
FEAR

A SPECIAL REPORT

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This Special Report is prompted by a concern that the fear level in our nation is rising from what was already an elevated level. We believe this needs to be more fully acknowledged as a separate, deeply troubling issue in our society and hope this Report will stimulate more discussion.

What people fear depends on many factors — their economic status, gender, how old they are, where they live, the news sources they rely on and, often, their political views. And there are many things that drive the increase in the American fear, some real, some subjective and some wholly manufactured (think QAnon conspiracy theories).

What Troubles People

It would be impossible to list all the phenomena that make people fearful, much less to analyze how real each threat is. Here's one round-up with findings that may be surprising, since most of these issues don't appear in current media reports. It's from the Chapman University's annual Survey of American Fears:

Top 10 Fears of 2022	% of Very Afraid or Afraid
1. Corrupt government officials	62.1
2. People I love becoming seriously ill	60.2
3. Russia using nuclear weapons	59.6
4. People I love dying	58.1
5. The U.S. involved in another world war	56.0
6. Pollution of drinking water	54.5
7. Not having enough money for the future	53.7
8. Economic/financial collapse	53.7
9. Pollution of oceans, rivers, lakes	52.5
10. Biological warfare	51.5

This list is a reminder that everyday Americans have a lot on their minds that the mainstream media miss. What we want to discuss in this Report, however, are the issues that do get attention in the press, in Congressional debates, in political campaigns, etc., because of several developments.

The War Threat

For example, No. 3 on the Chapman list — Russia using nuclear weapons — is surely prompted by the scary hints Vladimir Putin has dropped in the past year about maybe using short-range nukes in Ukraine. That, in turn, relates to another nail-biter for many people, the possibility of the U.S.'s getting drawn into armed conflict with Russia over Ukraine. Or a fight with China over Taiwan. Maybe the worst-case scenario, both at once. No one who follows current events can rule out these possibilities.

A Deadly Flood of Drugs

Yet another major concern for millions of Americans is the drug epidemic. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, more than 106,000 people died from drug-involved overdoses in 2021 — a stunning number. And the 2022 report is likely to be worse, thanks to both the continued abuse of opioids and the flood of methamphetamines that dealers are mixing into heroin, cocaine and even the marijuana that so many young people use. Drugs seem to be everywhere, so if you have a child or grandchild in an American school, it is a big, scary concern.

Differing Levels of Fear

Some fears that grab major headlines are legitimate — up to a point. But how people perceive them depends to a great extent on their political perspectives and the news reports they tune into.

Take crime. Watch local TV news, and the top story is likely to be about some violent incident — a shooting, stabbing, hit-and-run or the like. *If it bleeds, it leads* is still the iron law of TV news. Many viewers come away from this day-in, day-out exposure believing, even if they live in a safe neighborhood, that their city is awash in violence.

Some communities really are dangerous places, but more often the fear of rampant crime is overblown. According to the FBI, violent crime actually fell by 1% in 2021 compared with the previous year. The number of murders did increase by about 4%, but there was a fall in violent crime largely driven by a drop of nearly 9% in the robbery rate. Complete data for 2022 are not in yet, but one report came recently from the NYPD. It said that in Manhattan last year murders were down 14%, shootings down 17%, burglaries down 21% and robberies down 8%.

Why are so many people convinced crime is all around them? This is where political differences enter the picture. A Pew Research Center survey taken just before last year's midterm elections found that Republicans were much more likely than Democrats to see violent crime as a key voting issue: 73% of Republican and GOP-leaning registered voters said it was a very important to their vote, compared with 49% of Democratic or Democratic-leaning registered voters.

Democrats, on the other hand, usually see guns and mass shootings as the frightening issue. There were a staggering 48,830-gun deaths in 2021, up 23% from 2019 and the highest yearly total so far. While the majority of adult gun deaths are by suicide, children and teens are more likely to die by homicide — 60%. In fact, gun violence recently surpassed car accidents as the leading cause of death for American children. School shootings are a big part of this: 2022 saw 46 such shootings — more than one every school week of the year — making it the most violent year in schools since 1999.

When all is said and done, fear of crime and violence is real and widespread, and the fact that people have different reasons for feeling this fear doesn't mitigate it one bit.

On Some Issues, Different Views

Some things engender fear in one part of the population but not in others. Millions were frightened by Covid-19, and in fact the fatality toll is over one million and still climbing at the rate of 1,700 deaths a week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But millions more have refused to believe in the threat and rejected masks, social distancing, vaccines and other safety measures.

Climate change is another schizophrenic issue. It's an existential threat, say vast numbers of Americans. The weather is always changing and often deadly, say many others, what is happening now is par for the course.

Illegal immigration also spurs different levels of fear, although it is a very complicated issue. There is no question the U.S. has a very serious problem now and far into the future with vast numbers of people trying to get across our borders, most fleeing extreme poverty and lethal violence in parts of Central America and South America. There are some criminals among them, no question, although that concern is often exaggerated; the vast majority of people smuggling meth across the southern border, law enforcement officials say, are not immigrants but Americans hiding it in their cars.

The immigration crisis demands solutions, but Washington is the only place where new, up-to-date laws can be enacted, and the nation's capital is too divided to respond. The ultimate reason that this fear hangs over the nation is our own elected officials.

Looking for Responses

What can be done to help lower the level of fear in America?

One answer, we would argue, is for the members of Congress to relearn their appreciation for the art of compromise. True, there have been a few recent occasions in Washington when both parties made enough concessions to reach agreement on major legislation — think of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that won bipartisan support in 2021. But there are too many other issues where compromise is needed but is treated instead like a dirty word — think of immigration, sensible gun controls, climate change and so many of the other things that keep Americans awake at night.

Restoring the kind of community engagement that was once common in our nation would be helpful too. If it is true as some sociologists have argued that a majority of people are hunkered in their homes at night instead of, say, going out to chat with the neighbors, joining a bowling league or attending American Legion events, then it is not surprising that people feel more isolated. And isolation is a key factor in fear levels.

Here is what may be one of the biggest factors: The Wall Street Journal recently reported that in 1998 70% of Americans said patriotism was “very important” to them. By 2019 that number had dropped to 60%. Today it is down to just 38%. This loss of belief in our nation and everything that it stands for must surely be driving up the fear factor.

Rebuilding patriotism can change that — and again the answer lies in Washington. The ultimate cause of all the fear and increasing loss of patriotism may be the fact that so little is being done by our elected leaders to solve the many urgent problems that batter our nation. What could be more frightening than a feeling of helplessness in the face of danger?

There are undoubtedly many other explanations and responses. We hope this Report will get people talking about them and taking action. We would welcome your comments and suggestions.