**America's Top Fears 2019**

By Shreya Sheth, Henley Research Fellow, Chapman University

The Chapman University Survey of American Fears Wave 6 (2019) provides an in-depth examination into the fears of average Americans. In July of 2019, a random sample of 1,219 adults from across the United States were asked their level of fear about eighty-eight different phenomena including crime, the government, the environment, disasters, personal anxieties, technology, and many others.

**Top 10 Fears of 2019**

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

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| --- | --- |
| **Top Ten Fears of 2019** | **% Afraid or Very Afraid** |
| 1. Corrupt government officials | 77.2 |
| 1. Pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes | 68 |
| 1. People I love becoming seriously ill | 66.7 |
| 1. Pollution of drinking water | 64.6 |
| 1. People I love dying | 62.9 |
| 1. Air pollution | 59.5 |
| 1. Cyber-terrorism | 59.2 |
| 1. Extinction of plant and animal species | 59.1 |
| 1. Global Warming and Climate Change | 57.1 |
| 1. Not having enough money for the future | 55.7 |

**Government Corruption Tops the List Once Again**

For the fifth year in a row the top fear of Americans is corrupt government officials. And as in the previous five years, the fear that our government is corrupt far exceeds all others we asked about. More than 3/4 of Americans said they are afraid or very afraid of corrupt governmental officials in 2019. By comparison, the next highest level of fear was nearly 10 points lower at 68% (pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes).

Government corruption aside, our top ten list suggests that Americans are preoccupied by fears of four different types. Americans fear for the environment (#s 2, 4, 6, 8, & 9), fear devastating cybercrime (#7), fear bad things happening to loved ones (#s 3 & 5), and worry about their finances (#s 3 & 10). High levels of fear of loved one's becoming ill (#5) and high medical bills (#10) also indicate that health care remains a primary concern of Americans.

**Fear in the Cyber Dimension**

Americans are becoming more fearful of crime in cyberspace. Fear of cyber-terrorism makes it to the top ten list for the first time since increasing from 52.5% (2018) to 59.2% in 2019. The internet is an essential resource for the modern person and identity, therefore more individuals can be impacted by threats over the internet. A change in the landscape of terrorism is visible, seeing how Americans’ fear of cyber-terrorism is substantially greater than the fear of a random/mass shooting (47.4%), biological warfare (46.6%), nuclear weapons attack (43.8%), and terrorism (43.4%).

**Fear in the age of Trump**

We now have three years of data collected about American fears since Trump's election. The table below presents the top ten lists for 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. Since 2016, there are two striking changes in American fears.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Top Ten Fears (2016-2019)** | | | |  |
|  | **2016** | **2017** | **2018** | **2019** |
| 1. | Corrupt government officials (60.6%) | Corrupt Government Officials (74.5%) | Corrupt government officials (73.6%) | Corrupt government officials (77.2%) |
| 2. | Terrorist Attack (41%) | American Healthcare Act/Trumpcare (55.3%) | Pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes (61.6%) | Pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes (68%) |
| 3. | Not having enough money for the future (39.9%) | Pollution of Oceans, Rivers and Lakes (53.1%) | Pollution of drinki1ng water (60.7%) | People I love becoming seriously ill (66.7%) |
| 4. | Terrorism (38.5%) | Pollution of Drinking Water (50.4%) | Not having enough money for the future (57%) | Pollution of drinking water (64.6%) |
| 5. | Gun control (38.5%) | Not having enough money for the future (50.2%) | People I love becoming seriously ill (56.5%) | People I love dying (62.9%) |
| 6. | People I love dying (38.1%) | High Medical Bills (48.4%) | People I love dying (56.4%) | Air pollution (59.5%) |
| 7. | Economic/financial collapse (37.5%) | The US will be involved in another World War (48.4%) | Air Pollution (55.1%) | Cyber-terrorism (59.2%) |
| 8. | Identity theft (37.1%) | Global Warming & Climate Change (48%) | Extinction of plant and animal species (54.1%) | Extinction of plant and animal species (59.1%) |
| 9. | People I love becoming seriously ill (35.9%) | North Korea using weapons (47.5%) | Global Warming and Climate Change (53.2%) | Global Warming and Climate Change (57.1%) |
| 10. | The Affordable Health Care Act/Obamacare (35.5%) | Air Pollution (44.9%) | High Medical Bills (52.9%) | Not having enough money for the future (55.7%) |

