



STATE · OF · THE NATION

FULL REPORT

2025

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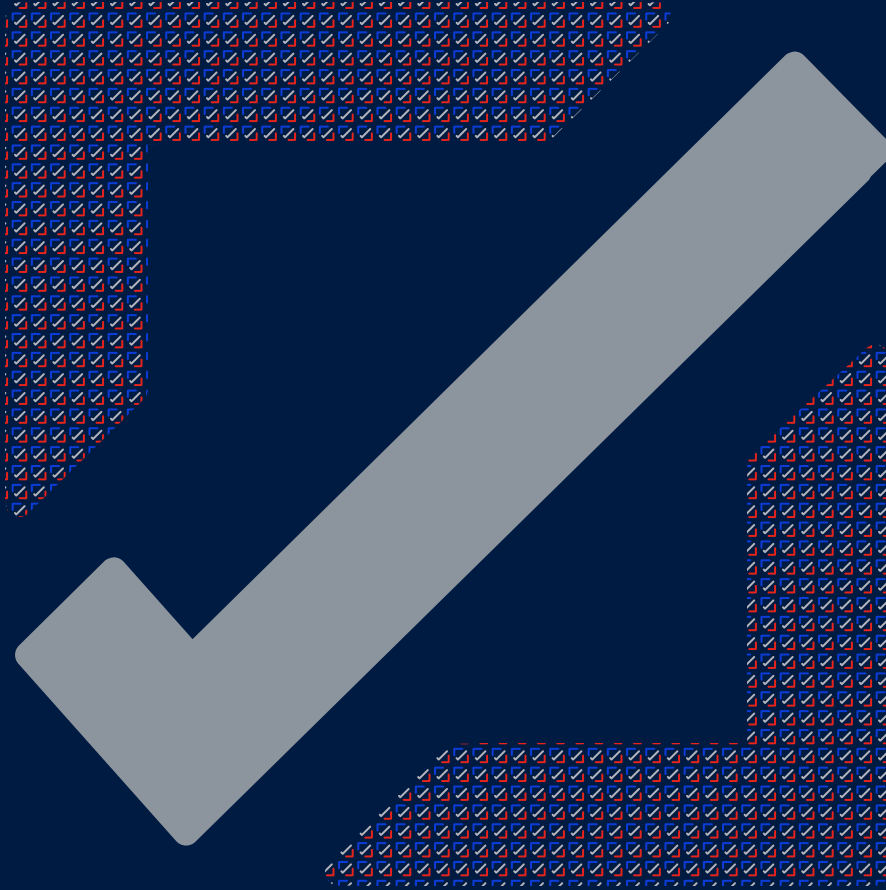
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2025

Executive Summary

Executive Summary

What is the state of the nation? This is a fundamental question. Increasingly, we see evidence, from polling data to our own dinner tables, that the answer is “not very strong.” Many feel that things are not going well in the United States. A gnawing sense of angst seems to have descended upon us. We seem polarized and distrustful, worried and pessimistic.

Where exactly are we going wrong? Just as importantly, what might we be overlooking—what is actually going right? And can we agree on any of the answers? These are the questions that we sought to answer with the State of the Nation Project. The wide-ranging authors of this report—the board of the project—have come to agreement on 15 topics and 37 measures that we believe capture crucial elements of the state of the nation. When these measures are going in the right direction, it is something to celebrate. But when they are headed in the wrong direction, or when we fare poorly relative to other countries, we believe it should raise alarm bells about where we are or where we are headed. Taken together, these measures paint a useful and compelling picture of our country that should help guide our future. This is America’s progress report.

It was not obvious at the beginning of the project how much agreement might be possible. The entire project was an experiment. Could liberals agree with conservatives, Democrats with Republicans, on anything meaningful? Could we agree on anything other than “extreme” measures like murder and suicide, which are obviously concerning? Could we keep our discussions from turning into the tugs-of-war we see nightly on cable news, which typically go nowhere productive? When we first started describing the State of the Nation Project to others, many said the answer to these questions was a firm “no.” The country is too divided, we were told, to come to agreement on anything important.

But we could agree—and we did. As a group, we are leaders and scholars from seven of the nation’s leading think tanks, from across the political spectrum. At least one board member has also worked for or advised the last five US presidential administrations—two Republicans (George W. Bush and Donald Trump) and three Democrats (Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden).

We came to agreement in a very American way—we debated, and then we voted. For a topic or measure to get into this report, a supermajority of the board had to agree. No topic or measure could get into this report because only one or two politically aligned groups supported it. Broad-based agreement was a requirement.

But we went further. We are not just reporting what we, just 14 people out of almost 350 million Americans, think about the state of the nation. We also asked you, the nation’s citizens, to vote. We put the same list of topics and measures to a representative sample of roughly 1,000 US adults. While the broad public generally agreed with most of the decisions we made, there are also some differences that we report with full transparency.

Some factors were clearly easier to measure than others. National security, in particular, was judged to be an important topic by both the board and the public but proved difficult to capture. We did not gain supermajority support for any measure within this topic. Therefore, we chose to include a section on National Security and to report some data; but, to reflect our hesitation about these measures, we are not reporting any data on national security in this Executive Summary.



With other topics, we had some good measures but also missing pieces. Civil liberties is one example. We only included a single measure for this topic—specifically, events threatening freedom of the press—but we could not find consistent and reliable measures of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. Similarly, we only included two measures in the Violence section—murders and shootings—where we had the most confidence in the data; we omitted others, such as assaults, mainly because of data quality issues. On these topics, and others that we discuss throughout the report, there is an urgent need to improve data.

In what follows, we explain our key findings and what we think they mean about how the country is doing. Many of the individual results will not be surprising. You have probably seen media headlines about many of them. However, we also think you will be surprised, as were we, with some of the findings. Some of our results do not line up with fear-mongering media headlines and political campaign advertisements. Others simply are not getting enough attention.

A different picture also emerges when we see all these measures together. Think of your favorite picture or painting and imagine trying to break it into puzzle pieces. The individual pieces do not look like anything meaningful when they are spread across the table until you put all the pieces together and the picture comes into focus.

How we summarize the results

Below, we summarize all the topics and measures we considered. In all cases, we focus on data from the period 1990 to 2023, which allowed us to provide a sense of long-term trends without losing sight of recent fluctuations. We tried to capture the current state of the nation, not provide a history lesson. In many cases, the data were not available for the full period, so we reported what we could.

We report each measure three different ways. First, we report the national trend. Is the measure going up, going down, or remaining stable? Then, we report two different international measures to show how we are doing relative to other high-income countries.¹ The first is the percentage of countries we are outperforming in the most recent data available. A higher percentage is always better. (For example, we “outperform” countries that have higher rates of murder and suicide and other measures where higher numbers are worse. In other cases, such as GDP, we outperform countries that have lower numbers.) We also sometimes report the international rank trend, which tells us whether we are falling behind other countries or moving up in the international rankings over time. If our international ranking did not change or only changed by one place over the time frame, then we report the international rank trend as stable.

We color coded all the measures, as shown in Table 1. To be in the top (green) category for the international comparison, we had to be outperforming at least 80% of high-income countries. This high bar reflects the high expectations we think Americans have for their country. At the other extreme, we show our international standing in red when we outperform less than 50% of high-income countries. But we also show the exact percentage in case you want to use a different standard.

¹ Specifically, we included countries labeled as “upper middle income” or “high income” by the World Bank. This includes 117 independent countries with income per capita greater than \$4,516.



Table 1: How We Summarize the Nation's Performance

	National Trend	% of Countries the US Outperforms	International Rank Trend
Positive / Improving	Greater in most recent year than first year available	>80%	Rank increased by 2+ spots from first to most recent year
Neutral / Stable	Most recent year not visibly different from first year	50 – 79%	Change of no more than one spot in the rankings in the most recent year relative to first year
Negative / Worsening	Lower in most recent year than first year	<50%	Rank dropped by 2+ spots from first to most recent year

In some cases, the national trends are difficult to interpret. When the trend data are only available for a short period and the trend during this period is erratic, we say the results are “unclear.” Also, if the trends are erratic and do not show a clear overall trend from the beginning to the end of the period, then we say the results are “mixed.”

It is possible for the picture to look different in each of the three ways of reporting each measure. For example, the national trends do not always align with the international rank trends because, when measures are declining in the United States, they are also sometimes declining in other countries, as was common during the COVID pandemic. So, our national trend can be declining even while the international rank trend is stable or improving in relative terms. It is also possible that we are improving on both the national trend and international rank trend but are still at a low international level. We report each measure all three ways, when possible, so that you can see and interpret the full picture.

You will also notice that there are more green-highlighted cells in the national trends column than there are in the international rank trend column. One reason is that all countries face many of the same pressures, constraints, and opportunities. If one country finds a way to improve something, then other countries can follow their lead. Countries’ national trends can improve even as their rankings remain steady.

Other measures improve “naturally.” Economic output (GDP), for example, is almost always increasing in most countries because new technologies increase productivity—and we generally only adopt technologies when they produce more or better output. But some countries might improve faster than others. In those cases, countries that are improving more slowly have a declining trend relative to other countries.

Although we report 37 measures in three different ways, this entire progress report is boiled down to a single table. **Table 2** reports all the topics and measures that reached supermajority board support. We report the topics alphabetically rather than in any order of priority. We also place a small “(p)” next to the name of each topic measure in the table that also had supermajority support from the public. Those without the “(p)” were only supported by the board. In the section titled “Board Vote and Public Opinion Poll,” we provide more detail about our decision process, and what “supermajority support” means in practice.

If there had been no agreement between the board and the public, then none of the measures would have the “(p)” label. We interpret the board and public votes as showing considerable agreement. The public gave supermajority support to all but three of the topics that the board supported and to more than half the measures. Also, all but one of the measures with supermajority support from the board also had majority public support. (The exception was the percentage of people who volunteered for a group, which received only 38% support from the public.)

The above analysis likely overstates agreement in some ways and understates it in others. The board and public never had a chance to sit down and talk about these topics and measures, which might have led to more agreement, but that would have been very difficult to do with 1,000 people involved. On the other hand, the table only includes measures that the board supported, and some measures that the public supported did not receive board support. We chose to report these later (see the “Board Vote and Public Opinion Poll” chapter) to avoid making this summary overly complicated.

Overall, this level of agreement between the board and the public gives us confidence that this is a valid assessment of the state of the nation. Still, we report the data transparently so that readers can see what the report would have looked like if we had relied on the public opinion poll alone.



Table 2: Summary of National Trends and International Rankings/Performance

Topics and Measures	National Trend	% of Countries the US Outperforms	International Rank Trend
Children & Families (p)			
Child mortality (p)	Improving	57	Worsening
Low birthweight	Worsening	50	Stable
Youth depression (p)	Worsening	1	Worsening
% with single parent	Stable	3	Stable
Citizenship & Democracy (p)			
Voter participation (p)	Stable	37	Improving
Belief in democracy (p)	Worsening	33	Improving
Neg. views of other party	Worsening	0	Worsening
Civil Liberties (p)			
Press freedom threats (p)	Unclear	66	Worsening
Economy (p)			
Output/GDP (p)	Improving	98	Stable
Productivity	Improving	88	Improving
Education (p)			
Test scores (8th grade)	Mixed	62	Improving
Avg year of educ.	Improving	86	Stable
% in school/working	Improving	56	Improving
Environment			
Greenhouse gas emissions	Mixed	1	Stable
Air quality (p)	Improving	73	Worsening
Inequality (p)			
Income inequality	Worsening	22	Worsening
Poverty (p)	Improving	25	Stable
Life Satisfaction			
Current life satisfaction	Worsening	70	Worsening
Social isolation	Worsening	66	Worsening



Table 2: Summary of National Trends and International Rankings/Performance

Topics and Measures	National Trend	% of Countries the US Outperforms	International Rank Trend
Mental Health (p)			
Depression/anxiety	Worsening	11	Worsening
Fatal overdoses (p)	Worsening	0	Worsening
Suicide rate (p)	Worsening	16	Worsening
National Security (p)			
[See topic section]			
Physical Health (p)			
Life expectancy	Improving	62	Worsening
Social Capital			
Volunteered for group	Stable	63	NA
Trust in other people	Worsening	73	Stable
Trust... (p)			
...in local government (p)	Stable		NA
...in federal government (p)	Worsening	6	Worsening
...in police (p)	Worsening	66	Stable
...in criminal justice (p)	Stable	39	Worsening
...in colleges/universities	Worsening	11	Worsening
...in science (p)	Stable	32	Improving
Violence (p)			
Murder rate (p)	Improving	30	Worsening
Shootings (p)	Unclear	10	Improving
Work & Labor Force (p)			
Employment/population ratio	Mixed	26	Worsening
Labor force participation	Worsening	23	Worsening
Long-term unemployment (p)	Mixed	84	Stable
Hourly earnings growth	Mixed	70	Improving



Key Conclusions

So, what is the state of the nation? Where exactly are we going wrong? Just as importantly, what might we be overlooking—what is actually going right? These are the questions we started with. Now, we have some answers that we think can help guide the country going forward. Again, our goal was never to prescribe solutions, but to create a progress report that focuses our attention on the right spots.

We organize our discussion of the results into groups of measures based on the combination of national trends, percentage of countries we are outperforming, and international rank trends.

Strengths that we are maintaining. This category includes topics and measures where we have a high international standing and show no sign of decline, either nationally or internationally.

We continue to generate strong economic growth, and this is likely to be a strength well into the future. We remain among the world's leaders on both economic output (GDP) and worker productivity and we continue to improve on both measures. Some of our advantage in total output is driven in part by our population size, but we still do well on GDP per capita.

Strengths that may be at some risk. This category includes topics and measures where we rank high internationally, but there are signs of decline in national and international trends.

Civil liberties are among the nation's founding principles and remain strong by global standards, but there are some warning signs, at least on freedom of the press. This is one of the topics where good measures are most difficult to come by. However, we can measure freedom of the press by the number of attacks on journalists and restrictions on their actions. While we cannot track this very far back, we are outperforming roughly two-thirds of countries. On the other hand, we experienced a very large spike in press attacks in 2020, an election year, and we are declining relative to other countries.

Areas where we are improving. This category includes measures where we are improving both in our national trend and in international rankings, regardless of our international standing.

Education levels are improving compared with other countries. Our test scores have traditionally been in the middle of the pack. We outperform most countries, though we are not in the top tier, on years of education and the percentage of young people working or in school. Nevertheless, compared with other countries, all three education measures have seen improving or stable trends. (While our test scores have improved since 1990, our national trend has declined over the last decade, which is why these are labeled “mixed” in **Table 2**.)

Poverty is declining. While the United States is a “high-income” country overall, some are still impoverished and face difficulties providing for their basic needs and those of their children. We have consistently fared poorly compared with other high-income countries on this measure, although our national trend is moving in the right direction.



Topics where our outcomes are stable or mixed. This is a catch-all category that includes situations where the picture looks very different across measures or where our national and international trends are heading in different directions.

For our physical environment, there is a mix of good news and bad news.. Our air quality is improving nationally, although worsening compared to other countries. Greenhouse gases were worsening until the late 2000s and then started improving. These impacts have largely canceled each other out so that our emissions are now very similar to 1990. And these emissions accumulate in the atmosphere, which means we are only making the problem worse more slowly than in the past. Human activity is continuing to warm the earth's temperature, raise sea levels, and perhaps increase the number of extreme weather events. The precise effects are difficult to forecast, and technology improvements could help offset those emissions in the future. However, waiting for technology alone to solve this problem is a risky bet, given the changes in climate already arising and the forecasts of worse to come. Without a significant change in direction, climate change will likely be disruptive and costly and significantly reduce our quality of life.

The labor force is also seeing a mix of trends. Long-term unemployment among prime-age workers is slightly lower now than in the early 1990s. Also, real earnings growth, while naturally somewhat erratic with the Great Recession and COVID, has been improving overall, relative to other countries. However, we are in the bottom tier of countries in terms of the employment-to-population ratio and labor force participation, with some slight declines over time, nationally and internationally.

Our citizenship and democracy measures are in the bottom-tier internationally and declining, though more slowly than in other countries. We are last among all comparison countries on polarization and not much better on voter participation and belief in democracy. While voter participation has been stable nationally, our belief in democracy and views of the other political party have been declining. We have been steadier in this area than other countries, but this is still worrisome given the national security and other implications that come with a global decline in democracy.

Our physical health—specifically, life expectancy—is improving but more slowly than other countries. We also note an almost unprecedented decline in life expectancy at the start of the COVID pandemic. Life expectancy had also plateaued and declined slightly just before the pandemic. We have since rebounded so that life expectancy is once again at an all-time high.

Social capital is above most countries with mixed trends. We still outperform most countries on volunteering and trust in other people and these measures are mostly stable, except that our national trend in trust in other people is declining.



Areas that are worsening. This category includes topics and measures where we have been above most countries but are now declining either nationally or internationally and not improving on either.

Life satisfaction is in decline. We outperform most countries on current satisfaction with our lives and social isolation, but both measures are worsening overall and relative to other countries.

We trust one another, and key institutions, less and less. Three of the six trust measures we included are on the decline. While trust in local government, the criminal justice system, and science has been stable, trust in the federal government, police, and colleges/universities is on the decline. In fact, trust in colleges/universities and the federal government arguably saw the largest drops of any of the 37 measures across all of the topics. If we do not trust our key institutions, then it will be difficult to make improvements in the many critical areas of American life that these institutions are responsible for.

Persistent weaknesses. This category includes those areas where we have low international standing and where we do not see improving trends.

Our mental health is very low by global standards and getting steadily worse. On all three mental health measures—depression/anxiety, fatal overdoses, and suicide—we are among the worst high-income countries and getting worse, both in our national and international trends. Our rate of fatal overdoses is highest among all countries where it can be measured.

While we have a very high average income, we continue to have among the most unequal incomes in the world. When we analyze income across all groups, we see that income inequality is rising. Combined with the reduction in poverty (see above), this means that inequality is rising because income growth has been more concentrated among those who were well-off to start with. (This measure is net of government programs and transfer payments such as Social Security.)

We remain among the most violent high-income countries in the world. The US has historically been one of the most violent high-income countries in the world, and that remains true today. However, contrary to public perception, the murder rate declined sharply over the past several decades. The increases during COVID were temporary, and the murder rate has declined to pre-COVID levels.

Our children and families are not well. Across four different measures (child mortality, low birthweight, percentage of children growing up with a single parent, and youth depression), we are either rank in the middle or among the worst of the world's high-income countries. And almost all these measures are trending in the wrong direction.



Themes

The various parts of the country do not operate in isolation. While we stop short of a full analysis that attempts to explain any individual finding or explain the findings' complex interplay, we do highlight some key patterns and connections.

Conclusion #1: We are a nation of extremes—extreme successes and extreme failures.

We are near the top in the world, among high-income countries, on economic measures but near the bottom on measures related to mental health, citizenship and democracy, inequality, and violence, as well as for measures of greenhouse gas emissions and some children/family measures.

Conclusion #2: Our national trends are improving in more areas than we are declining. However, relative to other countries, the opposite is true—we are declining in more areas than we are improving.

In **Table 2**, you can see that our national trends are generally improving on measures related to the economy, education, environment, physical health, and probably violence (five topics). Conversely, our national trends are generally declining for citizenship and democracy, life satisfaction, mental health, and trust (four topics).

However, compared with other countries, we are also declining on the environment, physical health, and possibly civil liberties. This means that our international standing is declining on five topics and improving in only two (economy and education). In this respect, we are getting better overall, but more slowly than other countries.

If, instead of focusing on the number of topics, we gave equal weight to each measure, then we would also be declining on considerably more measures than we are improving. This is true in both national and international trends. This is because there are a few topics—life satisfaction, mental health, and trust—where most measures are headed in the wrong direction.

Conclusion #3: Our economy is poised for continued success.

This is really the only area where we are excelling. We have had one of the largest and fastest-growing economies in the world for more than a century—and we show no signs of letting up. Our worker productivity remains high. Also, our education levels have been generally improving relative to competitors, which, along with our culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism, should allow us to maintain our high productivity in the future.

Finally, despite the slight decline in labor force participation, our workforce continues to grow slightly because of a gradually rising population. However, the population is only rising because of immigration, so upcoming policy decisions in this area will be important to our economic future, as well as national security.

**Conclusion #4: Our rising incomes are not translating into greater perceived well-being and social relations.**

Our measures of perceived well-being, especially in life satisfaction and mental health, are all going in the wrong direction, even as our material well-being continues to rise. Research has generally suggested that “money buys happiness,” at least to some degree, but our trends on these measures are moving in opposite directions. We also see declines in our relationships with others, including social isolation and half of the trust measures. Given the importance of social relationships in our lives, these two trends are probably related.

One possible general explanation is that rising income is still improving our perceived well-being, but other factors are acting more powerfully to offset this and make us feel worse off. Another possibility is that the way in which we are pursuing material wealth is directly reducing psychological and social well-being. We encourage future investigation about the possible explanations.

Would the conclusions be different if we focused only on the public vote?

One of the most important conclusions of this report is the widespread agreement about what a national progress report should include. The public, in our opinion survey, largely echoed the board. The public had supermajority support for almost all of the 15 topics and about half the 37 measures—and simple majority support for all but one of the measures.

While some of the specifics of the progress report would have been different if we had focused only on the public vote, almost all the broad conclusions we reached above would have been the same. For example, there is a disconnect between our material well-being and perceived well-being, no matter how you look at it. This is partly because the board and the public supported almost all the same topics, and some of these are related. For example, the public did not have supermajority support for life satisfaction, but it did for the related topic of mental health, and these two topics show similar patterns.

Two exceptions are worth noting. First, the public showed less support for measures related to how we interact with other people. You can see in **Table 2** that the public did not support the topic of social capital or our measures of social isolation, the percentage of children growing up in a single-parent family, or the frequency of adults volunteering for groups. In fact, volunteering—which is one element of our social capital—was the sole measure that the board included that did not even reach majority support from the public. This pattern is noteworthy because we see rising social isolation as one of the underlying causes behind our growing negative perceptions of the world.

The second exception is the environment. As with social isolation, most Americans voted to put this on the list, but not a supermajority. Of all the topics in our report, the environment is the one most closely connected to high-profile political debates, and we note that we carried out the poll in the middle of the 2024 presidential election. The fact that it is a partisan issue, in a country that is becoming more polarized, might have led some people to vote against it during a campaign. Whatever the reason, this issue is different from the others that reflect how people see the world as it is now. With the environment, the issue is the potentially high risk of major climate change in the future. We are starting to feel some of the predicted effects of greenhouse gas emissions but not nearly what scientists generally predict for the years ahead. It is human nature that people pay less attention to uncertain risks that are far in the future, especially ones that may require changing behavior now. This may be partly why we think the board showed more support for this topic than the public did.

But these are the exceptions. Even if we limited our progress report only to the topics and measures that the board and public agreed on, we would still be a country of extremes, still be declining on more measures than we are improving, and still see a disconnect between the economy and perceived well-being.



The Intangibles

Another possible reaction to our report is that the state of the nation is simply too difficult to measure. In some ways, we agree. We only included measures above that we think: (a) relate to fundamentally important aspects of the state of the nation; and (b) are well-measured at least in the US. In this section, we briefly consider some of the aspects that we think are important but which we had to exclude due to the difficulty of measurement.

The most extreme case is national security, which we felt compelled to exclude from this summary. The board discussed a wide variety of measures with national security experts, such as the interest and recruitment of military personnel and military investment by our NATO allies, but decided that it was highly debatable whether any of these were sufficiently fundamental to our security.² We do discuss data on this topic in the National Security section but did not feel confident enough to include it in the summary with the other, more measurable, topics.

