CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

Chapman University Survey of America Fears 2025
Key Findings

Chapman University has completed the 11th annual Chapman Survey of American Fears. Each year researchers examine what Americans fear, why they fear it, and the consequences of those fears. The survey collects extensive background information about respondents, enabling analyses of how fears differ across groups.

In 2025, participants were asked about more than 65 fears spanning government, conspiracy theories, crime, the environment, the economy, personal finances, AI technology, health and illness, natural and human-made disasters, terrorism, war, the paranormal, and more.

Top 10 Fears and Trends

The top ten American fears of 2025 reflect a combination of fears about government, pollution, personal stresses, and war.

"Our top two fears remain the same as last year," said Dr. Christopher Bader, Chair and Professor of Sociology. "The fear of corrupt government officials has been the number one fear for the past 10 surveys, with nearly seventy percent of Americans reporting being afraid or very afraid this year," Bader added.

Dr. Steven Pfaff, Professor of Sociology, observed, "As it has for over a decade, the Chapman Survey finds that well over half of all Americans report fear of corrupt government officials. Indeed, fear of corrupt government officials remains the top fear among the many we survey. Majorities of Americans across partisan lines share this fear, which our analysis suggests stems from their perception that money has distorted the political process, and that powerful and resourceful interests achieve their goals even at the expense of the public good and voter preferences."

"When we move down the list to number two, things get more personal," Bader noted. "Nearly sixty percent of Americans (58.9%) fear a loved one becoming seriously ill. And we see this concern echoed by number five, the fear of a loved one dying. These always rank high."

The number three fear is an economic financial collapse, which ranked only fifteenth a year ago. Survey team member Dr. Ed Day, Associate Professor of Sociology, wonders if Americans' economic concerns are shifting to a deeper level. "In last year's survey, the economic fears we saw were more personal. For example, the fear of not having enough money for the future was in the 2024 top ten. That has slipped a bit this year, replaced by a fear that the entire system could be faltering."

In 2024, six of our top ten fears were related to war and warfare. Dr. Bader noted, "While war is still on American minds, its dominance in our top ten list is much reduced this year. Two of our top ten fears were related to war, with the fear of the US becoming involved in another world war sitting at number six and the fear of Russia using nuclear weapons at number eight."

Last year's war fears pushed environmental fears just out of the top ten. Two fears related to pollution have moved back onto the list in 2025. "Some of the environmental fears in the survey, like some of the weather items, depend on the region you live in," said Dr. Bader. "Water is important to all of us, though, so the water pollution items are a bit of a marker for environmental concerns. Pollution of drinking water (#8, 54.5%) and of the pollution of oceans, rivers and lakes (#9, 53.5%) were both in this year's top ten."

Cyber-terrorism remained in the top ten at #4, little changed from its third-place ranking last year. Government tracking of personal data rounded out this year's list at #10, vaulting from #20 in 2024 (52.7%).

For the second consecutive year, all fears in the top ten were reported by more than 50%. "This is something we saw for the first time in 2018, after a pretty rapid increase across the board from 2016," said Dr. Day. "We were sorry to see it return." Anticipating a frequently asked question, the survey team would like to note that the fear of public speaking ranked #46 (33.7%), right before murder by a stranger (#47, 33.5%) and after a devastating hurricane (#45, 34.1%).

TOP 10 FEARS OF 2025

Fear	% of Very Afraid or Afraid	Rank in 2024
1. Corrupt Government Officials	69.1%	1
2. People I Love Becoming Seriously Ill	58.9%	2
3. Economic/Financial Collapse	58.2%	15 ↑
4. Cyber-Terrorism	55.9%	3 ↓
5. People I Love Dying	55.3% (tie)	4 ↓
6. U.S. Becoming Involved in Another World War	55.3% (tie)	7 ↑
7. Pollution of Drinking Water	54.5%	11 ↑
8. Russia Using Nuclear Weapons	53.7%	5 ↓
9. Pollution of Oceans, Rivers, and Lakes	53.5%	13 ↑
10. Government Tracking of Personal Data	52.7%	20 ↑

Source: Original graph designed by Madeline Southern '26, Chapman University Survey of American Fears, 2025

