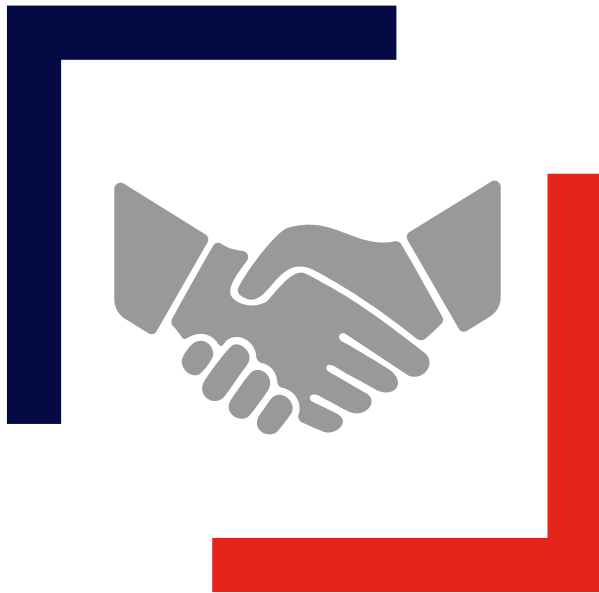


13

Section



Trust

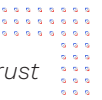
Trust

Introduction. Trust in institutions reflects the degree to which we believe groups such as governments and universities are serving the country—how honest and reliable they are and how they are serving the nation’s interests. These institutions are responsible for important aspects of our success, and our trust in them is also likely necessary if we are going to make lasting improvements in the measures listed elsewhere in this report.

Summary of Results. Of all the institutions we considered, trust is highest and most stable for local government and lowest for the criminal justice system. Trust in the scientific community was stable and even saw a small increase before COVID, but this declined slightly during COVID.

Three of the institutions we considered—the federal government, police, and higher education—have seen sharp declines in trust, among the steepest drops of any measures in this report. The trends in the other trust measures are stable. Trust is also declining on three measures relative to levels of trust expressed by citizens of other countries.

We do note some seemingly small differences in wording of the survey questions pertaining to trust of different institutions that make the cross-institutional comparisons in trust levels less definitive, but these likely do not influence the stark differences in trends across institutions.



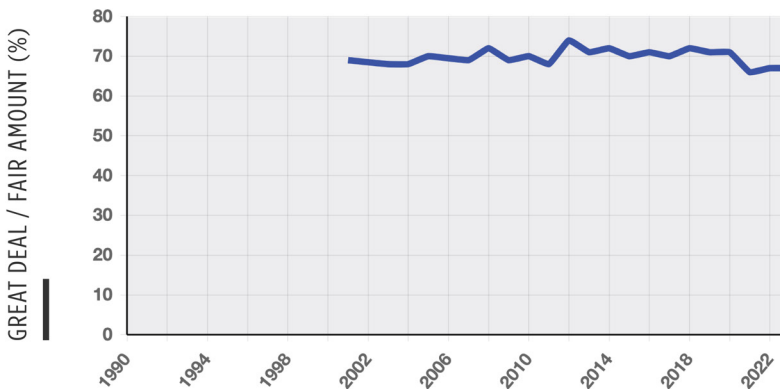
Trust in Local Government

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/fair amount of trust and confidence in local government to handle local problems. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
➔	NA	*

Why did we include this measure? Local governments are responsible for many of our most basic necessities, including schools, roads, parks, water, police, and fire protection. Trust in local government is therefore an important signal of the degree to which those needs are being met and of our ability to improve going forward.

Figure 26: Trust in Local Government (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

* Not available.

What do the data show? Of all the trust measures in this section, local governments have the highest public trust of any institution. Trust in local government has also remained fairly steady with 68–70% expressing a great deal or fair amount of trust.

What might explain these patterns? People tend to trust those who are closest to them and people they know. Many citizens see their locally elected leaders face-to-face. When possible, people also tend to move to local communities that they have positive views about and that provide the services that are important to them.