In the case of civil liberties and physical health, we included the topics but with only a single measure. For the Civil Liberties section, we could measure freedom of the press, but not freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. In the Physical Health section, we included only life expectancy. (This measure had the most support from the board, across all measures and topics.) It turns out, however, that other measures of health are difficult to judge. We considered including a survey measure of perceived health but decided against it. The omission of other health measures is partly because some board members felt that most elements of physical health were already captured by life expectancy. Finally, we also limited the Violence section to just the murder rate and shootings because others, such as assaults, are not well-measured over time. (That said, assaults and robberies do seem to track with the murder rate.) The more philosophically minded might also point to other, even harder-to-measure elements of life. Freedom and opportunity, in particular, are two ideas that are both central to the American way of life and difficult to boil down to a number. Other factors that are difficult to measure include: how well we respect, treat, and care for one another, the degree to which people are selfish, and whether people display virtues such as gratitude. Some of these, and others you might think of, might be captured in more indirect ways in our progress report. For example, whether people are virtuous (however we might define that) might be reflected in whether we report trusting other people. But some of these might be missing entirely.

While we do not claim that we can measure everything, we do believe our progress report helps to reinforce the importance of ideas such as freedom and opportunity while also capturing the essence, and important details, of how we are doing.

² Our board includes a national security expert, Kiron Skinner. In addition to the board, we thank Richard Haass, a supporter of the project, for his contributions on this topic.



Conclusion

In our monthly deliberations over the past two years, our conversations often drifted to the question: What can we do about all of this? But then we remembered that this was beyond the scope of the project, or at least this first report. Of course, we want to solve our problems. There would be little point in a progress report that did not ultimately lead to progress. The approach we took with the State of the Nation Project was to start from the beginning. We have to first ask: How are we doing? Then, we can move on to: How do we get better? We hope that our work will spur conversations across the country, from small towns to large cities, that lead to real, enacted solutions.

We conclude then by asking you to consider how you think we should move forward. In the face of our difficulties and with our many resources, gifts, and aspirations, what should we do now?

- How can we learn to trust each other, and our institutions, again and avoid thinking the worst of others? How can we reshape those institutions to earn that trust?
- How can we stop the growing interest in nondemocratic forms of government—military and authoritarian rule—and reengage citizens in democratic principles, values, and virtues?
- How can we reduce political polarization and listen more in order to understand others across our political divides?
- How can we protect and reinvigorate our social institutions—families, charities, and faith-based organizations—to combat social isolation and mental illness, develop the kinds of healthy relationships that we all need, and improve physical health? In the same vein, how can we build stronger families and deeper and more lasting friendships?
- How can we improve education to ensure that our children can become engaged citizens and remain among the most productive workforce in the world?
- How can we achieve even faster economic growth, knowing that faster growth improves not just today's living standards, but those of posterity?
- How can we better translate our economic prosperity into continued reduction in poverty and a sense of happiness and purpose, while protecting the environment?
- How can we be better informed and avoid misinformation while also protecting freedom of the press and free speech?
- How can we reduce murder, violence, and suicide—measures that long placed our country among the worst in the world—while protecting the Second Amendment right to bear arms?
- How can we improve our physical health given our increasingly sedentary jobs and lives and the draw of television, video games, and other screen time? How can we prevent illness and improve public health while respecting individual autonomy?
- How can we help children get off to a better start in life?
- How can we do any of the above in a media landscape designed to play on our worst fears, stoke our anger, and make us feel like we are constantly missing out on something?



These questions reflect some of our core findings as well as the connections and tensions we see between them. They are not the only questions we might ask. You no doubt have some of your own “how can we ...?” questions to add.

We do not attempt to answer any of the above questions here. But we are also much more likely to choose the right answers and cures when we ask the right questions and have the right diagnoses. In that spirit, we hope our analysis, built on both expert knowledge and the views of the American people, can push us to work together and focus on our most pressing needs.

In some respects, this progress report shows that United States is doing very well. In other respects, the report shows serious cause for concern. But it does help us see more clearly where we stand. Where we see areas of concern, we—America’s citizens, parents, elected officials, and leaders of our churches, schools, colleges, businesses, charities, and governments—can all help turn this ship in the right direction. We each have rights but also responsibilities. Every one of us has a role to play.

We called this the State of the Nation Project because the United States has always been a project. We have to work to reach our high aspirations and uphold our founding principles. In the years ahead, we hope to report back and show that we have moved the American project forward.

“So, with all the creative energy at our command, let us begin an era of national renewal. Let us renew our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope. We have every right to dream heroic dreams.”

- Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address 1981

“The future we want—opportunity and security for our families; a rising standard of living and a sustainable, peaceful planet for our kids—all that is within our reach. But it will only happen if we work together. It will only happen if we can have rational, constructive debates.”

- President Barack Obama, State of the Union 2016

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

How are we doing—and what does that mean?

It is an age-old philosophical question: What is a good society? Also, how do we know when we have found it? The State of the Nation Project asks similar questions: How are we doing? How are we, as a country, fulfilling our potential? These questions seem especially salient today as a large majority of citizens think we are on the wrong track.

Some would say that a good society is one that looks out for the well-being of its members, but what is “well-being”? Is a good society the sum of individual well-being or is there a larger sense of collective well-being? What special considerations should be given to the least well-off? What should take precedence—material, physical, spiritual, social, or emotional well-being? What if we have all those things but lack a sense of purpose and meaning in our lives?

These questions are fundamental to the human experience. They are also difficult to answer because we come to these questions with different philosophical or ideological perspectives and values. The liberal worldview gives greater weight to fairness and caring, while the conservative worldview prizes respect for tradition, liberty, loyalty, and sanctity.¹

These alternative values do not necessarily mean, however, that liberals and conservatives, or those with other perspectives, disagree broadly about how we are doing. One reason is that the two main philosophical traditions—as well as those who do not pledge allegiance to either one—might weigh values differently, but almost everyone gives some consideration to all of them. Almost all Americans think that justice and liberty are important to some degree, for example. Even when we delve into murkier ground, about the quality and character of life, few would disagree about the importance of happiness and depression.

We do see greater divergence in views when we talk about solutions and especially about the roles of different institutions carrying them out. Conservatives generally want to leave matters to individuals as well as families, charities, and religious organizations. Liberals, while also valuing those institutions, are more likely to turn to government, especially the federal government. These disagreements about solving problems are one reason why we made this The State of the Nation Project, not The Step-by-Step Guide to Improving the State of the Nation Project. Other organizations work to find bipartisan solutions to problems. We see our role as guiding and inspiring those efforts.

We believe that one reason the nation is struggling to solve its problems is the increasing confusion about where we are excelling versus faltering. It is easy to read the newspaper—or, more commonly these days, check websites and social media—and get frustrated with myriad issues and “alternative facts.” So many problems seem to warrant our attention, but we cannot do everything. How should we decide where to start? What are our most pressing problems? And what strengths can we draw on to move forward? To have any prayer of improving the state of the nation, we need to see the world for what it is. We need a progress report.

¹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon Books, 2013).

What are we hoping to accomplish?

Progress reports can take many shapes. The one we are trying to produce with The State of the Nation Project was designed with several goals in mind:

1. **Shift the tenor of national conversation.** It is increasingly difficult to have a reasoned, fact-based conversation about how we are doing. Such discussions get intense, and many people now avoid them altogether. Our public discourse tends to “bring more heat than light.” In this project, we are trying to reverse that—to shed light on how we are doing without the heated rhetoric.
2. **Focus the national conversation.** We are bombarded with news every day, and it is easy to get lost in the noise. One of our aims, therefore, is to focus the nation’s attention on what we consider to be some of the most important topics and measures. The list in the summary might seem long, and it is—the state of the nation is necessarily multifaceted—but if you took the time to consider all the measures and topics you see covered on a regular basis, you would see that our list is only a tiny fraction of the total. We sought to focus on the most important topics and measures and therefore the most significant problems and successes.
3. **Reach a broad audience.** This goes hand in hand with the goal of shifting the conversation. This report avoids technical language and drawn-out discussions. The report is long, but we also boil the state of the nation down to a single table in the summary. For those who want more detail, we have that, too, in the various sections that follow.
4. **Be specific.** Efforts in some states and other countries have focused on creating indices of progress that combine various kinds of metrics. These well-meaning efforts are motivated by a desire to replace other, especially economic, metrics that dominate national news with something more holistic. However, indices combine so many disparate metrics that they can be difficult to interpret. How can we meaningfully combine economic output and the murder rate into a single measure of “progress”? Even if we could agree on how to do that, some of the measures will inevitably be going up and others down, so that the combination—the index—might look stable, masking the successes on some measures and the failures on others. This is why we take a different approach, keeping the individual topics and measures separate, so we can see what is really going on.
5. **Test how much agreement might be possible on difficult issues.** Our board includes a wide-ranging group. We were not entirely sure when we started that we could agree on anything meaningful. But it turns out that we agree on quite a lot. The participants in our public opinion poll also hold quite divergent views on some issues, especially on how we solve problems, but we also see considerable agreement in the public at large as well. If we can agree on our successes and failures, we have a better chance of maintaining our strengths and addressing our crises.
6. **Provoke discussion on critical issues.** While we have decided not to be that step-by-step guide to solving the nation’s problems, we certainly do hope that this project provokes such conversations. We see the State of the Nation Project as a first step toward solutions, but it is not the only step. We do not want you to just read this report, but act on it.

7. **Clarify what can be measured and improve data in those areas.** We do not claim that every important element of the state of the nation can be measured. As you read on, you will see us write often about items that are difficult or impossible to measure. Even those that can be measured often are not measured well. We point out these areas to provide a fuller picture and hopefully improve future data.

Did we achieve all these aims? Time will tell. You be the judge.

How did we approach the project?

The idea for the State of the Nation Project emerged in early 2022. We began seeking funding and recruiting board members,² looking for people who had significant expertise and experience thinking about elements of the state of the nation, and who had reputations for being able to talk and work with others who have beliefs different from their own. Collectively, we sought a group from a wide range of expertise, academic disciplines, and political orientations. And we succeeded in that. The board includes senior leadership and fellows from seven of the nation's leading think tanks, across the political spectrum, and appointees and advisors in the last five presidential administrations.

Still, it would have been impossible to create a board that covered every combination of expertise and political ideology. Where we saw missing links, we sought expertise from non-board members. For those who wished to be acknowledged, their names can be found in the Acknowledgments section.

We held our first meeting in June 2023. We began by discussing how the process would work and sketching out potential topics. Once we had an initial list of topics, individual board members then led discussions on their areas of expertise. Before those meetings, the director and staff supported the effort by looking for an initial, broad list of potential and available metrics.

The composition of the group helped ensure that differing views were expressed. Part of the director's job was to play devil's advocate, actively looking for objections that might be made by others not involved in the project. We regularly asked: Who would disagree with us? And why? Are there well-reasoned arguments that would take us in a different direction?

The final result came from an iterative process. With each monthly meeting, we narrowed the list of potential measures to those that had some substantial support. At two points in the project we also held a "straw poll" vote which narrowed the list further. The first two votes focused on topics that we had discussed most recently, so that we did not lose track of our discussions. The board also voted on the entire set at the very end, discussing pros and cons of various measures (more on this below). These votes were generally anonymous, except to the director and staff.

² As noted elsewhere, the project is entirely funded and supported by Tulane University and its Murphy Institute of Political Economy.

After this last full vote, we also asked the general public to vote on the exact same set of measures that the board considered. Though we believe that we assembled an excellent and diverse board, we would not claim that 14 people, by themselves, could or should be the final authority over the state of the nation. We therefore agreed in advance that: (a) we would report the public opinion results in this report; and (b) we would indicate in the report how our conclusions would have been different if we had used only the public's views. We also gave board members the opportunity to change their votes based on the public poll. In the end, though, there was considerable alignment between what the board and public supported.

Guiding principles for choosing measures

While the board members each voted their own conscience, we found it useful to make decisions under certain guiding principles. The following text closely mirrors the text the board members received when they were first invited to join the project.

1. **Focus on what we value first, then think later about how well we can measure those things.** The report is a set of measures, and our conversations were inevitably shaped by measures we were familiar with, but we still tried to start with what we thought was important. At the end of each topic section, we describe topics and measures that we discussed but which did not have sufficient board support. We also sometimes discuss measures that we think may be important but where the data quality was insufficient.
2. **Be willing to challenge the status quo.** We did not automatically include measures that we, our colleagues, the media, or the general public typically focus on. The relevance of any measure depends on its purpose, which is different in this project than in most others. Part of the director's job was to raise questions about this at various points. In the end, the majority of measures will probably seem familiar, but we actively looked at less familiar ones, too.
3. **Focus on overall well-being.** Each measure should capture something that is fundamental to human well-being and flourishing. For each measure, we asked ourselves, could the nation be just fine even if this measure were going in the "wrong" direction? If so, then we should consider omitting that measure.
4. **Include leading and lagging indicators.** Lagging indicators tell us how we did in the recent past. Leading indicators signal where we might be headed. For example, our measure of life expectancy necessarily involves looking into the past; some people alive now were born in the early 1900s, so their life expectancy is necessarily determined by things that happened a long time ago. On the other hand, all the measures pertaining to children are more forward looking as they focus on the next generation.
5. **Avoid redundancy.** With each measure, we should ensure that it is not being captured indirectly by some other measure. For example, we considered some measures because they are components of happiness, but since we are including happiness as a measure in itself, we did not need to include all of these components. This rule helped keep the set of measures to a manageable number. We kept asking ourselves: Is this factor sufficiently captured indirectly by other measures?

6. **Focus on outcomes, not policies or specific behaviors.** For many of us, our initial instinct was to focus on what we can do to combat problems, which quickly lead us to measures of policy responses. We could, for example, measure spending on national defense or investments in children as indicators of the state of the nation. Again, we hope that the project will prompt discussion of such investments and solutions, but that is a much larger conversation and beyond the scope of this work.
7. **Report trends where possible.** While the project is about the state of the nation, we mean this in the broadest sense. In part because it is difficult to say whether a given level of some metric is “good” or “bad,” trends tell us whether we are headed in the right direction. So, we report trends where possible and we were more skeptical of measures where trend data are not available.
8. **Make international comparisons.** Another way to establish the state of the nation, other than tracking trends, is to make comparisons to other countries. A given measure might seem fine at first, but what if we see other nations surpassing us? In selecting measures, we therefore also preferred those where international comparisons are possible.
9. **Consider the validity and reliability of the measures.** If we simply did not believe the data available, then we did not report those measures. “In-between” cases emerged where important factors are measured imperfectly but well enough that levels and trends are meaningful. We investigated data quality prior to voting and board members had to judge for themselves. For example, some additional measures of violence likely would have been included if not for the measurement issues.
10. **Require super-majority support.** To come to a place that everyone would be comfortable with, we required super-majority support, but not unanimity. Since there are many different political ideologies, a majority-rules approach would mean including measures that some groups strongly opposed. That approach likely also would have led to a much larger number and variety of measures. On the other hand, requiring unanimity would have left us with very little. As you will see, the board only had unanimous agreement on a single measure (life expectancy). The last section describes the precise voting procedure.

One principle, you might notice, is not in this list. We did not place any limit on the number of measures we would include. Some board members explicitly wanted fewer measures—for this group, the goal of focusing the nation on key measures was paramount—while others sought a broader array, a deeper dive. This was a significant factor in the voting as board members often talked about their views on this matter.

One reason for laying out these principles is that you might not see your favorite measure on the list. The above principles might help explain why. We dropped a number of measures because they were largely redundant with others—meaning they seem to have similar underlying causes and are correlated with one another. Others we excluded because they were too closely linked to specific government policies, which we were explicitly trying to avoid. At the end of each section, we discuss some of the more obvious omissions and explain why these decisions were made.



Structure of each topic discussion

In the sections that follow, we discuss each topic separately along with its associated measures. Each section begins with a broad description of the topic, why we included it, and a summary of the findings across the measures within that topic. This is followed by a brief discussion and figures for each measure. We explain what specific measures we used, why we included them, and what the data show. We generally include one figure for each measure as well as basic information about international rankings (where possible).

We used the same approach with every measure. In each case, we tried to report US data trends from 1990 to 2023, a period of 33 years. If you see a shorter time frame, it is because data were not available for all years. Similarly, some data are not updated every year. We show whatever is available even if this created some inconsistency across the measures. We followed the same process in drawing conclusions about the US trend for every measure. Using this mechanical process both simplified our work and prevented cherry-picking of results.

In some cases, there were multiple potential data sources, and we judged which to choose on three criteria: (a) how well the measure's definition aligned with the board's preferences; (b) our understanding of the validity and reliability of the data; and (c) the number of years the data were available. We also compared the various data source options to see whether the choice of measure had any influence on the conclusions and indicated any discrepancies in the data notes in the appendix (this almost never happened).

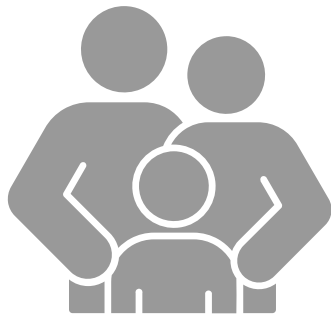
The international data are more complex for three reasons: (1) for each measure, the number and range of countries varies (this is why we used the "percentage outperforming" rather than the ranking); (2) even when available for a country, data collection and measurement varied across countries; and (3) the time frames with available data are generally shorter than the US-only figures (i.e., much of the international data collection started fairly recently). Therefore, we often dropped countries where the problems indicated in the source documentation appeared severe or where the source documentation expressed general caution. For each measure, these issues are reported in the Data Notes section. As a general rule, we chose years for comparison that had at least 25 countries with data available. We also tried to choose years which had data available for Russia and China, two countries that the United States is often compared against. The conclusions we draw are entirely our own, based on the above protocol, not the conclusions of organizations that reported the data.

After the findings and figures, we briefly discuss the possible causes underlying the findings. For example, a common explanation for short-term shifts, across a variety of measures, is the recent COVID pandemic. Providing some sense of the possible causes is important to make meaning of the results, but we do this only briefly and do not provide extensive supporting evidence—these are only "possible causes." Providing more extensive literature reviews on each of the 37 measures would have significantly slowed the project and yielded a much longer report. Brevity was one of our many goals.

In what follows, we provide a section on each of the 15 topics, ordered alphabetically. The structure of each section is identical.

01

Section



Children and Families



STATE OF THE NATION



Children & Families

Introduction. We can learn a lot about any country based on how it treats its children. Research is also clear that childhood shapes our life trajectories in profound ways. Moreover, those trajectories are shaped by children's families. For example, parents' income and wealth shape the physical resources available in the household. The time that parents and other family members spend with their children shape children's values, knowledge, skills, habits, beliefs, and emotional well-being. We are also products of our neighborhoods, friendships, national culture, policies, environments, and the decisions we make in adulthood. In the long run, no country can be more successful than its children.

Summary of Results. Our progress with children and families has been mixed. On the positive side, child mortality has declined sharply, while the percentage of children growing up in single parent households is almost identical to the level in 1990. On the other hand, the percentage of children born at low birthweights and the number of youth reporting symptoms of depression have been rising quickly. We also perform quite poorly relative to other high-income countries on all these measures. On youth depression and the percentage of children growing up in a single parent household, we are among the worst high-income countries.



Child Mortality

Specific measure: Mortality rate of children under age five per 100,000 children under age five. (Source: Authors' analysis of Centers for Disease Control data).

National Trend



% of countries the US outperforms

57%

Intl. Rank Trend



Why did we include this measure? All forms of mortality are concerning, but the deaths of young children are especially alarming, given the vulnerability of this group. A rising number of deaths also signals larger trends in threats and risks, even to those who survive.

Figure 1: Child Mortality (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Mortality rate of children under age five per 100,000 live births. (Source: Authors' analysis of World Health Organization data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 57% (out of 116 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? We have been making steady progress on this metric. Child mortality has been cut almost in half since 1990. However, other countries have apparently been making more progress as we remain in the middle of the pack and our relative position is declining. Currently, we rank just below Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovakia.

What might explain these patterns? The vast majority of high-income countries are reducing child mortality. The leading causes of death among infants and toddlers in the US are (in order): accidents, health conditions, and homicides. (When including adolescents and teenagers, the leading cause is murder/suicide.) The recent decline in US child mortality is almost entirely due to a decline in motor vehicle accident deaths. These have declined faster than the overall death rate from motor vehicle deaths, indicating that this is partly related to much greater use and quality of car seats and seat belt use. The decline in mortality is also happening despite the rise in low birthweight (see below), which increases child mortality.



Low Birthweight

Specific measure: Percentage of live births where children weigh 2,499 grams (5.51 lbs.) or less. (Source: Authors' analysis of Centers for Disease Control data).

National Trend



% of countries the US outperforms

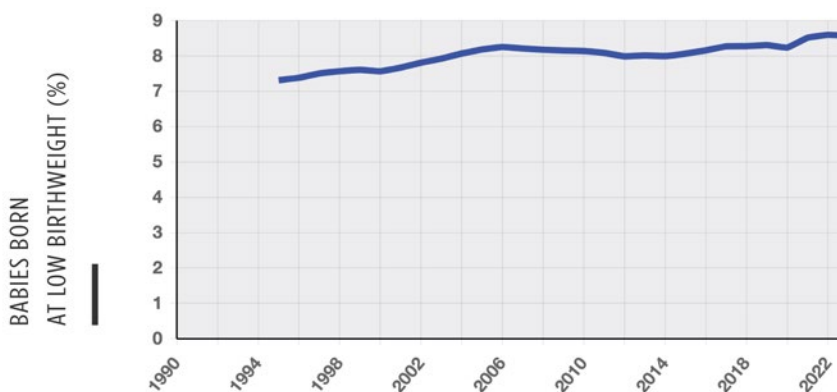
50%

Intl. Rank Trend



Why did we include this measure? Low birthweight is associated with a wide range of short-term issues for infants and longer-term issues later in life, including developmental delays, chronic health issues, behavioral and emotional problems, and stunted physical growth.

Figure 2: Low Birthweight (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Percentage of live births with babies weighing under 2,500 grams. (Source: Authors' analysis of UNICEF data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 50% (out of 101 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔

What do the data show? While the overall rate may seem low, the rate of low birthweight has been steadily rising, and we are only in the middle among high-income countries. Our international standing has remained relatively steady. Slovakia, Uruguay, and Luxembourg currently rank just above us. The top-ranked country, Iceland, has a rate that is less than half the US rate.

What might explain these patterns? Some of the rise in low birthweight is driven by the rising age at which women are having children. Also, the rising use of assisted reproduction (e.g., in vitro fertilization, IVF) leads to a greater prevalence of multi-child births where each baby generally has a lower birthweight. Low birthweight is also related to mothers' obesity, malnutrition, sexually transmitted diseases, stress, and substance abuse, which are related to a mix of behaviors, habits, policies, and socio-economic conditions. One of those conditions is poverty. While our measure of poverty is declining, this might not be the case among pregnant women and poverty measures do not capture access to health care very well. A lack of prenatal health care, especially among lower income groups, may contribute to these and other issues that cause low birthweight.



Youth Depression

Specific measure: We report two measures. The narrower definition of youth depression focuses on surveys of adolescents and teenagers (age 10–19) and uses the full set of symptoms used to clinically diagnose depression (the data do not reflect actual diagnoses). (Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation). The broader definition is the percentage of 9th–12th graders reporting feelings of hopelessness or sadness lasting every day for 2+ weeks in a row that prevented them from doing some of their usual activities, which is only one of the multiple criteria in the narrower definition. (Source: Authors' analysis of Youth Risk Behavior Survey).

