



2025

# Executive Summary

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# Executive Summary

What is the state of the nation? This is a fundamental question. Increasingly, we see evidence, from polling data to our own dinner tables, that the answer is “not very strong.” Many feel that things are not going well in the United States. A gnawing sense of angst seems to have descended upon us. We seem polarized and distrustful, worried and pessimistic.

Where exactly are we going wrong? Just as importantly, what might we be overlooking—what is actually going right? And can we agree on any of the answers? These are the questions that we sought to answer with the State of the Nation Project. The wide-ranging authors of this report—the board of the project—have come to agreement on 15 topics and 37 measures that we believe capture crucial elements of the state of the nation. When these measures are going in the right direction, it is something to celebrate. But when they are headed in the wrong direction, or when we fare poorly relative to other countries, we believe it should raise alarm bells about where we are or where we are headed. Taken together, these measures paint a useful and compelling picture of our country that should help guide our future. This is America’s progress report.

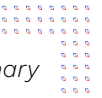
It was not obvious at the beginning of the project how much agreement might be possible. The entire project was an experiment. Could liberals agree with conservatives, Democrats with Republicans, on anything meaningful? Could we agree on anything other than “extreme” measures like murder and suicide, which are obviously concerning? Could we keep our discussions from turning into the tugs-of-war we see nightly on cable news, which typically go nowhere productive? When we first started describing the State of the Nation Project to others, many said the answer to these questions was a firm “no.” The country is too divided, we were told, to come to agreement on anything important.

But we could agree—and we did. As a group, we are leaders and scholars from seven of the nation’s leading think tanks, from across the political spectrum. At least one board member has also worked for or advised the last five US presidential administrations—two Republicans (George W. Bush and Donald Trump) and three Democrats (Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden).

We came to agreement in a very American way—we debated, and then we voted. For a topic or measure to get into this report, a supermajority of the board had to agree. No topic or measure could get into this report because only one or two politically aligned groups supported it. Broad-based agreement was a requirement.

But we went further. We are not just reporting what we, just 14 people out of almost 350 million Americans, think about the state of the nation. We also asked you, the nation’s citizens, to vote. We put the same list of topics and measures to a representative sample of roughly 1,000 US adults. While the broad public generally agreed with most of the decisions we made, there are also some differences that we report with full transparency.

Some factors were clearly easier to measure than others. National security, in particular, was judged to be an important topic by both the board and the public but proved difficult to capture. We did not gain supermajority support for any measure within this topic. Therefore, we chose to include a section on National Security and to report some data; but, to reflect our hesitation about these measures, we are not reporting any data on national security in this Executive Summary.



With other topics, we had some good measures but also missing pieces. Civil liberties is one example. We only included a single measure for this topic—specifically, events threatening freedom of the press—but we could not find consistent and reliable measures of freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. Similarly, we only included two measures in the Violence section—murders and shootings—where we had the most confidence in the data; we omitted others, such as assaults, mainly because of data quality issues. On these topics, and others that we discuss throughout the report, there is an urgent need to improve data.

In what follows, we explain our key findings and what we think they mean about how the country is doing. Many of the individual results will not be surprising. You have probably seen media headlines about many of them. However, we also think you will be surprised, as were we, with some of the findings. Some of our results do not line up with fear-mongering media headlines and political campaign advertisements. Others simply are not getting enough attention.

A different picture also emerges when we see all these measures together. Think of your favorite picture or painting and imagine trying to break it into puzzle pieces. The individual pieces do not look like anything meaningful when they are spread across the table until you put all the pieces together and the picture comes into focus.

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## How we summarize the results

Below, we summarize all the topics and measures we considered. In all cases, we focus on data from the period 1990 to 2023, which allowed us to provide a sense of long-term trends without losing sight of recent fluctuations. We tried to capture the current state of the nation, not provide a history lesson. In many cases, the data were not available for the full period, so we reported what we could.

We report each measure three different ways. First, we report the national trend. Is the measure going up, going down, or remaining stable? Then, we report two different international measures to show how we are doing relative to other high-income countries.<sup>1</sup> The first is the percentage of countries we are outperforming in the most recent data available. A higher percentage is always better. (For example, we “outperform” countries that have higher rates of murder and suicide and other measures where higher numbers are worse. In other cases, such as GDP, we outperform countries that have lower numbers.) We also sometimes report the international rank trend, which tells us whether we are falling behind other countries or moving up in the international rankings over time. If our international ranking did not change or only changed by one place over the time frame, then we report the international rank trend as stable.

