

# The Impact of One's Generation on Their Perception of the Insanity Defense

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## ABSTRACT

Following *United States v. Hinckley*, where John W. Hinckley, Jr. was found not guilty by reason of insanity (NGRI) after his attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan, the insanity defense has become a contentious topic because of its connections to legal, moral, and ethical domains. Moreover, attitudes towards these fields differ among generations due to specific events that shape how each cohort responds to different systems, resulting in varying opinions of the defense. Thus, this study aims to 1) understand how generational differences impact one's perception of the insanity defense and 2) explore generational attitudes towards legal standards of insanity, mental health, and insanity myths. A primary survey was distributed to students and full-time employees at a midsize high school in Washington state that collected participants' (n=227) demographic information, level of support for the insanity defense, and questions regarding the legal standards of insanity, mental health, and insanity myths. A secondary survey presented 12 participants with a case study modeled off the *United States v. Hinckley* case and a verdict preference. Primary survey results were analyzed using Likert scales, and secondary survey results were categorized by themes identified in responses. Data shows that recent generation display a more positive perception of the insanity defense than older generations, who exhibit milder acceptance of mental health issues in legal contexts. All generations displayed unawareness about the realities of the defense. These conclusions highlight the importance of promoting age diversity in legal juries and the need to mitigate misconceptions regarding the insanity defense.

## Introduction

As part of Generation Z (Gen Z), my perception of society is vastly different than my parents' perception of society, who are part of Generation X (Gen X). Whether it be our opinions on technology or our differing levels of empathy towards others, these differences highlight how historical events and sociocultural evolutions shape how a generational cohort acts and reacts to different situations and processes, such as the insanity defense. The insanity defense sits at an intersection between mental health and legal standards, lending itself to be a complex topic with a variety of internal and external considerations. Therefore, my initial assumption is that generation plays a significant role in shaping perceptions regarding the insanity defense with younger generations supporting its use at a higher rate than older generations. Throughout this study, I made discoveries that both verified and refuted my assumptions. I also broadened my scope of research to encompass attitudes regarding the legal standards of insanity, attitudes towards mental health, and one's endorsement of insanity myths.

## Literature Review

### History and Evolution of the Insanity Defense

The concept of legal responsibility is not newfound, defined in Hebrew law as crimes committed with or without intent (Platt and Diamond, 1966). Prototypical examples of criminal incapacity include “accidental homicide and crimes committed by children or insane persons” (Platt and Diamond, 1966). Both children and those with mental disabilities have limited judgment and underdeveloped intellectual capacities; however, those with mental disabilities are unable to appreciate their actions due to the nature of their condition (Skeem, Loudon, and Evans, 2004). This underscores the principle that “In both law and morals, the capacity for reason is the primary foundation for responsibility and competence” (Morse and Bonnie, 2013). Moreover, to be convicted of a crime, evidence that proves the action of the crime (*actus reus*), as well as evidence that proves that the defendant was in a sane state of mind at the time of the offense (*mens rea*) is necessary (Zejneli and Arifi, 2022; Appelbaum, 2021). Thus, defendants with mental disabilities require a unique set of standards that are specific to their case (Nichols, 2023) as the conversation of *mens rea* is more complex, leading to the insanity defense.

Across the United States, there is no ‘standard’ for the use of the insanity defense (Appelbaum, 2021). Five states have even abolished it: Idaho, Utah, Montana, Kansas, and Alaska (Appelbaum, 2021). In its application, though, two chief legal standards of insanity are utilized nationwide: the *M’Naghten* rule and the *Durham* rule. (Butler, 2006; Nichols, 2023; Arens, 1974). As one of the earliest and most well-known tests for insanity in criminal cases, the *M’Naghten* rule states that the defendant is not criminally responsible if, at the time of the crime, they 1) did not know the nature and quality of the act or, if they did know it, 2) they did not know what they were doing was wrong, as a result of mental disability (Appelbaum, 2021). The *Durham* rule, established in 1954 in the case of *Durham v. United States*, states that the accused is not criminally responsible if the unlawful act was a product of mental illness (Arens, 1974). The defense holds the burden of proof, as of the Insanity Defense Reform Act of 1984, as the assumption that all defendants are sane is a fundamental principle of criminal law (Piel, 2012).

## Life for Defendants Found NGRI

Individuals found not guilty by reason of insanity (NGRI) are in two different sectors of society: those who exhibit criminal behavior and those who have mental health issues. Because of this intersection, NGRI inpatients are at heightened risk for suicidal ideation, future violence, and criminal offenses (Mitchell et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2020). In addition, NGRI acquittees often face recidivism and rehospitalization (Parker, 2004). Violence during hospitalization stays is common (Delgado et al., 2020). As a result, contrary to public perception, the duration and intensity of supervision and treatment processes of defendants found NGRI often exceed those of convicted criminals (Martin et al., 2022).

Hospitalization and community treatment programs are two pathways in which those found NGRI take. In *Foucha v. Louisiana*, the United States Supreme Court ruled that keeping Terry Foucha confined would be unconstitutional because he was in remission from mental illness, establishing the precedent for future cases (Vitacco et al., 2008). NGRI patients can receive conditional release from inpatient facilities if they 1) do not present a danger to society or themselves and 2) no longer suffer from a mental illness (McDermott et al., 2020). Specifically, conditional releases help individuals reside in the community without harming themselves or others. Components of support provided during conditional release, such as assertive community treatment (ACT), have been shown to decrease rehospitalization rates and increase success rates (Parker, 2004). The ACT model is where a select group of mental health professionals provide comprehensive, community-based care for individuals with mental health issues. However, data for such implemented programs are inconsistent and do not always show positive results (Vitacco et al., 2008). Such failures in conditional release programs can exacerbate the public’s often negative and adverse feelings (Vitacco et al., 2008).

