

Introduction

Surveys and polls have become fixtures of American life, each day bringing new findings and making headlines. Some of the results are enlightening, while others serve only to muddy the water. Many surveys do not segment their findings by demographic characteristic, and most cannot reveal trends in attitudes over time because methodologies and questions vary from survey to survey.

The General Social Survey is different. It has a long history. For more than 40 years, it has asked Americans many of the same questions, allowing researchers to compare attitudes not just over time, but also by demographic characteristic. The General Social Survey is one of the few resources that allow attitudinal differences and changes in attitudes to be explored in depth, often permitting researchers to pinpoint why change has occurred. The General Social Survey is the mirror of America. The National Academy of Science has described it as a “national resource” and The National Science Foundation as a “public utility for the community at large.” The survey may not always show us a pretty picture of ourselves, but it is a more accurate picture than can be gleaned from snapshot surveys carried out by a multitude of organizations, each with a different agenda.

The eighth edition of *American Attitudes: Who Thinks What about the Issues That Shape Our Lives* brings you the results from the latest General Social Survey, fielded in 2014. In seven previous editions of *American Attitudes*, New Strategist has coaxed General Social Survey results out of the shadows of academia and placed them solidly in public view. This edition examines changes in the public’s attitudes over the past four-plus decades, but also provides a demographic profile of the most recent attitudes question by question. In hundreds of tables, the eighth edition of *American Attitudes* taps into the General Social Survey gold mine, revealing what the public thinks about topics ranging from gay marriage to the American Dream, how Americans feel about their financial status, their hopes for their children, how often they socialize and with whom, their religious beliefs, political leanings, family life, standard of living, and patriotism. This reference reveals the attitudes of Americans in two ways. First, it provides 2014 attitudes by demographic characteristic—sex, generation, race and Hispanic origin, region of residence, and education. Second, for every 2014 question for which historical data are available, *American Attitudes* shows you the history of response all the way back to the first appearance of the question on the General Social Survey.

Changing Attitudes

On most issues, Americans are surprisingly constant in their views. Over the decades that the General Social Survey has been administered, the majority of Americans consistently claim to be at least “pretty happy,” and most husbands and wives describe their marriage as “very happy.” Religion remains highly important to the majority, although religious diversity has increased. Most favor the death penalty, but also gun control. Most support abortion, at least in some circumstances.

On some issues, however, there have been important shifts over time. Attitudes toward sex roles, sexual behavior, and race relations have changed profoundly as younger generations with different attitudes replaced older ones. Overall, only 31 percent of Americans still favor traditional sex roles, for example, down from 66 percent in 1977. In 2014, only 29 percent of Millennials supported traditional roles compared with 48 percent of Americans aged 69 or older.

Other issues that have experienced significant attitudinal shifts in the past few decades include a decline in the percentage of people who identify themselves as Protestant, a sharp drop in daily newspaper readership, a decline in the percentage of people who think two is the ideal number of children, and a drop in the percentage of people who believe their income is average—the latter falling from 58 percent in 1972 to 46 percent in 2014. The percentage of Americans who believe their income is below average relative to others has grown from 24 to 32 percent. Most disturbing, perhaps, is the loss of faith in the American Dream. The percentage of people who agree with the statement, “The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living,” has fallen from a high of 77 percent in 2000 to a low of 55 percent in 2012 before rebounding slightly to 59 percent in 2014. Fortunately, nearly two-thirds of Millennials and Blacks and more than 70 percent of Hispanics still believe in the American Dream. Among older Americans, however, the figure is just 47 percent.

Differences by Demographics

Demographics do not necessarily divide Americans. On many issues, men and women think alike, Blacks and Whites agree, young and old are on the same side, and college graduates are in accord with their less educated counterparts. Every demographic segment, for example, overwhelmingly supports gun control. Regardless of their demographics, few people have much confidence in Congress, television, or the press.

On some issues, however, there are large differences by demographic characteristic. Women are more likely than men to pray at least once a day (68 versus 45 percent). Non-Hispanic Whites are more likely than Blacks to favor capital punishment (72 versus 46 percent). The Millennial generation is more likely than older Americans to think gays and lesbians should have the right to marry (70 versus 39 percent). The college-educated are much more likely than those without a bachelor’s degree to be interested in science and understand scientific concepts. Mix these diverse attitudes and values together, and you get the American perspective. That perspective is revealed in *American Attitudes*.