We color coded all the measures, as shown in Table 1. To be in the top (green) category for the international comparison, we had to be outperforming at least 80% of high-income countries. This high bar reflects the high expectations we think Americans have for their country. At the other extreme, we show our international standing in red when we outperform less than 50% of high-income countries. But we also show the exact percentage in case you want to use a different standard.

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<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we included countries labeled as “upper middle income” or “high income” by the World Bank. This includes 117 independent countries with income per capita greater than \$4,516.

**Table 1: How We Summarize the Nation’s Performance**

	<b>National Trend</b>	<b>% of Countries the US Outperforms</b>	<b>International Rank Trend</b>
<b>Positive / Improving</b>	Greater in most recent year than first year available	>80%	Rank increased by 2+ spots from first to most recent year
<b>Neutral / Stable</b>	Most recent year not visibly different from first year	50 – 79%	Change of no more than one spot in the rankings in the most recent year relative to first year
<b>Negative / Worsening</b>	Lower in most recent year than first year	<50%	Rank dropped by 2+ spots from first to most recent year

In some cases, the national trends are difficult to interpret. When the trend data are only available for a short period and the trend during this period is erratic, we say the results are “unclear.” Also, if the trends are erratic and do not show a clear overall trend from the beginning to the end of the period, then we say the results are “mixed.”

It is possible for the picture to look different in each of the three ways of reporting each measure. For example, the national trends do not always align with the international rank trends because, when measures are declining in the United States, they are also sometimes declining in other countries, as was common during the COVID pandemic. So, our national trend can be declining even while the international rank trend is stable or improving in relative terms. It is also possible that we are improving on both the national trend and international rank trend but are still at a low international level. We report each measure all three ways, when possible, so that you can see and interpret the full picture.

You will also notice that there are more green-highlighted cells in the national trends column than there are in the international rank trend column. One reason is that all countries face many of the same pressures, constraints, and opportunities. If one country finds a way to improve something, then other countries can follow their lead. Countries’ national trends can improve even as their rankings remain steady.

Other measures improve “naturally.” Economic output (GDP), for example, is almost always increasing in most countries because new technologies increase productivity—and we generally only adopt technologies when they produce more or better output. But some countries might improve faster than others. In those cases, countries that are improving more slowly have a declining trend relative to other countries.

Although we report 37 measures in three different ways, this entire progress report is boiled down to a single table. **Table 2** reports all the topics and measures that reached supermajority board support. We report the topics alphabetically rather than in any order of priority. We also place a small “(p)” next to the name of each topic measure in the table that also had supermajority support from the public. Those without the “(p)” were only supported by the board. In the section titled “Board Vote and Public Opinion Poll,” we provide more detail about our decision process, and what “supermajority support” means in practice.

If there had been no agreement between the board and the public, then none of the measures would have the “(p)” label. We interpret the board and public votes as showing considerable agreement. The public gave supermajority support to all but three of the topics that the board supported and to more than half the measures. Also, all but one of the measures with supermajority support from the board also had majority public support. (The exception was the percentage of people who volunteered for a group, which received only 38% support from the public.)

The above analysis likely overstates agreement in some ways and understates it in others. The board and public never had a chance to sit down and talk about these topics and measures, which might have led to more agreement, but that would have been very difficult to do with 1,000 people involved. On the other hand, the table only includes measures that the board supported, and some measures that the public supported did not receive board support. We chose to report these later (see the “Board Vote and Public Opinion Poll” chapter) to avoid making this summary overly complicated.

Overall, this level of agreement between the board and the public gives us confidence that this is a valid assessment of the state of the nation. Still, we report the data transparently so that readers can see what the report would have looked like if we had relied on the public opinion poll alone.