## Impact of Generations' Formative Experiences

Age cohorts, or generations, each have distinctive characteristics that result from a shared exposure to historical events and sociocultural evolutions that occurred during a specific time period. These generational traits have significant implications on how an individual perceives certain societal systems and processes (Baltes, 1987). Presently, in the United States, the majority of the population falls within Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers.

Baby Boomers (1946-1964) have experienced the civil rights movement and the space race (Colvin and Tobler, 2013), while Gen X (1965-1980) has gone through the nuclear threat, the AIDS epidemic, and the Persian Gulf War (Hogan et al., 2017). Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, were shaped by the first major school shooting at Columbine High School and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Lastly, Gen Z has grown up in a society defined by the rise of technology, the high rate of school shootings, and the first African American president of the United States (Moscrip, 2019).

These formative experiences have shaped certain generational attitudes. For example, as societal norms shift (Moscrip, 2019), Gen Z tends to display greater openness and empathy toward mental health, while older adults are less likely to know and recognize mental health issues and the processes in place to help them with such (Currin, Hayslip, and Temple, 2011). Additionally, Gen Z has a different perception of perceived safety and risk (Moscrip, 2019) than older generations, who feel less vulnerable to attack because they see themselves as less of a risk (Tulloch, 2000).

## The Gap

Following *United States v. Hinckley*, in which John W. Hinckley, Jr. was found NGRI after his attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan, the insanity defense has come to the “forefront of American consciousness” (Butler, 2006; Piel, 2012). Since then, it has generated large amounts of controversy and discussion. Martin et al. (2022) identified that “the public often perceives the insanity defense as a ‘get out of jail free card’” and a legal loophole (Skeem, Loudon, and Evans, 2004). However, studies show that negative attitudes are mitigated when people learn the facts about the defense (Martin et al., 2022).

There is extensive research regarding venirepersons’<sup>1</sup> attitudes towards the insanity defense, such as studies conducted by Butler (2006) and Skeem, Loudon, and Evans (2004), that contextualize the impact of biases and experiences on the judicial processes and outcomes of insanity defense cases. However, little to no research addresses the influence of generation on societal perceptions of the defense. Considering that the insanity defense stands at an intersection of moral, ethical, and legal grounds, it is crucial to understand how differing generational attitudes towards each of these fields shape an individual’s principal opinion.

This gap in research poses the question: To what extent does one’s generation impact their perceptions of the insanity defense? To do this, the current study examines individuals’ attitudes toward the insanity defense using the model employed by Butler (2006) and investigate the impact of age on such attitudes.

## Methodologies

### Design

In this study, I employed a quantitative and qualitative survey-based research approach and utilized correlational research to analyze the results. I selected to use survey-based research as its definition and purpose align

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<sup>1</sup> A potential juror who undergoes jury selection.

with the goals of this study. Check and Schutt (2012) define survey research as “the collection of information from a sample of individuals through their responses to questions.” Specifically, it collects information “about their behaviors, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences” (Leedy et al., 2019, p. 153). The first aim of this study was to understand and collect information about one’s perception of the insanity defense. Thus, survey-based research was an appropriate method. Secondly, I analyzed the data using correlational research. This type of research “examines the extent to which differences in one variable are associated with differences in one or more other variables” (Leedy et al., 2019, p. 148), which helped explore any possible correlations between one’s perception of the insanity defense and their respective generation.

Furthermore, other studies with similar aims have employed survey-based research successfully. For example, Butler (2006) utilized this methodology while measuring the attitudes of venirepersons toward the insanity defense, and Skeem, Louden, and Evans (2004) implemented it when exploring a similar topic.

## Participants

The primary survey was distributed to the entire student body and all full-time employees (FTEs) via school email. Participation was purely voluntary. Study participants were gathered from Lake Washington High School (LWHS), a midsize public high school located in Kirkland, Washington, with a total population of 1,875 students and 115 teachers as of 2022-2023 (“Enrollment Report”, 2023; “Washington State Report Card”, 2023). LWHS is part of the Lake Washington School District (LWSD) which indicates the following student ethnic demographics for the high school: 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 20.3% Asian, 3.2% Black/African American, 13.2% Hispanic/Latino of any race, 54.4% White, 0.1% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific, and 8.7% multiethnic (“Ethnic Report Summary”, 2024). Ethnic demographics for LWHS’ FTE population are as follows: 0.9% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 4.4% Asian, 0.9% Black/African American, 7.8% Hispanic/Latino of any race, 80.9% White, and 5.2% multiethnic (“Washington State Report Card”, 2023).

In my initial survey, a sample of 127 respondents participated. Twelve participants were then voluntarily surveyed a second time. The recruitment process for this was embedded into the primary survey. Among those interested, a random number generator was used to select the participants to remove hints of bias. Of the 12 participants, four were Gen Xers, four were Millennials, and four were Gen Zers.

The initial survey spanned about three weeks, from February 12, 2024 to February 29, 2024, to allow sufficient completion opportunity. Secondary surveying sessions took place on March 4, 2024; March 11, 2024; and March 18, 2024.

## Materials

Primary and secondary surveys were conducted through Microsoft Forms. Following the three-week collection period, survey responses were stored in a password-protected Microsoft Excel file. The process was repeated for the secondary survey. Initial survey questions modeled those of Butler’s study (2006). Butler structured her study using predictor and criterion variables.

### *Predictor Variable*

Participants’ level of support for the insanity defense was measured by assessing a set of four statements and selecting the one that they most agreed with.

“(1) The insanity defense is never an appropriate defense for the crime of first-degree murder; (2) In principle, I am opposed to the insanity defense, but I would consider it under certain circumstances; (3) In principle, I favor the insanity defense, but I would not consider it under certain circumstances; and (4) The insanity defense is always an appropriate defense for the crime of first-degree murder.”

