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America's Top Fears 2020/2021

The Chapman University Survey of American Fears Wave 7 (2020/2021) allows us to examine and better understand the fears of average Americans. In January of 2021, a random sample of 1,035 adults across the United States was asked about ninety-five different fears ranging from topics about the environment, government, natural disasters, COVID-19, and many more[1].

Top 10 Fears of 2020/2021

Below is a list of the top 10 fears for which the highest percentage of Americans reported being "Afraid" or "Very Afraid."

Top Ten Fears of 2020/2021	% Very Afraid or Afraid
1. Corrupt government officials	79.6%
2. People I love dying (#5 in 2019)	58.5%
3. A loved one contracting the coronavirus (COVID-19)	58%
4. People I love becoming seriously ill (#3 in 2019)	57.3%
5. Widespread civil unrest	56.5%
6. A pandemic or a major epidemic	55.8%
7. Economic/financial collapse	54.8%
8. Cyber-terrorism (#7 in 2019)	51%
9. Pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes (#2 in 2019)	50.8%
10. Biological warfare	49.3%

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[1] Because the survey was fielded at the start of 2021 (Jan 5th to 15th), we have used 2020/2021 in the title.

Government Corruption: America's Biggest Fear

For the sixth year in a row, the top fear remains to be corrupt government officials. As in the previous years, this fear continues to exceed the others that were asked about, with the next highest level of fear being over 20 points lower at 58.5%. Fear of corrupt government officials has even about increased 2% from the 77.2% of Americans in 2019 that reported being very afraid or afraid.

COVID-19 and Fears

The 2020/2021 list of fears reflects the worries and concerns that Americans have experienced over the past year. Aligning with the major events of 2020, fear of a pandemic/major epidemic rose from its thirty-first in 2019 to a sixth-place spot in 2020. Fear of economic/financial collapse and biological warfare, both prominent concerns throughout the year, rose to the top 10 list for the first time as well.

With the rise and spread of COVID-19, related fears were shown to be more pronounced. For example, concerns involving fears of loved ones' health were shown to be prominent. Fear of loved ones dying rose from fifth to second place since the 2019 survey. Fear of a loved one contracting the Coronavirus made a spot in the top 10 list as well. Interestingly, though, fear of loved ones becoming seriously ill actually dropped in its rank from third to fourth place due to a decrease in fear from 66.7% in 2019 to 57.3%. Another surprising finding was that 38.1% of respondents were very afraid or afraid of becoming seriously ill, which is a decline of 13% from the 2019 survey. Given the global pandemic, it is surprising that general fear of illness is down this year. The data seem to suggest that the drop in fear of general illness has been driven by declines from Republicans, who were less likely to fear COVID-19. The share of Republicans who are very afraid or afraid of becoming seriously ill dropped 22% compared to Republicans in the 2019 survey; fear of loved ones becoming ill dropped 27% among Republicans. Democrats and Independents do not have the same dramatic declines.

Q10a. How afraid are you of the following: Becoming seriously ill?	% CHANGE 2019 Survey to 2020 Survey				Q10b. How afraid are you of the following: People I love becoming seriously ill?	% CHANGE 2019 Survey to 2020 Survey			
	REP	IND	DEM	TOTAL		REP	IND	DEM	TOTAL
1 Very Afraid	-12%	-7%	-4%	-8%	1 Very Afraid	-18%	-10%	-3%	-10%
2 Afraid	-10%	-6%	-3%	-6%	2 Afraid	-9%	1%	5%	0%
3 Slightly Afraid	3%	2%	7%	4%	3 Slightly Afraid	16%	6%	1%	7%
4 Not Afraid	17%	11%	1%	9%	4 Not Afraid	11%	3%	-4%	3%

When looking at vaccinations and COVID-19, the majority of respondents (60.3%) strongly agree or agree with the statement, "When a safe and effective coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine becomes available, I will get it as soon as possible." But when looking at the opinions of vaccinations between political parties, differences can be seen. Republicans are more likely to agree that mandatory vaccinations violate personal and medical freedoms than Democrats, who are more likely to disagree with this notion. Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to have concerns about the safety of vaccines. Differences between opinions on vaccines also range among those with different education levels and ages as well. Learn more …

Civil Unrest

Potentially due to the general increase in protests and demonstrations throughout the past year, as well as the attacks on the Capitol that occurred during the time of the survey, fear of widespread civil unrest rose to the fifth-place spot. This is a substantial increase from its twentieth-place spot in 2019, with 47.8% of people indicating being very afraid or afraid. Now, this percentage has increased almost 10 points with 56.5% of Americans indicating being very afraid or afraid of widespread civil unrest.

