Introduction

**THE GAPS**

*Bridging the GAP Years, 1969-2019* is designed to explore growing divisions in our society. Over the past 50 years political polarization, income inequality, and feelings of social isolation have increased while our collective empathy has declined. *Bridging the GAP* presents that data and challenges citizens to creatively address those “gaps.” Most importantly, the exhibit provides space for visitors to congregate, reflect, and engage with one another.

**THE GOAL**

The goal of *Bridging the GAP* is to inspire a greater sense of community cohesion by highlighting the historical context for what presently divides us. After exploring the exhibit, we invite you to sit and engage in thoughtful Living Room Conversations. We hope that through conversation participants build relationships that increase understanding, reveal common ground, and lead to collaborative problem solving.

**THANK YOU**

If your organization is interested in hosting this exhibit for free, please contact Chief Curator Dustin Mack at dustin@myhistorymuseum.org.
A comparison of college students between 1979 and 2009 revealed a sharp decrease in measurable empathy. The decline of both empathic concern (sympathy for the misfortune of others) and perspective taking (imagining another’s point of view) suggests students became less likely to identify with the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of other people. Parallel trends in American society show an uptick in individualistic and aggressive behaviors. Since 2000 the percentage of households making charitable donations has dropped over 10% and online bullying has proliferated.

The decline of empathy has made it more difficult for many Americans to relate to a changing society. Over the past 50 years generational differences and demographic shifts have diversified the nation. Political and economic divisions have intensified cultural changes leaving a growing number of Americans feeling isolated.
Political Polarization

Since the 1960s Gallup Polling has asked Americans whether they believe big business, big labor, or big government is the biggest threat to the country. The general public has consistently identified “big government” as the largest threat, a trend that has steadily increased by more than 20%. Meanwhile concerns about “big business” and “big labor” have fluctuated. Republicans have overwhelmingly identified big government as the chief threat in each survey. A small majority of Democrats have also seen big government as the dominate threat, followed closely by worries about big business.

The partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans has varied over time. In 1969 ideological differences between the political parties existed, yet centrists shared overlapping beliefs and voted accordingly. This remained true until the 1990s when Democrats and Republicans began growing estranged. Members of Congress have become ideologically divided and more likely to vote with their own party. Despite this political polarization, Americans largely agree on basic democratic ideals and the responsibilities of being a US citizen.
Economic prosperity in the United States is not evenly distributed. Before 1980 income growth nationally was roughly equivalent. That has changed rapidly over the last 30 years. Urban economies on the coasts have prospered much faster than cities and rural communities in the heartland. The decline of blue-collar industries and population shifts have accelerated this trend.

Since the 1970s economic mobility in the United States has declined. After WWII 90% of children could expect to move up the income ladder. While the median household income has risen modestly, the distance between income levels has increased rapidly. This income inequality has made moving up the economic ladder more difficult. In 2012 children had about a 50% chance to earn more than their parents. A child’s gender and race, as well as education and location, dramatically impact earning potential and economic mobility.
Social Isolation

Americans are now more detached from major institutions – political parties, religion, the military, and marriage – than previous generations. Membership at places of worship, for example, has been on a steady decline since 2000, although Americans’ report religion has not lost importance in their lives over that time. The lack of participation in these institutions has changed how Americans socialize and voice their opinions.

As traditional institutions have fallen out of favor, Americans have adopted new ways to connect. 69% of adults now use social media including 88% of people 18-29 years old. This interconnectivity unites Americans throughout the country across political, economic, and racial demographics. Yet social media platforms have also contributed to the rise of online bullying, feelings of anger and social isolation, as well as a spike in depression rates.