### *Criterion Variables*

Participants were also presented with a 16-item measure: three items represented legal standards of insanity, three represented general questions about mental illness and health, and ten represented common insanity myths. After reading each item, participants used a six-point Likert scale, ranging from strong disagreement to strong agreement, to convey their opinions. For the controlled survey, participants indicated their verdict preferences for the case, selecting one of the following choices: 1) guilty, 2) not guilty, and 3) not guilty by reason of insanity.

In the secondary survey, a model of a real-life case and a summary of jury instructions were presented to participants. The chosen case was *United States v. Hinckley*. Real names were changed to prevent any prior knowledge of the case implicating the results.

### *Procedure*

After completing an initial voluntary consent form that outlined the nature of the study and ensured their participation was voluntary and anonymous, participants completed the two-part primary survey. The first section of the survey sought to collect standard demographic data, including gender, race, and generation. Despite the necessity of knowing the respondent's generation in alignment with the study, other information aided in determining if the sample size represented LWHHS' student and FTE populations. The second section modeled that of Butler's study (2006). Participants responded to one question evaluating their level of support for the insanity defense. Then, they responded to a 16-item measure that assessed their attitudes toward legal standards of insanity, mental illness, and myths regarding the defense. The last question was an inquiry that detailed the request for voluntary participants in the following 30-minute secondary surveying session.

Second-round volunteers were divided into generations, and four participants were chosen from each subgroup using a random generator. This process protected against researcher bias and ensured an equal and representative sample group. In a controlled setting, the 12 participants received jury instructions, a case study, and a verdict preference. Each survey section was provided one at a time in the aforementioned order. This ensured that each participant had an equal opportunity to complete the survey without outside influences. The jury instructions and case study were provided to participants, and they had as much time as they needed to assess and annotate the material. Following, they completed a verdict preference with reasoning through a Microsoft Forms survey.

### *Results*

The initial survey had 129 responses. Approximately 81% of respondents were part of Generation Z, 11% were Millennials, and 6% were part of Generation X. Two respondents also reported that they were part of the Baby Boomer generation; however, this number was not substantial enough to assess further. For that reason, this data was not used, yielding a total of 127 survey responses. The secondary survey had 12 participants: four Gen Zers, four Millennials, and four Gen Xers.

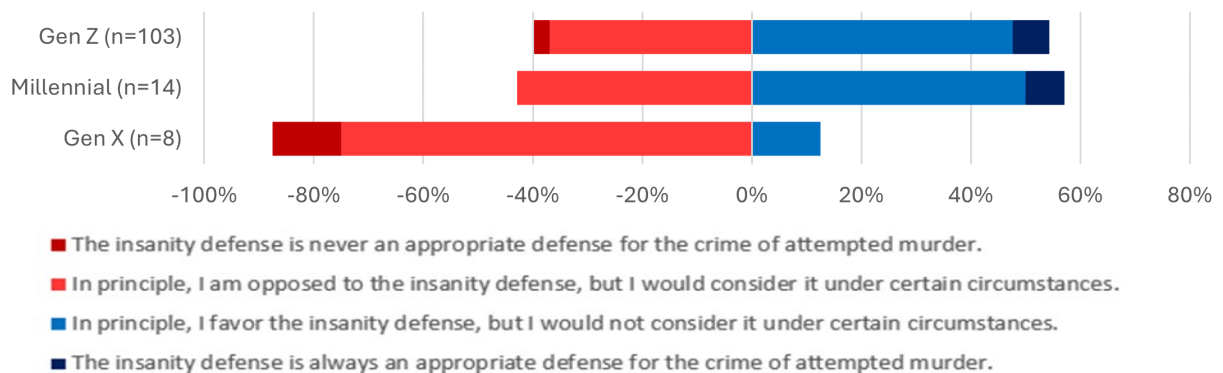
The racial demographics of initial survey participants were relatively representative of LWHHS' enrollment and employment percentages: 57% of survey respondents were White/Caucasian, 17% were Asian, 11% were Multiethnic, 2% were Middle Eastern, less than 1% were either Black/African American, less than 1% were Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1% were Hispanic, Latino or of Spanish Origin. Eight percent preferred not to disclose or did not identify with any of the options. For the secondary survey, participants were predominately White/Caucasian (67%), with 8% of participants being Asian, 17% being Multiethnic, and 8% who did not identify with any of the options.

Among those who responded to this question as part of the initial survey, 62% were female, 25% were male, and 9% preferred not to disclose. Seventy-five percent of participants in the secondary survey were female, while 25% were male.

## Primary Survey

### *Level of Support for the Insanity Defense*

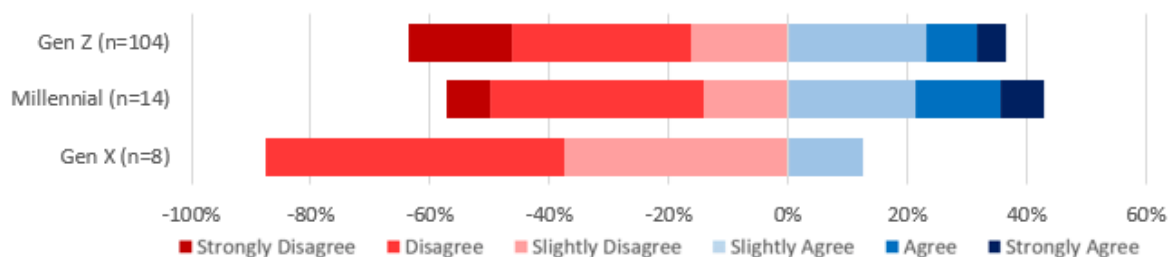
After reading a short definition of the insanity defense, participants indicated their level of support for its application in court cases. Among Gen Z and Millennials, the data is negatively skewed, with a slight majority of respondents indicating a positive level of support for the defense. However, among Gen X, the data is positively skewed, with a significant majority of respondents indicating a negative level of support for the defense, as shown in Figure 1. Despite the positive and negative skews, respondents seem to hold a predominately moderate attitude towards the defense.