National Trend
↓

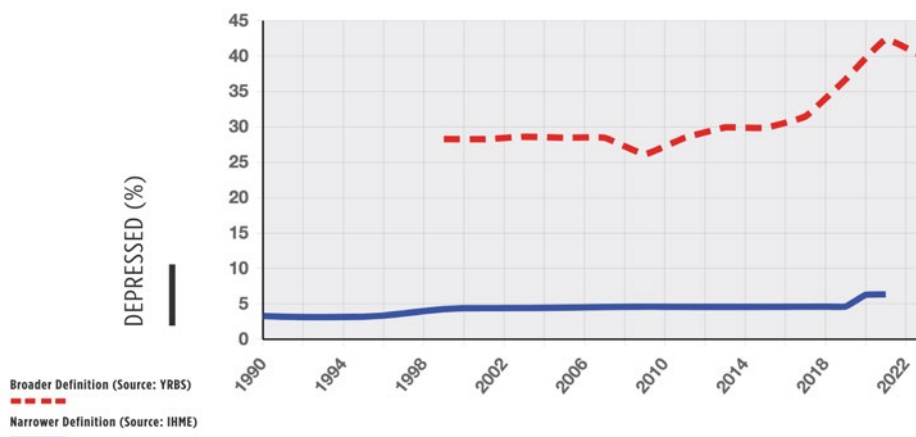
% of countries the US outperforms
1%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? Depression is an extreme form of mental distress and a common precursor to suicide. Given the importance of childhood for shaping life trajectories, depression at this early stage is a particular concern for the future. Especially in its more extreme forms, depression affects almost every element of life, including the ability to focus on studying, participate in school activities, and engage in deep relationships with friends and family. Depression also carries over to our ability to sleep and other aspects of our physical health. Those who have depression when they are young are also more likely to experience depression, and all of these symptoms, when they are older.

We included two different measures of depression because the available measures have different strengths and weaknesses and capture varying degrees of depression intensity. However, they show the same basic patterns.

Figure 3: Youth Depression (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as narrower definition above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 1% (out of 112 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓



What do the data show? The US ranks second-to-last in the world of 112 higher-income countries—just behind Greece, Spain, and Portugal—and we have been falling further and further behind.

What might explain these patterns? The upward shift in youth depression started around 2007 and has been concentrated mainly among girls. There has been considerable debate about the causes. The timing of the depression spike coincides with the launch of the iPhone, and the more recent spike around 2017 is associated with the rapidly expanded use of social media through those devices. We could not find any other proposed explanation that can explain these patterns. On the other hand, it is difficult to carry out the kinds of studies that would be needed to clearly pin down the role of smartphones, social media, or other causes.



Children Living with Single Parent

Specific measure: Percentage of children under 18 living with a single parent. (Grandparents and other relatives, though they may play important roles, are not counted as parents in these data. Households where a biological parent has a live-in, unmarried partner are also counted as single-parent households. However, when a stepparent marries the biological parent and/or adopts the child, it is considered a two-parent household). (Source: Census Bureau).

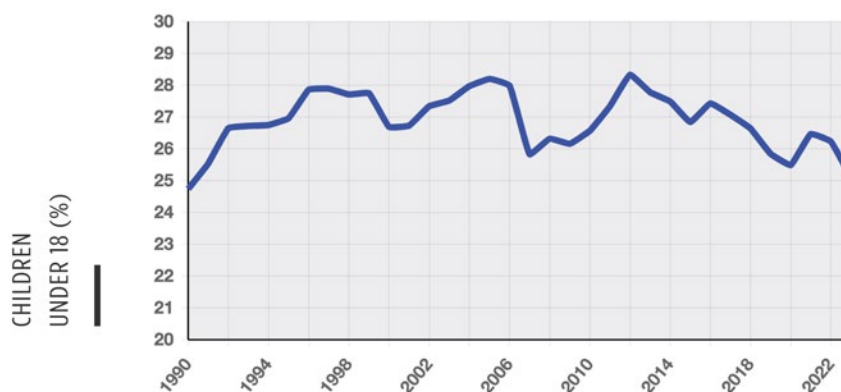
National Trend →

% of countries the US outperforms: 3%

Intl. Rank Trend →

Why did we include this measure? Single-parent households have less access to quality housing and schooling and are more unstable financially, which causes stress for parents and more frequent housing moves. Single parents also have less time and energy to spend with their children to provide emotional support, instill good habits, enforce rules, and help with homework. Perhaps for these reasons, growing up in a single-parent household is associated with a wide range of negative consequences during adolescence, including lower academic achievement, higher dropout rates, increased aggression in school, fewer social connections, risky behaviors (e.g., drug use), and a higher chance of teen pregnancy. When they become adults, these children tend to have lower incomes, higher rates of anxiety and depression, difficulty engaging in their own stable relationships (e.g., they have higher divorce rates), and increased rates of incarceration. Growing up with a single parent seems to be a particular problem for boys.

Figure 4: Children Living with Single Parent (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Author's analysis of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 3% (of 31 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔



What do the data show? Setting aside the year-to-year changes, the trend has been fairly stable but is shaped like a hill. We saw rising rates of single-parent childhood in the 1990s and stayed at this level until the mid-2010s. This has been followed by a decline of three percentage points that offset the initial rise. For that reason, we now stand at almost exactly the same level as 1990. The three countries just above the US are Lithuania, Belgium, and France, while the top-ranked country (Turkey) has one-fourth the US percentage living with a single parent.

What might explain these patterns? The rate of single-parent children has hovered in the 25–28% range for 35 years. This relative stability may seem surprising given that the marriage rate has been in steady decline during this same period. However, birth rates are declining for both single and married women of childbearing age, so these cancel out in our measure of the share of children living with single parents. We note that some countries that do especially well on this measure also have more limited opportunities for women beyond motherhood.

Related Topics: Youth depression is related to the larger topic of mental health for adults and is a precursor of measures like suicide (see the Mental Health section). Youth depression is also closely related to social isolation and perceptions of one's own well-being and leads people to withdraw from social life (see the Life Satisfaction section). While not likely a major cause of declining trust, depression does lead to negative thoughts and concerns about others (see the Trust section).

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

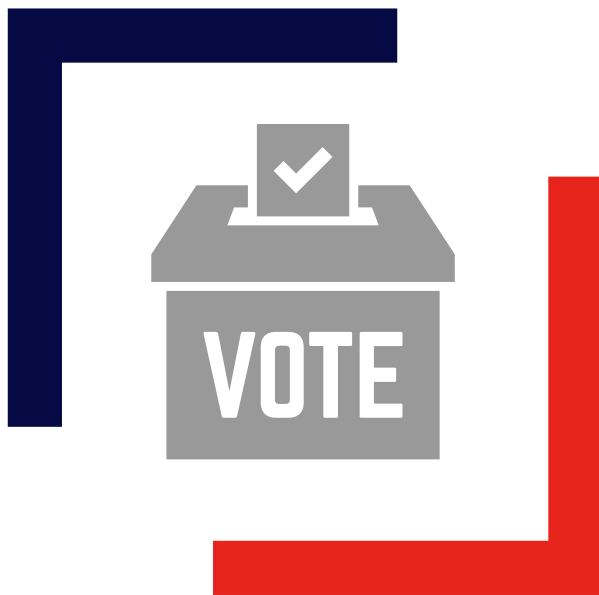
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Children & Families (as topic)	100%	81%
Child Mortality	85%	73%
Low Birthweight	85%	55%
Youth Depression	85%	76%
Children Living with Single Parent	77%	58%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not show sufficient support, for other measures, including the percentage of children in the juvenile justice system and the percentage of adults ever married. The public supported the former but not the latter.

02

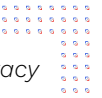
Section



Citizenship and Democracy



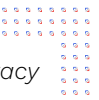
STATE OF THE NATION



Citizenship & Democracy

Introduction. The United States is a representative democracy. We choose our leaders and hold them accountable through elections. Those leaders are responsible for upholding the Constitution, which includes respecting civil liberties, separation of powers between branches of government, and the rule of law. Our elected officials are also obligated to maintain free and fair elections and the peaceful transition of power, and to lead with civility, truth, and transparency. But the responsibility of democratic government cannot be limited to elected leaders alone. Our citizens also have important responsibilities, including being informed, holding elected officials accountable through voting, tolerating those who are different and have divergent views from our own, and engaging more broadly in civic affairs. The rights of citizens go hand in hand with these responsibilities.

Summary of Results. Three measures of citizenship and democracy are included. We rank in the bottom-tier internationally on belief in democracy and polarization (i.e., having negative views of other political parties), measures that are also worsening over time. We are also tied for last among all comparison countries on polarization. However, we do rank in the top-half on voter participation in presidential elections and that measure is improving compared with other countries. (Our international standing on voter participation in congressional elections is lower, but this figure may not be as comparable across countries for reasons we explain.)



Voter Participation

Specific measure: Percentage of the voting-age citizen population who voted in presidential and congressional elections.
(Source: Census Bureau).

National Trend
→

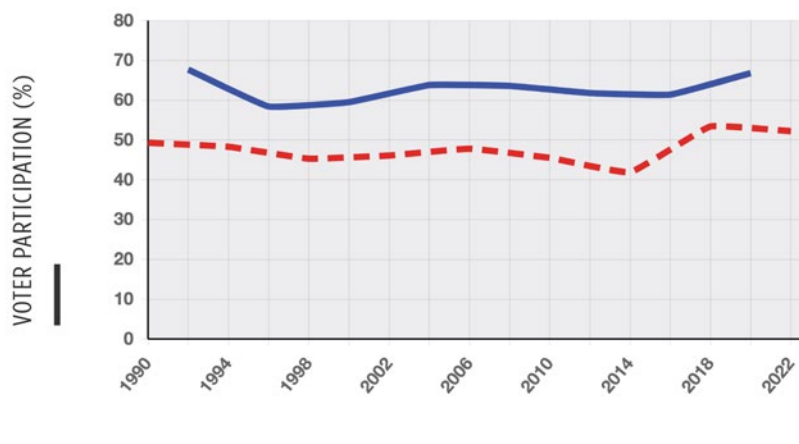
% of countries the US outperforms
37%

Intl. Rank Trend
↑

Why did we include this measure? Democracy is rooted in elections and its success depends on citizens holding their leaders accountable by voting. Voting is also a signal of how engaged citizens are in public affairs.

Figure 5: Voter Participation (National Trend)

How does the US rank globally?



• **Specific Measure:** Percentage of the voting-age population who voted in presidential elections. (Source: Author's analysis of International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance data).

• Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 57% (out of 44 countries)

• International Rank Trend: ↑

• **Specific Measure:** Percentage of the voting-age population who voted in parliamentary elections. (Source: Author's analysis of International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance data).

• Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 16% (out of 83 countries)

• International Rank Trend: ↑

What do the data show? The national trend in voter participation has been fairly stable and we have been improving relative to other countries. Our international standing depends somewhat on whether we focus on presidential elections or congressional elections.

What might explain these patterns? The striking difference in our international standing between presidential and congressional elections is partially due to the US having separate elections for the executive and legislative branches. Elections that involve the selection of a single leader (for example, a president) will naturally have higher turnouts when those elections occur. However, the US also ranks below most countries that have similarly structured elections. These factors likely make our voter engagement appear lower than it is.

Either way, our voter participation rate is mediocre by global standards. One reason for this is that some countries mandate election participation. Additional possible reasons include the limited use of automatic voter registration and the choice of voting days. The US holds its elections on workdays, while many others choose weekends or make the day a holiday. Many areas also have few voting places that are far away and involve long wait times, though mail-in voting has become much more widespread in recent years. Voter ID requirements are also increasing though it is not clear that our requirements over this period have been different from other countries.



Belief in Democracy

Specific measure: Support for a democratic political system versus other systems, such as rule by experts, armies, or authoritarian leaders who ignore elected legislative leaders. (Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).

National Trend
↓

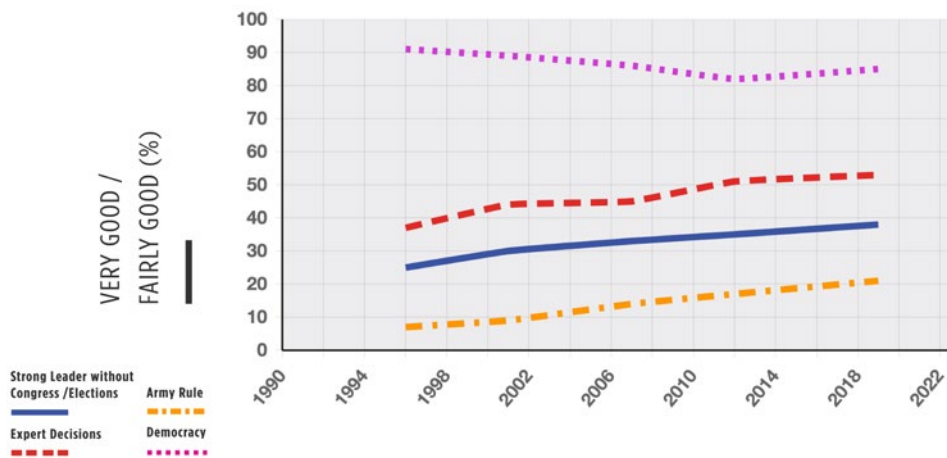
% of countries the US outperforms
33%

Intl. Rank Trend
↑

Why did we include this measure? A prerequisite for a strong democracy is that citizens believe that democracy is the best system for making decisions that affect everyone. A declining belief in democracy could also signal a weakening of democratic norms and practices.

Figure 6: What are Good Systems for Governing the Country? (National Trend)

How does the US rank globally?

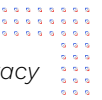


- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 33% (out of 30 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↑

What do the data show? Support for democracy has been on the decline, while support for other forms of government has been on the rise. While the percentage supporting democracy has declined slowly, the percentage supporting other forms of government has risen faster.

Almost two-thirds of high-income countries have more support for democracy than the United States, with Thailand, Brazil, and Malaysia being just ahead of us. (We also rank below China and Iran on this measure, though above Russia.) However, it appears that support for democracy is declining even faster in other countries, so our relative position is improving.

What might explain these patterns? The weakening belief in democracy has come alongside disenchantment with the federal government.



Polarization

Specific measure: Percentage of people in each major political party (Democrats and Republicans) with a mostly or very unfavorable view of the other main party. (Source: Authors' analysis of Pew Research Center data).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the US
outperforms

0%

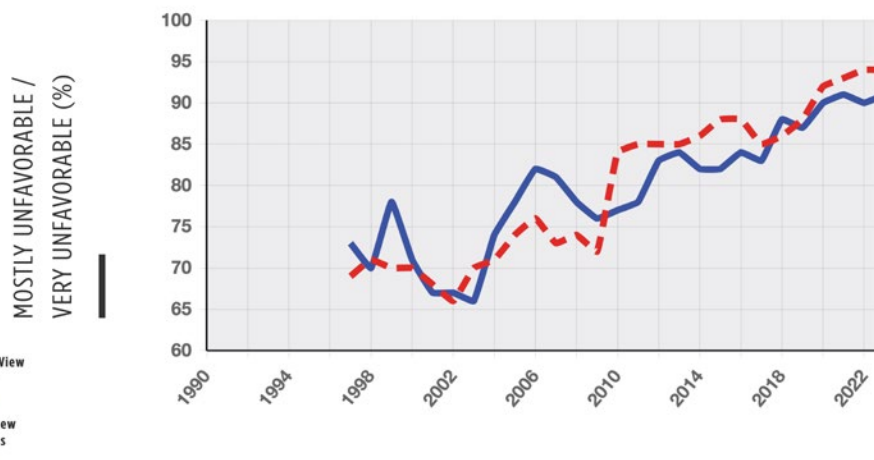
Intl.
Rank
Trend



Why did we include this measure? A key principle of democracy is respect for the views of others. In our party-based system, this also means respect for people of the other main political party. To be clear, we do not see this as a measure of agreement about specific public issues—disagreement is healthy—but only as a measure of, and a need for, respecting opposing views.

Figure 7: Polarization (National Trend)

How does the US rank globally?



• **Specific Measure:** The level that society is polarized into antagonistic political camps (response options: not at all, mainly not, somewhat, to a noticeable extent, to a large extent). (Source: Author's analysis of Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute).

• **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 0%, tied with 18 other countries for most polarized (out of 92 countries)

• **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Our views of the other political party are very low and declining, both in national terms and relative to other countries.

What might explain these patterns? This polarization partially reflects political realignment that accelerated in the early 1990s. It used to be, for example, that members and officials of the two parties did not differ markedly on their views on policy issues. This is no longer true. Polarization in social media and mass media also seems to be feeding this trend.

Related Topics: Political polarization is likely related to the decline in our social relations generally. Low voter participation and the steady decline in belief in democracy might reflect our low level of trust in the federal government (see the Trust section).

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

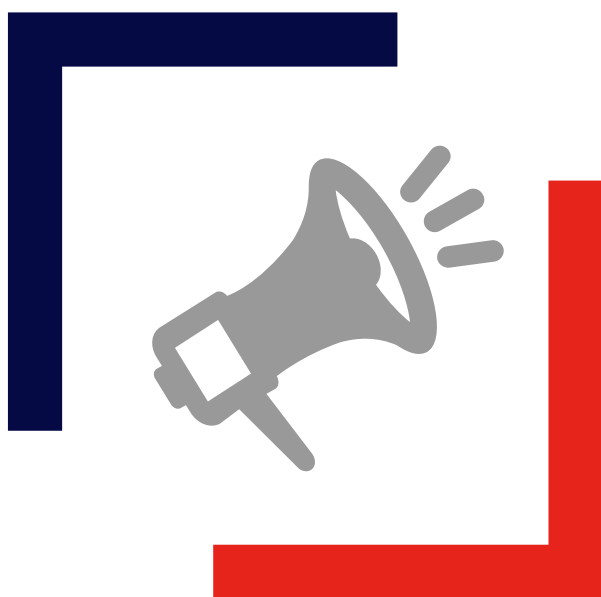
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Citizenship & Democracy (as topic)	100%	75%
Voter Participation	93%	75%
Belief in Democracy	79%	70%
Polarization	79%	64%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including adult knowledge of civics, child knowledge of civics, and the percentage of the population who believe the country is headed in the right direction. The public did not support child knowledge of civics but did support the other two measures.

03

Section



Civil Liberties



STATE OF THE NATION



Civil Liberties

Introduction. Civil liberties are central not only to our government, as outlined in the Bill of Rights in the US Constitution, but to what it means to be an American. Our freedoms of speech, press, religion, and assembly allow us to think for ourselves, criticize the government, and practice our faiths. We also have the right to due process and protection from unreasonable search and seizure. These rights protect us from unreasonable interference and imposition by our governments and help define what freedom means in the United States.

Summary of Results. The degree to which our civil liberties are being protected is difficult to measure. For this reason, we include only one measure, focused on freedom of the press. We are above most high-income countries on this measure, though many countries are above us and we are falling behind over time.

Freedom of the Press

Specific measure: Number of press freedom violations, including assaults and arrests of reporters, damage to their equipment, and subpoenas/legal orders for anonymous sources and restricting coverage. (Source: US Press Freedom Tracker).

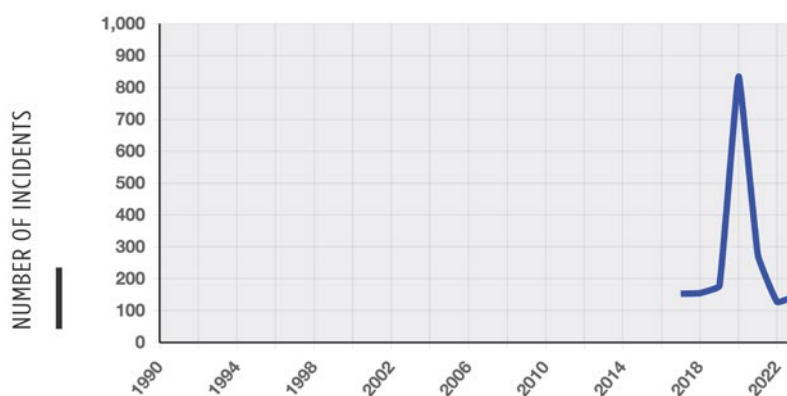
National Trend
*

% of countries the US outperforms
66%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? The press is seen as so important to holding the government accountable and keeping the public informed that it is sometimes called the “fourth estate,” placing it on par with other “estates,” including the government itself. The specific measure we chose was the only one we could find that consistently and objectively measured press freedom. Other data sources focus on assessments of press freedoms by experts and reporters themselves, but these are more subjective and difficult to interpret than our measure, which focuses on actual, documented events that seem to violate press freedoms. (We did use expert opinion for the international comparisons only because no other type of international source was available.)

Figure 8: Freedom of the Press (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Survey of experts on each country, assessing media freedom and integrity, including censorship, criticism, representation, self-censorship, bias, and corruption. (Source: Authors' analysis of V-Dem Institute data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 66% (out of 92 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? While we can only measure this over a short period of time, a sharp and temporary spike in press freedom violations occurred in 2020. Except for this spike, the US averages a bit fewer than 200 attacks on the press each year. Roughly 15% of these involved detention of journalists by the police and other government law enforcement officials. These are arguably the most egregious violations because, as a civil right, freedom of the press means freedom from government interference and corruption. (Given the short time frame and erratic nature of this measure, we categorize the national trend as “unclear” in the Executive Summary.)

What might explain these patterns? The year 2020 was an unusual year. The COVID pandemic upended our lives and led to controversy over social distancing, vaccines, and other pandemic-related matters; the murder of George Floyd spurred national protests over racial injustice; and the 2020 presidential election saw verbal attacks against the press. The number of attacks on the press was more than four times higher that year compared with 2019 and 2022.



Related Topics: Civil liberties are clearly aligned with the Citizenship and Democracy topic. Freedom of the press is necessary for a well-informed citizenry and as a venue for debate and public discussion.

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



Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Civil Liberties (as topic)	79%	79%
Freedom of the Press	79%	78%

Other Measures Considered: We note, again, that this is a particularly difficult topic to measure. We looked for measures of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly, but we could not find any that seemed credible and consistently measured over time.

04

Section



Economy



STATE OF THE NATION

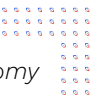


Economy

Introduction. In the United States, we provide for our material well-being mainly through markets. Private markets provide not only for basic necessities like food, housing, and medicine, but others, from entertainment to transportation, that shape the quality and character of life.

Summary of Results. The US has the second largest economy in the world, next to China (although we still far exceed China on a per capita basis). We also have among the most productive workforces in the world, beating out almost nine of every 10 countries. Both measures are at or near all-time highs.

Our trends are also generally moving in a positive direction. Output and productivity have both been improving overall and productivity has also been improving relative to other countries. Of all the topics and measures in this report, the economy is our greatest strength.



Economic Output

Specific measure: Real gross domestic product (GDP), or the level of production within our national boundaries, expressed in 2023 US dollars. (Source: Authors' analysis of World Bank and Bureau of Labor Statistics data). Recessions are highlighted in gray.