About the Book

The eighth edition of *American Attitudes* is organized into 10 topical chapters: Public Arena, Government and Politics, Patriotism, Science and Information, Religion, Work and Money, Family and Friends, Diversity, Personal Outlook, and Sexuality.

All but one chapter (Science and Information is the lone exception) have two sections of tables: 2014 responses by demographic characteristic and historical data back to the first appearance of the question on the General Social Survey. The exact wording of General Social Survey questions

is shown above each table—minus instructional details. The 2014 profile tables show attitudes by sex, generation (Millennials, aged 20 to 37; Generation X, aged 38 to 49; Baby Boomers, aged 50 to 68; and Older Americans, aged 69 or older), race and Hispanic origin (Black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White—the sample size is too small to allow for a breakout of Asian attitudes), the four geographic regions, and education (not a college graduate and bachelor’s degree or more). Each chapter also includes an introductory text that examines what has—and has not—changed over the four-plus decades.

About the General Social Survey

The University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center fields the General Social Survey. The National Opinion Research Center is the oldest nonprofit, university-affiliated national survey research facility in the nation. It conducts the General Social Survey through face-to-face interviews with an independently drawn, nationally representative sample of about 2,000 people aged 18 or older living in households in the United States. The National Opinion Research Center fielded the first General Social Survey in 1972, conducted it annually through 1994 (except for the years 1979, 1981, and 1992), and has fielded the survey every two years since then.

Although social scientists frequently use the General Social Survey to study trends, the survey’s results are not published comprehensively or regularly. Most General Social Survey analysis appears in academic papers and journals, which are not readily available to the average person. Several years ago, the Computer-Assisted Survey Methods Program of the University of California, Berkeley created a web-based tool for analyzing the General Social Survey. The online tool allows users to create custom tables of General Social Survey data. Using the tool, researchers at New Strategist extracted General Social Survey results like gold from a mine. With the publication of the eighth edition of *American Attitudes*, New Strategist is placing the gold in the hands of the public.

For More Information

Those who would like Excel spreadsheets of the General Social Survey attitudinal data presented here should visit New Strategist’s web site (newstrategist.com) and download the PDF of *American Attitudes*, which has links to the Excel version of each table.

Those who would like more information about General Social Survey methodology should visit the National Opinion Research Center site at <http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/general-social-survey.aspx>.

Those who want to explore the General Social Survey extraction tool should visit the Computer-Assisted Survey Methods Program site at <http://sda.berkeley.edu/cgi-bin/hsda?harcstda+gss14>.

Executive Summary: What Americans Think

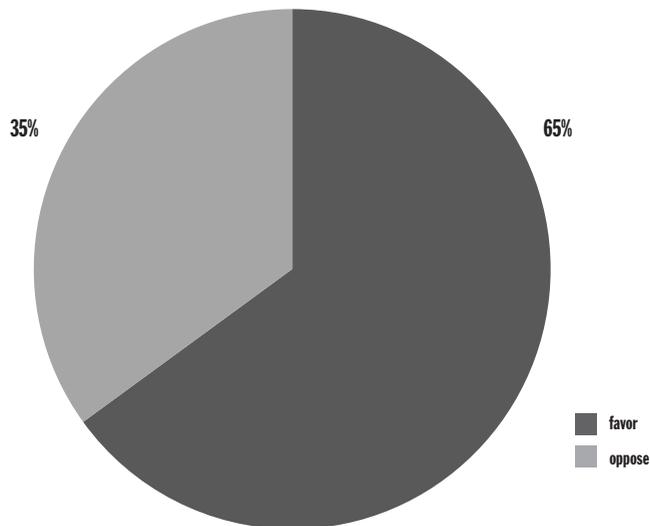
Although Americans disagree about some things, they find common ground on many important issues. These common attitudes and values define the American people. But knowing the issues on which we agree can hinder as much as further an understanding of the American psyche. That is because many of our attitudes are contradictory, causing confusion for those who try to explain the American perspective.

How can we be so optimistic about our lives but so cynical about our leaders? How can we so avidly want to cut government spending but support an increase in spending on so many government programs? How can we be so enthusiastic about science yet pray every day, think the Bible is the word of God, and believe in life after death? Here is a look at what Americans think about some of the most important issues of the day, revealing our many contradictions.