Homelessness

Given the high rates of homelessness in the U.S. and media attention on homelessness—especially tent camps in major U.S. cities—we added a series of questions on homelessness to the 11th wave of the FEAR survey. The data reveal three main findings.
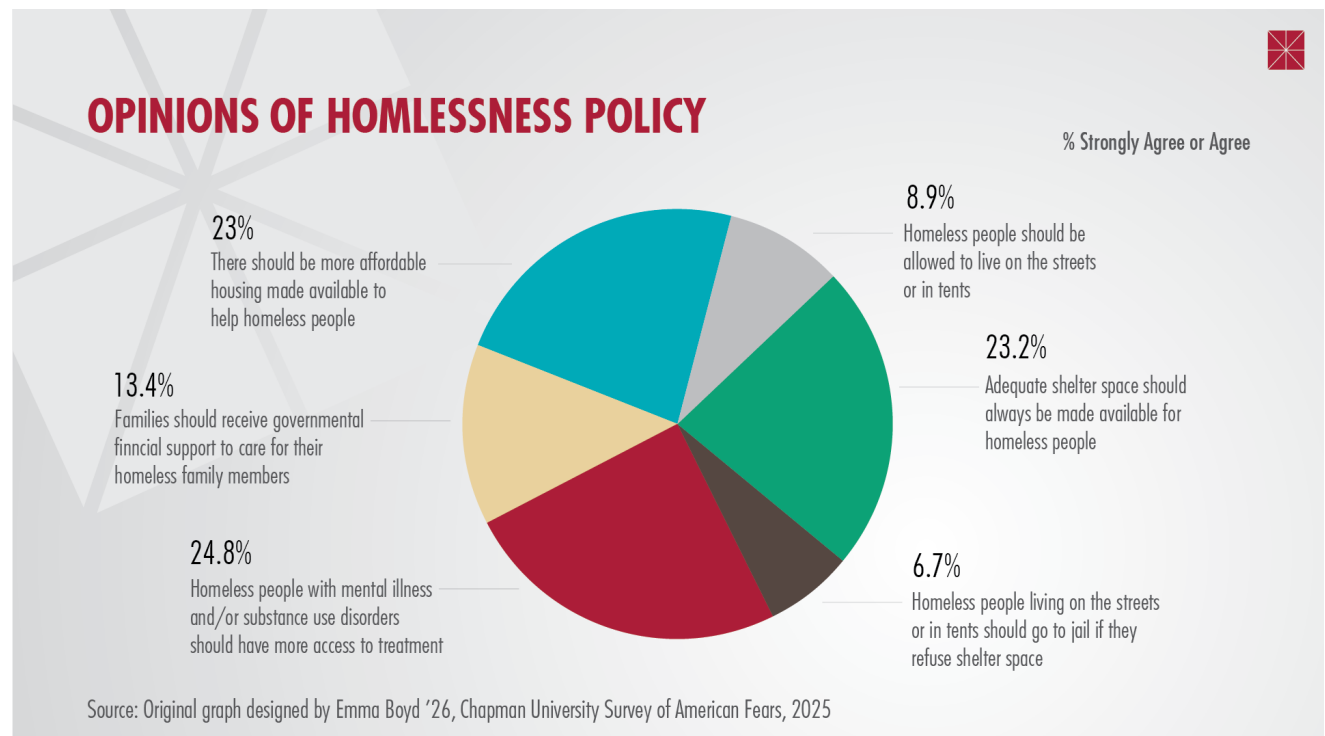
First, while Americans are fearful of many things and events, most are not fearful of tent camps or homeless people. They report low levels of fear (very afraid and afraid) for homeless tent camps (18.3%) and homeless people (11.9%). Surprisingly, respondents were more afraid of strangers (14.6%) than people experiencing homelessness, which represented the absolute bottom of the list of all fears reported in the survey. It is unclear why fear of homeless tent encampments or homeless people is low, but plausibly other issues—economic insecurity, global conflicts, natural disasters—are more pressing. Despite some political rhetoric about crises around homelessness, it does not seem to translate into fear.