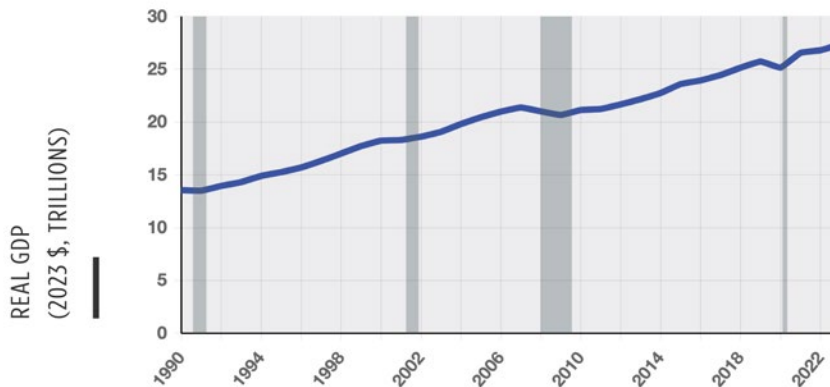
National Trend
↑

% of countries the US outperforms
98%

Intl. Rank Trend
→

Why did we include this measure? GDP measures the value of output of final goods and services—our nation's economic production. Because GDP depends not just on the quantity of output but also on prices, the measure reflects the value of that output to consumers in their market exchanges. As such, it is an important measure of income and material well-being.

Figure 9: Economic Output (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Real GDP, 2021 international dollars (PPP). (Source: Authors' analysis of World Bank data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 98% (out of 107 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔

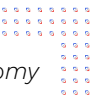
What do the data show? Real GDP has increased steadily over the long run. Loosely speaking, when GDP falls, it means we are in a recession; in Figure 9, we show these recessions with gray vertical boxes. The 1990s and early 2000s were a period of relative stability, but this was interrupted by two major economic events: The 2008 Great Recession and the brief, though sharp, recession at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. These recessions had far-reaching social, political, and economic impacts, though GDP itself quickly rebounded and is currently at an all-time high, ranking just below China.

What might explain these patterns? GDP is driven by three immediate factors: the size of the labor force, average hours per worker, and worker productivity. Our rise in GDP in recent years has been driven by productivity growth as well as some increase in population size (driven mainly by immigration).



The fact that we rank second to China in terms of total GDP might seem surprising because the press normally compares GDP on an exchange rate basis. However, exchange rates fluctuate much more than actual economic activity and, in some countries, are manipulated by government policies, so this measure is problematic. We therefore use a “purchasing power parity” (PPP) measure instead. This is more widely accepted by economists and, using this method, the US ranks second globally.

While we rank second to China in total GDP, our GDP per capita is much higher than China’s. Likewise, China’s high ranking in total GDP is driven by the fact that it has a much larger population and workforce.



Productivity

Specific measure: Real gross domestic product (GDP) per hour worked, expressed in 2023 US dollars. (Source: Authors' analysis of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development and Bureau of Labor Statistics data). Recessions are highlighted in gray.

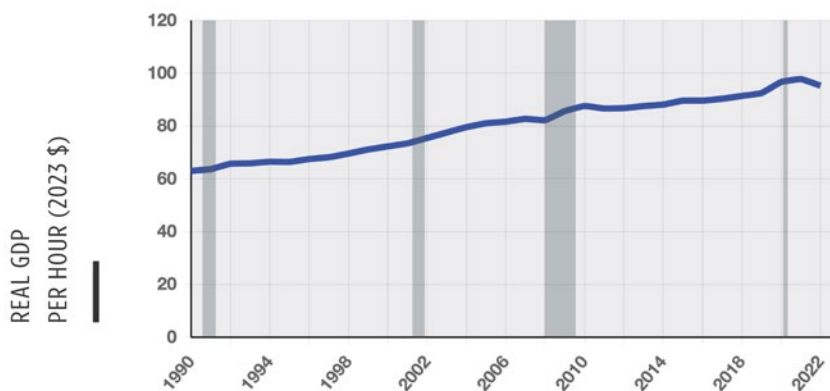
National Trend
↑

% of countries the US outperforms
88%

Intl. Rank Trend
↑

Why did we include this measure? It is not just how much we produce that matters but how much time we need to put into it. Productivity growth is one of the main drivers of overall economic growth and signals increases in human and physical capital and innovations in products, technology, management, and work processes. This allows us to increase our material prosperity while also having leisure time to rest, exercise, vacation, and spend time with our families and friends and in civic and community activities.

Figure 10: Productivity (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Real GDP per hours worked, 2017 international dollars (PPP). (Source: Authors' analysis of International Labor Organization data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 88% (out of 101 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↑

What do the data show? Both the domestic and international trends have been moving in a positive direction. We are also near the top in the world in worker productivity, though eleven countries are above us. (The countries just above us are Guyana, Sweden, and Singapore.) Again, given the close connection between productivity and GDP, it is no surprise that they are moving in tandem.

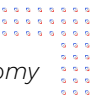
What might explain these patterns? Productivity improves because of a combination of factors. Firms can develop and invest in new production technologies and improve workplace organization, while workers may enter the workforce with greater general skills (human capital) or specific skills better matched to firm needs.

Among the smaller group of high-income countries with both strong GDP and productivity, the US leads in terms of both. This appears to be due to a combination of our large population size, historical investments in education and business capital, culture of hard work, innovation, entrepreneurialism, relatively stable democratic government, free market policies, national security, and other advantages.



Related Topics: The rise in productivity is a key factor behind the slight (though mixed) rise in average real wages, and economic output is driven partly by the size of the labor force (see the Work and Labor section). Since human capital is a key driver of productivity, the Education section is relevant. Economic output is also a driver of the environment and national security. Finally, as with other topics in this report, the averages we report reflect improvements for some groups and negative outcomes for others. For evidence on how economic output is shared across the population, see the Inequality section.

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



Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Economy (as topic)	100%	78%
Economic Output	93%	69%
Productivity	77%	65%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including new business starts, business investments, and corporate concentration. The public did not support any of these other measures either. Economic output received the most support from the public at 69%.

05

Section



Education



STATE · OF · THE NATION



Education

Introduction. The state of the nation can be no stronger than the state of its young people, including the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are instilled by parents, schools, and community organizations. Education prepares young people for their roles as workers and citizens.

Summary of Results. We chose to measure the state of education on three dimensions: eighth-grade test scores, years of education, and percentage of young adults who are either in school or employed. We are improving or remaining stable on all three education measures compared with other countries, and we rank near the top on years of education among adults. However, on two of the three measures—test scores (averaged across three main subjects) and percentage working or in school—we are in the top half of countries. Also, the trend in our test scores displays an inverted-U pattern, improving up to the mid-2010s, then stagnating or declining in more recent years (depending on the subject).



Academic Test Scores

Specific measure: Average scale scores of eighth graders taking the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) in math, reading, science, civics, and US history. Funded and managed by the federal government, the NAEP is a low-stakes test administered every few years to a representative sample of the nation's schools. (Source: National Center for Education Statistics).

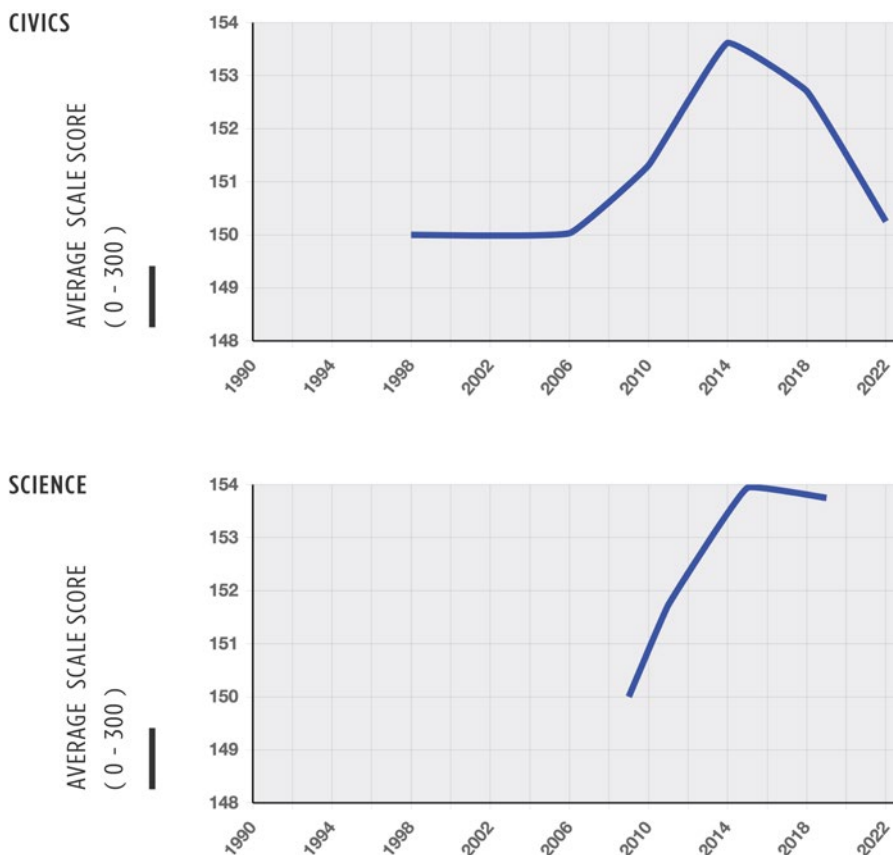
National Trend
↕

% of countries the US outperforms
62%

Intl. Rank Trend
↑

Why did we include this measure? It is widely agreed that these academic subjects are important. Increases in test scores, especially math and reading, cause increases in a wide variety of other long-term life outcomes, including earnings and employment. We focus specifically on eighth-grade NAEP scores because this is a pivotal grade/age for children's education and it is feasible to include essentially all students, even if they eventually drop out of school. Eighth-grade scores also reflect the accumulation of knowledge from earlier ages and grades. (We note that test score levels cannot be compared across subjects. For example, we cannot say that our math levels are higher than our reading levels.)

Figure 11: Test Scores (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

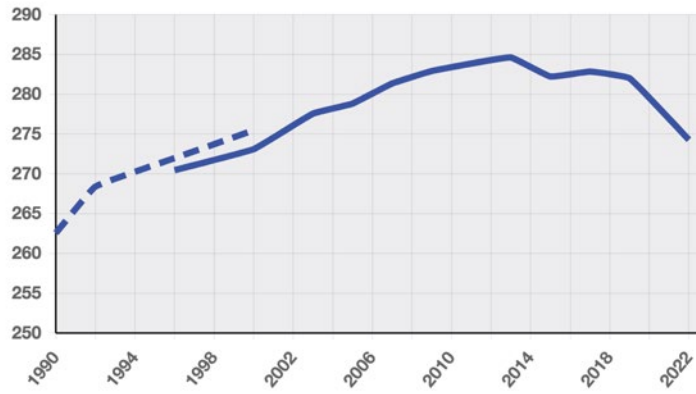
- **Specific Measure:** Average scaled scores of 15-year-olds on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). (Source: Authors' analysis of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:**
 - Math: 27% (out of 33 countries)
 - Reading: 86% (out of 37 countries)
 - Science: 74% (out of 47 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:**
 - Math: ↔
 - Reading: ↑
 - Science: ↑



MATH

AVERAGE SCALE SCORE
(0 - 500)

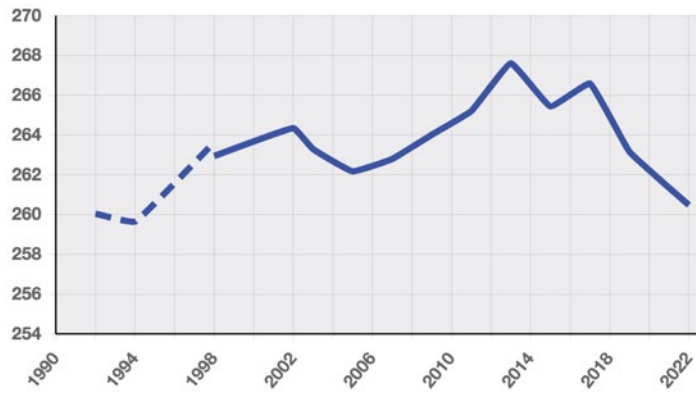
Test without accommodations
Test with accommodations



READING

AVERAGE SCALE SCORE
(0 - 500)

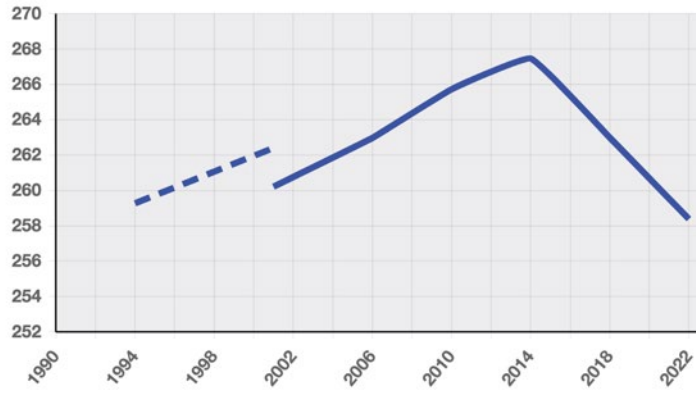
Test without accommodations
Test with accommodations



US HISTORY

AVERAGE SCALE SCORE
(0 - 500)

Test without accommodations
Test with accommodations





What do the data show? The national trends in test scores were generally increasing until about 2013 and then began to decline after that. The most recent scores are generally at the level of the early 1990s.

Our math scores are below similar countries, and our international standing has not improved over the period we analyzed. The results are noticeably more positive in reading and science and are also improving over time. (In the Executive Summary, we report the simple average of these three percentages, or 62%.)

What might explain these patterns? Student achievement is closely related to home and family situations. However, one such factor, child poverty has been on the decline, which suggests that other factors are pushing scores down. Education policy and practice also affect student achievement. The recent declining emphasis on test-based accountability may be one factor that may partially explain the pre-COVID decline in scores. Other possible factors include increased distractions from social media and gaming and changing alignment between the content taught in schools and what is covered on the above tests. However, research has not uncovered a definitive explanation about the reasons behind the recent decline in NAEP scores.

COVID led to school closures and altered learning environments that further reduced achievement throughout the world over the past few years. This was true in the United States as well, although we experienced less learning loss than most other countries, which is one reason why our international standing has remained stable or improved.



Average Years of Education

Specific measure: Average years of educational attainment for people aged 25–54. (Source: Authors' analysis of Census Bureau data).

National Trend



% of countries the US outperforms

86%

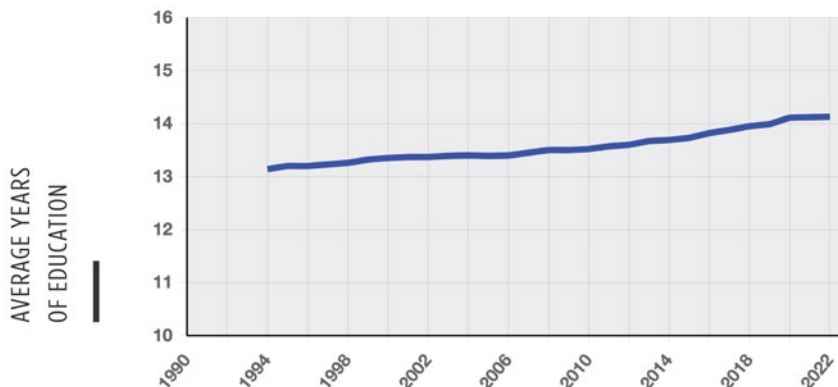
Intl. Rank Trend



Why did we include this measure? Test scores only capture some of the knowledge and skills we expect of young people. But students' motivation to learn and work hard, the ability to collaborate with and get along with others, and the wherewithal to persist through difficulties (sometimes now called "grit") are also important. Years of education is a useful signal of these "soft skills." By staying in school longer, students also engage in activities that help them improve on these dimensions. This is apparently why, when researchers look at the life outcomes of people who have the same test scores, the ones with more years of education have better outcomes on a wide range of measures, including earnings, employment, happiness, civic participation, life expectancy, and other measures of health. However, concern has arisen in recent years that the same level of education no longer reflects the same level of skill and knowledge, due to grade inflation and reduced standards. While the research on this is unsettled, it is still clear that students are learning useful skills and knowledge as they pass through the education system.

Formal education usually focuses on general skills, but our measure of years of education also includes more job- and career-oriented skills that are taught in community colleges and involve certificates in addition to academic degrees. There is increasing interest in alternative credentials, such as competency-based programs and digital badges, which place less focus on classroom time and let students progress and receive credentials based on whether they have demonstrated knowledge or experience in a particular area. These credentials are not yet very common or well-measured so while we are forced to omit them, we intend to include them in future reports when the data become available.

Figure 12: Average Years of Education (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:** 86% (out of 28 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔



What do the data show? This has been a US strength for much of the last few decades (as well as the last century) and continues today. Average years of education has increased steadily from about 13.1 years in 1994 to a plateau of 14.1 since 2020. In other words, 25- to 54-year-olds in the United States used to attain the equivalent of “some college” (13 years of education), on average, and they now attain the equivalent of an associate’s degree (14 years of education). We also rank above the vast majority of comparison countries.

What might explain these patterns? The steady rise through 2020 in years of education follows a longstanding US trend. It is also a longstanding international trend, which is why our international standing has remained stable even as our years of education have risen. Given the accompanying decline in test scores in recent years (see above), concern has arisen that students are not learning as much as in the past while they are in school, which might make rising years of education misleading. On the other hand, time in school may develop skills, knowledge, and dispositions other than what is measured on these tests.



Young Adults Employed or in School

Specific measure: Population age 18–24 currently employed or in school.
(Source: Authors' analysis of International Labor Organization data).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the US
outperforms

56%

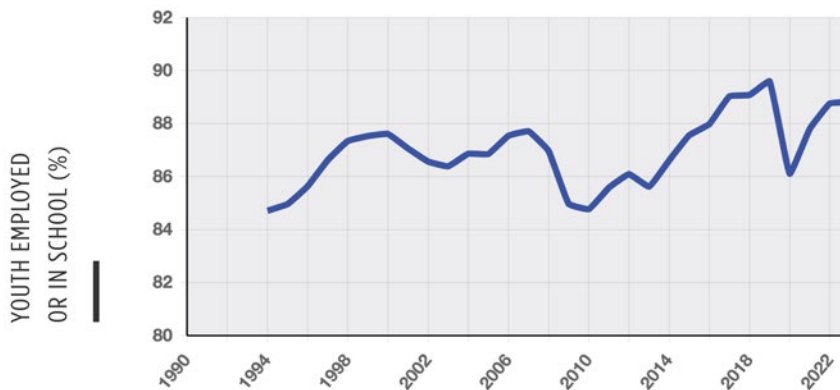
Intl.
Rank
Trend



Why did we include this measure? Formal education is not the only way to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions. Workplace skills, for example, are learned on the job. Therefore, we also report the percentage of young adults who are either enrolled in a formal education program or working (or both). Those who are neither working nor in school are sometimes called “disconnected” from opportunity.

Another reason for focusing on this measure is that formal education is usually completed by the time people reach their mid-20s, and the prior measure (average years of education) focuses on the population aged 25 to 54. This measure of employed-or-in-school stops instead at age 24 and provides a better sense of the experiences of current young adults who will make up the majority of the workforce in the decades ahead.

Figure 13: Young Adults Employed or in School (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 56% (of 57 countries).
- **International Rank Trend:** ↑

What do the data show? The percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds who are employed or in school has generally been rising. The number has ranged from a low of about 85% to a high of almost 90% just before COVID.

Internationally, we do not fare as well on this measure as we do with years of education for ages 25 to 54. However, we note that most higher-income countries show very similar numbers on this metric. The countries just above us are generally in the 90–92% range, compared with our 89%.

What might explain these patterns? This upward trend is consistent with the rise in average years of education (see above). More students are graduating high school and attending college, which increases both measures. However, the number of young adults employed or in school is more unstable than years of education because employment among young people is more erratic. When recessions hit, young people are among the first to be laid off.

Related Topics: Education is a key factor in making people qualified for work (see the Work and Labor Force section) and improving worker productivity (see the Economy section). The Trust section provides evidence of declining trust in higher education.

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

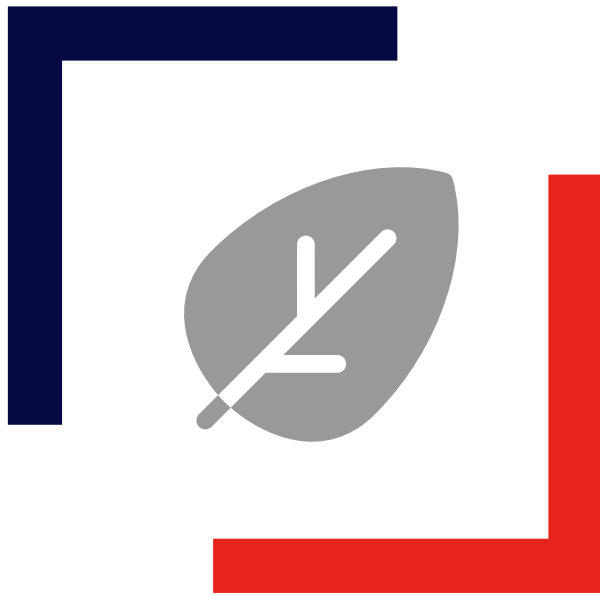
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Education (as topic)	100%	83%
8th Grade NAEP Scores	86%	57%
Average Years of Education, 25-54	86%	50%
Employed or in School, 18-24	79%	64%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including parent ratings of school quality. The public also narrowly rejected that measure (68% support).

06

Section



Environment



STATE OF THE NATION



Environment

Introduction. Human life depends on an environment that can provide for the most basic human needs. But climate change is increasing the earth's temperature, melting glaciers, raising sea levels, and likely shifting ocean currents. This, in turn, appears to be reducing biodiversity and increasing the intensity of extreme weather, such as floods, droughts, wildfires, hurricanes, and excessive heat days. The quality of the air we breathe is also critical to our existence.

Climate change and air quality are driven mainly, although not entirely, by human activity. Climate change is also creating fast-rising financial losses from property damage as well as increased prevalence of asthma, dementia, heatstroke, exhaustion, and other health ailments. Some argue that the future effects are somewhat uncertain and that future technological developments might reduce greenhouse gas emissions or offset warming with technologies that cool the earth. However, given the major risks involved and the uncertainty about future technologies, there is broad agreement that greenhouse gas emissions are a significant problem. The actions we take on climate change also have a global impact. Each country's emissions affect everyone else, and US emissions affect our ability to lead on this issue.

Summary of Results. We are the world's second-largest annual emitter of greenhouse gases and the largest cumulative emitter over the last century. While we have made some improvements, greenhouse gases accumulate in the earth's atmosphere, so the fact that we have lowered our annual emissions means that we are only making the problem worse more slowly than in the past. We are also improving air quality, though not as fast as other higher-income countries.



Net Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Specific measure: Net greenhouse gas emissions (carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, fluorinated gases), including discharge from land use and deforestation. (Source: Environmental Protection Agency).

National
Trend
↕

% of
countries
the US
outperforms
1%

Intl.
Rank
Trend
➡

Why did we include this measure? Greenhouse gases trap the sun's rays and cause the earth to warm, resulting in several predictable environmental effects. The number of extreme heat days increases, causing dehydration, exhaustion, and heat strokes and making us less healthy and productive. Warming also increases extreme weather events. The rising number and severity of droughts and floods make it difficult to grow crops, while the increasing severity of hurricanes, superstorms, and wildfires destroys homes and businesses and sometimes costs lives. Climate change is a concern in part because a large share of the nation's—and the world's—population lives near large bodies of water. Climate change is melting glaciers, raising sea levels, and likely increasing the severity of hurricanes, all of which particularly affect coastal areas.