Table 2: Summary of National Trends and International Rankings/Performance

Topics and Measures	National Trend	% of Countries the US Outperforms	International Rank Trend
<b>Children &amp; Families (p)</b>			
Child mortality (p)	Improving	57	Worsening
Low birthweight	Worsening	50	Stable
Youth depression (p)	Worsening	1	Worsening
% with single parent	Stable	3	Stable
<b>Citizenship &amp; Democracy (p)</b>			
Voter participation (p)	Stable	37	Improving
Belief in democracy (p)	Worsening	33	Improving
Neg. views of other party	Worsening	0	Worsening
<b>Civil Liberties (p)</b>			
Press freedom threats (p)	Unclear	66	Worsening
<b>Economy (p)</b>			
Output/GDP (p)	Improving	98	Stable
Productivity	Improving	88	Improving
<b>Education (p)</b>			
Test scores (8th grade)	Mixed	62	Improving
Avg year of educ.	Improving	86	Stable
% in school/working	Improving	56	Improving
<b>Environment</b>			
Greenhouse gas emissions	Mixed	1	Stable
Air quality (p)	Improving	73	Worsening
<b>Inequality (p)</b>			
Income inequality	Worsening	22	Worsening
Poverty (p)	Improving	25	Stable
<b>Life Satisfaction</b>			
Current life satisfaction	Worsening	70	Worsening
Social isolation	Worsening	66	Worsening



Table 2: Summary of National Trends and International Rankings/Performance

Topics and Measures	National Trend	% of Countries the US Outperforms	International Rank Trend
Mental Health (p)			
Depression/anxiety	Worsening	11	Worsening
Fatal overdoses (p)	Worsening	0	Worsening
Suicide rate (p)	Worsening	16	Worsening
National Security (p)			
[See topic section]			
Physical Health (p)			
Life expectancy	Improving	62	Worsening
Social Capital			
Volunteered for group	Stable	63	NA
Trust in other people	Worsening	73	Stable
Trust... (p)			
...in local government (p)	Stable		NA
...in federal government (p)	Worsening	6	Worsening
...in police (p)	Worsening	66	Stable
...in criminal justice (p)	Stable	39	Worsening
...in colleges/universities	Worsening	11	Worsening
...in science (p)	Stable	32	Improving
Violence (p)			
Murder rate (p)	Improving	30	Worsening
Shootings (p)	Unclear	10	Improving
Work & Labor Force (p)			
Employment/population ratio	Mixed	26	Worsening
Labor force participation	Worsening	23	Worsening
Long-term unemployment (p)	Mixed	84	Stable
Hourly earnings growth	Mixed	70	Improving



## Key Conclusions

So, what is the state of the nation? Where exactly are we going wrong? Just as importantly, what might we be overlooking—what is actually going right? These are the questions we started with. Now, we have some answers that we think can help guide the country going forward. Again, our goal was never to prescribe solutions, but to create a progress report that focuses our attention on the right spots.

We organize our discussion of the results into groups of measures based on the combination of national trends, percentage of countries we are outperforming, and international rank trends.

**Strengths that we are maintaining.** This category includes topics and measures where we have a high international standing and show no sign of decline, either nationally or internationally.

**We continue to generate strong economic growth, and this is likely to be a strength well into the future.** We remain among the world's leaders on both economic output (GDP) and worker productivity and we continue to improve on both measures. Some of our advantage in total output is driven in part by our population size, but we still do well on GDP per capita.

**Strengths that may be at some risk.** This category includes topics and measures where we rank high internationally, but there are signs of decline in national and international trends.

**Civil liberties are among the nation's founding principles and remain strong by global standards, but there are some warning signs, at least on freedom of the press.** This is one of the topics where good measures are most difficult to come by. However, we can measure freedom of the press by the number of attacks on journalists and restrictions on their actions. While we cannot track this very far back, we are outperforming roughly two-thirds of countries. On the other hand, we experienced a very large spike in press attacks in 2020, an election year, and we are declining relative to other countries.

**Areas where we are improving.** This category includes measures where we are improving both in our national trend and in international rankings, regardless of our international standing.

**Education levels are improving compared with other countries.** Our test scores have traditionally been in the middle of the pack. We outperform most countries, though we are not in the top tier, on years of education and the percentage of young people working or in school. Nevertheless, compared with other countries, all three education measures have seen improving or stable trends. (While our test scores have improved since 1990, our national trend has declined over the last decade, which is why these are labeled “mixed” in **Table 2.**)

**Poverty is declining.** While the United States is a “high-income” country overall, some are still impoverished and face difficulties providing for their basic needs and those of their children. We have consistently fared poorly compared with other high-income countries on this measure, although our national trend is moving in the right direction.