Chapter 1: Public Arena

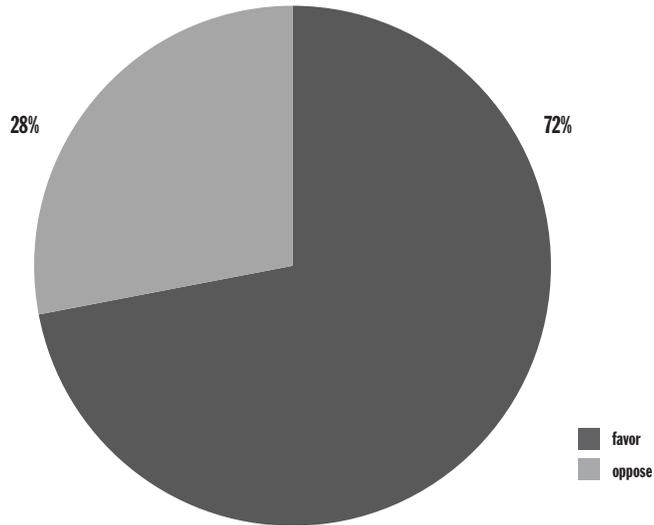
The death penalty is supported...

“Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?”



... and so is gun control

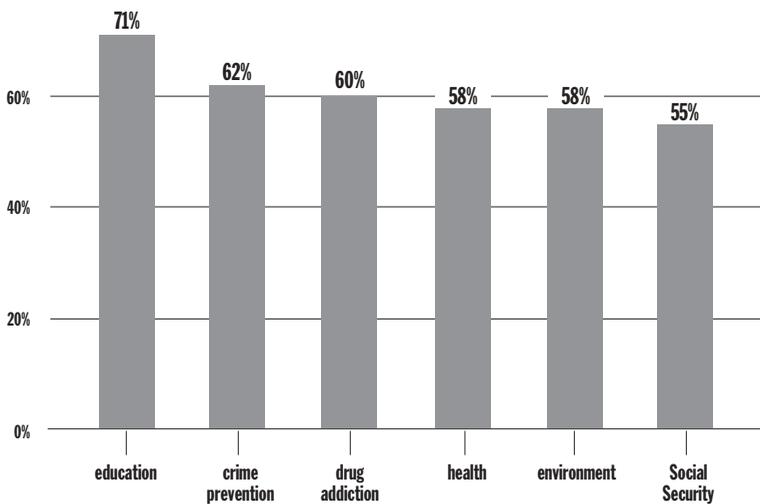
“Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?”



Chapter 2: Government and Politics

Most think taxes are too high, but they want the government to spend more...

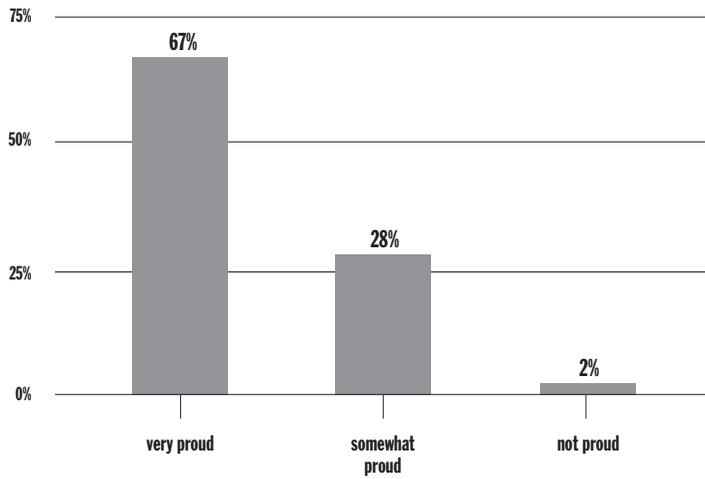
Percent who thinks we are spending “too little” money on...