Figure 14: Greenhouse Gas Emissions (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.)
(Source: Authors' analysis of Climate Watch data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 1% (out of 114 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔

What do the data show? The United States is the second-highest annual emitter of greenhouse gases after China. Our trends are mixed because our emissions were rising into the mid-2000s and that trend has subsequently reversed, so that our emissions are still almost identical to 1990. We are still easily the highest cumulative emitter since the Industrial Revolution.

What might explain these patterns? Greenhouse gas emissions are driven heavily by economic activity, which is currently dependent on energy consumption and the burning of fossil fuels. It is no coincidence that China and the US are the top two countries ranked by economy size and emissions. We are generating economic output more efficiently than in the past—with lower greenhouse gas emissions per unit of output—but the overall problem is getting worse because these gases accumulate in the atmosphere.



The primary greenhouse gas is carbon dioxide, which is responsible for 80% of gross US greenhouse gas emissions. The main sources are transportation, electricity generation, and industry. We have improved in these areas in recent years by switching from coal to natural gas, expanding the use of renewable energy, and improving efficiency in all of the major sources, especially vehicles. Methane represents only 12% of US greenhouse gas emissions but has particularly large warming effects. Methane comes mainly from animal agriculture, oil and gas industry operations, and landfills.

Air Quality

Specific measure: Annual mean concentration of particulate matter with diameter of 2.5 micrometers or less (roughly 3% of the width of a human hair). (Source: Authors' analysis of Environmental Protection Agency data).

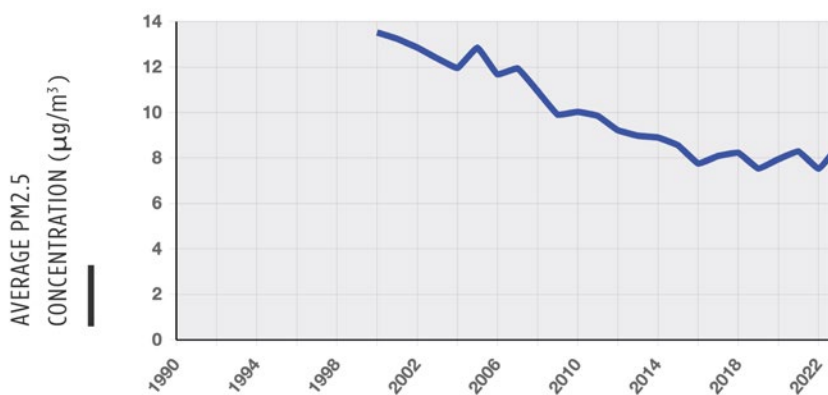
National
Trend
↑

% of
countries
the US
outperforms
73%

Intl.
Rank
Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? Our lungs are designed to provide oxygen to the body and to remove pollution that interferes with basic bodily functions. However, this only works for larger particles that our bodies can filter out—not tiny particles. The main source of these tiny particles is combustion of fossil fuels—the same source as greenhouse gas emissions (transportation, electricity generation, etc.). This particulate matter directly enters our respiratory systems and bloodstreams and can bypass the usual defenses. This appears to create harmful breathing problems (asthma and bronchitis) and an increased risk of heart attacks, strokes, and hypertension.

Figure 15: Air Quality (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

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

What do the data show? Particulate matter has declined by almost 50% since the year 2000, and we rank ahead of almost three-quarters of higher-income countries, just behind Denmark, Sweden, and Portugal. However, other countries are improving faster than we are, so our relative position is declining.

What might explain these patterns? Given that greenhouse gas emissions and particulate matter have the same sources, the decline in the burning of fossil fuels partly explains the decline in particulate matter. But particulate matter has declined much more quickly than carbon dioxide emissions because it has been subject to government regulations.

Related Topics: Greenhouse gas emissions arise mainly because of economic activity—energy fuels the economy (see the Economy section). Sea level rise and extreme weather events caused by climate change are expected to create considerable migration and food insecurity, which may destabilize countries and create more international conflict (see the National Security section). Particulate matter is linked to lower birthweight and reduced cognitive function in children (see the Children and Families section) and other health effects (see Physical Health).

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

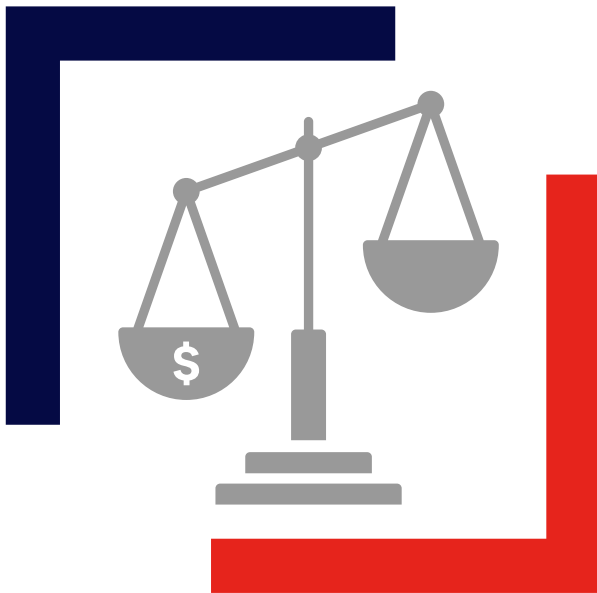
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Environment (as topic)	77%	66%
Greenhouse Gas Emissions	62%	55%
Air Particulate Matter (PM2.5)	62%	61%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including the number of extreme heat days. The public did not support this additional measure either.

07

Section



Inequality



STATE OF THE NATION



Inequality

Introduction. Inequality refers to the differences in income and wealth between all groups in society—between rich and poor. High levels of inequality can signal real differences in social and economic opportunity and lead to perceived unfairness, distrust of government and other key institutions, and political unrest.

The importance of inequality relative to *average* economic well-being is sometimes debated. Some argue that a degree of inequality is a natural outgrowth of differences in individual abilities, motivations, and decisions. Others argue that inequality of outcome is less important than inequality of opportunity—specifically, the opportunity to get out of difficult economic circumstances, or economic mobility. Still, inequality is a concern across the political spectrum.

Summary of Results. More than three-quarters of high-income countries have lower income inequality than the United States. Our income inequality is also worsening overall and relative to other countries. This can be mainly attributed to quite large increases in income among the most well-off. We can see this partly by comparing income inequality to our second measure: poverty. The poverty rate has been declining, mostly because of government interventions like Social Security and the Earned Income Tax Credit. The result is that fewer people have incomes so low that they cannot provide for their basic needs. But the increase in income among the rich has been larger, which explains rising income inequality.

Income Inequality

Specific measure: Income Gini coefficient (net of government taxes and transfer programs). This is an index that ranges from zero to 100 where higher numbers indicate more inequality. (Source: World Bank).

National Trend



% of countries the US outperforms

22%

Intl. Rank Trend



Why did we include this measure? The Gini coefficient is a common measure of inequality and describes the extent to which a measure like income is concentrated within certain groups. When the income Gini coefficient is zero, it means everyone has exactly the same income. When it is 100, it means that a single person has all the income. (Of course, these extremes almost never occur in practice, but the extremes are useful for understanding the scale.) The specific income Gini coefficient we use captures all sources of income, including wage earnings as well as pensions, government taxes and transfers. We also prefer this measure because it reflects the income of all households, rather than comparing only the rich versus the poor (i.e., those at the ends of the income distribution).

Figure 16: Income Inequality (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- *Specific Measure: (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).*
- *Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 22% (out of 27 countries)*
- *International Rank Trend: ↓*

What do the data show? Income inequality has been rising slightly since 1990 but with a temporary dip during the COVID pandemic. The US compares poorly relative to the rest of the world. We rank in the bottom 25% of countries, just below El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, and Lithuania—and we are falling further behind over time.

The spike in the figure in 1993 should be interpreted with caution; it may be the result of a change in the way the data were collected rather than a true change in income inequality. (See Data Notes for more detail.)

What might explain these patterns? Income inequality is driven by a complex set of forces, including the variation in education and human capital, decisions made by individuals regarding their careers and work hours, segregation and isolation of opportunity, the strength of labor unions and minimum wage laws, free trade policies that place US workers in competition with those in low-wage countries, technological change favoring high-skill workers, and government taxation and spending. Given these general causes, our low international standing is not especially surprising. The US has more unequal academic achievement outcomes than other countries, weaker unions, lower minimum wages, and lower government spending on the social safety net than other countries.

While we do not argue that any factor is more important than the others, we can say that the rise in income inequality is driven mainly by people with very high incomes. As we show below, poverty is actually declining, which reduces income inequality. So, the “rich are getting richer” faster than the poor.

Also, income inequality is intertwined with wealth inequality. Wealth comes mostly from inheritance and other financial support across generations, which also produces income. The high and growing level of US wealth inequality therefore partially explains rising income inequality.



Poverty

Specific measure: The Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which measures income net of government taxes and transfer programs (see examples below). (Source: Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy and the Census Bureau).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the US
outperforms

25%

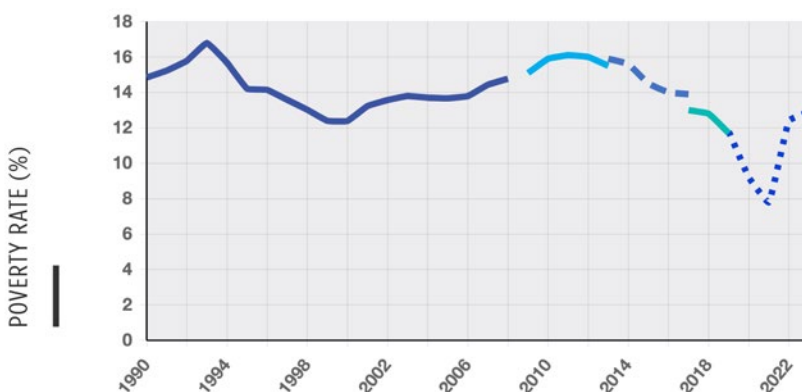
Intl.
Rank
Trend



Why did we include this measure? There is general agreement that people should be able to provide the most basic material needs for themselves and their families. Poverty measures capture this by identifying households where these needs are not being met.

An advantage of the Supplemental Poverty Measure we use is that it accounts for a wide variety of factors affecting the economic resources people have available. First, it counts more than just wage income and includes cash benefits and some in-kind government supports that are intended to prevent poverty. Income from Social Security, Supplemental Nutrition (SNAP), Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Child Tax Credit, and housing subsidies are all included, for example. Second, this supplemental poverty measure subtracts necessary expenses, such as taxes and out-of-pocket health expenses, from that income when deciding whether someone is living in poverty. (Medicare and Medicaid benefits are not directly counted as income, but these programs affect out-of-pocket health expenses, which are accounted for as necessary expenses.)

Figure 17: Poverty (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- *Specific Measure: Relative poverty rate. (Source: Authors' analysis of Luxembourg Income Study Database data).*
- *Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 25% (out of 20 countries)*
- *International Rank Trend: ↔*

What do the data show? Poverty declined slowly between 2010 and 2019, then fairly sharply during the COVID pandemic, to an all-time low before rising sharply back to pre-pandemic levels in 2022. Three out of every four high-income countries do better on this measure than the US. We rank just below Italy, followed by Poland and Germany.

There are several breaks in the trend because poverty is not consistently measured by a single source over the relevant time period. The first break is due to a change in data source, and the remaining three are due to changes in the data collection and calculation methods. However, the fact that each of the partial trends tracks the prior one gives us confidence in the general patterns. (See Data Notes for more detail.)

What might explain these patterns? In the discussion above, we noted some of the factors affecting income inequality generally, and most of these also affect poverty. One reason the US likely has higher poverty is that we spend less on the government programs intended to reduce poverty, but there is debate about the degree to which the government should address poverty directly, given the costs to taxpayers. Also, government programs may reduce employment, which could increase poverty over the longer term.

Related Topics: Every other section in this report focuses on average outcomes across the country. This is the only one where we focus on how outcomes compare between groups within the country. However, our explanations for rising income inequality are related to the other topics. For example, most income comes from wages from work (see the Work and Labor Force section). Also, education is a key driver of income (see the Education section).

Income inequality might also be a partial cause of our poor standing on other measures of the state of the nation, especially how people perceive their lives and the country as a whole. See the Life Satisfaction and Mental Health sections, as well as the polarization measure under Citizenship and Democracy. On the other hand, if the ability to provide for basic needs is a key factor in these perceptions, then the decline in poverty shown in this section should be improving perceptions of Life Satisfaction and Mental Health measures. The reduction in poverty could, however, be associated with the declining murder rate (see the Violence section).

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



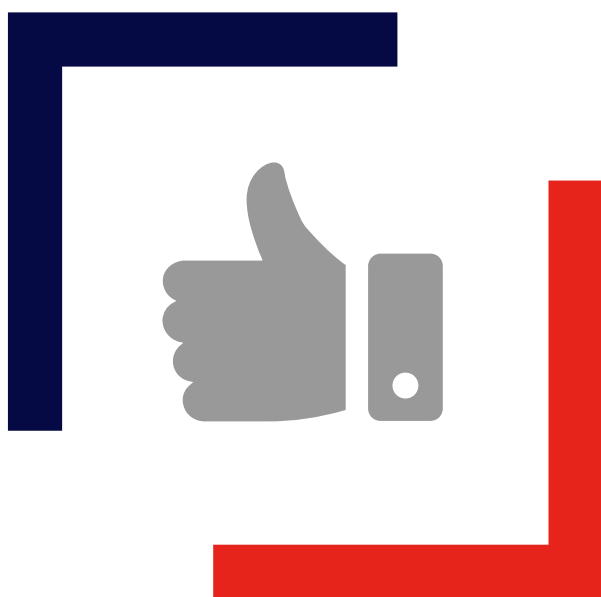
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Inequality (as topic)	100%	62%
Income Inequality	71%	62%
Poverty	93%	76%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including homelessness, wealth inequality by race, and wage inequality by decile. The public only supported poverty and homelessness, but between the three measures of inequality (income, wealth, and wage), they aligned with the board, ranking income inequality the highest.

08

Section



Life Satisfaction



STATE OF THE NATION



Life Satisfaction

Introduction. Many of the measures in this report—economic output, employment, greenhouse gas emissions, and life expectancy—are not matters of opinion. They go up or down regardless of what we think about them. But how people view the world is also important. The nation’s founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence about “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” So, it is worth asking: Are we actually happy or satisfied with our lives? The answers to this question are useful in part because of everything the other measures miss. We might have good jobs and incomes, but does that material prosperity actually make us feel better off? If we are not satisfied with our lives, then we might be passing on more discontent, or a reduced sense of hope, to our children.

Summary of Results. We included two measures for this topic: satisfaction with our current lives and social isolation—whether people have friends and family members they can count on. We are in the top half of countries on both of these measures, but not in the very top tier, and our international standing is declining over time.



Satisfaction with Current Life

Specific measure: Average evaluation of the population's current life with 10 being the best possible life today and zero being the worst possible life today. (Source: Analysis of Gallup World Poll data by Carol Graham and coauthors).

National Trend
↓

% of countries the US outperforms
70%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? Perhaps more than any other measure, this one tells us how Americans feel about their own current state of affairs. This measure is about how we feel about our own lives.

Figure 18: Satisfaction with Current Life (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above.)
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 70% (out of 44 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? On a scale of 0–10, we rate ourselves about 6.7 in the most recent data. This means that, on average, we are closer to our best lives than our worst, but also that most people are not living their best lives now. We rank just below Slovenia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. (Finland ranks first.) Our satisfaction with our current lives has also been steadily declining since 2006, the first year we can measure, and declining relative to other nations.

What might explain these patterns? Current life satisfaction worsened abruptly in the 2007–2009 range in ways that have persisted. Two major events happened around this time. The first was the 2008 Great Recession when people lost jobs and lost their homes to foreclosure, forcing many to move to other neighborhoods. But the fact that the numbers did not bounce back after the recession suggests that a second factor was at work. The rise of smartphones, which first became widespread in 2007, is one possible explanation. Isolating the effects of smartphones is difficult, however, and researchers are still exploring this and whether any other factors suddenly changed at the same time.

Social Isolation

Specific measure: Percentage of people who do not have friends or relatives they can count on to help whenever they need. (Source: Analysis of Gallup World Poll data by Carol Graham and coauthors).

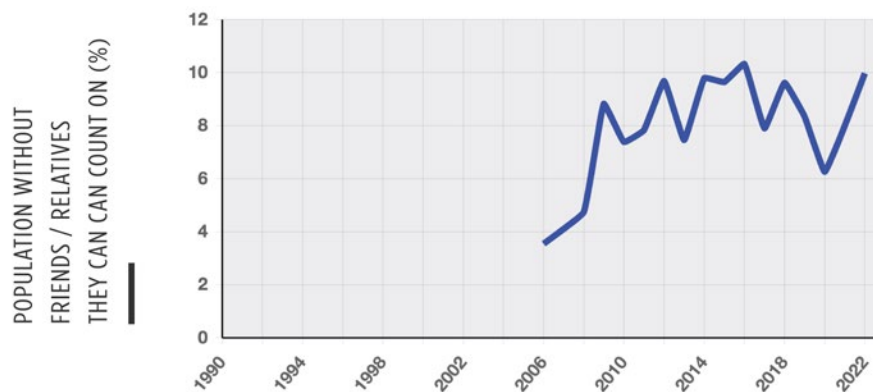
National Trend
↓

% of countries the US outperforms
66%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? Humans are naturally social. Our sense of happiness, purpose, and security depends heavily on our friends and family members. When life gets difficult, we need people we can count on to lift us back up.

Figure 19: Social Isolation (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 66% (out of 44 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? About one in 10 Americans say they do not have friends or family members they can count on. The US ranks just below Costa Rica, Uruguay, and Ireland. As with the satisfaction measure above, Finland ranks first. Like the decline in current life satisfaction above, this also seems to have taken a turn for the worse in the mid-2000s. Other evidence reinforces that Americans have fewer close friends and family members than in the past and that people are spending less time with friends in person.

What might explain these patterns? As with current life satisfaction, we see a sharp turn for the worse around 2007. The separation of people from their jobs and neighbors in the wake of the Great Recession is one possible explanation. Also, the introduction of smartphones at about the same time may have increased social isolation because these devices take our time and attention away from in-person interaction with other people.

Unlike current life satisfaction, however, this was not the start of a persistent decline in social isolation. It is unclear why social isolation largely stabilized (with some seemingly random fluctuations from year to year) and current life satisfaction continued to decline.

Perhaps surprisingly, COVID did not immediately produce negative effects on social isolation. In fact, social isolation actually diminished in the early months of the pandemic, perhaps because many Americans spent more time at home with family members and roommates, or because people banded together to help each other get through the crisis. Social isolation spiked back up in later years to an all-time high.



Still, the trends in current life satisfaction and social isolation may be partially intertwined: people may be less satisfied with their current lives because they are more socially isolated, and they are more isolated because they have a more negative outlook that pushes them away from friends and family. The increased pressure we place on ourselves to excel in life could explain both patterns: raising expectations about some areas of our lives and leading us to put less effort into our relationships.

Related Topics: It may be that the smartphone effect was compounded by other harmful trends. Life satisfaction is related to all the other subjective measures, including youth depression (see Children and Families), trust in people generally (see Social Capital), and all of the trust-in-institution measures (see Trust). Finally, social isolation is a widely accepted cause of suicide (see the Mental Health section).

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



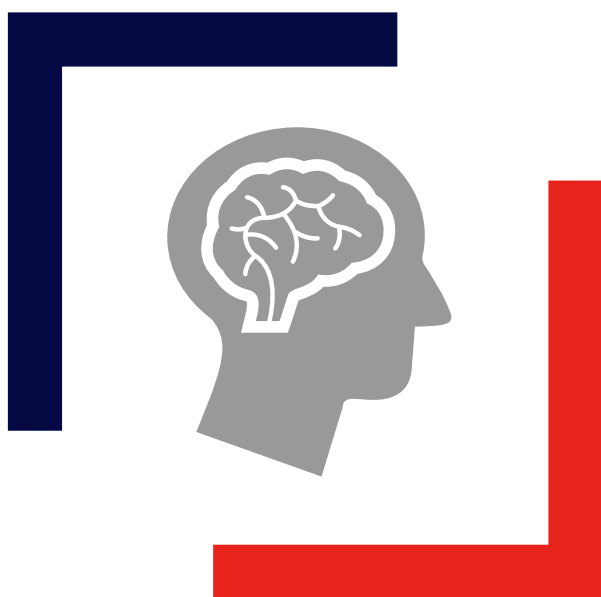
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Life Satisfaction (as topic)	100%	70%
Life Satisfaction	92%	67%
Social Isolation	85%	63%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered but did not include other measures, including hope (i.e., how you would rate your life in five years, with 10 being the best possible and zero being the worst possible). The public also did not support this measure.

09

Section



Mental Health

 **STATE OF THE NATION**



Mental Health

Introduction. Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is more than just happiness. It reflects how we think and feel, manage stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Mental health is essential for human thriving and has rightfully received much more attention in recent years.

Summary of Results. The United States is near the bottom of higher-income countries on every mental health measure we examined: depression and anxiety, fatal overdoses, and suicide. We are also getting steadily worse on these measures over time, overall and relative to other countries. These negative trends do not just reflect increased reporting of mental health disorders. They point to an actual decline in our well-being. America is doing worse in mental health than any other topic in this report.

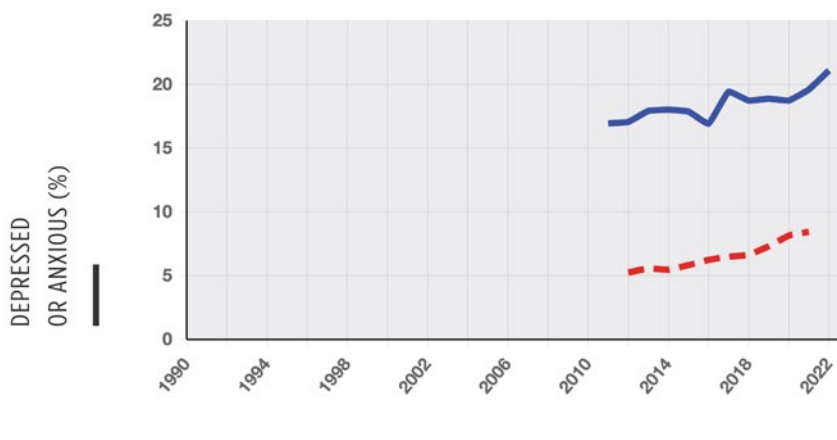
Depression and Anxiety

Specific measure: Our measure of anxiety is the percentage of adults who report being nervous “all of the time” or “most of the time” over the past month. (Source: Authors’ analysis of National Surveys on Drug Use and Health). Our depression measure is the percentage of adults who report that they have been clinically diagnosed with depression. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
↓	11%	↓

Why did we include this measure? We chose this measure because it encompasses many disorders and is more representative of the state of anxiety today. Depression is another common mental illness and is equally debilitating. Depression and anxiety can also affect physical health and contribute to the risk of addiction.

Figure 20: Depression and Anxiety (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:**
 Depression: Percent prevalence of depressive disorders. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data).
 Anxiety: Percent prevalence of anxiety disorders. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:**
 Depression: 12% (out of 114 countries)
 Anxiety: 10% (out of 115 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:**
 Depression: ↓ Anxiety: ↓

What do the data show? On both anxiety and depression measures, we are among the worst among high-income countries, ranking near the bottom, just below Monaco, Finland, and Gabon on depression and just below Peru, Greece, and Cyprus on anxiety. We are also getting worse over time, both overall and relative to other countries.