Second, there were some patterns regarding political affiliation. Among those reporting fear (very afraid and afraid) of homeless tent encampments, the majority were Conservatives (extremely or leaning) (44%), with Moderates (29%) and Liberals (extremely or leaning) (22%) at similar levels. Similar results hold by party affiliation, with Republicans representing a greater share of those who report high levels of fear,

and Independents and Democrats reflecting similar proportions. Given the spatial concentration of tent encampments in West Coast "liberal" cities, the actual presence may not be a driving factor for fear; despite lower homeless concentrations in more conservative-leaning areas, higher levels of fear are reported.

Third, there was strong consensus about what the government should do to address homelessness. While addressing homelessness—especially at the federal level—is an increasingly partisan issue, that is not what the data reveal about Americans in general. On the one hand, the majority of Americans do not support doing nothing (letting people live on the streets or in tents), nor do they favor taking an aggressive or punitive response, such as increasing criminal justice interventions. An overwhelming majority supported adequate shelter space to meet the need (86%), greater access to treatment (94%), and more affordable housing (86%). The data represent a clear policy vision for local governments to implement. In addition to support for the usual suspects—shelters, treatment, and housing—Americans seem open to financial support for families to care for homeless family members (48%). Given that this type of financial support is a less-well-circulated idea, it has potential to grow with concerted public attention.

Dr. Karen Snedker, Associate Professor of Sociology observed, "Fear of homeless tent encampments and homeless people is low and represented two of the five lowest recorded fears in the survey. While not afraid, Americans want government to do more to address homelessness and expressed surprisingly consensus on how to respond."

OPINIONS OF HOMLESSNESS POLICY

% Strongly Agree or Agree

8.9%
Homeless people should be allowed to live on the streets or in tents

23%
There should be more affordable housing made available to help homeless people

23.2%
Adequate shelter space should always be made available for homeless people

13.4%
Families should receive governmental finncial support to care for their homeless family members

24.8%
Homeless people with mental illness and/or substance use disorders should have more access to treatment

6.7%
Homeless people living on the streets or in tents should go to jail if they refuse shelter space

Source: Original graph designed by Emma Boyd '26, Chapman University Survey of American Fears, 2025
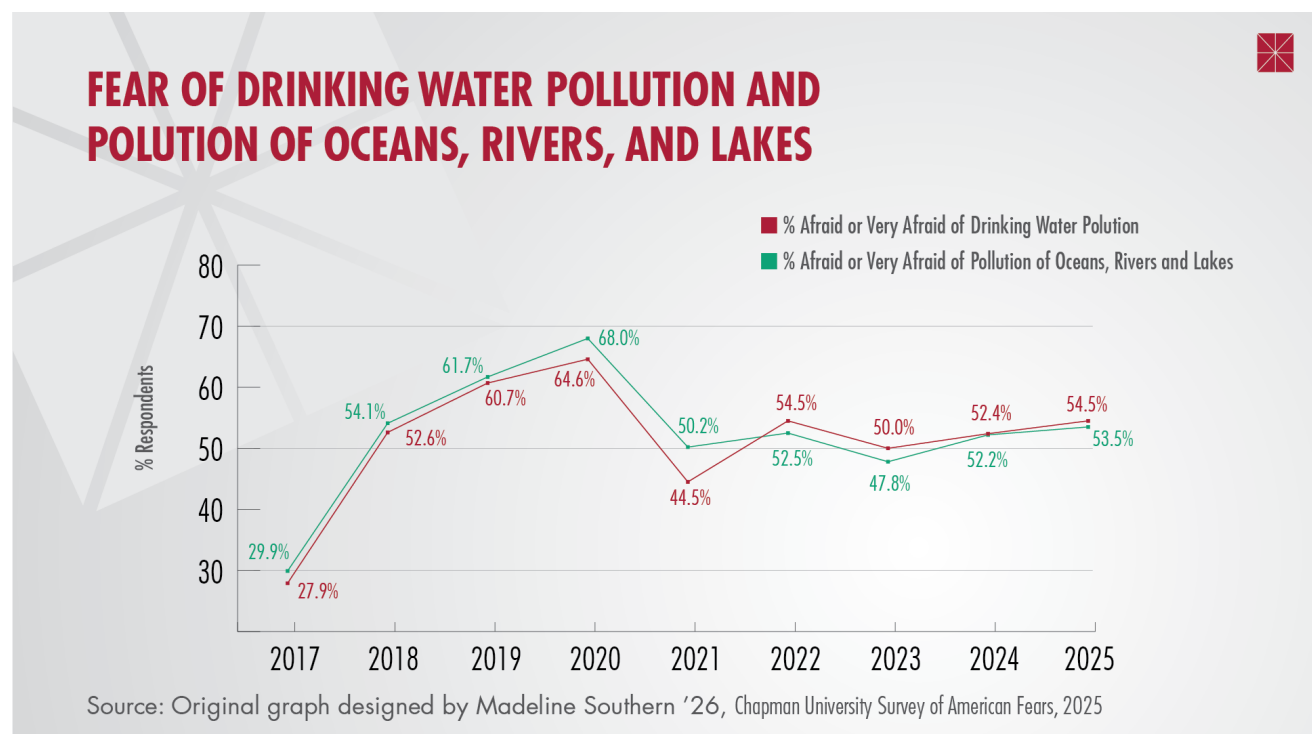
Environmental Fears/Climate Change/Water Pollution

