Father Knows Best"	Father isn't home
TV dinners	low-fat fast food
network TV	cable TV
45s and "American Bandstand"	CD's and MTV
Ma Bell	Internet
VW buses	minivans and SUV's
Free Love	condoms
VD	AIDS
monocultural	multicultural

- The bridgers are also a much more confident and ambitious generation than the boomers.
- Attitudes of College Freshmen:
1971 (boomers) and 1993 (bridgers)

Reasons noted as very important in deciding to go to college:

	<u>Boomers 1971</u>	<u>Bridgers 1993</u>
Parents wanted me to	22.9%	34.6%
Get a better job	73.8%	82.1%
Gain general education	59.5%	65.3%
Make more money	49.9%	75.1%
Learn about things	68.8%	75.2%
Prepare for graduate/professional school	34.5%	61.2%

Objectives considered to be essential or very important:

	<u>Boomers 1971</u>	<u>Bridgers 1993</u>
Raise a family	60.2%	70.6%
Be very well off financially	40.1%	74.5%
Help others in difficulty	62.7%	63.3%
Be successful in own business	41.9%	42.6%
Participate in community action	25.9%	25.6%

Students who rated themselves above average in:

	<u>Boomers 1971</u>	<u>Bridgers 1993</u>
Academic ability	50.6%	56.1%
Leadership ability	34.9%	55.9%
Mathematical ability	32.0%	43.0%
Popularity	29.2%	45.6%
Self-confidence (intellectual)	34.8%	59.6%
Self-confidence (social)	27.4%	51.3%

Source: *The American Freshman*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California – Los Angeles.

The World of the Bridgers

- Their Multiracial World:
 - Bridgers know that their world is both multiracial and multicultural.
 - The increased diversity is engendering two significantly different responses from the bridgers.
 - A large number of bridgers are calling for greater tolerance.
 - Among the bridgers, we will likely find the greatest level of racial tolerance our nation has ever known *and* the most intense bigotry a generation has produced in a century.
- Their Diverse Families:
 - Susan Mitchell suggests the introductory question of children boomers was: “What does your father do for a living?” But, she proposes, the question of children bridgers is: “Does your dad live with you?”

	<u>Children Boomers 1970</u>	<u>Children Bridgers 1993</u>
Two-parent homes-all	85%	71%
Two-parent homes-black	64%	39%
Two-parent homes-white	90%	77%
One-parent homes-all	12%	27%
One-parent homes-black	35%	60%
One-parent homes-white	10%	22%
Living with a never-married mother-all	7%	31%

- The children surveyed also say their parents’ opinions matter most to them when it comes to drinking, spending money, and questions about sex and AIDS. They even listen more to their parents than their friends about which snack foods to eat.

- Their economic world:
The bridger generation is already divided economically between the “haves” and “have-nots.”
Bridgers have a high level of confidence that they can do well individually even though the economy will suffer in the aggregate.
- Their religious world:
The bridgers are a religious group.
The bridgers as a generation believe in almost any expression of a higher being or higher power.
They resist any claim that one faith system is superior or exclusive.

The Church: Learning from Past Failures

- In both the boomer and the buster generations, the church did experience a season of success in reaching a large number from each group.
- The quick surge of church growth from these generations was almost equally matched by a quick exodus over three to seven years. Two primary factors explain this:
 - Mistake #1: Eagerness to Accommodate
 - Some churches went overboard in making changes.
 - The user-friendly exuberance led to low expectations and subtle encouragement of biblical illiteracy.
 - The boomers and the busters entered the church looking for something different. The relevancy of the worship, the ability to remain anonymous, and the hope of the Christian faith initially attracted them. But they quietly left the church when they discovered it to be amazingly similar to the world they knew.
 - They were looking for a challenge; what they found was the lowest of expectations.
 - Mistake #2: Waiting for Adulthood
 - A second major mistake made by many churches attempting to reach the boomers and busters is that they waited until these generations reached adulthood.