What might explain these patterns? These patterns may reflect increased reporting of anxiety and depression and increased public awareness of mental health, but there is general consensus that people are more anxious and depressed than they used to be. The next two measures (suicides and fatal overdoses), which are based on actual behavior rather than self-reports, also suggest a decline in mental health. We consider other explanations of this decline below and discuss common patterns we see with our other mental health measures.

The depression rates in Figure 20 are higher than the anxiety rates. One reason for this is that the depression surveys ask about whether people have ever been diagnosed, while the anxiety surveys ask only about the past month. This makes it difficult to compare the levels of these two measures, so we focus on each separate trend.

Fatal Overdoses

Specific measure: Deaths per 100,000 population from drug overdoses.
(Source: Authors' analysis of Centers for Disease Control data).

National
Trend% of
countries
the US
outperforms

0%

Intl.
Rank
Trend

Why did we include this measure? Fatal overdoses are a concern not only because of the direct loss of life but also because the use of powerful drugs reflects a broader problem with addiction. Most people who use these drugs do not die from them but do get addicted and this can physically change how our brains and bodies work in ways that make it difficult to stop using them. The fact that so many are using such high-risk drugs reflects a broader mental health crisis.

The most common drugs leading to overdose are opioids (including fentanyl, oxycodone, and heroin), stimulants (including cocaine and methamphetamines, commonly called “meth”), and sedatives (including Xanax and Valium). We focus on fatal overdoses because these reflect more extreme drug use and because they are measured more accurately than nonfatal overdoses. (When overdoses are judged to be intentional, they are also counted as suicides, which we discuss separately below.)

Figure 21: Fatal Overdoses (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Deaths per 100,000 population from drug use disorders. (Source: Authors' analysis of Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 0% (out of 115 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? We come in last among the world's high-income countries and are getting worse each year. There are some signs that opioid overdoses may be tapering off, but they are still very high by historical standards.

What might explain these patterns? The primary cause of the rise in fatal overdoses appears to be increased supply and use of powerful drugs. This is partially driven by the increased availability of drugs and drug combinations that produce stronger effects and pose greater risks. Drugs like fentanyl are becoming more accessible and are far more potent than heroin and morphine, for example. The illicit production of such drugs also means that users often do not know what they are consuming. Illicit drugs are often mixed with cheaper and more dangerous drugs that users are not aware of. The rise in overdoses may also be related to the declining mental health shown in other measures in this section as well as under the Life Satisfaction section.

Suicide Rate

Specific measure: Suicide rate per 100,000 people. (Source: Centers for Disease Control).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the US
outperforms

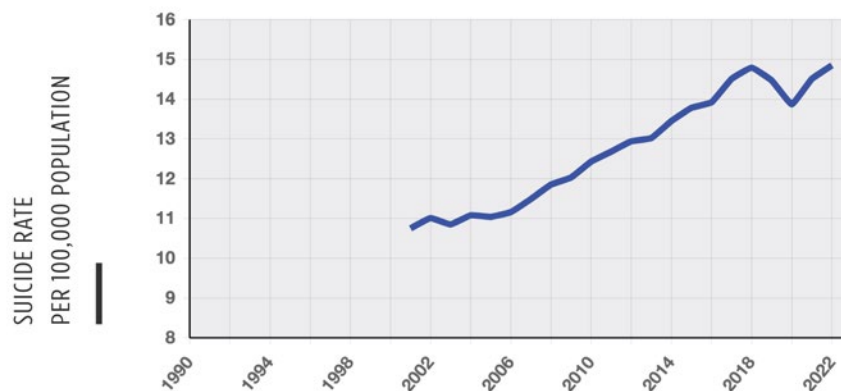
16%

Intl.
Rank
Trend



Why did we include this measure? Suicide is arguably the most extreme indicator of mental illness. Suicide is also consistently and accurately measured over time.

Figure 22: Suicide Rate (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Health Organization data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 16% (out of 106 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

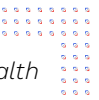
What do the data show? US suicides have been generally rising, overall and relative to other countries, ranking just below Botswana, Japan, and Finland. A steep, temporary drop in suicides occurred in 2020, coinciding with the COVID pandemic, but these numbers are once again at an all-time high.

What might explain these patterns? The US suicide rate is higher than almost every other country in part because of the much broader availability of guns, which are, by far, the most common means of suicide. Our suicide rate is also likely rising over time because of a decline in mental health and a rise in isolation and distress reflected in the other measures.

When we look across all these mental health measures, along with survey-based measures in Life Satisfaction and other sections, it is clear that our mental health is poor and getting worse. The causes of mental illness are many and complex, but some potential reasons include social media, social isolation, economic disparity, and increased access to addictive substances and behaviors.

Related Topics: The patterns here are consistent with other measures of how people feel about their lives. The most similar measure is youth depression (see the Children and Families section), which is also worsening. We also see declines in current life satisfaction and increased social isolation (see the Life Satisfaction section). Declines in mental health are also associated with declining trust in other people and institutions (see the Social Capital and Trust sections).

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



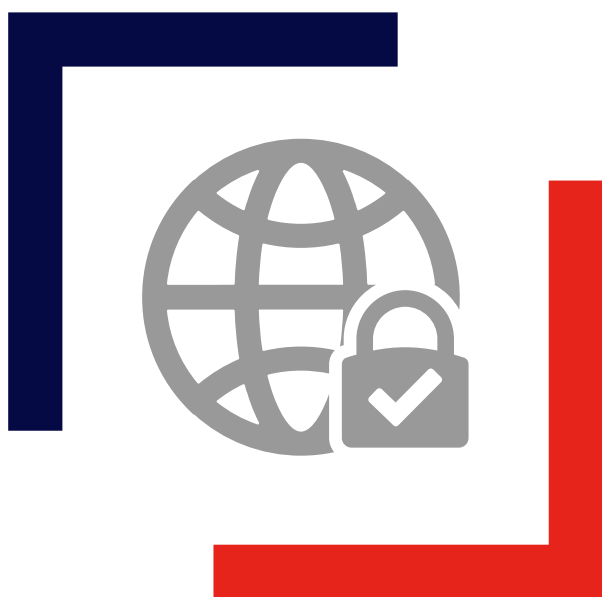
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Mental Health (as topic)	100%	79%
Depression and Anxiety	79%	66%
Fatal Overdoses	86%	70%
Suicide Rate	93%	74%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including substance abuse and time spent alone. The public supported substance abuse but not time spent alone.

10

Section



National Security



STATE OF THE NATION



National Security

Safety is one of the most fundamental human needs, and national security refers, first, to safety threats from foreign powers. Threats of war, terrorism, and other forms of mass physical violence all undermine our security. While we normally think of these threats as coming from other countries, the last quarter-century has also seen the rise of terrorist organizations and other groups that act on their own or as proxies for other nations.

Beyond the threat of invasion and other forms of violence, national security also includes the security and stability of our economy, climate, and basic necessities such as food, key natural resources and energy sources. The security of data, computers, and global communications networks are also important to our direct defense, with the growing dependence of our military forces on global positioning systems and remote-guided weapons, and indirectly through its role in economic and diplomatic affairs.

Summary. We handle this topic differently than any other in the report because, while there was fairly strong support for including this topic (79% of the public said the topic was important), no measure related to this topic received more than 61% support from the public. The board vote showed even less support for the individual measures. The apparent reason is that national security is more difficult to measure than other topics. For example, the military defense aspect of national security depends on factors such as the effectiveness of our weapons systems and military, our military and diplomatic strategies, and the strengths and strategies of other countries, all of which are difficult to quantify.

In other sections of the project where we did not trust particular measures, we could simply focus on the best available measures under that topic. The situation is different here because we have concerns about all the potential measures, individually and collectively. It is not a question of the credibility of the data sources, but whether it is even possible to measure national security well. For that reason, we have chosen to discuss the topic in a different way. Rather than report figures in this section and draw conclusions from trends that have modest support from the board and the public, we discuss some of the measures that had the most support. We also explain how national security is related to topics that we report in other sections, especially the economy, environment, citizenship and democracy, and violence.

Measures with the most support. Three measures received majority, but not supermajority, support from the board: interest among young people in serving in the military, the military expenditure of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allied countries, and bipartisan congressional support for major defense bills. We discuss each briefly below. The figures underlying this discussion can be found in the Data Notes. Again, we do not include the figures in this section because all of the measures had limited support and we do not believe these measures provide a sufficiently compelling picture of our national security.



- **Interest among young people in serving in the military.** We found three measures of this: stated plans for military service among high school students; the number of people applying for military service; and the number who applied, were deemed eligible, and made it through initial training (called “accessions”). The percentage of high schoolers showing interest has been fairly stable, fluctuating in the 10–12% range since 1994. However, the number of applications has been steadily declining. (Accessions have been declining more slowly, possibly because of the caps on the number of new recruits set by Congress.)
- **Military expenditure of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allied countries.** Our national security depends in part on our relationships with, and strengths of, our allies. NATO has been a key alliance since just after World War II (1949). NATO guidelines recommend that member countries spend at least 2% of GDP on military defense, though many members have fallen short. The percentage of NATO countries reaching this bar has risen in recent years from 10% to almost 30% since 2014.
- **Bipartisan congressional support for major defense bills.** Bipartisan support allows the military to plan long term and pursue consistent strategies over time. It provides our allies with confidence that we are committed to our treaties and agreements and sends signals to our adversaries about our resolve and ability to sustain military efforts over time. Congress has generally been more unified in recent years than in the 1990s. Across both parties, Senate support has generally been much higher and less erratic than in the House of Representatives.

Again, we emphasize that the state of our national defense is especially difficult to measure. But, on these three measures, our national security is generally stable or improving. Interest among young people has been steady, and defense spending among our allies is growing, along with support from Congress. The only warning sign seems to be that the initial interest reported by high school seniors is not translating to actual applications to join the armed forces.

Related Topics: National security is closely related to several other topics covered in this report. The economy, in particular, is the basis for our ability to pay soldiers, fund defense-related scientific research, and purchase military equipment and weapons. Moreover, economic partnerships often go hand in hand with military partnerships. Our military allies often rely on us for foreign aid and military equipment that are made possible by our economic power. Also, our control over major global financial institutions gives us power in a wide variety of international negotiations, which are intertwined with our national defense.

The earth’s environment is also central to our national defense, though in more indirect ways. Climate change creates instability, both at home and abroad. For example, as greenhouse gas emissions continue leading the earth’s temperature to rise, large migrations of people seeking healthier climates across national boundaries are likely to follow. Climate change may also lead to scarcity in basic resources, such as food, drinkable water, and shelter. All of these forces can destabilize governments and lead to armed conflict as countries try to provide the basic needs of their citizens.

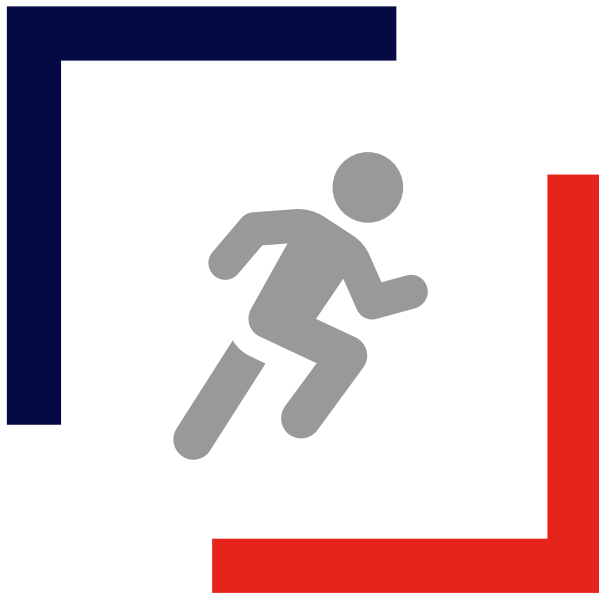
For the purposes of both deterring adversaries and responding to their threats, it is also important that our citizens support the systems and institutions responsible for protecting us. Declining belief in democracy and distrust in the federal government along with rising political polarization undermine that support over time and degrade our ability to prevent and respond to threats.



Our success on the above dimensions, as reported in the other sections, has been mixed. While our economy remains strong, we have fallen behind China, which now has the world's largest economy, in GDP. Belief in democracy, while still strong, has been waning. Finally, partly because of our own limited success with greenhouse gas emissions, we have provided limited global leadership on the topic, which will ultimately be necessary to stem this global problem. (See the Economy, Citizenship and Democracy, Environment, and Trust sections.)

11

Section



Physical Health



STATE OF THE NATION



Physical Health

Introduction. The importance of our physical health may seem self-evident. We value living long and prosperous lives. We also cannot achieve our potential if we are sick or unsafe. Physical health is also intricately connected to mental health and other measures of psychological well-being.

Summary of Results. Life expectancy, or the number of years we can expect to live, is the sole measure that the board agreed to include. (Suicides are related but are located in the Mental Health section.) Life expectancy was steadily improving for decades, even centuries, through 2014 but then, in almost unprecedented fashion, life expectancy actually declined. The main immediate causes behind this decline were drug overdoses and alcohol-related deaths among young people and the middle-aged, especially men. It is also increasingly recognized that adult physical health and life expectancy are shaped by the environment and experiences in early childhood. This decline in life expectancy began prior to the COVID pandemic, which produced an additional, though brief, decline. Life expectancy has since bounced back and is once again at an all-time high, though we remain in the middle of the pack of higher-income countries globally.

Life Expectancy

Specific measure: The number of years today's newborn children would live if subject to the mortality risks prevailing for the US population.
(Source: UNICEF).

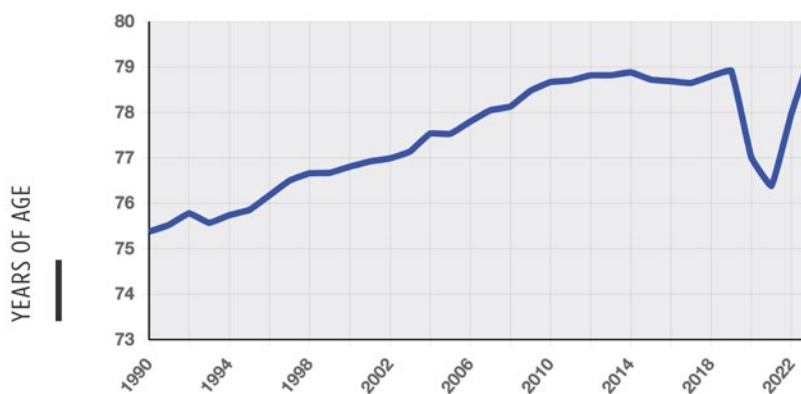
National Trend 

% of countries the US outperforms **62%**

Intl. Rank Trend 

Why did we include this measure? Life expectancy is a common and intuitive measure of how well we succeed in living long and healthy lives. When people die young, it reflects unhealthy habits, availability and quality of health care, and external threats to safety, such as violence. (We note that life expectancy is not simply the average age at which people are currently dying, which, for older Americans, is partially based on factors that occurred in the distant past. Life expectancy tells us how long we can expect today's newborns to live based on the risks that the rest of the population faces now.)

Figure 23: Life Expectancy (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 62% (out of 117 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Life expectancy currently stands at 79.3 years, an all-time US high, though we remain in the middle of the pack of high-income countries globally. This figure was steadily improving for decades, even centuries, through 2014 but then actually declined. A sharp decline and rebound also occurred during the COVID pandemic. Currently, we fall just behind Panama, Albania, and the Czech Republic.

What might explain these patterns? The main immediate causes behind the pre-COVID decline were increased drug overdoses and alcohol-related deaths among young people and the middle-aged, especially men. During COVID, the US also had an unusually high “excess mortality” rate, which reflects both the direct and indirect effects on mortality from COVID.

Related Topics: Life expectancy is partly rooted in our experiences when we are growing up, such as low birthweight (see the Children and Families section) and poverty (see the Inequality section). Another cause of lower life expectancy is social isolation (see the Life Satisfaction section).

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



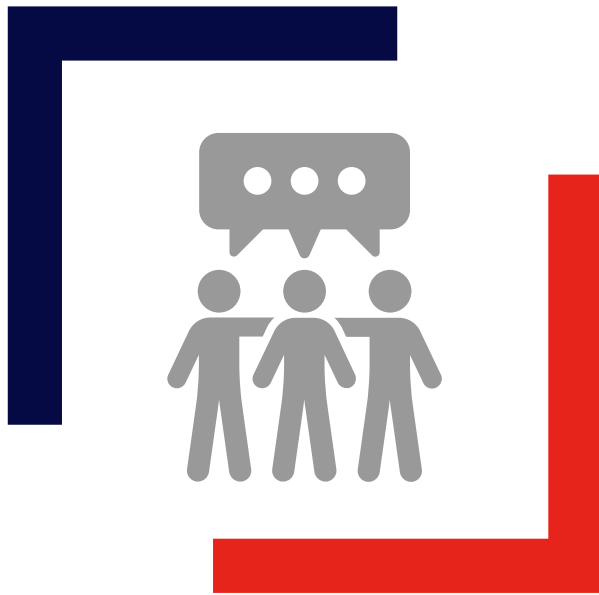
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Physical Health (as topic)	100%	73%
Life Expectancy	100%	60%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including body mass index (BMI), physical disability rate, and a more subjective measure of self-reported general health. The public did not support any of these additional measures either, although the general health measure received the most support (67%).

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.

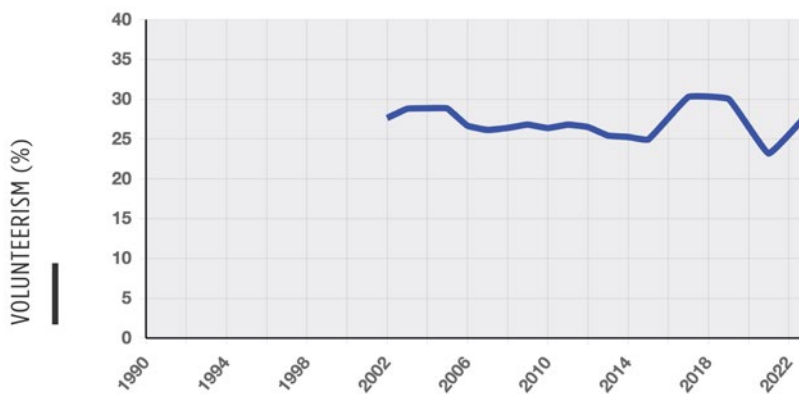
Volunteerism

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)

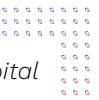


• How does the US rank globally?

- **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

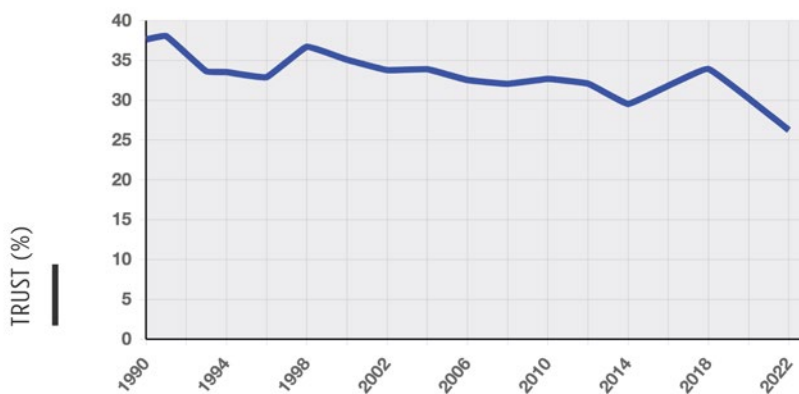
73%

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.



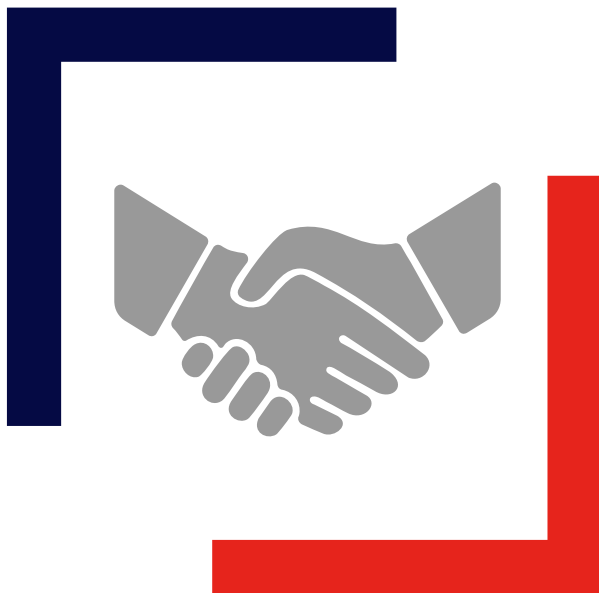
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Social Capital (as topic)	93%	52%
Volunteerism	86%	38%
Trust in Neighbors	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.

13

Section



Trust



STATE OF THE NATION



Trust

Introduction. Trust in institutions reflects the degree to which we believe groups such as governments and universities are serving the country—how honest and reliable they are and how they are serving the nation’s interests. These institutions are responsible for important aspects of our success, and our trust in them is also likely necessary if we are going to make lasting improvements in the measures listed elsewhere in this report.

Summary of Results. Of all the institutions we considered, trust is highest and most stable for local government and lowest for the criminal justice system. Trust in the scientific community was stable and even saw a small increase before COVID, but this declined slightly during COVID.

Three of the institutions we considered—the federal government, police, and higher education—have seen sharp declines in trust, among the steepest drops of any measures in this report. The trends in the other trust measures are stable. Trust is also declining on three measures relative to levels of trust expressed by citizens of other countries.

We do note some seemingly small differences in wording of the survey questions pertaining to trust of different institutions that make the cross-institutional comparisons in trust levels less definitive, but these likely do not influence the stark differences in trends across institutions.



Trust in Local Government

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/fair amount of trust and confidence in local government to handle local problems. (Source: Gallup).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the US
outperforms

NA

Intl.
Rank
Trend

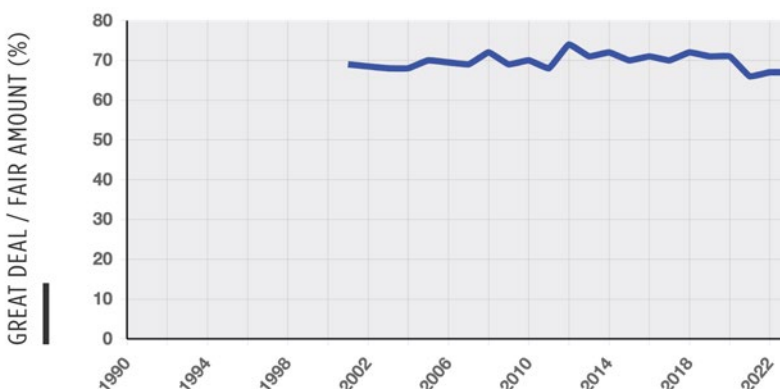
*

Why did we include this measure? Local governments are responsible for many of our most basic necessities, including schools, roads, parks, water, police, and fire protection. Trust in local government is therefore an important signal of the degree to which those needs are being met and of our ability to improve going forward.

Figure 26: Trust in Local Government (National Trend)

How does the US rank globally?

* Not available.



What do the data show? Of all the trust measures in this section, local governments have the highest public trust of any institution. Trust in local government has also remained fairly steady with 68–70% expressing a great deal or fair amount of trust.