Chapter 3. Patriotism

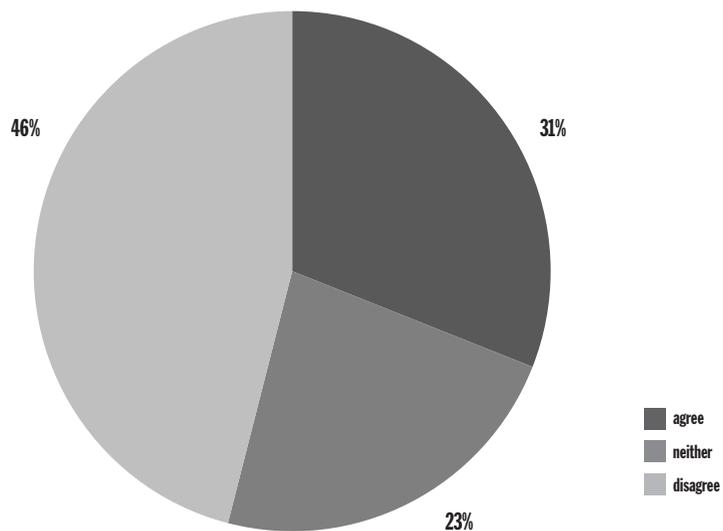
Most are proud to be American...

“How proud are you of being American?”



...but many do not think America should be supported when it's wrong

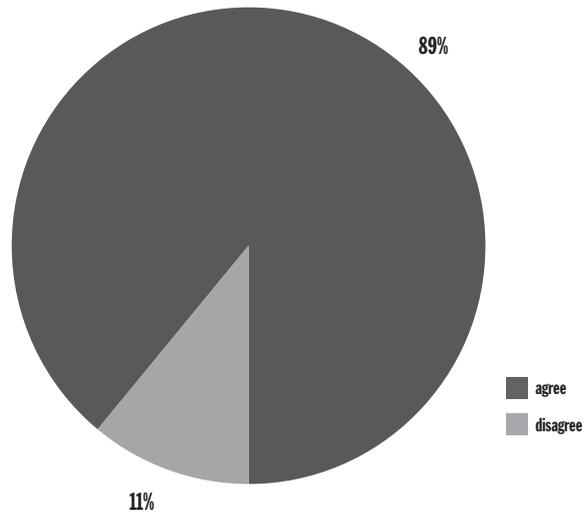
“People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.”



Chapter 4. Science and Information

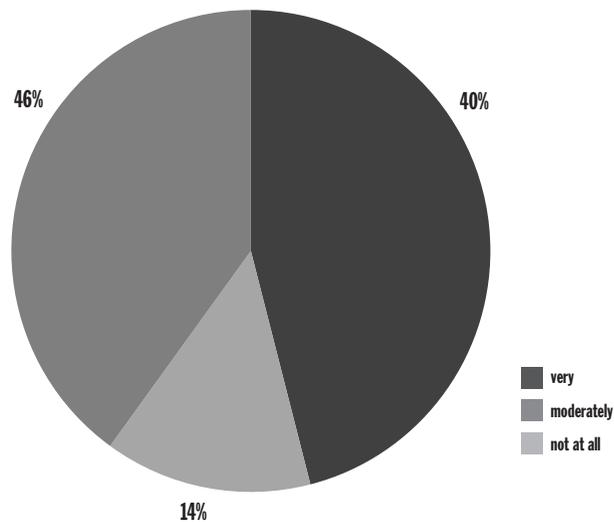
Most think science creates opportunities for younger generations...

“Because of science and technology, there will be more opportunities for the next generation.”



...but interest in science lags

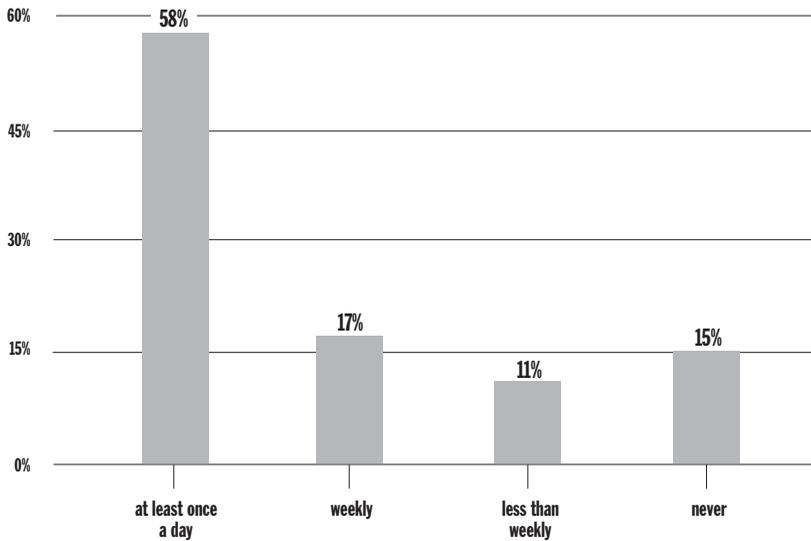
“There are a lot of issues in the news, and it is hard to keep up with every area. How interested are you in new scientific discoveries?”