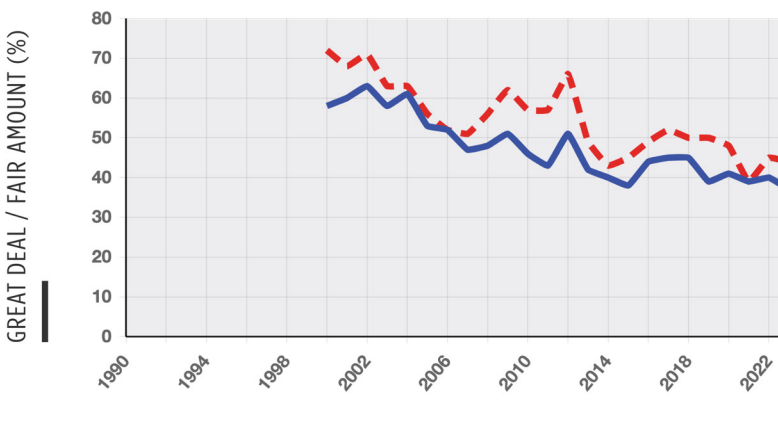
Trust in Federal Government

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/fair amount of trust and confidence in the federal government to handle domestic and international problems. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
↓	6%	↓

Why did we include this measure? The federal government has important responsibilities, including national defense, economic policy, immigration, environmental resource management, and social insurance and income support programs. The federal government also shapes the actions of state and local governments through laws and program subsidies and shapes interstate commerce through business regulation and transportation infrastructure.

Figure 27: Trust in Federal Government (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Percentage of the population reporting confidence in the national government. (Source: Authors' analysis of Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development data).
- Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 6% (out of 36 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Trust in the federal government has declined from a peak of 60–70% in the year 2000 to less than 50% in a fairly short period of time—one of the sharpest drops of any measure in this report. We are ranked just below Latvia, South Korea, and Greece. Trust is somewhat higher in international affairs.

What might explain these patterns? This is a continuation of an old trend that began in the 1960s. When people perceive that things are not going well in the country, as many of the measures in this report suggest, the federal government, and especially the president, are often held responsible.

Handle International Problems

 Handle Domestic Problems



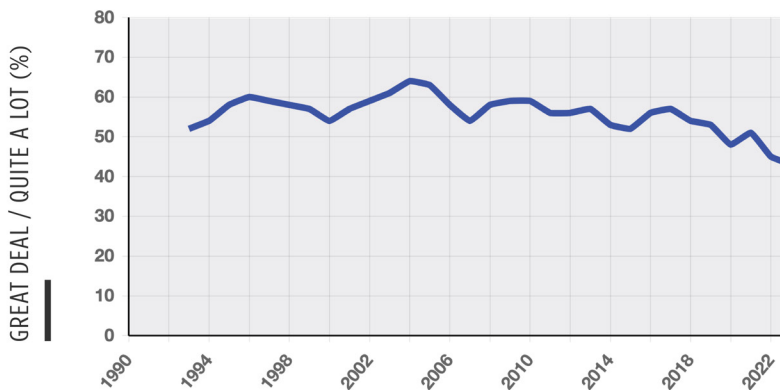
Trust in Police

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in the police. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
↓	66%	→

Why did we include this measure? The police are responsible for enforcing laws and protecting our safety. These are some of the most fundamental roles of government.

Figure 28: Trust in Police (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- *Specific Measure:* (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).
- Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 66% (out of 29 countries)
- *International Rank Trend:* ↔

What do the data show? The national trend shows declining trust in police since the early 2000s, but we are in the top half compared with other high-income countries and our international standing has been stable. We rank just below the Netherlands, Andorra, and Australia and well behind China.

What might explain these patterns? Multiple factors may be behind this. We are not aware of evidence that the frequency of actual police misconduct has changed over this period, so we cannot draw conclusions about this possible cause. The decline in trust in police does align roughly with the introduction of the first camera-based smartphone in 2007. The rise of these devices, as well as police body cams later, means that interactions with the police are now frequently captured on video and then shown on social media and in mass media. Some of these videos have shown what appears to be evidence of violent misconduct, especially against African Americans. (We note that viral videos sometimes do not convey well the context of police encounters that escalate, from the perspective of either the police or the accused.) The drops in trust in the police have been larger for African Americans and young people.



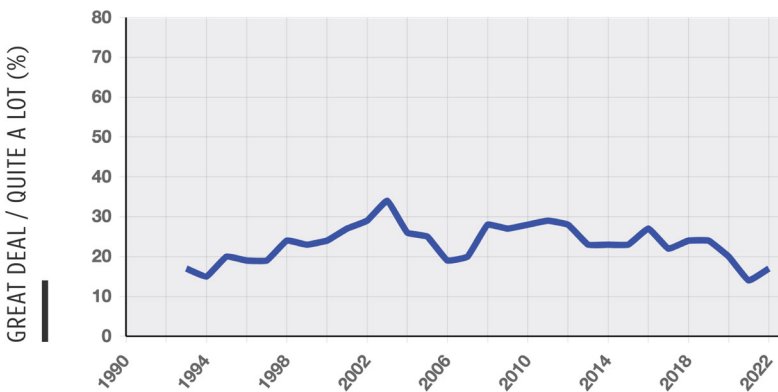
Trust in Criminal Justice System

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in the criminal justice system. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
→	39%	↓

Why did we include this measure? The criminal justice system is responsible for enforcing laws and holding people responsible for crimes. This includes the police, courts, prisons, and fairness of sentences. The rule of law is central to our democracy, economy, and social fabric.