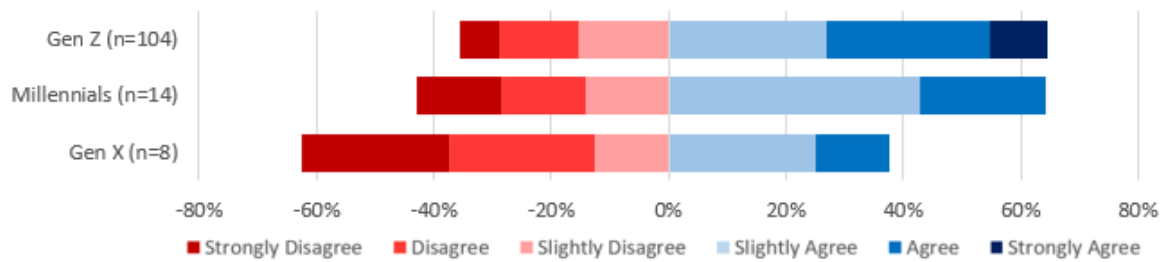
**Figure 1.** Indicated Level of Support for the Insanity Defense by Generation

### *Attitudes Toward Legal Standards of Insanity*

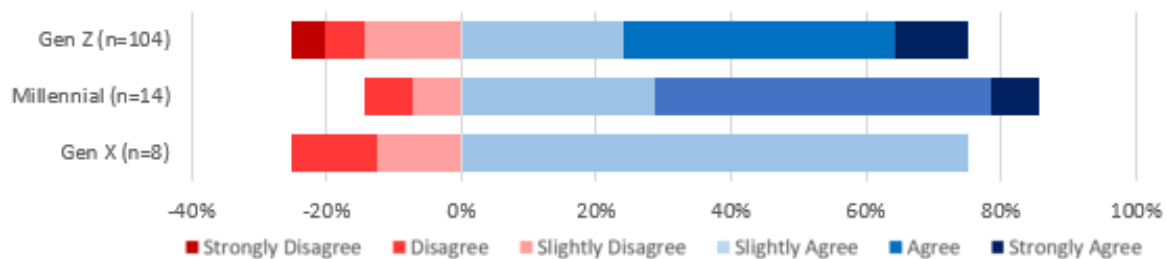
Participants were asked their level of support towards the legal stands of insanity, on a six-point Likert scale. Data is divided by generation classification. For Figures 2 and 3, similar to Figure 1, attitudes among Gen Z and Millennials follow similar trends, while Gen X tends to skew more positive in both cases. However, data among all three generations was skewed negatively, with a significant majority of respondents expressing a positive attitude towards the statements.



**Figure 2.** If the person is unable to appreciate (recognize) the wrongfulness of their conduct, then they should be found NGRI.



**Figure 3.** Level of support for the following prompt: If a person is unable to control their conduct, then they should be found NGRI.

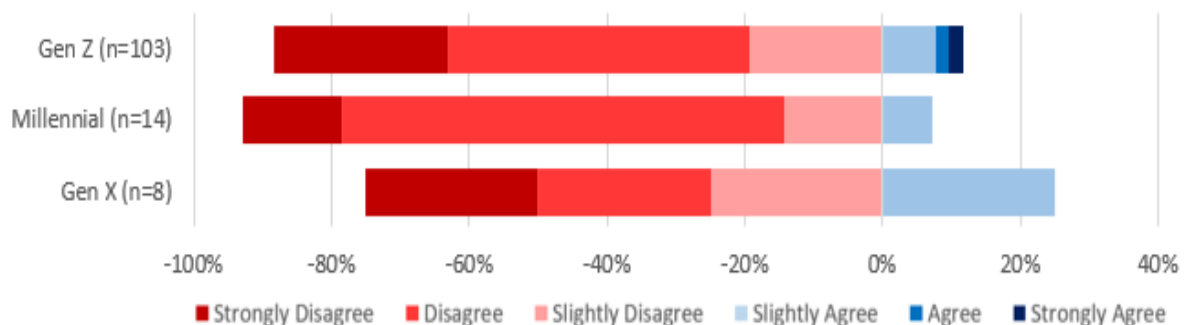


**Figure 4.** Level of support for the following prompt: If a person suffers from a mental disease or defect that substantially impairs their capacity to either appreciate the wrongfulness of their conduct or to control their conduct, they should be found NGRI.

Immediately noteworthy about this data is the overwhelming shift towards a more positive attitude as a new criteria (i.e. a person who suffers from a mental disease or defect) was introduced, shown in Figure 4.

### *Attitude Toward Mental Illness*

Figure 5 compares the attitudes toward mental health issues or illness among the three generations. The data was positively skewed.

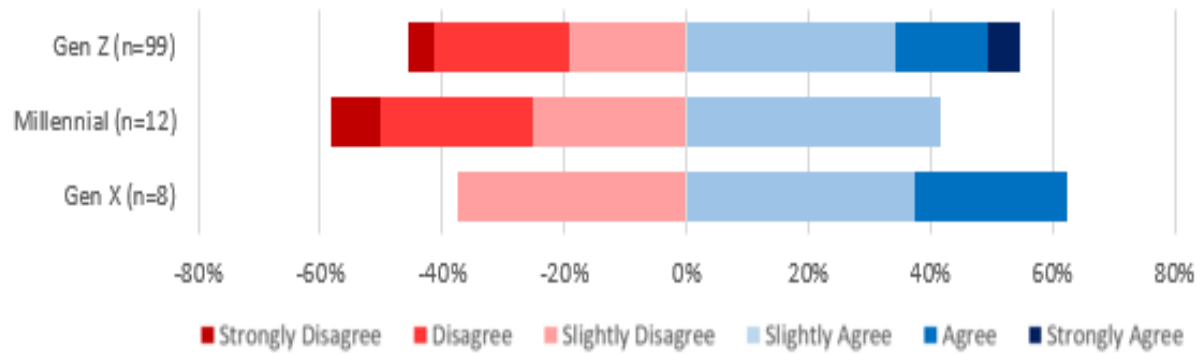


**Figure 5.** Level of support for the following prompt: Most mental health issues/illnesses are within a person's control.