**Topics where our outcomes are stable or mixed.** This is a catch-all category that includes situations where the picture looks very different across measures or where our national and international trends are heading in different directions.

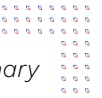
**For our physical environment, there is a mix of good news and bad news..** Our air quality is improving nationally, although worsening compared to other countries. Greenhouse gases were worsening until the late 2000s and then started improving. These impacts have largely canceled each other out so that our emissions are now very similar to 1990. And these emissions accumulate in the atmosphere, which means we are only making the problem worse more slowly than in the past. Human activity is continuing to warm the earth's temperature, raise sea levels, and perhaps increase the number of extreme weather events. The precise effects are difficult to forecast, and technology improvements could help offset those emissions in the future. However, waiting for technology alone to solve this problem is a risky bet, given the changes in climate already arising and the forecasts of worse to come. Without a significant change in direction, climate change will likely be disruptive and costly and significantly reduce our quality of life.

**The labor force is also seeing a mix of trends.** Long-term unemployment among prime-age workers is slightly lower now than in the early 1990s. Also, real earnings growth, while naturally somewhat erratic with the Great Recession and COVID, has been improving overall, relative to other countries. However, we are in the bottom tier of countries in terms of the employment-to-population ratio and labor force participation, with some slight declines over time, nationally and internationally.

**Our citizenship and democracy measures are in the bottom-tier internationally and declining, though more slowly than in other countries.** We are last among all comparison countries on polarization and not much better on voter participation and belief in democracy. While voter participation has been stable nationally, our belief in democracy and views of the other political party have been declining. We have been steadier in this area than other countries, but this is still worrisome given the national security and other implications that come with a global decline in democracy.

**Our physical health—specifically, life expectancy—is improving but more slowly than other countries.** We also note an almost unprecedented decline in life expectancy at the start of the COVID pandemic. Life expectancy had also plateaued and declined slightly just before the pandemic. We have since rebounded so that life expectancy is once again at an all-time high.

**Social capital is above most countries with mixed trends.** We still outperform most countries on volunteering and trust in other people and these measures are mostly stable, except that our national trend in trust in other people is declining.



**Areas that are worsening.** This category includes topics and measures where we have been above most countries but are now declining either nationally or internationally and not improving on either.

**Life satisfaction is in decline.** We outperform most countries on current satisfaction with our lives and social isolation, but both measures are worsening overall and relative to other countries.

**We trust one another, and key institutions, less and less.** Three of the six trust measures we included are on the decline. While trust in local government, the criminal justice system, and science has been stable, trust in the federal government, police, and colleges/universities is on the decline. In fact, trust in colleges/universities and the federal government arguably saw the largest drops of any of the 37 measures across all of the topics. If we do not trust our key institutions, then it will be difficult to make improvements in the many critical areas of American life that these institutions are responsible for.

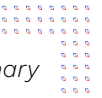
**Persistent weaknesses.** This category includes those areas where we have low international standing and where we do not see improving trends.

**Our mental health is very low by global standards and getting steadily worse.** On all three mental health measures—depression/anxiety, fatal overdoses, and suicide—we are among the worst high-income countries and getting worse, both in our national and international trends. Our rate of fatal overdoses is highest among all countries where it can be measured.

**While we have a very high average income, we continue to have among the most unequal incomes in the world.** When we analyze income across all groups, we see that income inequality is rising. Combined with the reduction in poverty (see above), this means that inequality is rising because income growth has been more concentrated among those who were well-off to start with. (This measure is net of government programs and transfer payments such as Social Security.)

**We remain among the most violent high-income countries in the world.** The US has historically been one of the most violent high-income countries in the world, and that remains true today. However, contrary to public perception, the murder rate declined sharply over the past several decades. The increases during COVID were temporary, and the murder rate has declined to pre-COVID levels.

**Our children and families are not well.** Across four different measures (child mortality, low birthweight, percentage of children growing up with a single parent, and youth depression), we are either rank in the middle or among the worst of the world's high-income countries. And almost all these measures are trending in the wrong direction.