Figure 29: Trust in Criminal Justice System (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 39% (out of 28 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Trust in the criminal justice system follows a similar inverted-U pattern as trust in the police, which is one part of the criminal justice system. However, while trust in the criminal justice system is much lower overall, levels now are similar to those in the 1990s, whereas trust in police has declined. Less than 20% of people reported trust in the criminal justice system—the lowest among all the institutions we examined. We rank just below Canada, Andorra, and Australia. We are also tied with Russia, and China is the highest ranked country.

What might explain these patterns? One potential explanation for the low standing of the criminal justice system as a whole, relative to police alone, is that the police are a more visible part of the criminal justice system to the average person, compared with courts and prisons. Most of us see police officers on a daily basis, and familiarity tends to promote trust, similar to what we observed with people trusting local government more than federal government. However, this seems insufficient to explain the overall discrepancy between trust in police and the criminal justice system. People also see the police in person in other countries, yet our trust in criminal justice is lower than trust in police (we outperform only 39% of countries with the criminal justice system but 66% with the police).

Another possible explanation is that people blame the criminal justice system for the nation's high murder rate (see the Violence section). But, again, if the explanation were the rate of violence, then we might expect people to blame both the police and criminal justice in similar ways, and this does not seem to be the case. Also, the murder rate has generally been improving even as trust in both criminal justice and the police is worsening.

The especially low standing of the criminal justice system may be more about the courts, prisons, and sentencing rules. Much attention has been paid recently to prisoners who turned out to be innocent after years behind bars. Also, the United States has the highest rate of imprisonment in the world.



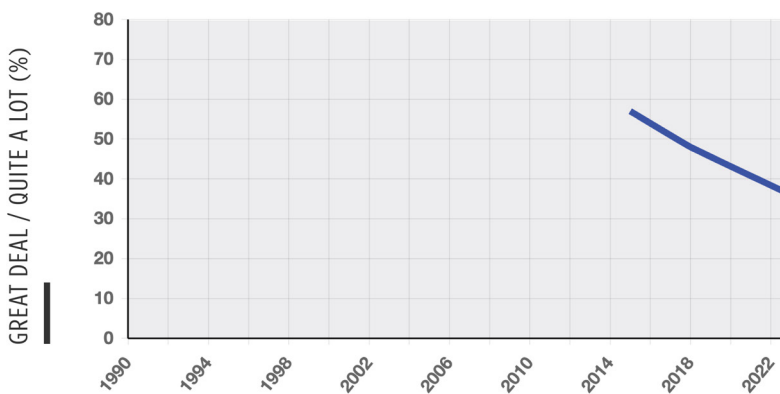
Trust in Colleges and Universities

Specific measure: Percentage with a great deal/quite a lot of confidence in higher education. (Source: Gallup).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
↓	11%	↓

Why did we include this measure? Colleges and universities play a key role in educating citizens for technical, managerial, and other professional careers. They also carry out basic research to advance scientific discovery and applied research focused on developing next-generation medicines, defense capabilities, and consumer products. Colleges and universities therefore play many key roles.

Figure 30: Trust in Colleges and Universities (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Values Survey).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 11% (out of 28 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

What do the data show? Trust in colleges and universities is plummeting and now sits below 40% support. We are also near the bottom of high-income countries and falling further. We rank just below Ukraine, Peru, and Romania.

What might explain these patterns? Only the federal government and police have dropped as far as colleges and universities on this measure—and the decline here is much sharper. In 2015, higher education was among the most trusted institutions, just below local government. This earlier positive view likely reflects in part that people who have attended colleges and universities report positive views about their experiences. Graduates do very well in the labor force. We also have far more world-leading universities than any other country and students from other countries come to the US in large numbers to attend them.