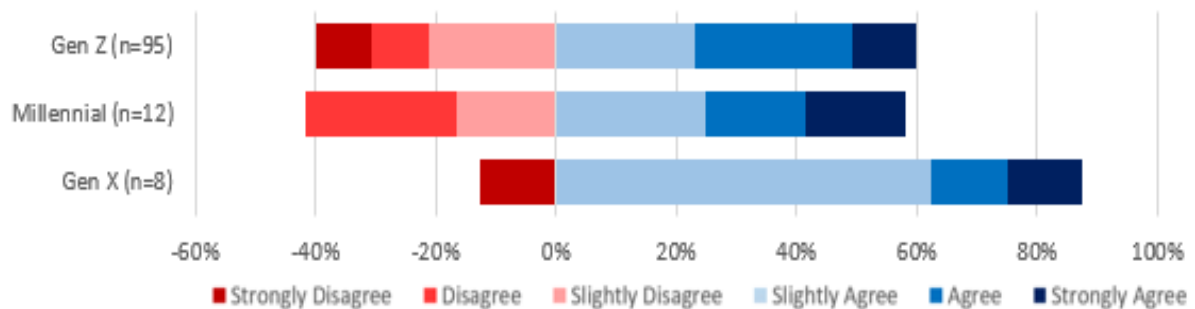


### *Endorsement of Insanity Myths*

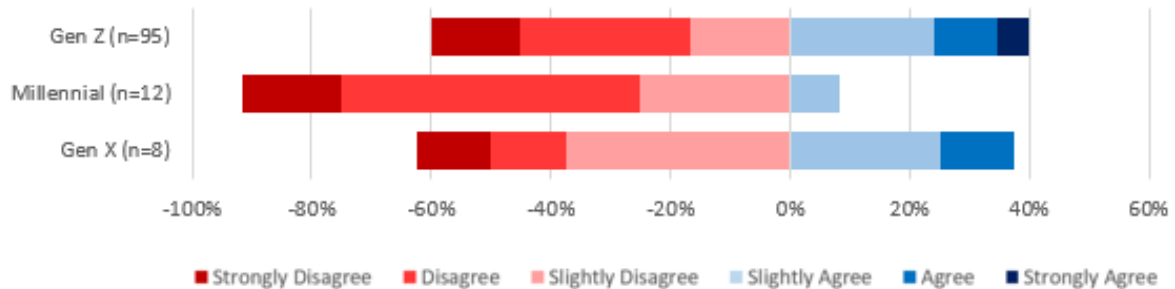
Figure 6-9 present the levels of endorsement for certain myths regarding the insanity defense and insanity. It can be seen that each statement prompted varying responses within the generations themselves, with no clear consensus.



**Figure 6.** Level of support for the following prompt: The insanity defense is a "legal loophole."

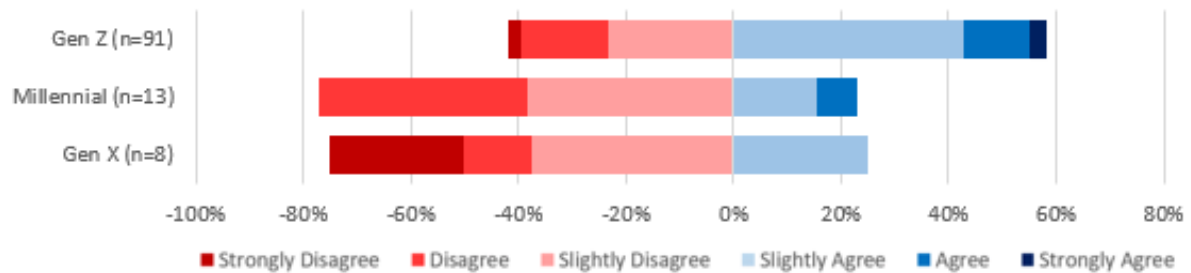


**Figure 7.** Level of support for the following prompt: Insanity is a medical, not a legal, term.



**Figure 8.** Level of support for the following prompt: It's easy to "fake" insanity.





**Figure 9.** Level of support for the following prompt: Most serial killers, mass murderers, and spree killers plead NGRI.

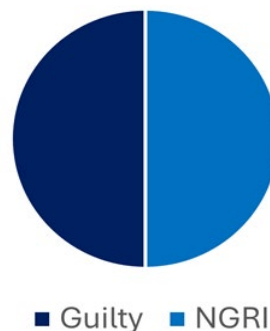
## Secondary Survey

Following the initial survey, the secondary survey was hosted for 12 participants, with an equal representation of participants from each generation. After being presented with a sample case study, participants were asked to select a verdict, shown in Figure 10.