The Church and the Bridgers: A Time of Challenge – A Time of Hope

- A prayer movement is renewing churches, college campuses, and denominations.
- A renewed hunger for God's Word abounds.

Chapter One: The Minds of the Bridgers

Highlights:

- The bridger generation is very worried about the education they are receiving.
- No generation at this young age has experienced more stress.
- This generation is the most serious yet.
- The bridgers could be called "the visual generation."
- The bridgers worry about money.
- Bridgers are not nearly as pessimistic about themselves as older generations are about them.
- In a study of older bridgers, the research found some encouraging self-portraits among the 723 bridgers interviewed:
 - Approximately 80% describe themselves as "excited about life."
 - Three out of four claim they are "trusting of other people."
 - Nearly 75% say they are "optimistic about the future."
 - Two-thirds see themselves as leaders.
 - Only a minority admit that they are "stressed out."
 - Less than 20% say they are "lonely."
 - Only 20% describe themselves as "discouraged."

What Is on Their Minds?

- Reading, Writing, and a Whole Lot More!
 - Their education is the number one topic on their minds.
 - Bridgers are being judged today by their classroom achievements more than any other measure.
 - It is little wonder that bridgers who make "As" are more excited, trusting, and optimistic than "C" students, while the lower academic-performing bridgers are more stressed out, lonely, and discouraged.

- While bridgers have education on their mind, they are less inclined to do something about it.
- The bridgers have education as the foremost issue on their mind, but the system is failing them, and they are failing the system.
- The greater tragedy is that the bridgers seem truly desirous of education, but what we are offering them is mediocre at best and irrelevant at worst.
- Stressed-out Minds
 - The bridgers are the first generation raised predominantly by working mothers.
 - They are growing up with the highest crime rate ever.
 - They are growing up in the most fragmented families of any American generation.
 - They are confused about leaders in our nation who seem to say one thing but do another.
 - Peer pressure and issues of sexuality are ever-present stress issues.
- Independence vs. Dependence
 - Because adulthood has been forced upon the bridgers prematurely, they are far more independent than previous generations.
 - They have the freedom to acquire more information earlier, which may have negative consequences.
 - The bridgers are more insecure about forming relationships or dealing with anyone outside the security of their own home.
 - The generation that assumed household responsibilities at the earliest age may also be the generation that leaves that home at the latest age.
- A Very Serious Group of People!
 - Carefree childhoods are not the norm for the majority of bridgers.
 - Bridgers face much more serious problems than the boomers did when they were children.
 - They are focusing on the best way to get a better job, a better education, a better financial position, and better leadership skills.
- The Visual Generation
 - *Visually Sophisticated.* The bridgers “are able to take in information visually as never before.

- *Captivated by the Tube.*

Weekly Television Viewing for Bridgers
(Shown in hours: minutes per week)

	<u>Ages 12-17</u>	<u>Under Age 12</u>
Total viewing time	21:50	23:01
Monday-Friday, 7:00am – 10:00 am	:52	2:07
Monday-Friday, 10:00am – 4:00pm	1:55	3:11
Monday-Friday, prime time	6:57	5:42
Saturday-Sunday, 7:00am – 1:00pm	:51	1:24
Sunday, 1:00pm – 7:00pm	1:23	1:13

- Surprisingly, bridgers are not the worst television junkies. Adult women spend nearly 40 percent more time at the television than teenage bridgers. And adult men spend almost 30 percent more time watching television than bridgers. The difference is that the bridgers' lives have been dominated by television since birth.
- *Shorter Attention Spans.*
- *Bored Silly.*
- The visual bridgers have not had many opportunities in their lives to do nothing, to relax, to read, or to reflect. They are either too busy with an activity or they are watching television.
- *Read Less.* Reading does not capture the attention of most bridgers.
- *Slower Developmental Skills.* Their verbal skills are weak.
- Not the least among these downside issues is that bridgers may mature more slowly in emotional, intellectual, and developmental skills.
- Money on Their Minds
 - Bridgers have economic issues on their minds.
 - *Reason #1: Materialistic Boomer Parents.* The parents of bridgers are poor examples.
 - *Reason #2: The Downsizing Environment.* Fear of job losses is very much a concern for many adults. Bridgers are money –minded because they fear the money may soon be gone.
 - *Reason #3: Family Deterioration.* Half of the bridgers will live with a single parent before they reach the age of eighteen.
 - *Reason #4: Their Own Materialistic Values.* Many bridgers also have been exposed to the ways of consumerism at an