Two environmental fears, pollution of drinking water and pollution of surface water (oceans, rivers, and lakes), have often ranked among the top ten during the past decade. Both appear again in 2025, with drinking water at #7 and surface water at #9.

Americans consistently rank these forms of pollution above other environmental fears, including fear of climate change, which appeared in the top ten only between 2017 and 2020. Surface water pollution dropped out of the top ten in 2023, and neither appeared in the top ten in 2024; both were back near the top of the list this year.
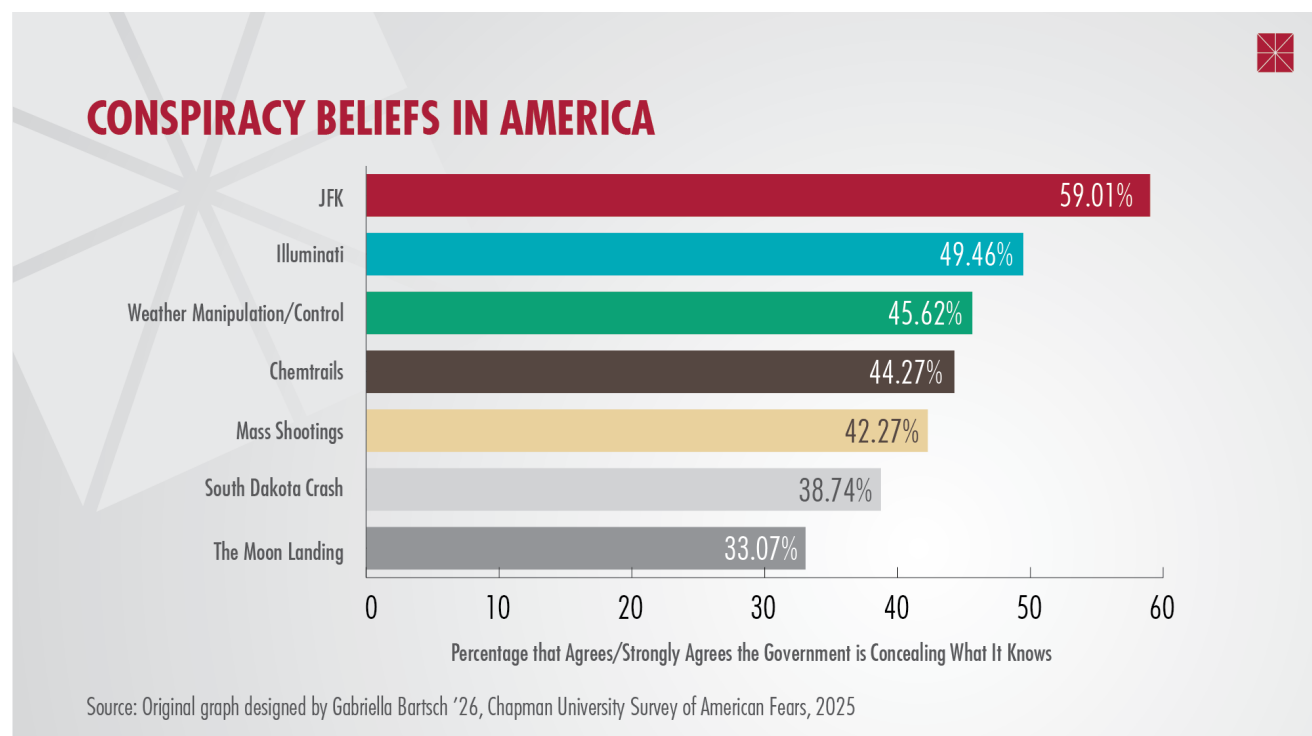
"It seems reasonable that Americans place such a high value on drinking water safety. However rare, incidents of contamination by chemicals and microbes are highly publicized and have deadly consequences. The dangerously high levels of lead discovered in cities like Flint Michigan and Newark New Jersey ten years ago made people question the safety of their own water. The Biden Administration's $15 million program to replace every lead service line in the country kept the issue in the news, and now there is some concern that the Trump Administration might not follow through on that commitment," said Dr. David Shafie, Associate Professor and Chair of Political Science.