Chapter 5. Religion

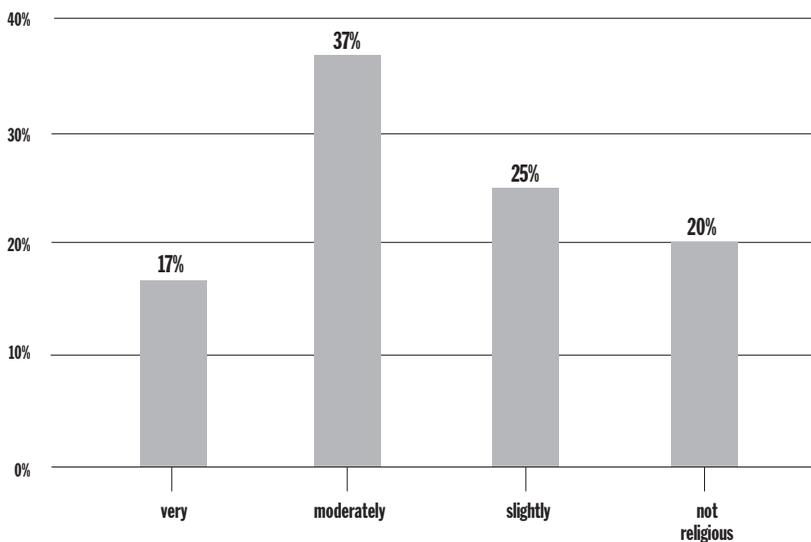
Most pray at least once a day...

“About how often do you pray?”



...but few consider themselves “very religious”

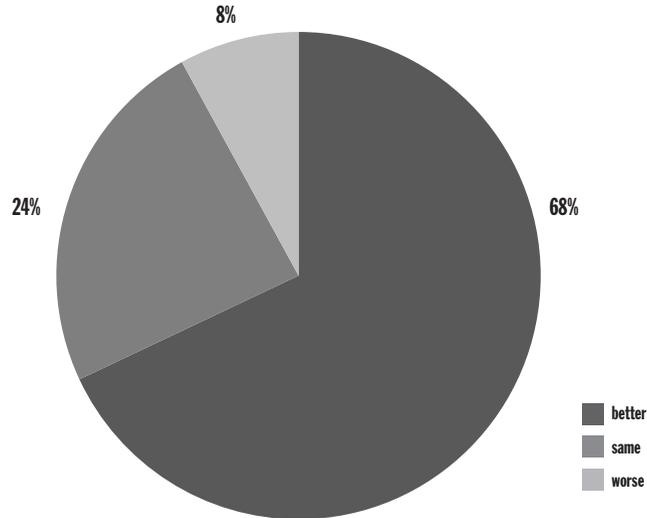
“To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person?”



Chapter 6. Work and Money

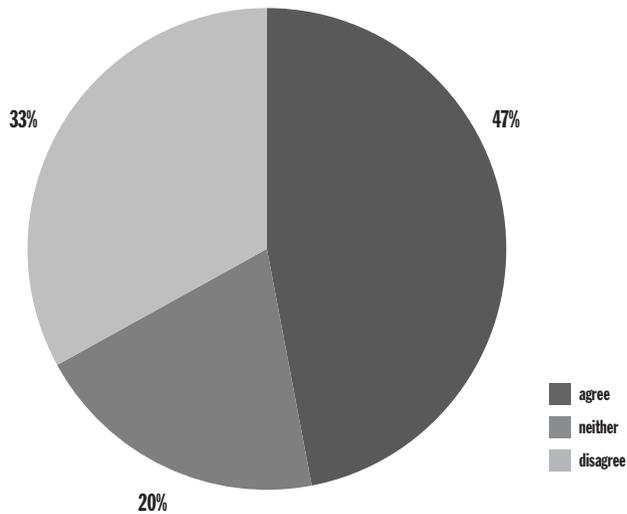
Older Americans enjoyed a rising standard of living...