However, in more recent years, that trust has plummeted, potentially because of concerns about the rising sticker price of college, increasing student debt, unfair admission practices, affirmative action, the liberal political leanings of faculty, and politically biased free speech rules. (Several of these are related to the increased scrutiny of diversity, equity, and inclusion statements and course requirements.) Campus protests have received particular attention in the past year, though these are too recent to be reflected in the data we are reporting.



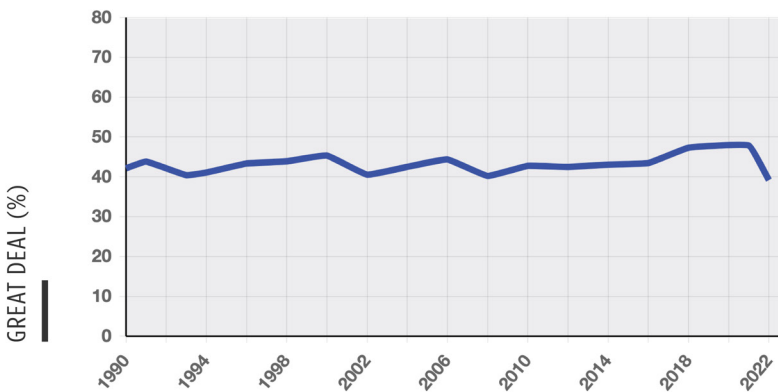
Trust in Science

Specific measure: Percentage of the population with a great deal of confidence in the scientific community. (Source: Authors' analysis of the General Social Survey).

National Trend	% of countries the US outperforms	Intl. Rank Trend
→	32%	↑

Why did we include this measure? Science plays an important role in our lives, including basic research that helps us understand our world and applied research that develops new technologies such as medicines, energy sources, transportation, communication, weapons systems, and space exploration, to name a few.

Figure 31: Trust in Science (National Trend)



How does the US rank globally?

- *Specific Measure:* Percentage of people who believe that “science and technology are making our lives healthier, easier, and more comfortable.” (Source: Authors’ analysis of World Values Survey).
- Percentage of countries the US outperforms: 32% (out of 28 countries)
- International Rank Trend: ↑

What do the data show? The level of trust in the scientific community has been stable and at a level similar to the most recent trust numbers for higher education and police. We rank just below Germany, Mexico, and Turkey, and well below China and Russia. The scientific community was also the only institution that saw rising trust before COVID. That trust diminished somewhat with the onset of COVID.

What might explain these patterns? The slight growth of trust in science before the pandemic might reflect recognition of the new medicines and other discoveries emerging from the scientific community. We also note that the data for trust in science come from a different data source than the other trust measures, which could explain some of the differences across institutions.

The drop in trust in science during the COVID pandemic might be explained by the overall contentiousness of the pandemic and the unusually significant role of science in making decisions. The scientific community was asked to make judgements on social distancing and other health measures that involved science but also entailed difficult value judgments that are beyond the scientific domain. Specific concerns emerged about whether COVID originated from a lab leak (in China), poor and overconfident communication about COVID-related evidence, conflicting and shifting advice from the scientific community about how to respond to the pandemic, and political conflict over appropriate public health and social distancing measures being recommended by the public health community.

Across all these institutions, trust is higher in institutions that are closest to our daily lives and with which we have the most direct experience. This is clearest with the comparisons of local and federal governments and of police with the criminal justice system. Also, the more distant institutions are from those they serve, the more their values and orientations tend to diverge from what local residents prefer.

Local government has seen the steadiest trust. While trust in science and the criminal justice system have also remained fairly stable, they have experienced more variation in recent years. The federal government, higher education, and the police are at the other extreme with the largest declines in trust. This might be partially explained by increasingly negative political and media messages about these institutions.

For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.

Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures

	<i>Support from Board</i>	<i>Support from Public</i>
<i>Trust (as topic)</i>	<i>100%</i>	<i>79%</i>
<i>Trust in Local Government</i>	<i>79%</i>	<i>80%</i>
<i>Trust in Federal Government</i>	<i>86%</i>	<i>82%</i>
<i>Trust in Police</i>	<i>79%</i>	<i>83%</i>
<i>Trust in Criminal Justice System</i>	<i>79%</i>	<i>81%</i>
<i>Trust in Universities</i>	<i>79%</i>	<i>62%</i>
<i>Trust in Science</i>	<i>79%</i>	<i>73%</i>

Other Measures Considered: The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including trust in public schools, the medical system, religion, the three branches of government, mass media, the military, big business, small business, organized labor, large tech companies, and banks. The public supported trust in public schools, the medical system, the three branches of government, the military, and banks.