Interestingly, a strong relationship between political affiliation and fear of widespread civil unrest can be seen. Some 75.8% of those who identify as extremely liberal fear widespread civil unrest compared to only 43.2% of those who identify as extremely conservative. This is a 30-point difference between the two groups, indicating that more liberal an individual is, the more likely they are to fear widespread civil unrest. Learn more …

Environmental Concerns Diminishing

In the face of a multitude of other fears and growing concerns, it seems as if environmental issues have taken a backseat. Fears of pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes have dropped in rank from second to ninth place, losing nearly 18% of Americans. This trend can also be seen as 23.7% of respondents are now very afraid of climate change, down 13% from 2019. A similar sort of drop can be seen in those who are very afraid of pollution of the air (down 14%) and drinking water (down 18%). In general, it seems as if Americans are less afraid of concerns involving the environment than they were in years before.

The Complete List of Fears, 2020/2021

The following is a complete list of all fears addressed by the Chapman University Survey of American Fears Wave 7 (2020/2021), ranked by the percent of Americans who reported being afraid or very afraid.

Sorted by Percent Afraid/Very Afraid

Complete List of Fears (2020/2021)	% Afraid or Very Afraid
1. Corrupt government officials	79.6%
2. People I love dying	58.5%
3. A loved one contracting the coronavirus (COVID-19)	58%
4. People I love becoming seriously ill	57.3%
5. Widespread civil unrest	56.5%
6. A pandemic or a major epidemic?	55.8%
7. Economic/financial collapse	54.8%

8. Cyber-terrorism	51%
9. Pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes	50.8%
10. Biological warfare	49.3%
11. Government restrictions on firearms and ammunition?	48.9%
12. A terrorist attack	48.8%
13. Global warming and climate change	48.7%
14. Not having enough money for the future	48.6%
15. The US becoming involved in another world war?	48.3%
16. Government tracking of personal data	45.6%
17. Corporate tracking of personal data	44.9%
18. Pollution of drinking water	44.6%
19. Extinction of plant and animal species	44.4%

20. Government interference with the coronavirus (COVID-19) vaccine approval	44.2%
21. Identity theft	43.8%
22. Iran using nuclear weapons	43.4%
23. White supremacists	43.4%
24. High medical bills	42.8%

25. Government use of drones within the U.S	42.7%
26. North Korea using nuclear weapons	42.5%
27. A nuclear weapons attack	42.3%
28. Air pollution	41.3%
29. Contracting the coronavirus (COVID 19)	41%
30. A nuclear accident/meltdown	38.7%
31. Terrorism	38.7%
32. Credit card fraud	38.5%
33. Becoming seriously ill	38.3%
34. Catching the coronavirus (COVID-19)	38%
35. Right wing extremists	37.2%
36. Random/mass shooting	36.7%
37. Being hit by a drunk drive	36.5%
38. The collapse of the electrical grid	36.1%
39. A devastating wildfire?	34.1%

40. A devastating drought?	32.9%
41. Oil spills	32.7%
42. The Proud Boys	32.3%

43. A devastating earthquake	32%
44. Racial/hate crime	31.5%
45. A devastating hurricane	31.4%
46. Heights	31.2%
47. Break-ins	31%
48. A devastating tornado	31%
49. Not having enough money to pay my rent or mortgage	30.7%
50. Police brutality	30.1%
51. Sharks	29.5%
52. Theft of property	29.4%
53. Dying	29.3%
54. Public speaking	29%
55. Murder by a stranger	28.9%
56. Left wing extremists	28.9%
57. Being unemployed	28.9%
58. Gang Violence	28.4%
59. A devastating flood	28.3%
60. Sexual assault by a stranger	27.6%

61. Mugging	27.5%
62. Computers replacing people in the workforce	27.5%
63. Financial fraud (such as a Ponzi Scheme, embezzlement, etc.)?	26.3%
64. Losing your job due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?	26.3%

65. Abduction/Kidnapping	25.6%
66. . A devastating blizzard/Winter storm	25.3%
67. Reptiles (snakes, lizards, etc.)	24.7%
68. Deep lakes and oceans	24.7%
69. Stalking	23.3%
70. Insects/arachnids (spiders, bees, etc.)	22.8%
71. Sexual assault by someone you know	22.4%
72. Antifa	22.1%
73. Walking alone at night	22.1%
74. Murder by someone you know	21.8%
75. Germs	21.7%
76. Illegal immigration	21.5%
77. Murder Hornets	20.1%