FEAR OF DRINKING WATER POLLUTION AND POLUTION OF OCEANS, RIVERS, AND LAKES

■ % Afraid or Very Afraid of Drinking Water Polution
■ % Afraid or Very Afraid of Pollution of Oceans, Rivers and Lakes

% Respondents

Year	Drinking Water	Oceans, Rivers, Lakes
2017	27.9%	29.9%
2018	52.6%	54.1%
2019	60.7%	61.7%
2020	64.6%	68.0%
2021	44.5%	50.2%
2022	54.5%	52.5%
2023	50.0%	47.8%
2024	52.4%	52.2%
2025	54.5%	53.5%

Source: Original graph designed by Madeline Southern '26, Chapman University Survey of American Fears, 2025

Conspiracy Theories

From perennial favorites like the moon landing conspiracy to the JFK assassination, conspiracy theories are woven into American culture and fueled by fear. They spread quickly via the web and social media and often proliferate after mass shootings and disasters. For example, after Hurricane Helene, a variety of conspiracies spread online, including debunked claims that the government was going to seize land or that the hurricane itself was a product of government weather control. "These conspiracies that proliferate online have real-world consequences when they prevent disaster victims from getting the help they need," said Dr. Ann Gordon, Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Henley Social Sciences Research Lab.

The survey also included a conspiracy theory that was created by the team, "the South Dakota Crash." "There is no existing lore about a South Dakota crash and therefore the item gives us a sense of how conspiratorial Americans are in orientation, in general," said Christopher Bader. "The fact that 43% of Americans believe that the government is concealing what it knows about the South Dakota crash tells us that Americans are very distrustful these days."

CONSPIRACY BELIEFS IN AMERICA

Category	Percentage
JFK	59.01%
Illuminati	49.46%
Weather Manipulation/Control	45.62%
Chemtrails	44.27%
Mass Shootings	42.27%
South Dakota Crash	38.74%
The Moon Landing	33.07%

Percentage that Agrees/Strongly Agrees the Government is Concealing What It Knows