What might explain these patterns? People tend to trust those who are closest to them and people they know. Many citizens see their locally elected leaders face-to-face. When possible, people also tend to move to local communities that they have positive views about and that provide the services that are important to them.



Trust in Federal Government

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/fair amount of trust and confidence in the federal government to handle domestic and international problems. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend



% of countries the US outperforms

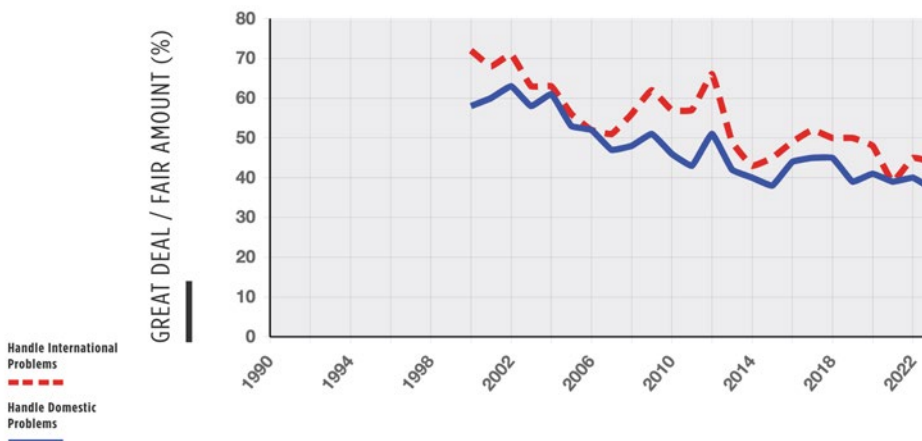
6%

Intl. Rank Trend



Why did we include this measure? The federal government has important responsibilities, including national defense, economic policy, immigration, environmental resource management, and social insurance and income support programs. The federal government also shapes the actions of state and local governments through laws and program subsidies and shapes interstate commerce through business regulation and transportation infrastructure.

Figure 27: Trust in Federal Government (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Percentage of the population reporting confidence in the national government. (Source: Authors' analysis of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development data).
- Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 6% (out of 36 countries)
- International Rank Trend: ↓

What do the data show? Trust in the federal government has declined from a peak of 60–70% in the year 2000 to less than 50% in a fairly short period of time—one of the sharpest drops of any measure in this report. We are ranked just below Latvia, South Korea, and Greece. Trust is somewhat higher in international affairs.

What might explain these patterns? This is a continuation of an old trend that began in the 1960s. When people perceive that things are not going well in the country, as many of the measures in this report suggest, the federal government, and especially the president, are often held responsible.

Trust in Police

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in the police. (Source: Gallup).

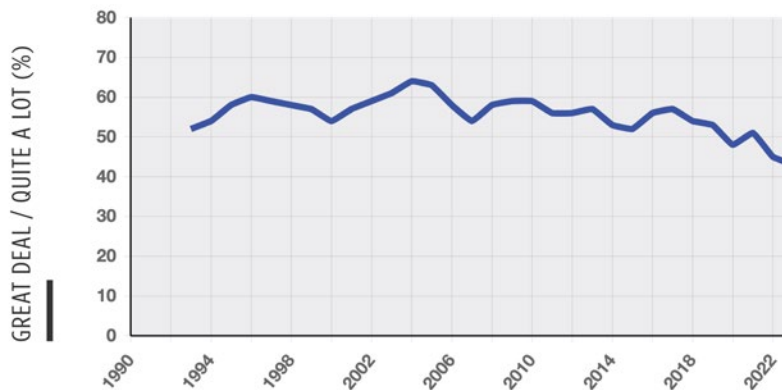
National Trend
↓

% of countries the US outperforms
66%

Intl. Rank Trend
→

Why did we include this measure? The police are responsible for enforcing laws and protecting our safety. These are some of the most fundamental roles of government.

Figure 28: Trust in Police (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- *Specific Measure: (Same as above.)*
(Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).
- Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 66% (out of 29 countries)
- International Rank Trend: ↔

What do the data show? The national trend shows declining trust in police since the early 2000s, but we are in the top half compared with other high-income countries and our international standing has been stable. We rank just below the Netherlands, Andorra, and Australia and well behind China.

What might explain these patterns? Multiple factors may be behind this. We are not aware of evidence that the frequency of actual police misconduct has changed over this period, so we cannot draw conclusions about this possible cause. The decline in trust in police does align roughly with the introduction of the first camera-based smartphone in 2007. The rise of these devices, as well as police body cams later, means that interactions with the police are now frequently captured on video and then shown on social media and in mass media. Some of these videos have shown what appears to be evidence of violent misconduct, especially against African Americans. (We note that viral videos sometimes do not convey well the context of police encounters that escalate, from the perspective of either the police or the accused.) The drops in trust in the police have been larger for African Americans and young people.

Trust in Criminal Justice System

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in the criminal justice system. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend
→

% of countries the US outperforms
39%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? The criminal justice system is responsible for enforcing laws and holding people responsible for crimes. This includes the police, courts, prisons, and fairness of sentences. The rule of law is central to our democracy, economy, and social fabric.

Figure 29: Trust in Criminal Justice System (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 39% (out of 28 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Trust in the criminal justice system follows a similar inverted-U pattern as trust in the police, which is one part of the criminal justice system. However, while trust in the criminal justice system is much lower overall, levels now are similar to those in the 1990s, whereas trust in police has declined. Less than 20% of people reported trust in the criminal justice system—the lowest among all the institutions we examined. We rank just below Canada, Andorra, and Australia. We are also tied with Russia, and China is the highest ranked country.

What might explain these patterns? One potential explanation for the low standing of the criminal justice system as a whole, relative to police alone, is that the police are a more visible part of the criminal justice system to the average person, compared with courts and prisons. Most of us see police officers on a daily basis, and familiarity tends to promote trust, similar to what we observed with people trusting local government more than federal government. However, this seems insufficient to explain the overall discrepancy between trust in police and the criminal justice system. People also see the police in person in other countries, yet our trust in criminal justice is lower than trust in police (we outperform only 39% of countries with the criminal justice system but 66% with the police).

Another possible explanation is that people blame the criminal justice system for the nation's high murder rate (see the Violence section). But, again, if the explanation were the rate of violence, then we might expect people to blame both the police and criminal justice in similar ways, and this does not seem to be the case. Also, the murder rate has generally been improving even as trust in both criminal justice and the police is worsening.

The especially low standing of the criminal justice system may be more about the courts, prisons, and sentencing rules. Much attention has been paid recently to prisoners who turned out to be innocent after years behind bars. Also, the United States has the highest rate of imprisonment in the world.



Trust in Colleges and Universities

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in higher education. (Source: Gallup).

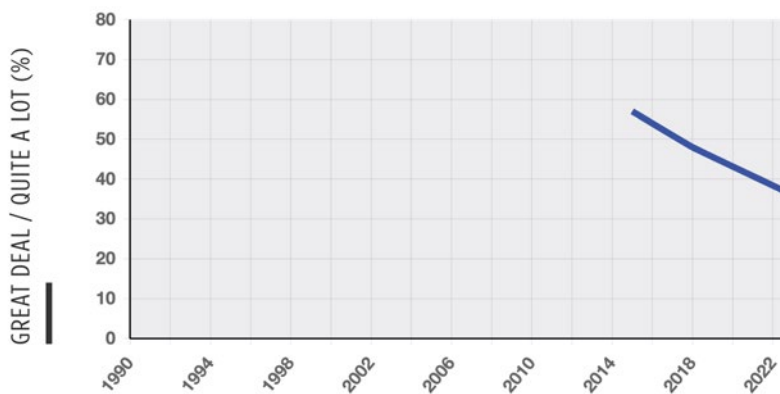
National Trend
↓

% of countries the US outperforms
11%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? Colleges and universities play a key role in educating citizens for technical, managerial, and other professional careers. They also carry out basic research to advance scientific discovery and applied research focused on developing next-generation medicines, defense capabilities, and consumer products. Colleges and universities therefore play many key roles.

Figure 30: Trust in Colleges and Universities (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 11% (out of 28 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Trust in colleges and universities is plummeting and now sits below 40% support. We are also near the bottom of high-income countries and falling further. We rank just below Ukraine, Peru, and Romania.

What might explain these patterns? Only the federal government and police have dropped as far as colleges and universities on this measure—and the decline here is much sharper. In 2015, higher education was among the most trusted institutions, just below local government. This earlier positive view likely reflects in part that people who have attended colleges and universities report positive views about their experiences. Graduates do very well in the labor force. We also have far more world-leading universities than any other country and students from other countries come to the US in large numbers to attend them.

However, in more recent years, that trust has plummeted, potentially because of concerns about the rising sticker price of college, increasing student debt, unfair admission practices, affirmative action, the liberal political leanings of faculty, and politically biased free speech rules. (Several of these are related to the increased scrutiny of diversity, equity, and inclusion statements and course requirements.) Campus protests have received particular attention in the past year, though these are too recent to be reflected in the data we are reporting.



Trust in Science

Specific measure: Percentage of the population with a great deal of confidence in the scientific community. (Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the US
outperforms

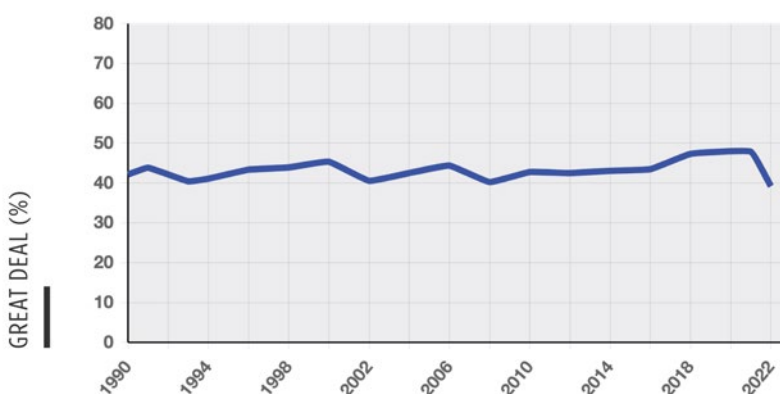
32%

Intl.
Rank
Trend



Why did we include this measure? Science plays an important role in our lives, including basic research that helps us understand our world and applied research that develops new technologies such as medicines, energy sources, transportation, communication, weapons systems, and space exploration, to name a few.

Figure 31: Trust in Science (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Percentage of people who believe that “science and technology are making our lives healthier, easier, and more comfortable.” (Source: Authors’ analysis of World Values Survey).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 32% (out of 28 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↑

What do the data show? The level of trust in the scientific community has been stable and at a level similar to the most recent trust numbers for higher education and police. We rank just below Germany, Mexico, and Turkey, and well below China and Russia. The scientific community was also the only institution that saw rising trust before COVID. That trust diminished somewhat with the onset of COVID.

What might explain these patterns? The slight growth of trust in science before the pandemic might reflect recognition of the new medicines and other discoveries emerging from the scientific community. We also note that the data for trust in science come from a different data source than the other trust measures, which could explain some of the differences across institutions.

The drop in trust in science during the COVID pandemic might be explained by the overall contentiousness of the pandemic and the unusually significant role of science in making decisions. The scientific community was asked to make judgments on social distancing and other health measures that involved science but also entailed difficult value judgments that are beyond the scientific domain. Specific concerns emerged about whether COVID originated from a lab leak (in China), poor and overconfident communication about COVID-related evidence, conflicting and shifting advice from the scientific community about how to respond to the pandemic, and political conflict over appropriate public health and social distancing measures being recommended by the public health community.

Across all these institutions, trust is higher in institutions that are closest to our daily lives and with which we have the most direct experience. This is clearest with the comparisons of local and federal governments and of police with the criminal justice system. Also, the more distant institutions are from those they serve, the more their values and orientations tend to diverge from what local residents prefer.

Local government has seen the steadiest trust. While trust in science and the criminal justice system have also remained fairly stable, they have experienced more variation in recent years. The federal government, higher education, and the police are at the other extreme with the largest declines in trust. This might be partially explained by increasingly negative political and media messages about these institutions.

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

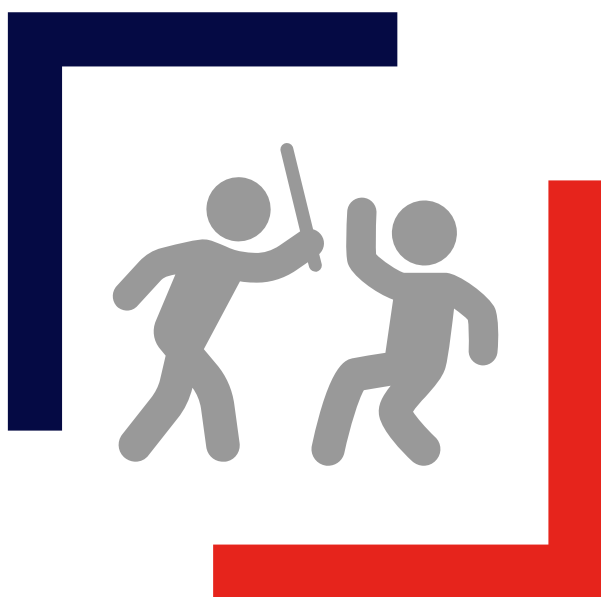
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Trust (as topic)	100%	79%
Trust in Local Government	79%	80%
Trust in Federal Government	86%	82%
Trust in Police	79%	83%
Trust in Criminal Justice System	79%	81%
Trust in Universities	79%	62%
Trust in Science	79%	73%

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including trust in public schools, the medical system, religion, the three branches of government, mass media, the military, big business, small business, organized labor, large tech companies, and banks. The public supported trust in public schools, the medical system, the three branches of government, the military, and banks.

14

Section



Violence



STATE OF THE NATION



Violence

Introduction. Safety from physical violence, along with food, water, and shelter, is among the most basic human needs. Violence resulting in death not only indicates a direct loss of life but instills fear in others who see themselves as facing increased risks in their daily lives. That fear, in turn, can lead people to avoid interactions with others and prevent people from reaching their full potential.

Summary of Results. The United States has historically been one of the most violent countries in the world, and this is still true today. However, contrary to public perception, the murder rate has declined sharply since the early 1990s. This is also very likely true of shootings, because of the close connection between murder and shootings, though the shootings data do not go back to 1990. We are having mixed success in improving our international standing on these measures.

Murder Rate

Specific measure: Rate of murder and other unlawful, but intentional, killings per 100,000 people. (Source: Authors' analysis of FBI and Brennan Center for Justice data).

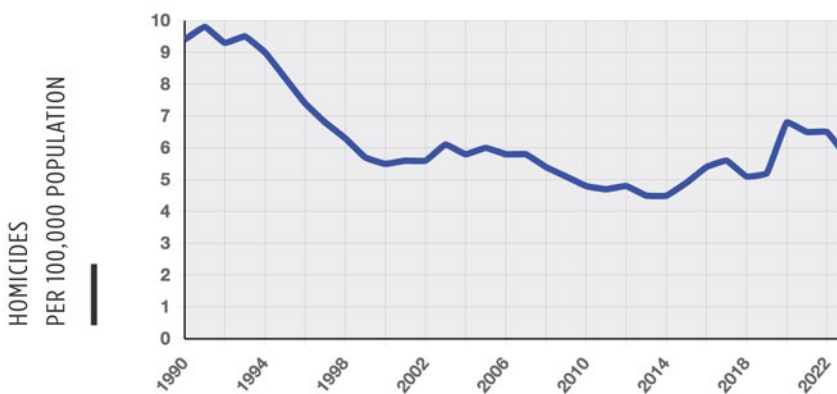
National
Trend% of
countries
the US
outperforms

30%

Intl.
Rank
Trend

Why did we include this measure? Murder is the most severe form of violence. It is also the one most accurately measured.

Figure 32: Murder Rate (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 30% (out of 70 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Our murder rate is very high by global standards. In 2023, 5.7 out of every 100,000 people in the US were murder victims. We rank just ahead of Russia and just behind Ukraine, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, the murder rate declined by almost 50% between 1990 and 1999 and continued declining for the most part until 2014. The murder rate spiked with the onset of COVID but then returned nearly to its prior level—well below the level of the 1990s.

What might explain these patterns? Almost all murders are committed with guns. Broad civilian access to guns is unique to the United States. The Constitution's Second Amendment provides the right to bear arms and, as a result, the country has more guns than people. Because almost all murders are committed with guns, and there are essentially no alternative weapons that are as lethal, this is one viable explanation for our high murder rate.

Cycles of high murder rates are also partly driven by demographics, especially the number of men in the population between the ages of 20 and 34. The decline in the murder rate from 1990 to 1999 coincided with a decline in the percent of the population who are men in that age range. The decline in the crack epidemic in the late 1990s and stricter sentencing and mass incarceration were also likely causes. The increased number of police officers might have been a factor in the 1990s, though the number of officers has subsequently declined to near their prior levels even as the murder rate has remained much lower than the 1990s.

Shootings

Specific measure: Rate of fatal and nonfatal shootings per 100,000 population. This includes murders and suicides as well as officer-involved, accidental, mass shootings and many other types. (Source: Authors' analysis of Gun Violence Archive, Centers for Disease Control, and Washington Post Fatal Force Tracker data).

National
Trend

*

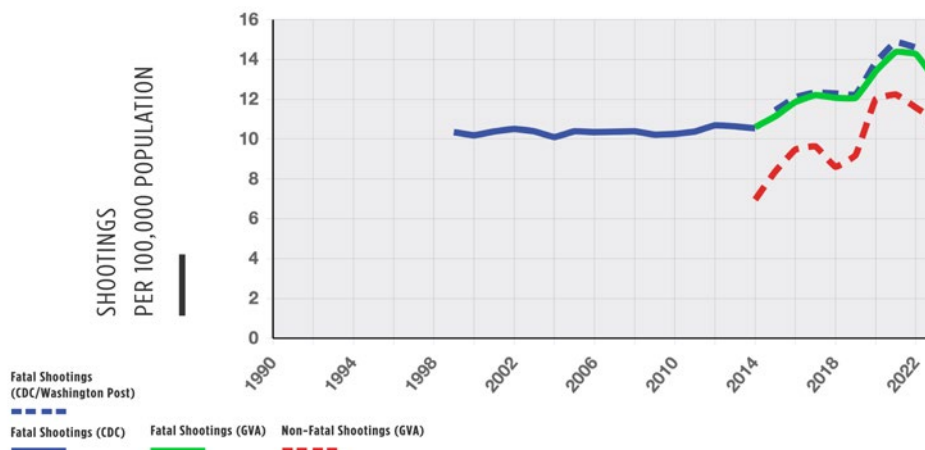
% of
countries
the US
outperforms

10%

Intl.
Rank
Trend

Why did we include this measure? All uses of guns create physical injury, trauma, and/or fear.

Figure 33: Shootings (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Rate of fatal shooting deaths per 100,000 population. (Source: Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 10% (out of 115 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↑

What do the data show? The rate of gun violence generally tracks the murder rate. We are among the most dangerous comparison countries on this measure, though improving somewhat in global terms. We rank just below the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, and Guyana, and far below China and Russia. The rate of nonfatal shootings closely tracks fatal ones.

The fatal shooting rates are generally higher than the murder rates shown earlier because the fatal shootings measure also includes suicides and accidental shootings. We characterize this trend as “unclear” because, although shootings have increased in recent years, shootings rates closely track the murder rate, which improved in the years during which we lack shootings data.

What might explain these patterns? Given the close connection between the murder rate and gun violence, see the explanations above for the murder rate.

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

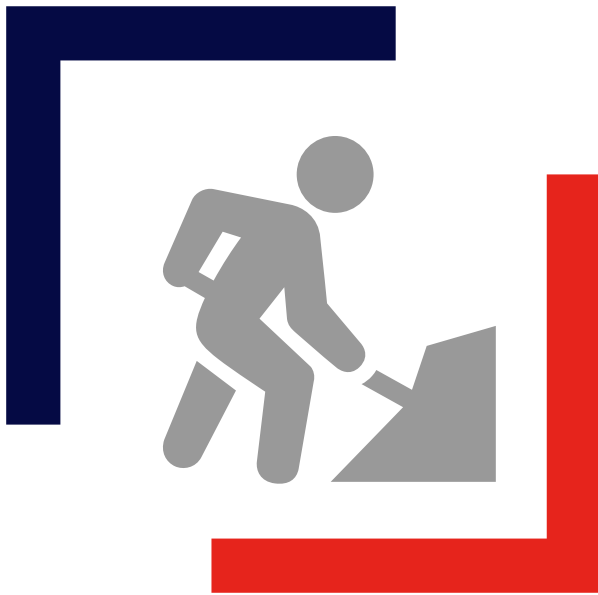
Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Violence (as topic)	100%	76%
Murder Rate	86%	73%
Gun Violence (Fatal & Non-Fatal)	79%	72%

Other Measures Considered: We also considered including various types of assaults, but data accuracy was a serious concern so we did not vote on it.

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Section



Work and Labor Force



STATE OF THE NATION



Work and Labor Force

Introduction. Paid work is one of the important activities in our lives. Most directly, work yields the income we need to provide for ourselves and our families. Our employment also partially defines who we are and can be a source of dignity, respect, and fulfillment. It is one of the main ways in which we interact with people outside our families and make contributions to society as a whole. People spend more of their lives working than in any activity other than sleep.

Summary of Results. Our metrics on the US workforce show mixed success. We have low long-term unemployment, and we rank above 50% of other high-income countries, and are improving globally, on hourly earnings growth. However, we are in the bottom half of high-income countries—and declining globally—on employment and labor force participation rates. These last two trends are driven by declining workforce participation among men combined with slower growth than peer countries in workforce participation among women. Explanations include declining interest and opportunities in work among men, some of which are related to weak wage growth for working people, and safety net programs that may discourage work.



Employment-to-Population Ratio (EPOP)

Specific measure: Percentage of the population age 25–54 (“prime age” adults) who are employed. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data).

National Trend
↕

% of countries the U.S. outperforms
26%

Intl. Rank Trend
↓

Why did we include this measure? The employment-to-population ratio measures the extent to which this age group is working for pay. Those not employed include those who are not in the labor force (for example, because they are raising children at home, are full-time students, or have a disability) and those who are seeking work but cannot find an acceptable job. While there are often good reasons not to be working, this measure is useful because it reflects all the possible reasons that people might not work. With this and the other work measures below, we focus specifically on those age 25–54 to avoid including young adults who are not working because they are in college and older adults who are not working because they are retired. (The term “prime age” refers to the idea that these are ages when we are most likely to be in the labor force.)

Figure 34: Employment-Population Ratio (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:** 26% (out of 34 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? The figure shows that the employment-to-population ratio has fluctuated between 75% and 82% since 1990. In other words, a bit more than three out of four of the United States’ prime age adults are typically employed outside the home. Recessions are indicated in this and the other figures in this section with a gray vertical bar covering the recession periods.

What might explain these patterns? The most recent level is slightly above the first point on the graph, which suggests little change. However, the trends vary across several key periods. The ratio was increasing from 1990 until its peak around 2000, then declined some, and saw a sharp decline with the 2008 Great Recession. It then took more than a decade for the figure to revert back to the pre-2008 level, but then came the COVID-19 pandemic. More generally, employment is strongly related to the business cycle. Because the trend depends so strongly on the specific year we start with, this is a rare case where we have decided to indicate a mixed trend direction in the report summary.



The United States also fares poorly on this employment measure compared with other high-income countries, and we are falling further behind. The countries ranked just above us are Belgium, Israel, and France, though we are separated from all three by less than two percentage points. On the other hand, Russia is ranked first and has about half as many nonemployed people.