78. A large volcanic eruption	18.9%
79. Not being able to pay off the college debt of myself or a family member	18.3%
80. Catching influenza (the seasonal flu)	16.7%
81. Small, enclosed spaces	16.2%
82. Technology that I don't understand	15.9%
83. Black Lives Matter (BLM)	14.7%
84. Needles	11.9%

85. Flying	11.5%
86. Strangers	11.4%
87. Being caught in an embarrassing moment on Zoom or video conference	9.8%
88. Ghosts	9.3%
89. Zombies	9.3%
90. Whites no longer being the majority in the US	8.7%
91. Blood	8.7%
92. Muslims	6.8%
93. Immigrants	5.8%
94. Clowns	5.6%

95. Animals (dogs, rats, etc.)	4.6%

Sorted Alphabetically

Completed List of Fears (2020/2021)	% Afraid or Very Afraid
Abduction/Kidnapping	25.5
Air Pollution	41.3
Animals (dogs, rats, etc.)	4.6
Antifa	28.2

Becoming Seriously ill	38.3
Being Caught in an Embarrassing Moment on Zoom or Video Conference	14.3
Being Hit by a Drunk Driver	36.5
Being Unemployed	39.7
Biological Warfare	49.3
Black Lives Matter (BLM)	15.0
Blood	8.1
Break-ins	31.0
Catching Influenza (the seasonal flu)	16.8
Catching the Coronavirus (COVID-19)	38.0
Clowns	5.6

Computers Replacing People in the Workforce	27.5
Contracting the Coronavirus (COVID-19)	41.0
Corporate Tracking of Personal Data	44.9

Corrupt Government Officials	79.6
Credit Card Fraud	38.5
Cyber-Terrorism	51.0
Deep Lakes and Oceans	24.7
Devastating Blizzard/Winter Storm	25.3
Devastating Drought	32.8
Devastating Earthquake	32.0
Devastating Flood	28.3
Devastating Hurricane	31.3
Devastating Tornado	31.0
Devastating Wildfire	34.2
Dying	29.2
Economic/Financial Collapse	54.8
Extinction of Plant and Animal Species	44.4
Financial Fraud (such as a Ponzi Scheme, embezzlement, etc.)	26.3
Flying	11.5
Gang Violence	28.3
Germs	21.7
Ghosts	9.4

Global Warming and Climate Change	48.7
Government Interference with the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccine Approval	44.1
Government Restrictions on Firearms and Ammunition	49.0
Government Tracking of Personal Data	45.6
Government Use of Drones within the U.S.	42.7
Heights	31.2
High Medical Bills	42.8
Identity Theft	43.8
Illegal Immigration	21.4
Immigrants	5.9
Insects/Arachnids (spiders, bees, etc.)	22.8
Iran Using Nuclear Weapons	43.3
Large Volcanic Eruption	19.0
Left Wing Extremists	33.8
Losing Your Job Due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic	26.3
Loved one contracting the coronavirus (COVID-19)	57.9
Mugging	27.4
Murder by a Stranger	28.9

Murder by Someone You Know	21.7
Murder Hornets	20.1
Muslims	6.9
Needles	11.9

North Korea using Nuclear Weapons	42.5
Not being Able to Pay off College Debt of Myself or a Family Member	40.4
Not having Enough Money for the Future	48.6
Not having Enough Money to Pay my Rent or Mortgage	35.2
Nuclear Accident/Meltdown	38.6
Nuclear Weapons Attack	42.2
Oil Spills	32.7
Pandemic or a Major Epidemic	55.8
People I Love Becoming Seriously ill	57.3
People I Love Dying	58.6
Police Brutality	30.1
Pollution of Drinking Water	44.5
Pollution of Oceans, Rivers and Lakes	50.2
Public Speaking	29.0

Racial/Hate Crime	31.6
Random/Mass Shooting	36.7
Reptiles (snakes, lizards, etc.)	24.7
Right Wing Extremists	43.4
Sexual Assault by a Stranger	27.6
Sexual Assault by Someone You Know	22.4
Sharks	29.5
Small, Enclosed Spaces	16.2

Stalking	23.4
Strangers	11.4
Technology that I Don't Understand	15.9
Terrorism	38.7
Terrorist Attack	48.8
The Collapse of the Electrical Grid	36.1
Theft of Property	29.4
The Proud Boys	41.9
The US Becoming Involved in Another World War	48.3
Walking Alone at Night	22.1

Whites No Longer Being the Majority in the US	8.7
White Supremacists	44.8
Widespread Civil Unrest	56.6
Zombies	9.3