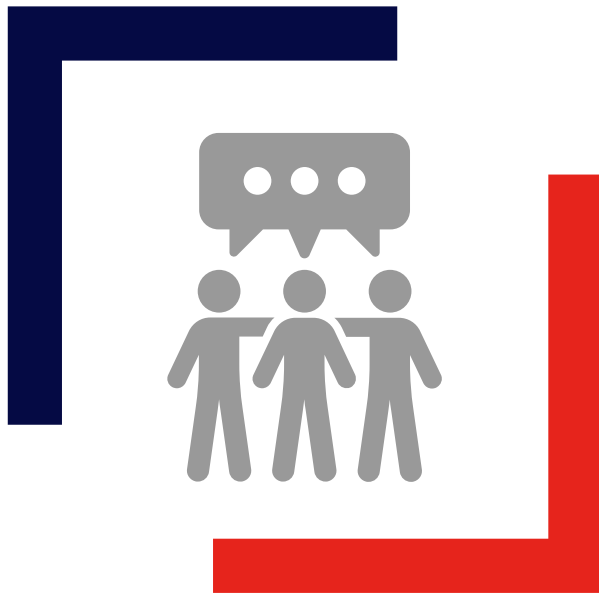


12

Section



# Social Capital



STATE OF THE NATION



# Social Capital

**Introduction.** Social capital refers to the strength and usefulness of our relationships with other people, including family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and institutions (such as schools, religious organizations, and civic organizations). Our sense of connectedness and the degree to which we cooperate with others, hold shared values and purposes, and trust one another are all part of social capital. While we often see and respect people as individuals, almost everything we do is accomplished through groups and therefore depends on our social relations. Throughout our history, Americans have been recognized for our active participation in civic groups and public affairs—from town hall meetings to marches—and volunteering for our favored causes. This makes social capital particularly relevant in the United States.

**Summary of Results.** With the exception of a brief decline during the COVID pandemic, which precluded many forms of in-person activity, volunteerism has held relatively steady or increased slightly over the past two decades. (Unfortunately, we do not have consistent trend data going back to 1990.) However, we show declining trust in other people, mirroring international trends. On both measures—volunteerism and trust in other people—we are above the average of other higher-income countries, but far from the top tier.

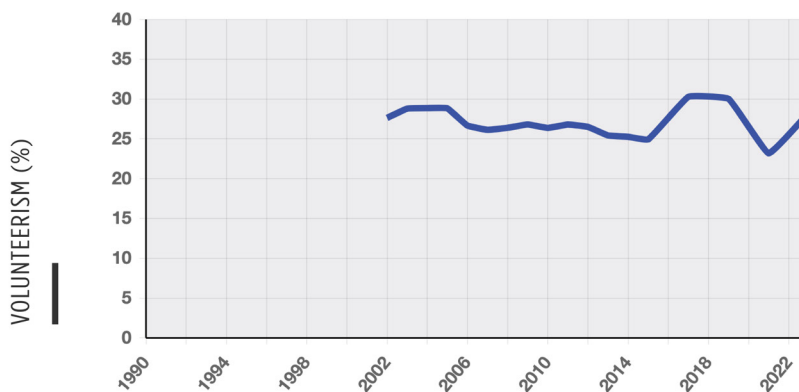
## Volunteerism

**Specific measure:** Percentage of the population (age 16 and over) who have volunteered through an organization in the past year. (Source: Authors' analysis of Census Bureau data).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
→	63%	*

**Why did we include this measure?** Civic and nonprofit groups play an important role in American society and often depend on volunteers to carry out their work. Our willingness to volunteer is also a sign of our sense of shared purpose and interest in contributing to our communities.

Figure 24: Volunteerism (National Trend)

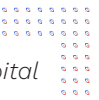


### • How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of International Labor Organization data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 63% (out of 35 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** Not available.

**What do the data show?** Volunteerism has held relatively steady over the past two decades. Our international ranking is just below Austria, Germany, and Ireland—and our volunteerism rate is half that of the top-ranked country (Norway). Unfortunately, there is no way to capture the US trend in the 1990–2002 period or the trend in our international standing for any two years for a reasonable number of countries.

**What might explain these patterns?** It is unclear why volunteerism increased so quickly in 2017, but the fact that this occurred over two consecutive years and remained there until COVID suggests that it is probably not a data issue. We do not view the brief decline and rebound around the COVID pandemic as reflecting meaningful instability because social distancing rules precluded many forms of in-person activity, including some volunteer work. One reason that volunteerism may be stable is that declines in volunteer work among middle-aged adults is being offset by the growing share of retirees and greater encouragement for high school and college students to volunteer.



## Trust in Other People

**Specific measure:** Percentage of adults reporting that other people can generally be trusted. (Source: Authors' analysis of General Social Survey).

National  
Trend



% of  
countries  
the US  
outperforms

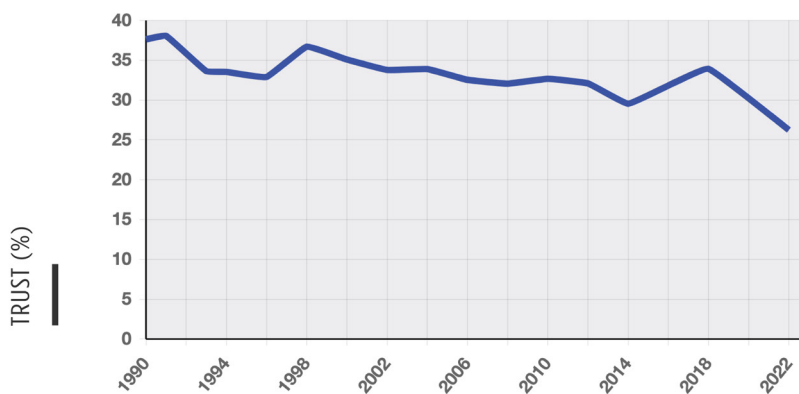
73%

Intl.  
Rank  
Trend



**Why did we include this measure?** We cannot have positive relations with each other, or in society as a whole, if we do not trust each other. This requires believing that others are generally honest, try to do the right thing, and do not take advantage of us. (We also include measures of trust in institutions elsewhere in the project.)

Figure 25: Trust in Other People (National Trend)



### How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of the World Values Survey).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 73% (out of 30 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔

**What do the data show?** Trust in other people has been declining steadily since 1990, although this has been a global phenomenon, which explains why our international ranking has been steady. We also remain above almost three-quarters of other high-income countries on this measure. China leads the world on this measure, while Germany, Great Britain, and Canada are ranked just above us.

**What might explain these patterns?** Decline in trust may reflect a combination of increased social isolation, cynicism about our collective ability to solve persistent social problems, social and mass media that emphasize negative messages about people's actions, and the increasingly impersonal nature of key institutions. We also note that trust is among the many subjective measures, based on surveys of Americans, that show a steady decline.

**Related Topics:** Our "trust in other people" measure is related to social isolation (see the Life Satisfaction section), depression (see the Mental Health section), and a long list of trust measures—mostly focused on trust in institutions, rather than individuals—that can be found in the Trust section. Political polarization may also be related to the decline/stagnation in both social capital measures and is discussed in the Citizenship and Democracy section.

\*For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.\*

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**Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures**

	Support from Board	Support from Public
<b>Social Capital (as topic)</b>	93%	52%
<b>Volunteerism</b>	86%	38%
<b>Trust in Neighbors</b>	86%	65%

**Other Measures Considered:** The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including religious observance, percentage of people receiving emotional support, and percentage of people contributing financially to charity. The public did not support any of these other measures. However, all three of these additional measures received more public support than volunteerism.