**Increasing Fear About the Environment**

A striking difference between 2016 and 2017-2019 has to do with the environment. Since Trump's election, Americans' are increasingly fearful of pollution, global warming, and other environmental disasters. Not a single environmental concern made the top 10 list in 2016. In 2017, four of the top ten fears were related to the environment (#s 3, 4, 8, & 10). In 2018 and 2019, five of the top ten fears were environmental in nature (#s 2, 3, 7, 8, & 9).

**Fear in on the Rise**

The extent to which Americans are afraid, in general, also appears to be on the rise.

In 2016, the highest level of fear reported by our respondents was for corrupt government officials at 60.6%. From there fear dropped precipitously, with #2 on the list in 2016 (terrorist attack) down to forty-one percent and the rest of the 2016 top ten list all under forty percent.

By 2017, the top fear (corrupt government officials) was up to 74.5%, and five of the top ten fears were expressed by more than half of the population.

In 2018 and 2019, all the top ten fears were held by more than half of Americans. The noticeable increase in the top ten fears have ranged from:

* 2016: 35.5% to 60.6%
* 2017: 44.9% to 74.5%
* 2018: 52.9% to 73.6%
* 2019: 55.7% to 77.2%

Americans are becoming more afraid.

**The Complete List of Fears, 2019**

The following is a complete, list of all fears addressed by the Chapman University Survey of American Fears Wave 6 (2019), ranked by the percent of Americans who reported being afraid or very afraid.