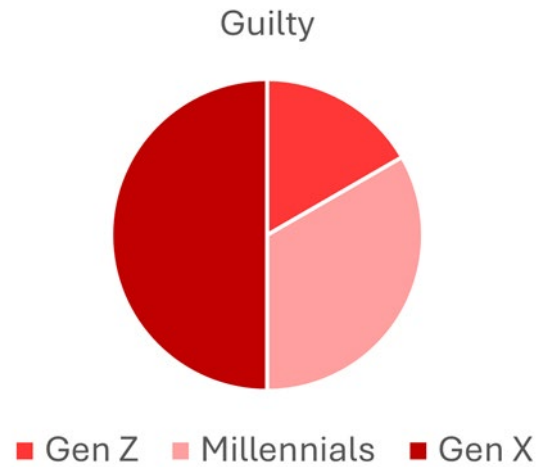
It is important to note that no participants selected a “Not Guilty” verdict. Seventy-five percent of Gen X participants selected a “Guilty” verdict and 75% of Gen Z participants selected a “NGRI” verdict. Millennials were split evenly among these two verdict options.

### *Motivations for Selecting a “Guilty” Verdict*

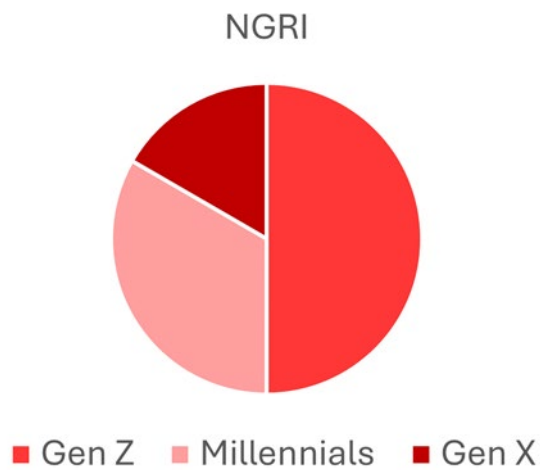
Further qualitative questioning was conducted to understand each participant’s choice. When asked to provide reasoning for a “Guilty” verdict, 3 themes were identified, shown in Table 1. Most participants had concluded that the defendant could distinguish right from wrong, with all 3 Gen X participants including a mention of this theme in their reasoning. Only Gen X indicated a worry regarding the defendant skipping punishment.



**Figure 10.** Verdict preference of all participants



**Figure 11.** Guilty preference as a function of generation



**Figure 12.** NGRI preference as a function of generation

**Table A.** Reasons for selecting a “Guilty” Verdict

Reason	Example(s)	No. of Gen Z Participants that Mentioned (n=1)	No. of Millennial Participants that Mentioned (n=2)	No. of Gen X Participants that Mentioned (n=3)
Clear Intent	“His end goal was to get the attention of Jodie and he did this by killing the president”	1	2	1

"Get out of Jail Free Card"	"I don't feel that he should be able to escape punishment for his actions"	0	0	2
Could distinguish right from wrong	"He knew what he was doing was wrong"	0	1	3

Note. If a participant's response alluded to multiple themes, it was counted for each of them. Some responses have been edited to enhance grammatical clarity.

### *Motivations for Selecting an "NGRI" Verdict*

The same process was conducted with participants who selected an "NGRI" verdict. No reason was most prominent among respondents' answers, with each reason being equally represented (four times). In addition, the reasoning is continuous and similar among respondents, regardless of generation, as shown by Table 2. Each reason is represented in at least 1 response from each generation, albeit "Clear diagnosis and tests" in the Gen X response.

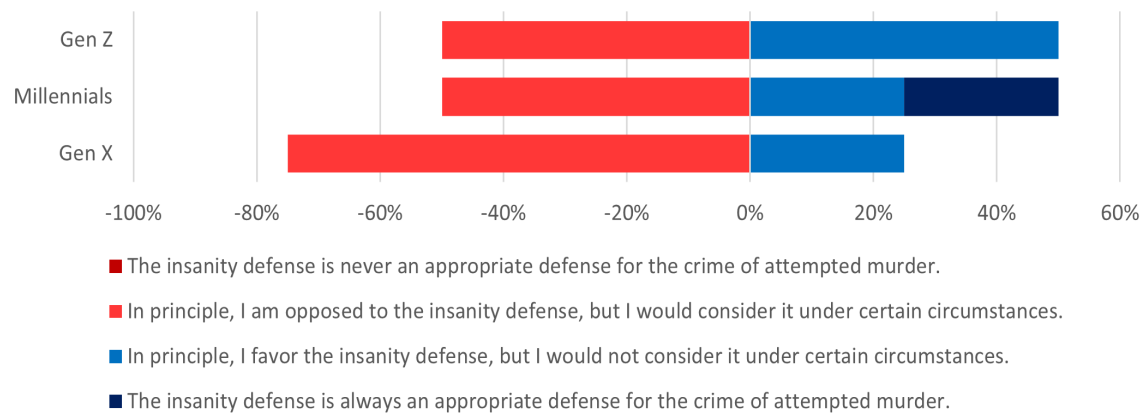
**Table B.** Reasons for selecting a "Not Guilty by Reason of Insanity" Verdict

Reason	Example(s)	No. of Times Gen Z Participant Mentioned (n=3)	No. of Times Millennial Participant Mentioned (n=2)	No. of Times Gen X Participant Mentioned (n=1)
Clear diagnosis and tests	"His score on the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory showed peak abnormality while a CAT scan of Smith showed widened sulci in his brain"	2	2	0
Unable to control conduct	"The fact that John Smith believed that killing Miller will make Jodie Foster respect and love him shows quite an abnormal understanding	3	1	1