## Themes

The various parts of the country do not operate in isolation. While we stop short of a full analysis that attempts to explain any individual finding or explain the findings' complex interplay, we do highlight some key patterns and connections.

**Conclusion #1: We are a nation of extremes—extreme successes and extreme failures.**

We are near the top in the world, among high-income countries, on economic measures but near the bottom on measures related to mental health, citizenship and democracy, inequality, and violence, as well as for measures of greenhouse gas emissions and some children/family measures.

**Conclusion #2: Our national trends are improving in more areas than we are declining. However, relative to other countries, the opposite is true—we are declining in more areas than we are improving.**

In **Table 2**, you can see that our national trends are generally improving on measures related to the economy, education, environment, physical health, and probably violence (five topics). Conversely, our national trends are generally declining for citizenship and democracy, life satisfaction, mental health, and trust (four topics).

However, compared with other countries, we are also declining on the environment, physical health, and possibly civil liberties. This means that our international standing is declining on five topics and improving in only two (economy and education). In this respect, we are getting better overall, but more slowly than other countries.

If, instead of focusing on the number of topics, we gave equal weight to each measure, then we would also be declining on considerably more measures than we are improving. This is true in both national and international trends. This is because there are a few topics—life satisfaction, mental health, and trust—where most measures are headed in the wrong direction.

**Conclusion #3: Our economy is poised for continued success.**

This is really the only area where we are excelling. We have had one of the largest and fastest-growing economies in the world for more than a century—and we show no signs of letting up. Our worker productivity remains high. Also, our education levels have been generally improving relative to competitors, which, along with our culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism, should allow us to maintain our high productivity in the future.

Finally, despite the slight decline in labor force participation, our workforce continues to grow slightly because of a gradually rising population. However, the population is only rising because of immigration, so upcoming policy decisions in this area will be important to our economic future, as well as national security.



**Conclusion #4: Our rising incomes are not translating into greater perceived well-being and social relations.**

Our measures of perceived well-being, especially in life satisfaction and mental health, are all going in the wrong direction, even as our material well-being continues to rise. Research has generally suggested that “money buys happiness,” at least to some degree, but our trends on these measures are moving in opposite directions. We also see declines in our relationships with others, including social isolation and half of the trust measures. Given the importance of social relationships in our lives, these two trends are probably related.

One possible general explanation is that rising income is still improving our perceived well-being, but other factors are acting more powerfully to offset this and make us feel worse off. Another possibility is that the way in which we are pursuing material wealth is directly reducing psychological and social well-being. We encourage future investigation about the possible explanations.

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## Would the conclusions be different if we focused only on the public vote?

One of the most important conclusions of this report is the widespread agreement about what a national progress report should include. The public, in our opinion survey, largely echoed the board. The public had supermajority support for almost all of the 15 topics and about half the 37 measures—and simple majority support for all but one of the measures.

While some of the specifics of the progress report would have been different if we had focused only on the public vote, almost all the broad conclusions we reached above would have been the same. For example, there is a disconnect between our material well-being and perceived well-being, no matter how you look at it. This is partly because the board and the public supported almost all the same topics, and some of these are related. For example, the public did not have supermajority support for life satisfaction, but it did for the related topic of mental health, and these two topics show similar patterns.

Two exceptions are worth noting. First, the public showed less support for measures related to how we interact with other people. You can see in **Table 2** that the public did not support the topic of social capital or our measures of social isolation, the percentage of children growing up in a single-parent family, or the frequency of adults volunteering for groups. In fact, volunteering—which is one element of our social capital—was the sole measure that the board included that did not even reach majority support from the public. This pattern is noteworthy because we see rising social isolation as one of the underlying causes behind our growing negative perceptions of the world.

The second exception is the environment. As with social isolation, most Americans voted to put this on the list, but not a supermajority. Of all the topics in our report, the environment is the one most closely connected to high-profile political debates, and we note that we carried out the poll in the middle of the 2024 presidential election. The fact that it is a partisan issue, in a country that is becoming more polarized, might have led some people to vote against it during a campaign. Whatever the reason, this issue is different from the others that reflect how people see the world as it is now. With the environment, the issue is the potentially high risk of major climate change in the future. We are starting to feel some of the predicted effects of greenhouse gas emissions but not nearly what scientists generally predict for the years ahead. It is human nature that people pay less attention to uncertain risks that are far in the future, especially ones that may require changing behavior now. This may be partly why we think the board showed more support for this topic than the public did.

