

Millennials Upending Traditional Security Assumptions

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The following is a guest post from licensed clinical social worker and addiction counselor Kimberley Berlin.

What impact does drug and alcohol use by millennials have on their ability to obtain a security clearance? How do the differing substance abuse patterns and outlooks of millennials alter traditional personnel security assumptions? In this article, we explore not only the unique challenges for this generation, but also the consideration of how millennials may ultimately alter the Richter scale of security clearance adjudications in the future.

WHO ARE THESE “MILLENNIALS?”

“Millennials” are the demographic cohort born between the 1980’s and 1998, coming of age approximately in 2004. They range from 23 to 35 years old and are more sophisticated than any previous generation; primarily because they are the first to have grown up exclusively with technology as the foundation of their lives. They do not use checks – they use on-line banking and finance almost exclusively. They are not familiar with cassette tapes, and even CD’s are old technology – everything they listen to is downloaded, using MP3 or other formats. They multi-task and use truncated language in order to simultaneously text, email, post on social media, and check in with their manager. They may well have no idea what cc and bcc stand for. Newspapers have always been in color, they have always had access to email, and *Beta* is a preview version of software, not a VCR format.

This generation is not only world savvy; according to Pew Research Center, they are reading more books than any previous generation. They are dedicated to health and wellness, they influence food and fashion trends, and command instant access to knowledge. This desire for immediate answers drives the power of “apps” to give them feedback in “real time.”

CHANGING ATTITUDES AND OUTLOOKS

For a generation that is castigated for being self-absorbed, entitled, and reckless, the reality is far from popular opinion. Millennials almost exclusively disapprove of cigarette smoking and daily drinking and according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), they engage in significantly lower rates of drug and alcohol abuse than in previous years.

Millennials actually use fewer drugs and consume less alcohol than their parents or baby boomers. Tempting though it may be to point fingers, according to NIDA, teenage drug use declined by more than 34% between 1993 and 2013; a crucial time period that encompasses the teenage years of almost all millennials.

By all accounts, alcohol use is also less common for millennials. According to the same NIDA report, teen drinking has decreased by 42% since 2003 alone, and by more than 60% since 1995. Now that most millennials are in their 20's or 30's, this demographic is also leaning away from hard liquor, preferring craft beer and wine.

As marijuana became decriminalized and legalized across the U.S., this generation has had a completely different exposure to what has always been referred to as "the gateway drug." The mind-set of this group tends to view legalization as legitimate whether they are liberal or conservative. In a 2013 Harvard study 44 percent of participants supported legalization of marijuana for recreational use and 66% supported legalization for medical purposes. Just three years later, the Pew 2016 study showed that support for legalization had risen to 71% across all political platforms in the millennial cohort.

What is interesting to note in this study is that respondents were not influenced by whether they themselves smoked marijuana or not. This is an idealistic generation that views legalization as less of a personal or political question, and more of an issue whose time is long overdue.

IMPACTS ON NATIONAL SECURITY ASSUMPTIONS

So how do the opinions of and drug/alcohol use patterns of millennials impact the security clearance process?

In "The Millennial Generation and the Workplace" Elizabeth Claps delved into an extensive study of her generation's unique characteristics and how their upbringing contributed to their values, culture and outlook on life. Millennials are "...eager to get started on everything they had prepared for" they seek to "dive into the workforce" with unparalleled capabilities. To Millennials, jobs are not jobs, they are "lifestyle choices."

This is an important distinction to appreciate. Millennials may "experiment" in college – they may party, play and even slack – but when it comes to landing the dream job, all bets are off. Millennials *get serious*. Playtime is over and their lives as they have dreamed them, (and been told they deserve), can now become a reality. There is no time for any excess; whether drinking or smoking pot, their expectations of their performance is to be the best they can be with nothing interfering with their goals.

I have personally conducted almost one hundred security clearance evaluations on the millennial cohort. To a one, the pattern is the same: As young college students they wanted a taste of freedom and independence – their placement in a good college was hard won. Drinking on weekends and smoking the occasional joint is "just part of the landscape." If someone offered them Ecstasy at a concert, why not? Mushrooms on a camping trip? Sure – "I wanted to see what it was all about." But once experienced, and once the career trajectory is in place, the fun ends. Experimentation becomes a thing of the past; getting drunk on weekends is no longer a feasible or healthy choice, and an almost laser-like focus on success in the workplace takes over.

Claps describes this phenomenon:

"Millennials as a whole are independent, creative and efficient. They seek fairness, justice and diversity. Their development in a world of individualism and customization, their familiarity with technology, their ability to multitask and their desire for a balanced schedule of work and family all coalesce to create a life that is rewarding."

ADJUDICATIVE CONSIDERATIONS

These traits demand a more flexible view of a Millennial's history of illicit substances. While it is imperative that the DSM-V Criteria are always adhered to, more often than not, a millennial will abstain from *any* use of substances (often including alcohol) starting on the day they begin their application process into the workforce.

If they land the “dream job” that requires a clearance, the attitude is even more rigorous. Nothing will stand in the way of achieving their goals, particularly anything that they themselves might cause to damage their chances of success.

Millennials will give up “partying” with friends, experimentation, or any other previous behavior of their early college days without hesitation. What makes this population unique is that they have no problem giving substances up, and once they make up their mind to never engage in the activities again – they *don't*.

It is this last aspect of the millennial personality that should be attended to by those of us conducting security clearance evaluations, defending cases of denial, and yes, even hearing appeals. As hard as it is to appreciate, when these future government workers state they will never smoke a joint again – they *mean it*. When they say that they will never go out to a concert and use other illegal drugs again – they *won't*.

For millennials, the mind-set isn't so much that the risk is too great, it's that they have high expectations of everyone and everything, including themselves. Lowering the bar would never occur to them, and it is that ethic that lends itself to a more dedicated and productive worker who strives to improve not only the workplace but the world around them that makes the Millennial Generation “*The Next Great Generation*” to come.

Ms. Berlin is the owner of [Compassionate Beginnings, LLC](#), a private integrated therapy practice in Leesburg, Virginia. Her work focuses primarily on national security cases – including the evaluation of security clearance holders, pilots (by DOT regulation), and others whose fitness for duty has been questioned by the government.