early age through the influences of the media, politicians, and a myriad of other forces.

- The bridgers have more money than any generation in history, but, paradoxically, they have more money worries.
- Skeptical Minds
 - The church lost more boomers for a lot of reasons, but one of the big ones was that the church *assumed* the boomers would not commit to the church's values. We must not make the same mistake with the bridgers.
- Politically Confused
 - There is no political patter that fits with their system.
- Thoughts about God?
 - The reason "God" is on their minds, however, is that all other avenues to fulfillment seem empty.
 - The bridgers have "God" on their minds. Their key question is: What kind of God will they find?

The Church Responds

- Understanding is not synonymous with total accommodation.
- Research shows that the baby boomers returned to the church in large numbers in the 1980s, perhaps as many as twenty million. Sadly, that same research shows that the boomers exited the church by the same number or even greater in the 1990s.
- A Solution for Stressed-out Bridgers
 - Rather than soft-pedaling the gospel message, we must present it clearly and without compromise. They must know that peace can never be found outside of Jesus Christ.
- An Answer to the Independence/Dependence Struggle
 - Many would like more clearly defined boundaries.
- Christ Is the Only Way
 - Bridgers may resist exclusivism.
 - If we really love them and have a biblical theology of lostness, they will see our love and concern.

Chapter Two: The World They Knew

Highlights

- The bridger generation does not have the “web” of extended family or friends that previous generations knew.
- The bridgers will replace the boomers are the generation upon which the nation gives its attention.
- The bridgers could be called “the media generation.”
- The bridgers could be called “the rights generation.”
- The bridgers are growing up in a world that has devalued human life.

Ten Shaping Influences of the Bridgers

- Shaping Influence #1: Disappearance of “The Web”
- Shaping Influence #2: The Important Generational Attention
 - One of the reasons that the baby boomer generation continues to be self-serving is that everyone has told them how important they are.
 - The bridgers will receive this same level of attention.
- Shaping Influence #3: Economic Uncertainty
 - Bridgers will be taught that the economic health of our nation is sound, but only so if everyone makes necessary sacrifices.
 - Though bridgers may be less idealistic than the boomers, they seem to have a healthy realistic approach to the economy.
- Shaping Influence #4: Emergence of the Media Generation
- Shaping Influence #5: Preoccupation with “Rights”
 - The bridger generation will not be asking what they can do for their country; rather, they will be asking what their country has done for them lately.

- Shaping Influence #6: Disappearance of Moral Boundaries

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Uncertain</u>
What is right for one person in a given situation might not be right for another person in a similar situation.	91%	8%	1%
When it comes to matters of moral and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive that they know the truth.	80%	19%	1%
Lying is sometimes necessary.	57%	42%	1%
The main purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment.	64%	36%	0%

- These bridgers as a rule cannot give a clear reason why they should *not* be involved in such behavior [sexual]. Amorality among these children will soon reap disastrous consequences.

- Shaping Influence #7: Rising Violence

- The issue of crime and violence is foremost on the minds of bridgers.

- Shaping Influence #8: Vanishing Gender Roles

- Tomorrow's young men will be more likely to try hair colour and jewelry, while women will be more likely to visit the hardware stores.