“Compared to your parents when they were the age you are now, do you think your own standard of living now is...” (percent of people aged 69 or older responding)



...but they don't think the trend will continue

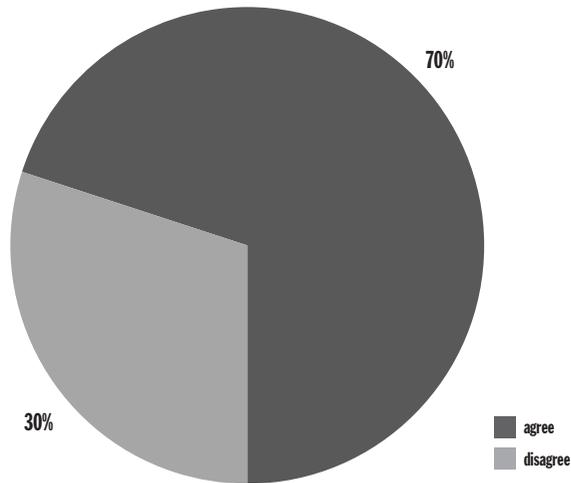
“The way things are in America, people like me and my family have a good chance of improving our standard of living. Do you agree or disagree?”



Chapter 7. Family and Friends

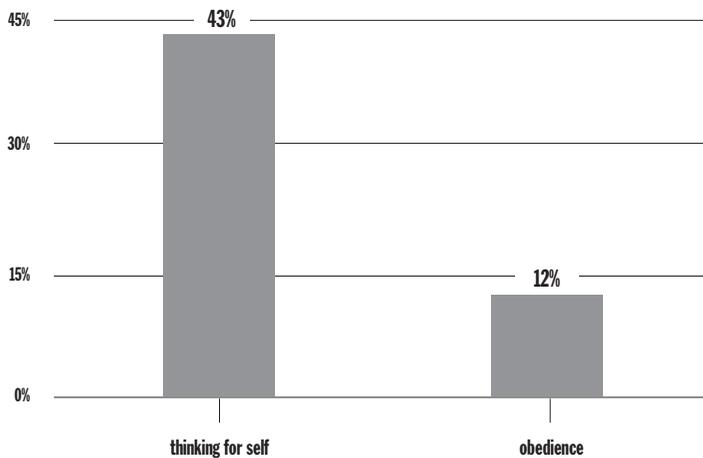
Most think spanking children is OK...

“Do you agree that it is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking?”



...but few think obedience is the most important trait in a child

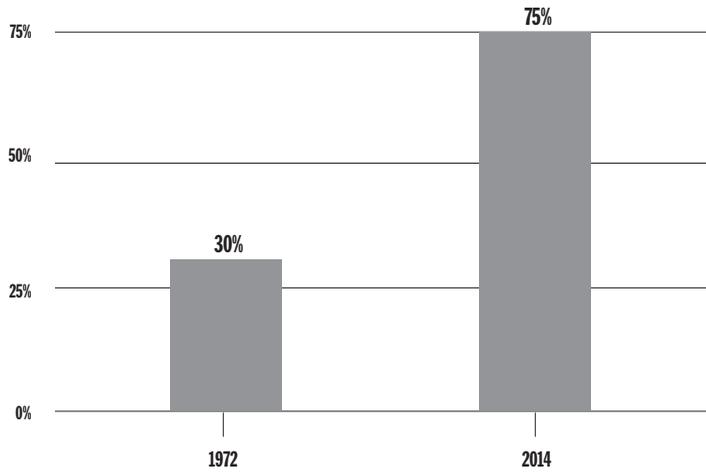
“How important is it for a child to learn to think for self/obey to prepare him or her for life?” (percent of people responding “most important”)



Chapter 8. Diversity

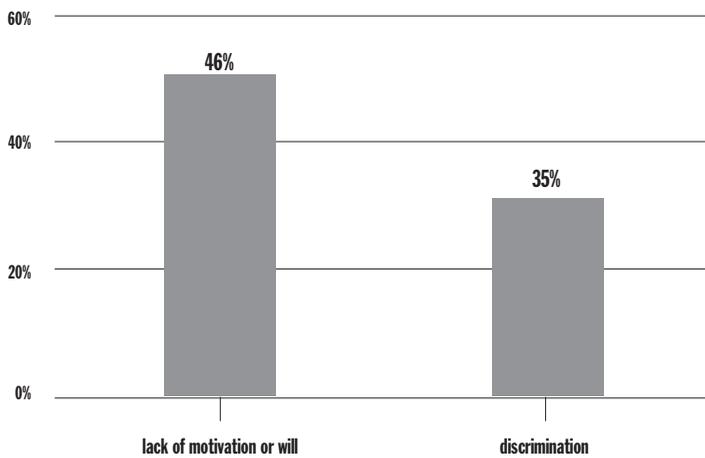
American society is more integrated...