**Sorted by Percent Afraid/Very Afraid**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Complete List of Fears (2019)** | **% Afraid or Very Afraid** |
| 1. Corrupt government officials | 77.2 |
| 1. Pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes | 68 |
| 1. People I love becoming seriously ill | 66.7 |
| 1. Pollution of drinking water | 64.6 |
| 1. People I love dying | 62.9 |
| 1. Air pollution | 59.5 |
| 1. Cyber-terrorism | 59.2 |
| 1. Extinction of plant and animal species | 59.1 |
| 1. Global warming and climate change | 57.1 |
| 1. Not having enough money for the future | 55.7 |
| 1. Economic/financial collapse | 55.3 |
| 1. High medical bills | 53 |
| 1. Corporate tracking of personal data | 52.4 |
| 1. The U.S. will be involved in another world war | 52 |
| 1. Terrorist attack | 51.4 |
| 1. Becoming seriously ill | 51.3 |
| 1. Government tracking of personal data | 50 |
| 1. Identity theft | 50 |
| 1. Oil spills | 47.8 |
| 1. Widespread civil unrest | 47.8 |
| 1. The outcome of the 2020 election | 47.5 |
| 1. Random/Mass shooting | 47.4 |
| 1. Being hit by a drunk driver | 47 |
| 1. Communism | 46.9 |
| 1. Biological warfare | 46.6 |
| 1. Credit card fraud | 46.6 |
| 1. North Korea using nuclear weapons | 44.9 |
| 1. The collapse of the electrical grid | 44.3 |
| 1. Nuclear weapons attack | 43.8 |
| 1. Terrorism | 43.4 |
| 1. Pandemic or a major epidemic | 42.8 |
| 1. Not having enough money to pay my rent/and or mortgage | 40.5 |
| 1. Iran using nuclear weapons | 40.1 |
| 1. Devastating drought | 39.2 |
| 1. Theft of property | 38.2 |
| 1. Socialism | 37.8 |
| 1. Nuclear accident/meltdown | 37.7 |
| 1. Break-ins | 37.6 |
| 1. Government restrictions on firearms and ammunition | 37.1 |
| 1. Computers replacing people in the workforce | 36.8 |
| 1. Heights | 36.2 |
| 1. Losing my data, photos or important documents in a disaster | 35.7 |
| 1. Being unemployed | 35.2 |
| 1. Dying | 34.6 |
| 1. Devastating wildfire | 34.3 |
| 1. Devastating hurricane | 33.2 |
| 1. Sharks | 32.3 |
| 1. Devastating tornado | 32.2 |
| 1. Devastating flood | 32.2 |
| 1. Racial/Hate crime | 31.9 |
| 1. Devastating earthquake | 31.8 |
| 1. Capitalism | 31.7 |
| 1. Globalization/Globalism | 31.7 |
| 1. Public speaking | 31.2 |
| 1. Murder by a stranger | 31 |
| 1. Government use of drones within the U.S. | 30.7 |
| 1. Mugging | 30 |
| 1. Police brutality | 29.9 |
| 1. Not being able to pay off college debt, now or in the future, whether it be yours, a child's or partner's | 29.2 |
| 1. Financial fraud (such as a Ponzi scheme, embezzlement etc.) | 29 |
| 1. Devastating blizzard/winter storm | 28.2 |
| 1. Abduction/Kidnapping | 27.1 |
| 1. Illegal immigration | 26.5 |
| 1. Sexual assault by a stranger | 26.2 |
| 1. Gang violence | 26 |
| 1. Reptiles (snakes, lizards, etc.) | 25.9 |
| 1. Insects/arachnids (spiders, bees, etc.) | 25.7 |
| 1. Deep lakes and oceans | 24.4 |
| 1. Stalking | 24.1 |
| 1. Walking alone at night | 23.2 |
| 1. Murder by someone you know | 22.2 |
| 1. Technology that I don't understand | 21.7 |
| 1. Small enclosed spaces | 21.4 |
| 1. Sexual assault by someone you know | 20.3 |
| 1. Germs | 18.8 |
| 1. Harmful side effects from the flu vaccine | 17 |
| 1. Large volcanic eruption | 16.7 |
| 1. Needles | 16.6 |
| 1. Catching influenza (the seasonal flu) | 16.5 |
| 1. Flying | 13.5 |
| 1. Whites no longer being the majority in the U.S. | 13.4 |
| 1. Catching the flue from a flu vaccine | 12.6 |
| 1. Strangers | 12.3 |
| 1. Zombies | 9.3 |
| 1. Clowns | 8.2 |
| 1. Blood | 8.1 |
| 1. Ghosts | 7.7 |
| 1. Animals (dogs, rats, etc.) | 5.5 |

**Sorted Alphabetically**

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| --- | --- |
| **Complete List of Fears (2019)** | **% Afraid or Very Afraid** |
| 1. Abduction/Kidnapping | 27.1 |
| 1. Air pollution | 59.5 |
| 1. Animals (dogs, rats, etc.) | 5.5 |
| 1. Becoming seriously ill | 51.3 |
| 1. Being hit by a drunk driver | 47 |
| 1. Being unemployed | 35.2 |
| 1. Biological warfare | 46.6 |
| 1. Blood | 8.1 |
| 1. Break-ins | 37.6 |
| 1. Capitalism | 31.7 |
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| 1. Devastating drought | 39.2 |
| 1. Devastating earthquake | 31.8 |
| 1. Devastating flood | 32.2 |
| 1. Devastating hurricane | 33.2 |
| 1. Devastating tornado | 32.2 |
| 1. Devastating wildfire | 34.3 |
| 1. Dying | 34.6 |
| 1. Economic/financial collapse | 55.3 |
| 1. Extinction of plant and animal species | 59.1 |
| 1. Financial fraud (such as a Ponzi scheme, embezzlement etc.) | 29 |
| 1. Flying | 13.5 |
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| 1. Pollution of drinking water | 64.6 |
| 1. Pollution of oceans, rivers, and lakes | 68 |
| 1. Public speaking | 31.2 |
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