WHAT AMERICANS THINK

A Jittery Nation
People are still unnerved by the events of Sept. 11

By Richard Morin

Most Americans feel no more safe and secure from terrorism today than immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., according to a new national survey by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at the University of Michigan.

The poll also found that public confidence in key institutions, which had surged immediately after the terrorist attacks, may now be ebbing.

The survey tracked changes in attitudes of 613 randomly selected adult Americans who were first interviewed in the fall. It found that while in four Americans report no change in the extent to which the attacks affected their personal sense of safety and security.

About one in 10—11 percent—said they are feeling less secure now, while only 13 percent said they are feeling more secure.

"The preliminary findings from this survey suggest that the psychological, social and political effects of last fall's events have been enduring," says political scientist Michael Traugott, a senior research scientist at ISR. "Despite attempts by the government to assure Americans that homeland security is a priority, most Americans don't feel any safer today than they did right after the attacks."

The second round of interviews, conducted in March, suggests that about four in 10—42 percent—of all Americans had become more concerned than they were last fall that they personally might be injured or killed in a terrorist assault. An even larger proportion—80 percent—expressed concern that other Americans might get hurt, Traugott reports.

An overwhelming majority—84 percent—also considered it at least somewhat likely that terrorist attacks or similar acts of violence would occur in the U.S. "in the near future." But only one in four expected that such attacks would happen in their community.

Researchers also measured how specific behaviors were affected by Sept. 11.

"Among those who ordinarily engaged in the particular activity, 69 percent said they were more concerned about their safety when taking an airplane, while about 37 percent reported heightened safety concerns while attending a sporting event and 22 percent said they had become more concerned about their safety when going to a shopping mall," according to the summary.

Traugott also asked respondents to estimate the chances that another major bioterrorism attack—one that would affect 100 people or more—would occur in the next five years. About three in four Americans thought the odds were at least 50-50—and four in 10 placed the chances at 70 percent or greater.

THESE FEARS HAVE CONSEQUENCES, Traugott found. Seven in 10 Americans said they were willing to give up at least some of their civil liberties to improve security—and the percentage was even higher among those who said they were concerned about their personal safety.

Traugott reports that the new results and last fall's results show virtually identical levels of willingness to surrender civil liberties.

Policy and support for measures that limit personal liberties and expand law enforcement powers have not been seen in the last decade, including after the Oklahoma City bombing," Traugott says.

In the new poll, nine in 10 Americans favor having more police assigned to patrol public places and additional powers to permit the military to work with local police on anti-terrorism activities.

Seven in 10 supported a law requiring all adults to carry a national identification card that would include their photograph and Social Security number.

"I think the idea of a national identification card in this country used to be anathema," says ISR psychologist Robert L. Kahn, "so this degree of support for such a law is indeed surprising."

About half said they support random police searches in public places, while fewer than half favor allowing wiretaps of conversations between terrorist suspects and their attorneys. One in four—24 percent—support giving police the power to conduct random searches of "anyone who appears to be Arab or Muslim." Says Kahn: "People are most in favor of laws that improve security but remain impartial," Kahn says. "The more specifically groups are targeted by complexion or nationality, the less likely the public is to support these measures."

The survey also suggests that the public's confidence in major institutions is diminishing. Although questions measuring confidence in institutions were not asked in the first round of polling, Traugott compared the results of the second wave with the findings of other surveys that included confidence measures. Seventy-three percent reported that they were confident in the military. But only 40 percent expressed equal levels of confidence in Congress, 30 percent in the executive branch, 34 percent in organized religion and 11 percent in major companies.

"In times of crisis, a 'rally round the flag' phenomenon affects attitudes toward institutions, just as it affects presidential approval ratings," Traugott says. "But these findings suggest that this positive attitude is beginning to wear off."

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