- Shaping Influence #9: Rapid Change Driven by High Tech

- Infotech will become increasingly portable and smaller.
- Infotech will be implanted in our bodies.
- The costs of high technology will continue to decline dramatically.
- Rural and resort areas will boom as high tech allows people to work at home.
- High technology will allow children to start formal education at earlier ages.
- Some bridgers may spend little or no time on a university campus as they get a college education.
- Skills and knowledge will become obsolete faster than ever.
- Cash will become increasingly less popular.
- We will spend more time in the comfort of our homes.

- Shaping Influence #10: Devaluation of Life.
 - Largely unknown to the bridger generation is the Christian perspective that suffering can be an instrument for God's glory.
 - The bridger generation has largely responded to abortion, infanticide, and assisted suicide with indifference.

The Church Responds

- The Priority of Scripture
 - Those churches that reach the bridgers will be biblical churches.
- Willingness to Be Persecuted
 - Will the church stand firm?
- A Heart for Evangelism
 - People do not have a heart and passion for evangelism. Churches that reach the bridgers must have people who believe that those without Christ go to hell when they die.
- High-expectation Churches
 - Low-commitment youth respond better to a high-commitment church.
- Reach the Bridgers, Now!
 - Between 75 and 90 percent of all Christians in America became believers before the age of nineteen.

Chapter Three: It's a Family Affair

Highlights

- The bridger generation is redefining the meaning of family
- The bridgers could be called "the fatherless generation."
- The bridgers could be called "the daycare generation" or "the latchkey generation."
- The bridgers have less time with their parents than any previous generation.

The Seven Greatest Family Influences on the Bridgers

- Influence #1: Acceptance of Divorce
 - Half of the bridgers whose parents divorced are entering adulthood underachieving, worried, angry, and with feelings of inferiority.
 - Sixty percent of the bridger children feel rejected by one or both parents.
 - Four in ten of these bridgers have no goals or ambitions for life.
 - Many of the bridgers, particularly the females, will enter their own marriages with guilt and anxiety.
 - The bridger children of divorce will be more rebellious and present greater discipline problems.
 - Emotions of fear, guilt, and depression will be common among the bridger children of divorce.
 - These bridgers will be less likely to trust others.
- Influence #2: The Fatherless Home
 - Children who grow without dads have a greater risk of suffering from emotional pain and behavioral problems.
- Influence #3: Mothers Working outside the Home
 - Because bridgers are less dependent, they can care for others and themselves more readily. But this independence results in their aloofness and distancing themselves from others.
 - Because bridgers are required to care for themselves more, they have more information and are more savvy about the world. But they are also less optimistic and less idealistic.
 - Because bridgers grew up with their parents gone most of the time, they handle more adult responsibilities at a younger age. But they have “less time for internal growth, for slow maturation, and fewer hours in the dreamy imagination states that many think is a key to a satisfying adulthood.
- Influence #4: Decreasing Time between Bridgers and Their Parents
- Influence #5: Victims of Family Violence
- Influence #6: Smaller Families/Children Leave Later

- Influence #7: Better Communications? Yes! Not!

<u>Survey Question</u>	<u>Teens' Response</u>	<u>Parents' Response</u>
Have you had one or more alcoholic drinks?	66% say yes	34% think they have
Have you considered suicide?	43% say yes	15% think they have
Have you ever smoked?	41% say yes	14% think they have
Do you tell your mom about boyfriends and sex?	36% say yes	80% think they do
Have you ever used drugs?	17% say yes	5% think they have
Have you lost your virginity?	70% say yes	14% think they have
Have you thought about running away from home?	35% say yes	19% think they have

The Bridgers Respond

- Sex without Boundaries
- Living in a Material World
- Stress-Depression-Suicide
- Substance Abuse
- No Time for Truth
 - The greatest threat to the bridgers in their family environment is the absence of Christian truth claims.

The Church Responds

- Provide a Safe Haven
- Proclaim the Good News
- Provide Clear, Biblical Teaching

The Church – the Family of God

- The church that reaches the bridgers will send a clear message that a family is available to love and care for them unconditionally.