One reason we have been declining globally on the employment-to-population ratio is that other countries have been catching up to the US on a closely related measure: short-term unemployment rates. Also, while birth rates have been declining in both the US and higher-income countries generally, other countries provide more generous government-funded parental leave and childcare so that parents can more easily remain in and rejoin the workforce if they choose.



Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR)

Specific measure: Percentage of the population age 25–54 (“prime age adults”), employed or unemployed and actively looking for work. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data).

National
Trend



% of
countries
the U.S.
outperforms

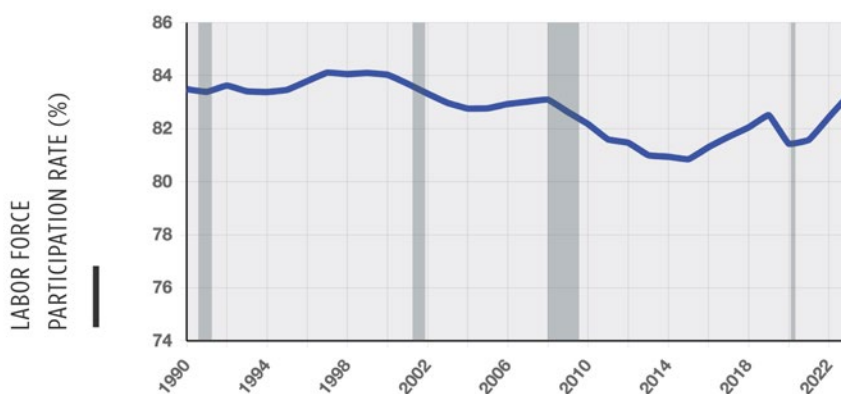
23%

Intl.
Rank
Trend



Why did we include this measure? The labor force participation rate allows us to better understand whether changes in the employment-to-population ratio are due to changes in the likelihood that people are actively working or seeking work.

Figure 35: Labor Force Participation Rate (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:** 23% (out of 40 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? The figure shows that labor force participation is more stable than the employment-to-population ratio because the latter is affected more by the business cycle and fluctuating short-term unemployment rates. However, there is also a clearer downward trend in labor force participation, which is now almost a percentage point below the late-1990s peak. The drop occurred in two phases, which align with the periods discussed above. The first, smaller drop occurred from 2001–2004 (one-percentage point drop) and a second larger drop began with the Great Recession (two full percentage points). We are in the bottom quarter of countries on labor force participation and still declining. The countries just above us in the international comparison are Paraguay, Israel, and Greece.

What might explain these patterns? Declining labor force participation may reflect some combination of declining interest, ability, and opportunities in work, as well as rising incomes, which increase demand for leisure. This trend may also be driven by men—women have seen increased or stable labor force participation. One likely reason is the decline in manufacturing jobs, which, since the mid-20th-century expansion of unionization, have been higher-paying jobs than the alternatives available to these workers. Once a person loses one of these jobs, it is generally difficult to find another of similar quality. Another reason may be that adults are getting married and having children less often and later in life and men have traditionally been the primary breadwinners. This means men now spend fewer of their prime working years being financially responsible for their families.



More adults—again, especially men—are not working and are also receiving income from disability insurance. This is happening even while work itself has been much safer and more accommodating to some disabilities. Declining mental and physical health and rising drug use may be part of the explanation. Also, while disability insurance programs are less generous overall in the US than in peer countries, some expanded coverage for mental health and some other ailments might partially explain why labor force participation in the US is declining relative to other countries.

For women, employment has generally been increasing or remaining steady. This reflects the decline in birth rates combined with changing social norms about women's role in the labor force and declining occupational segregation by gender, which has increased women's job opportunities. The rise in single-parent households (and unmarried adults generally), combined with the fact that women are typically the main caretakers of children, means that women now have a greater need to work outside the home than in the past.

The trend in labor force participation also tells us that the decline in the employment-to-population ratio we saw earlier is not due, for example, to an increase in the number of people who are seeking work but cannot find it. (This is further reinforced below in our discussion of the long-term unemployment rate.)



Long-Term Unemployment Rate

Specific measure: Percentage of the labor force age 25–54 (“prime age adults”) unemployed for six months or more. (Source: Authors’ analysis of International Labor Organization data).

National Trend



% of countries the U.S. outperforms

84%

Intl. Rank Trend



Why did we include this measure? Short-term unemployment mostly reflects the business cycle, layoffs, and people deciding they are not satisfied with their current jobs. Some degree of unemployment is natural and healthy as it allows both employers and employees to search for better matches between skills and job requirements. However, unemployment becomes a larger problem when people are out of the labor force for long periods of time. The longer workers are out of work, the harder it is to find a job and reengage in gainful employment.

Figure 36: Long-Term Unemployment Rate (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Same as above).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 84% (out of 25 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↔

What do the data show? Setting aside recessionary cycles, the trend has been flat and long-term unemployment for prime age workers is quite low—less than 1%. We also do well on this metric compared with other countries. Only three other countries in our data have lower long-term unemployment than the US: Canada, the Netherlands, and South Korea have slightly lower rates.

The 2008 Great Recession had a particularly harmful effect on long-term unemployment. Once people lost their jobs, they had to wait a long time for the recession to end and to find good opportunities.

What might explain these patterns? Long-term unemployment is one of the bright spots in this section. One reason it is so low is that we have less generous unemployment insurance than other countries, which creates more pressure on workers to accept another job quickly when they are out of work. (US short-term unemployment rates, while not shown, are also low by global standards.)

Hourly Earnings Growth

Specific measure: Year-over-year growth rate of real average hourly earnings among those working, based on 2023 US dollars, private sector only. (Source: Authors' analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data).

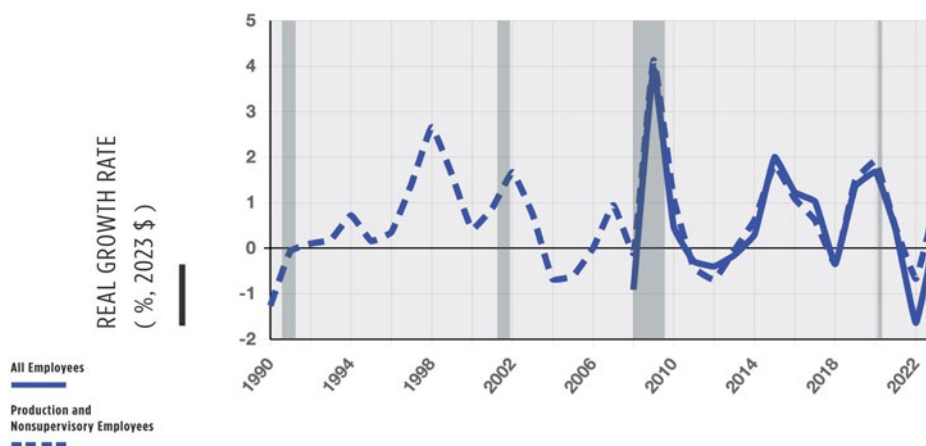
National Trend
↕

% of countries the U.S. outperforms
70%

Intl. Rank Trend
↑

Why did we include this measure? Inflation-adjusted wages capture the ability of Americans to provide for their own needs and are a measure of work productivity. This is the largest single source of income overall and, for working age adults, usually the sole source of income.

Figure 37: Hourly Earnings Growth (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Year-over-year growth rate of real average hourly earnings, based on 2021 international dollars (PPP). (Source: Authors' analysis of International Labor Organization data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 70% (out of 20 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↑

What do the data show? Real wage growth has been positive in all but six of the prior 16 years. That means workers are becoming better off economically. We are also doing well compared with other countries, and we have been moving up the international ranks. The countries just above us in the international comparison are Chile, Costa Rica, and South Korea. Like the other work and labor forces measures, real wage growth is also sensitive to economic conditions. Higher unemployment changes the number of jobs in different wage categories, which is a key factor affecting real wage growth. (Workers who keep their jobs in recessions usually do not see declines in wages.)

What might explain these patterns? Real wage growth is related to productivity growth. When productivity rises, employers can pay workers more. However, they do not move completely in tandem. Productivity has been increasing somewhat faster than real wages (see the Economy section). This reflects the rapid growth of executive pay, which falls outside the wage definition, relative to the wages of the average worker.

We also note that the US international rankings on both average wage growth and productivity are higher than our education metric rankings (see the Education section). This may be explained by our relatively freer markets and investment in physical capital that work in tandem with worker skill.



Related topics: The above discussion connects our measures of work and labor to many other topics covered in this report. We discuss the connection between wages and productivity and how GDP is heavily dependent on the size of the labor force in the Economy section. We also note how delay and decline in marriage is related to workforce participation (see the discussion of the percentage of children growing up with a single parent in the Children and Family section). Finally, we discuss why our wage growth and productivity measures might be higher than our education levels (see the Education section).

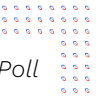
For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.



Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	Support from Board	Support from Public
Work (as topic)	100%	83%
Employment-Population Ratio (prime age)	83%	55%
Labor Force Participation Rate (prime age)	92%	60%
Long-Term Unemployment Rate (prime age)	77%	66%
Average Hourly Earnings Growth Rate	85%	64%

Other Measures Considered: All four of the measures voted on for this topic were supported by the board.



Board Vote and Public Opinion Poll: Process and Results Summary

The State of the Nation Project was designed to provide a progress report for the country that accounts for both expert opinion and public opinion—it is a progress report for and by Americans.

In the Executive Summary and Introduction, we briefly explain how we went about our work and how we polled citizens. Also, in the Executive Summary and topic sections, we indicate the level of support from the board and the public. In this section, we describe both the board and public opinion processes in more detail and report additional results from those votes.

The Board Vote

As noted earlier, the Board met for more than a year to discuss various topics. In some cases, this helped narrow down the potential topics and measures to vote on. In other cases, the discussion broadened the possibilities and led us to consider new topics and measures that we had not previously thought about. In what follows, we focus just on the process of the final vote, taken in September 2024.

Supermajority support was a governing principle of the project. As a general rule, we required 75% support for any measure to get in.¹ Why is this a “general rule” and not a hard and fast one? This is because of the two-step nature of the voting. Again, we voted first on the topics and then, if that measure had sufficient support, we voted on specific measures.

This two-step approach created some complications. To see why, consider the simplest possible voting rule: that a measure must reach 75% support to be included. In that case, we might end up in a situation where we exclude a whole topic because we just could not agree on the best specific measure, which would seem to conflict with the will of the board on the topic as a whole.² We therefore applied the following rules:

- For a topic to be included, 75% of the board must have voted for at least one of the measures within the topic—i.e., no more than 25% voted against ALL the measures within the topic. This prevented us from excluding whole topics just because some of us favored some measures while others favored other measures on the same topic.

¹ We also considered ranked-choice voting, but this is more sensible when the number of options is modest and where ranking is feasible. Also, unlike the method we used, ranked-choice voting would require setting a specific number of measures.

² Another possible interpretation of this situation is that the board thought the topic was important but that the measures were inadequate to the task.



- For a measure to be included within an included topic, it must generally have 75% support with two exceptions:

Exception 1: If a topic is included (see above rule) but none of the individual measures reach 75%, then we include the top-voted measure(s).³ However, if the top vote-getter does not receive at least 60% support, the data are not included as part of the summary progress report (i.e., the data are only provided in the topic's separate section).

Exception 2: We defined as a “subtopic” those measures that capture a very similar idea and then applied the same rule as to the main topics. That is, if 75% voted for at least one of the measures in the subtopic, then one of the measures from the subtopic was included even without 75% support for the measure itself. If a subtopic was included by this rule, then we applied Exception 1 and included the top vote-getter from the subtopic.

These exceptions were triggered in the following cases:

Environment. We voted on three measures: net greenhouse gas emissions, extreme heat days, and air particulate matter. Everyone voted for at least one of the three, so the topic was included. Greenhouse gas emissions and air particulate matter had above 60% support and tied; therefore, we included both.

National security. We voted on six measures. Three board members voted against all of the measures, so that it was nearly excluded entirely. Since none of the measures reached 60% support, we did not report these in the main summary progress report, but we did include them in the National Security section.

Income inequality. We voted on three different measures of economic inequality, based on wages, income, and wealth, respectively. Every board member voted for one of these, but none of them reached the 75% threshold. So, we included the highest vote-getter of the three (income inequality). Poverty had sufficient support on its own and was therefore also included under the Inequality section.

Public Opinion Poll

We asked a representative sample of 1,000 American adults to vote on the same set of topics and measures as the board during early October of 2024. These citizens included Democrats and Republicans and men and women in roughly equal proportion. Some had college degrees and others less than a high school diploma.

The poll was conducted by the survey firm *YouGov*, using an online-only survey of an established panel of respondents. *YouGov* was selected for its reputation as a leader in public opinion polling. It is one of the top public opinion firms in the United States and a pioneer in web panel research. Its methods have also been validated, meaning that its results generally align with other rigorous methods. We are therefore confident that the sample was representative of the nation.⁴

³ If there was a tie for the top vote-getter, we included both.

⁴ YouGov provided survey weights, which we applied in all the results reported anywhere in this report. These weights are designed to ensure that the results are truly representative of the US population.



We decided not to report results separately for groups such as Democrats and Republicans. This is because our aim with the project is not the same as the typical poll. We are not trying to dissect public opinion or understand why people voted the way they did. We just wanted to know, overall, what Americans believe about how we can measure our progress. There are plenty of other polls out there that attempt to explain why Americans disagree. Here, we are trying to understand what we typically agree on. It would be essentially impossible for a measure to reach 75% support if it did not have substantial support from both political parties.

We started the survey by explaining, in general terms, what the State of the Nation Project is about. Next, we asked all of the respondents to express their opinion about what topics are most important. Finally, we picked a random sample of five topics where citizens reported their views about the measures we considered for that topic. In all cases, they were asked to rate each topic/measure as being extremely important, very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not at all important. We also gave them an opportunity to introduce topics and measures that we did not ask them about.

Voting Rules and Results

As with the board vote, the meaning of supermajority support requires some explanation. We considered a survey response to be a vote for the topic or measure when respondents selected either “extremely important” or “very important.” Then, we used the same protocol as above for the board vote, including the exceptions, except that we also considered the confidence interval (topics/ measures within the margin of error of the threshold were counted as being supported by the public).

The confidence intervals are +/- 3.1 percentage points for the topic votes and +/- 5.7 percentage points (for $p < .05$) for the measure votes. Roughly speaking, this means that, when we report support of 75% for a topic, we can be fairly certain that if we carried out the analysis with a different representative sample, the result would be in the range of 72–78%. Since fewer people were polled about each specific measure, that range is wider: 69–81%. In what follows, we report the results of both the board and public votes.

Table 3 focuses on the topic votes only. We highlight the topics with both board and public support in dark green. The light green topics are those where the board included a topic, but the public voted against it. Finally, we highlight in red topics that both the board and the public voted against (and which are not included).



Table 3: Results of the Topic Vote

Topic	Board Support (% of board who voted for at least one measure in topic)	Public Support (% of public who voted topic "extremely important" or "very important")
Children & Families	100%	81%
Citizenship & Democracy	100%	75%
Civil Liberties	79%	79%
Economy	100%	78%
Education	100%	83%
Environment	77%	66%
Inequality	100%	62%
Life Satisfaction	100%	70%
Media	57%	58%
Mental Health	100%	79%
National Security	79%	79%
Physical Health	100%	73%
Social Capital	93%	52%
Trust	100%	79%
Violence	100%	76%
Work	100%	83%

In general, we see considerable support for all the topics from both the board and the public. This is partly because of the way we selected the topics. That is, we focused on topics from the beginning that the board thought were important.

Next, we report the same information for each separate measure, across all the topics, using the same color coding. We add one color: we highlight in yellow measures that the board voted against but that the public favored (and which are not included in the report).



Table 4: Results of the Measure Vote

Topics and Measures	Board Support (% of board who voted "yes")	Public Support (% of public who voted "extremely important" or "very important")
Children and Families	100%	81%
Child mortality	85%	73%
Low birthweight	85%	55%
Youth depression	85%	76%
% with single parent	77%	58%
% in juvenile justice system	54%	69%
% adults married	50%	36%
Citizenship & Democracy	100%	75%
Voter participation	93%	75%
Adult knowledge of civics	64%	80%
Belief in democracy	79%	70%
Child knowledge of civics	43%	69%
Neg. views of other party	79%	64%
Country in right direction	57%	73%
Civil Liberties	79%	79%
Press freedom threats	79%	78%
Economy	100%	78%
Output/GDP	93%	69%
New business starts	71%	62%
Business investments	57%	57%
Productivity	77%	65%
Corporate concentration	50%	62%
Education	100%	83%
Test scores (8th grade)	86%	57%
Avg. year of educ.	86%	50%
Parent school ratings	43%	68%
% in school/working	79%	64%



Table 4: Results of the Measure Vote

Topics and Measures	Board Support (% of board who voted "yes")	Public Support (% of public who voted "extremely important" or "very important")
Environment	77%	66%
Greenhouse gas emissions	62%	55%
Air quality	62%	61%
Extreme heat days	54%	56%
Inequality	100%	62%
Poverty	93%	76%
Income inequality	71%	62%
Wage inequality	64%	61%
Net worth inequality	64%	53%
Homelessness	64%	74%
Intergenerational mobility	43%	53%
Life Satisfaction	100%	70%
Current life satisfaction	92%	67%
Hope	62%	65%
Social isolation	85%	63%
Media	57%	58%
% get news from soc. media	57%	50%
Mental Health	100%	79%
Depression/anxiety	79%	66%
Fatal overdoses	86%	70%
Suicide rate	93%	74%
Substance abuse	71%	72%
Time spent alone	71%	48%
National Security	79%	79%
Military recruitment	57%	61%
Number of trade agreements	21%	55%
Number of treaties	21%	57%



Table 4: Results of the Measure Vote

Topics and Measures	Board Support (% of board who voted "yes")	Public Support (% of public who voted "extremely important" or "very important")
Number of NATO members	36%	48%
NATO military spending	57%	57%
Bipartisan defense agreement	57%	60%
Physical Health	100%	73%
Life expectancy	100%	60%
Adult BMI	71%	48%
General health (subjective)	64%	67%
Physical disability	50%	61%
Social Capital	93%	52%
Volunteered for a group	86%	38%
Religious observance	71%	40%
Receive emotional support	57%	56%
Contributed to charity	64%	41%
Trust...	100%	79%
..in local government	79%	80%
..in federal government	86%	82%
..in colleges & universities	79%	62%
..in public schools	71%	78%
..in science	79%	73%
..in medical system	64%	82%
..in religion	50%	49%
..in 3 branches of government	64%	79%
..in mass media	71%	61%
..in other people	86%	65%
..in military	64%	76%
..in police	79%	83%
..in criminal justice	79%	81%



Table 4: Results of the Measure Vote

Topics and Measures	Board Support (% of board who voted "yes")	Public Support (% of public who voted "extremely important" or "very important")
..in big business	71%	53%
..in small business	64%	55%
..in organized labor	71%	59%
..in large tech companies	71%	55%
..in banks	64%	72%
Violence	100%	76%
Murder rate	86%	73%
Gun violence	79%	72%
Work	100%	83%
Employment/pop. ratio	83%	55%
Labor force participation	92%	60%
Long-term unemployment	77%	66%
Hourly earnings growth	85%	64%



Measures that Had Public Support but Lacked Board Support

Twelve measures had supermajority support from the public but not from the board, by the above rules (including the exceptions). These measures are not shown in the main sections of this report. We summarize them below:

- Percentage of children in the juvenile justice system (54% support from the board versus 69% from the public) (Children & Families)
- Adult knowledge of civics (64% support from the board versus 80% from the public) (Citizenship & Democracy)
- Percentage of the population who believe the country is headed in the right direction (57% support from the board versus 73% from the public) (Citizenship & Democracy)
- Parents' ratings of schools (42% support from the board versus 68% support from the public) (Education)
- Homelessness (64% support from the board versus 74% from the public) (Inequality)
- Substance abuse (71% from the board versus 72% from the public) (Mental Health)
- Percentage of the population who would say they are in good general health (64% support from the board versus 67% support from the public) (Physical Health)
- Trust in public schools (71% support from the board versus 78% from the public) (Trust)
- Trust in the medical system (64% support from the board versus 82% from the public) (Trust)
- Trust in the three branches of government (64% support from the board versus 79% from the public) (Trust)
- Trust in military (64% support from the board versus 76% from the public) (Trust)
- Trust in banks (64% support from the board versus 72% from the public) (Trust)

Measures that Lacked Both Board and Public Support

As a further reflection of the degree of agreement between the board and the public, the following 26 measures were rejected by both groups:

- Percentage of adults ever married (Children & Families)
- Children's knowledge of civics (Citizenship & Democracy)
- New business starts (Economy)
- Business investments (Economy)
- Corporate concentration (Economy)
- Extreme heat days (number) (Environment)
- Wage inequality by decile (Inequality)
- Net worth inequality by race (Inequality)
- Intergenerational mobility (Inequality)
- Hope (Life Satisfaction)

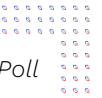
- Percentage of people getting news through social media (Media)
- Time spent alone (Mental Health)
- Number of trade agreements (National Security)
- Number of treaties (National Security)
- Number of NATO members (National Security)
- Adult BMI (Physical Health)
- General health—self-reported (Physical Health)
- Physical disability rate (Physical Health)
- Receive emotional support (Social Capital)
- Religious observance (Social Capital)
- Contributed to charity (Social Capital)
- Trust in religion (Trust)
- Trust in mass media (Trust)
- Trust in big business (Trust)
- Trust in large tech companies (Trust)
- Trust in small business (Trust)
- Trust in organized labor (Trust)

Open-ended responses from public opinion poll

We asked the public to mention additional topics and measures that we might have omitted. The most common response to this open-ended question was that respondents thought we had done a good job capturing the most important topics and measures.

In some cases, the public participants mentioned topics that we did not allow them to vote on. Below is a summary of the most frequent ones. After that list, we explain why those likely did not end up on our list.

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| • Abortion access/rights | • Gun control |
| • Addiction | • Health care |
| • Affordability/housing | • Housing |
| • Border security | • Immigration |
| • Climate change/environment | • Inflation |
| • Cost of living | • Intergenerational mobility |
| • Crime | • Patriotism |
| • Election fraud | • Hope |
| • Food security | • Political corruption/leadership |
| • Freedom | • Race |
| | • Religion |



We note that the survey was fielded in early October of 2024, in the heart of the campaign for US president. While that might be seen as a disadvantage, this had the advantage that the public was thinking more about the state of the country.

Overall, we believe that the board diverged from the public for four key reasons:

01. Some in the list represent policies rather than outcomes (e.g., abortion is a practice/policy).
02. Some are captured in other measures (e.g., housing affordability is partly captured by the inflation adjustments in the GDP and wage measures, which account for changes in housing and other goods and services).
03. Some are closely related to things we did include (e.g., we excluded public health partly because it is related to life expectancy).
04. Some were discussed but there was insufficient support:
 - a. **Border security.** We discussed the number of immigration-related contacts near the border. However, there was disagreement about the general importance of immigration (legal and otherwise) and even whether immigration should be viewed positively or negatively. There was also a sense that the state of the nation could be just fine no matter the number of immigration-related contacts.
 - b. **Intergenerational mobility.** This was discussed, but there was not enough interest to bring it to a vote. One reason was that these measures naturally reflect outcomes from the fairly distant past.⁵

⁵Intergenerational mobility is measured by the percentage of people who move to a different income group from their parents. So, we have to wait until people reach the age of their parents to capture this.