Percent who say Blacks live in their neighborhood...



...but racism lurks

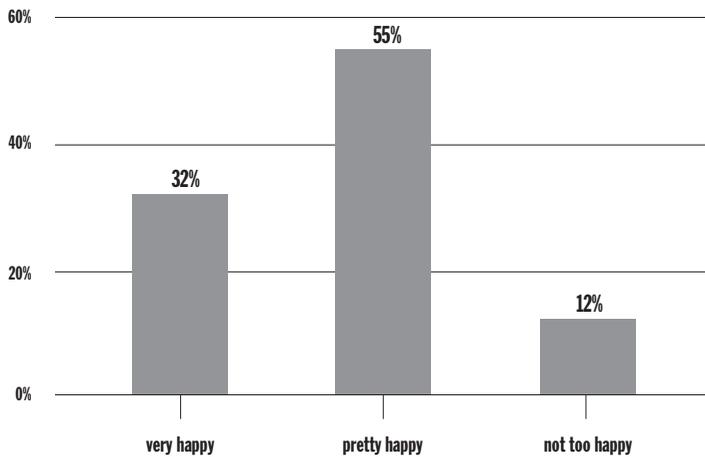
Percent of Americans who think Black's lower socioeconomic status is due to...



Chapter 9. Personal Outlook

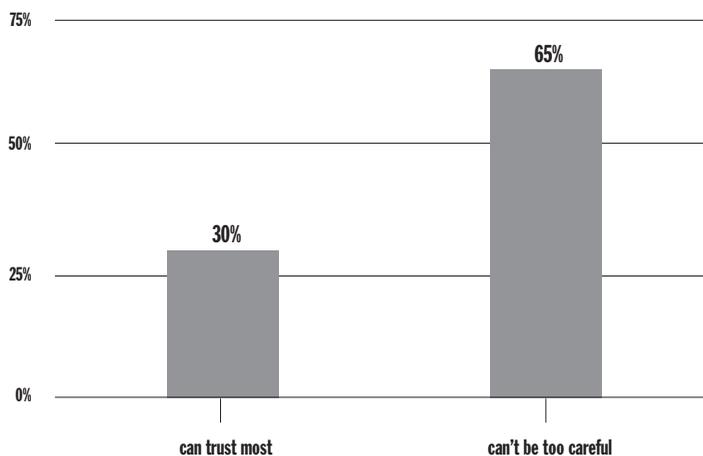
Most Americans are at least pretty happy...

“Would you say that you are...”



...but nearly three out of four do not trust other people

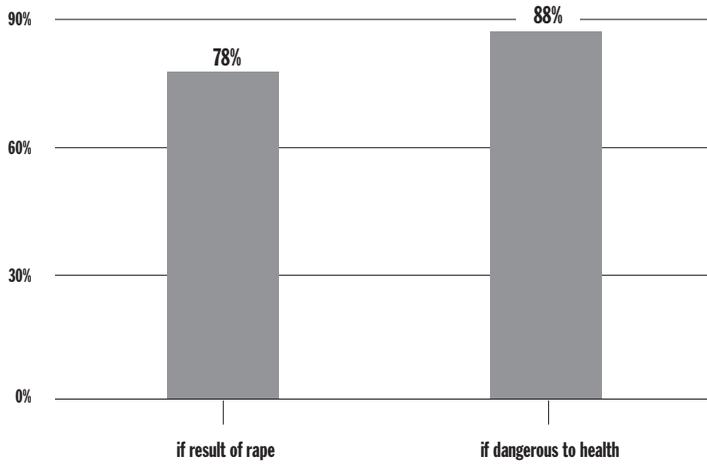
“Would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in life?”



Chapter 10. Sexuality

Most support abortion if a woman has been raped or her health is endangered...

“Do you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if she became pregnant as a result of rape/the woman’s health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?” (percent saying “yes”)



...but most do not support abortion for any reason

“Should it be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion if the woman wants it for any reason?”