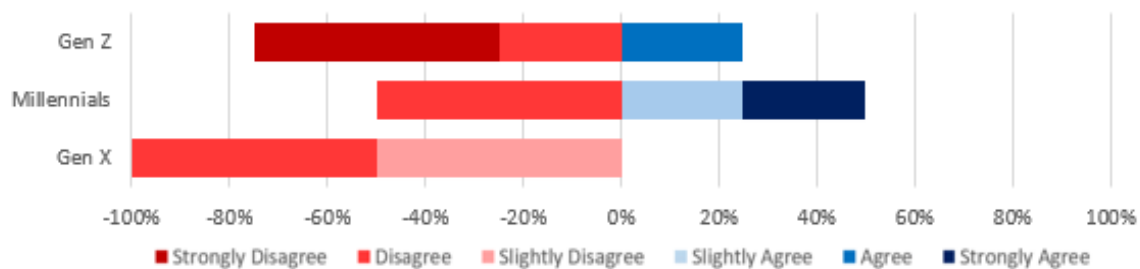
	of/handle on emotions”			
Needs help	“It is apparent that with earlier intervention this tragedy would have been prevented as John had shown clear signs of distress for years before the incident”	3	1	1

### *Initial Opinions and Attitudes of Secondary Survey Participants*

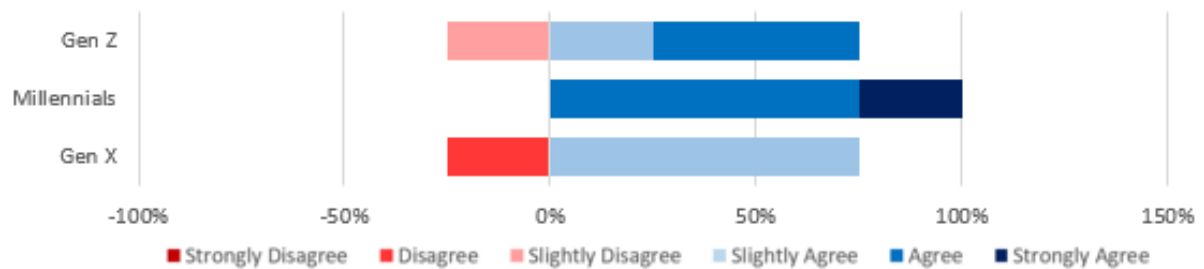
Because secondary survey participants also completed the primary survey, their initial survey results are also critical to the discussion to ensure the sample is representative of the original population group. Originally, both Gen Z and Millennials were evenly split when assessing their levels of support for the defense, while Gen X was positively skewed. There is noticeable differentiation when comparing Figures 13 and 14 to the results of the entire respondent pool (see Figures 2 and 3). However, Figure 14 seems to follow a similar trend to Figure 4, with a negative skew among all generations.



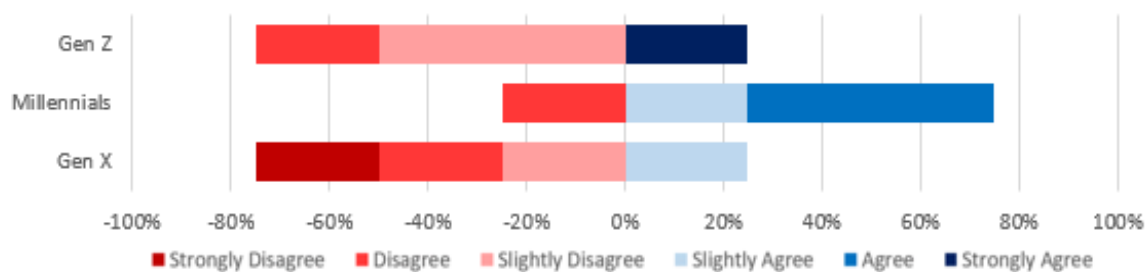
**Figure 13.** Indicated Level of Support for the Insanity Defense by Generation



**Figure 14.** Level of support for the following prompt: If the person is unable to appreciate (recognize) the wrongfulness of their conduct, then they should be found NGRI.



**Figure 15.** Level of support for the following prompt: If a person is unable to control their conduct, then they should be found NGRI.



**Figure 16.** Level of support for the following prompt: If a person suffers from a mental disease or defect that substantially impairs their capacity to either appreciate the wrongfulness of their conduct or to control their conduct, they should be found NGRI.

## Discussion

Based on both the initial and secondary survey response analyses and patterns, a few conclusions can be drawn to better understand the extent to which generation can impact one's perception of the insanity defense, including attitudes regarding the legal standards of insanity, attitudes towards mental health, and endorsement of insanity myths.

First, the data suggests a strong correlation between one's generation and their perception of the insanity defense. In the initial survey, both Gen Z and Millennials favored a positive level of support with a slight majority. However, Gen X substantially favored a negative level of support. In the secondary survey, Gen Z selected an 'NGRI' verdict 75% of the time, Gen X selected a 'Guilty' verdict 75% of the time, and Millennials were evenly split. Together, the surveys suggest that on a generational level, being of a more recent generation relates to a more positive perception of the insanity defense. Meanwhile, being of an older generation seems to be correlated with a more negative perception of the insanity defense. Additionally, it is important to note that among the initial survey results, opinions remained predominantly moderate, with less respondents selecting an exclusive attitude. This suggests that respondents' attitudes could change situationally, despite their moral beliefs. These findings support my initial hypothesis on the impact of generation on perceptions of the insanity defense but also suggest the variability of the opinions due to the influence of situational factors.

An interesting finding about attitudes regarding the legal standards of insanity was the differentiation in support among the three standards. For example, the initial data suggests that there is more support for an

NGRI verdict on the basis of volitional incapacity than cognitive incapacity overall. Furthermore, in the secondary survey, five (3 Gen Z, 1 Millennials, 1 Gen X) out of the six participants that selected an NGRI verdict highlighted that the defendant was unable to control his conduct, while 4 (1 Millennial, 3 Gen X) out of six participants that selected a Guilty verdict highlighted that the defendant could distinguish right from wrong. Noteworthy about this data is that all Gen Z that selected an NGRI verdict highlighted volitional incapacity and all Gen X that selected a Guilty verdict highlighted cognitive incapacity which is concurrent with the initial survey data. This suggests a potential generational difference in attitudes toward legal standards of insanity where Gen Z appears to place greater emphasis on the inability of controlling one's conduct, while Gen X focuses on appreciating the wrongfulness of that conduct. Lastly, when introducing a new criteria (i.e. a person who suffers from a mental disease or defect) to the same legal standards, all generations exhibited an overwhelming positive shift. However, both Gen Z and Millennials held stronger attitudes (i.e. Agree, Strongly Agree) regarding the prompt, whereas Gen X selected only a mild attitude (i.e. Slightly Agree). Along these lines, the data supports the idea that the recent Generations have a stronger acceptance and awareness of mental health (Do et al., 2020). Though at different intensities, the data suggests a widespread recognition of the importance of considering mental health and illness within legal standards.