Source: Original graph designed by Gabriella Bartsch '26, Chapman University Survey of American Fears, 2025
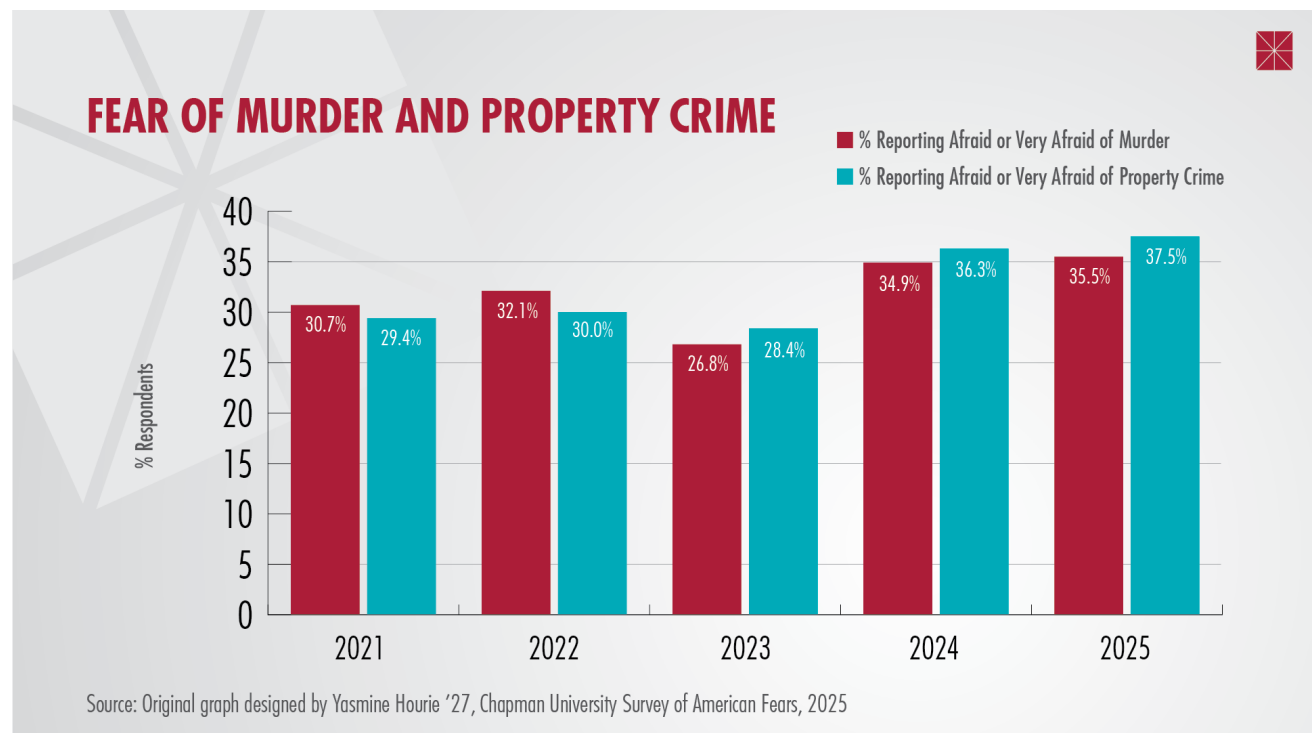
FEAR OF CRIME

"When we talk about fear of crime, we're usually talking about street crime," said Dr. Day. "not the crimes like our number one fear, government corruption.
"And fear of street crime," he continued, "has always had more to do with how crime is talked about than crime rates. Really, since 9-11, national opinion polls have shown that most Americans believe that crime is going up, though crime rates were declining most years.

"There was a huge increase in murder at the start of the pandemic – the largest one year percentage increase we've ever recorded – an increase NOT seen in other countries and that threw off the trend, but we've returned to pre-pandemic levels.

"In fact, the drop since 2021 has been dramatic. The numbers dropped 6% 2022, 12% in 2023, 15% in 2024, and preliminary numbers are showing another large drop in the first half of 2025.

"When we look at fear of homicide in our survey, though, we see that fear is going up while murder is going down. If anything, it looks like fear was reacting to election rhetoric, not the numbers."

FEAR OF MURDER AND PROPERTY CRIME

■ % Reporting Afraid or Very Afraid of Murder
■ % Reporting Afraid or Very Afraid of Property Crime

% Respondents

Year	Murder	Property Crime
2021	30.7%	29.4%
2022	32.1%	30.0%
2023	26.8%	28.4%
2024	34.9%	36.3%
2025	35.5%	37.5%

Source: Original graph designed by Yasmine Hourie '27, Chapman University Survey of American Fears, 2025

"You get the similar story about fear from property crime. Property crime had also declined steadily since 9-11," Dr. Day said. "Then it actually did the reverse of murder during the pandemic, taking a giant dip at the start. After that, it returned to pre-pandemic levels and then started declining again. But fear of property crime since the pandemic? Well, it dipped but has been steadily rising the last few years as the actual amount of crime has gone down."

"What we learn is that fear of crime isn't really driven by crime rates. It's driven by how we talk about crime. People have easier access to information about crime than they've ever had, but the information isn't what they're looking at. They're looking at influencers telling them what to think instead of at information and then drawing their own conclusions. It turns out that the Internet isn't an information highway after all, but a manipulation highway."

Methodology

Conducted for Chapman by SSRS, this nationally representative survey utilizes a probability-based method. It included 1,015 respondents, with a margin of error of +/- 3.6%.