Chapter Four: A Violent Generation

The Church Responds

- “Old-Fashioned” Time

- When we see anger, moral uncertainty, and disregard for authority common among bridgers, we also are seeing young persons hungry for time and real relationships with adults.
- Alternatives for Social Interaction
 - Bridgers typically respond to challenges. Churches that can be culturally relevant and biblically demanding will be the churches that reach this generation.
- Biblical Teachings
 - Seeker-friendly activities are only successful to a point. Eventually and soon the youth need to be exposed to Scripture.

Chapter Five: **It's the Economy, Stupid**

- Teach Christian bridgers biblical truths about money.
- Model a life of biblical stewardship.

Chapter Seven: **The Fears of the Bridgers**

Highlights

- The greatest fear among the bridgers is that something bad will happen to their families.
- Bridgers fear they will not make it financially as adults.
- This generation, like no generation before, has a fear of being a crime victim.
- The bridgers live in fear of AIDS.
- Fear #1: "Will something bad happen to my family?"
- Fear #2: "Will I get a good education?"
- Fear #3: "Will I be able to make it financially?"
- Fear #4: "Will I (or someone I know) be a victim of violence or crime?"
- Fear #5: "Will my friends still like me if I don't go along?"
- Fear #6: "How do I tell right from wrong?"
- Fear #7: "Where will I find the time to do everything?"
- Fear #8: "Do I have to have sex this young?"

- Fear #9: “Will someone I know or love die from AIDS (maybe me!)?”
- Fear #10: “Will I ever have a happy marriage and family?”

Chapter Nine: **The Faith(s) of the Bridgers**

Highlights

- The bridgers are a very religious group, but almost any religion will do.
- This generation will resist the truth that Christ is the only way of salvation.
- The “big no” of the bridger generation is religious intolerance.
- The great heresy of the Christian church in the twenty-first century will be inclusivism.

Redefining Christianity

- The bridger generation is being influenced by adults in America.
- Universalism
 - Universalism is “the belief that no human being will ultimately be lost.
- Pluralism
 - Pluralism holds that humans may be saved or go to heaven through numerous religious traditions and saviors.
- Inclusivism
 - This belief attempts to capture the much-desired tolerance of pluralism while affirming the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.
- Exclusivism
 - Nash defines Christian exclusivism “as the belief that (1) Jesus Christ is the *only* Savior, and (2) explicit faith in Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation.”

Chapter Ten:
The Church Responds: Now, Not Later

Bridgers and Receptivity

- Obstacles in the Churches to Evangelizing the Bridgers:

Chart 25
 Estimated Proportion of Each Generation Reached for Christ:

<u>Generation</u>	<u>Percentage Reached for Christ</u>
Builders	65%
Boomers	35%
Busters	15%
Bridgers	4%

- Ignorance
 - Many church leaders simply do not realize that they are losing a generation.
 - “They don’t pay their way.”
 - “They mess up the church.”
 - “They’re not like us.”
 - “They cause too much change.”
 - “But we’ll neglect the adults.”
 - “They’re too young to understand.”

Will the Bridgers Come to Our Churches?

- Only a small number of the bridgers are making decisions for Christ.

Effective Evangelistic Churches: Reaching a Generation for Christ

- Unconditional love
- Clear boundaries
- High expectations
- Cultural sensitivity

Chapter Eleven:
The Church: A Real and Present Hope for the Bridger Generation

Parental Training

- When 100,000 children between the ages of eight and fourteen were asked what they wanted most in their parents, they named ten top items:
 - Parents who do not argue in front of them.
 - Parents who treat each member of the family the same.
 - Parents who are honest.
 - Parents who welcome their friends to the home.
 - Parents who are tolerant of others.
 - Parents who build a team spirit with their children.
 - Parents who answer their questions.
 - Parents who are consistent.
 - Parents who concentrate on their good points instead of their weaknesses.
 - Parents who give punishment when needed, but not in front of others, especially their friends.