This theme continued when respondents were asked about their attitudes toward mental illness. Although the data was positively skewed among all generations, over 20% of Gen X showed positive level of agreements towards the idea that most mental health issues/illnesses are within a person's control. In addition, a dominant majority of Gen X endorse the myth that insanity is a medical, not a legal, term. This is concurrent with current research that shows that older adults are less likely to know and recognize mental health illnesses, and the processes in place to help them with such (Currin, Hayslip, and Temple, 2011). Moreover, all Gen Z (n=3) that selected an NGRI verdict in the secondary survey pointed to the reason that the defendant needed help for his mental health issues.

Lastly, the data suggests that respondents, among all generations, are uninformed about the realities and characteristics of the insanity defense through their endorsement of insanity myths. Firstly, a slight majority of Gen X viewed the defense as a 'legal loophole' in the initial survey. In the secondary survey, out all of those that selected a Guilty verdict (n=6), 2 respondents (2 Gen X) highlighted that they did not want the defendant to escape punishment as reasoning for their verdict. Together, the surveys suggest that Gen X may subscribe to this myth at higher rates than Gen Z and Millennials, and that they are unaware about the legal processes that succeed an NGRI verdict, which is concurrent with existing research that asserts that the public often views the defense as a 'get out of jail free card' (Martin et al., 2022; Currin, Hayslip, and Temple, 2011). Opposingly, an overwhelming majority of Millennials disagreed with the prompt that it is easy to "fake" insanity in the initial survey. In addition, both Millennials that selected an NGRI verdict highlighted that there were clear diagnoses and tests that validated the defendant's mental health issues. This data supports the notion that Millennials hold a level of trust in empirical evidence and indicates a skepticism towards the idea that individuals can manipulate the legal system. Lastly, despite the data for Millennials and Gen X being largely aligned, Gen Z supported the myth that most serial killers, mass murderers, and spree killers plead NGRI 30% more than the other generations. This could be correlated to Gen Z's unique experience with the increased frequency of school shootings and the ramifications of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack at the beginning of the generation that have had impacts on perceptions of safety (Moscrip, 2019).

## Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

I believe this research contributes to the body of knowledge on the perceptual differences among generations regarding societal processes, such as the insanity defense. For example, it furthers understanding on the impact of generation on levels of support and opinions towards the defense. Moreover, it adds to the understanding of how attitudes regarding the legal standards of insanity, attitudes towards mental health, and endorsement of

insanity myths vary among generational cohorts. Lastly, it upholds the idea put forth by previous research (Moscrip, 2019; Currin, Hayslip, and Temple, 2011; Tulloch, 2000) that age and generation impacts how one acts and reacts to different things, as a result of historical events and sociocultural evolutions.

This study also has some notable limitations to address. One weakness of this study is due to the sampling procedure, specifically convenience sampling. All participants were drawn from Lake Washington High School, of which I, the researcher, am a student at. This led to an apparent disparity in the sample sizes between generations, as LWHHS has a student population of 2,068 students and 115 teachers. All students are a part of Gen Z. In addition, because of the lack of participants that fell into the Baby Boomer generation, I had to disregard all data from the subgroup, although the population of Baby Boomers living in the United States totals to an estimated 73 million, as of the last U.S. Census (United States Census Bureau, 2019). The school is also located in a predominantly left-leaning region of Washington state, which likely influenced participants' perceptions and opinions for this specific sample. Lastly, although this study focused on generational differences, this characteristic acted as a limitation in the way that there can exist significant variability among individuals in the same generation. This could be due to interindividual differences, as a result of unique experiences and behaviors.

Future studies might consider sampling from general areas, outside of a high school setting, across the United States to get a more accurate representation and spread of generation samples, including Baby Boomers while also considering different geographical influences. It would also be beneficial to collect data on specific age groups within a generation in order to enhance the predictive power of generational analyses. Specifically, using an age-period-cohort analysis could provide more specific data by accounting for multiple time varying phenomena (Rutherford, Lambert, and Thompson, 2010). Moreover, including multiple case studies that range in intensity and severity of crimes in the secondary surveying portion could support a greater understanding of the situational influence mentioned in the Discussion section.

Based on this study's findings, it is clear that a greater degree of education is required to teach individuals, regardless of generation, the realities and complexities of the insanity defense. Specifically targeting the process of the defense could mitigate the endorsement of myths that challenge its validity and security. However, a limitation of this is that those with strong beliefs about the topic at hand are less likely and willing to change their opinions, or if they are, changes are likely to be slow (Stark and Frenkel, 2013). Adopting a counter-attitudinal advocacy strategy, or role-reversal strategy, has proven to act as a mode of influence that has the potential to cause lasting changes to one's attitudes as it forces them to acknowledge how the situation could be different when assessed from the other side (Stark and Frenkel, 2013). In addition, recognizing the potential impact of generation on perceptions of the insanity defense, as suggested by the data, it is increasingly important that legal juries are age diverse to be fully representative and inclusive of differing opinions.

Despite the limitations listed above, this study contributes to the developing body of knowledge regarding generational attitudes, perceptions of the insanity defense, and the correlation between the two.

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