But these are the exceptions. Even if we limited our progress report only to the topics and measures that the board and public agreed on, we would still be a country of extremes, still be declining on more measures than we are improving, and still see a disconnect between the economy and perceived well-being.



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## The Intangibles

Another possible reaction to our report is that the state of the nation is simply too difficult to measure. In some ways, we agree. We only included measures above that we think: (a) relate to fundamentally important aspects of the state of the nation; and (b) are well-measured at least in the US. In this section, we briefly consider some of the aspects that we think are important but which we had to exclude due to the difficulty of measurement.

The most extreme case is national security, which we felt compelled to exclude from this summary. The board discussed a wide variety of measures with national security experts, such as the interest and recruitment of military personnel and military investment by our NATO allies, but decided that it was highly debatable whether any of these were sufficiently fundamental to our security.<sup>2</sup> We do discuss data on this topic in the National Security section but did not feel confident enough to include it in the summary with the other, more measurable, topics.

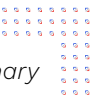
In the case of civil liberties and physical health, we included the topics but with only a single measure. For the Civil Liberties section, we could measure freedom of the press, but not freedom of speech, religion, and assembly. In the Physical Health section, we included only life expectancy. (This measure had the most support from the board, across all measures and topics.) It turns out, however, that other measures of health are difficult to judge. We considered including a survey measure of perceived health but decided against it. The omission of other health measures is partly because some board members felt that most elements of physical health were already captured by life expectancy. Finally, we also limited the Violence section to just the murder rate and shootings because others, such as assaults, are not well-measured over time. (That said, assaults and robberies do seem to track with the murder rate.) The more philosophically minded might also point to other, even harder-to-measure elements of life. Freedom and opportunity, in particular, are two ideas that are both central to the American way of life and difficult to boil down to a number. Other factors that are difficult to measure include: how well we respect, treat, and care for one another, the degree to which people are selfish, and whether people display virtues such as gratitude. Some of these, and others you might think of, might be captured in more indirect ways in our progress report. For example, whether people are virtuous (however we might define that) might be reflected in whether we report trusting other people. But some of these might be missing entirely.

While we do not claim that we can measure everything, we do believe our progress report helps to reinforce the importance of ideas such as freedom and opportunity while also capturing the essence, and important details, of how we are doing.

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<sup>2</sup> Our board includes a national security expert, Kiron Skinner. In addition to the board, we thank Richard Haass, a supporter of the project, for his contributions on this topic.





## Conclusion

In our monthly deliberations over the past two years, our conversations often drifted to the question: What can we do about all of this? But then we remembered that this was beyond the scope of the project, or at least this first report. Of course, we want to solve our problems. There would be little point in a progress report that did not ultimately lead to progress. The approach we took with the State of the Nation Project was to start from the beginning. We have to first ask: How are we doing? Then, we can move on to: How do we get better? We hope that our work will spur conversations across the country, from small towns to large cities, that lead to real, enacted solutions.

We conclude then by asking you to consider how you think we should move forward. In the face of our difficulties and with our many resources, gifts, and aspirations, what should we do now?

- How can we learn to trust each other, and our institutions, again and avoid thinking the worst of others? How can we reshape those institutions to earn that trust?
- How can we stop the growing interest in nondemocratic forms of government—military and authoritarian rule—and reengage citizens in democratic principles, values, and virtues?
- How can we reduce political polarization and listen more in order to understand others across our political divides?
- How can we protect and reinvigorate our social institutions—families, charities, and faith-based organizations—to combat social isolation and mental illness, develop the kinds of healthy relationships that we all need, and improve physical health? In the same vein, how can we build stronger families and deeper and more lasting friendships?
- How can we improve education to ensure that our children can become engaged citizens and remain among the most productive workforce in the world?
- How can we achieve even faster economic growth, knowing that faster growth improves not just today's living standards, but those of posterity?
- How can we better translate our economic prosperity into continued reduction in poverty and a sense of happiness and purpose, while protecting the environment?
- How can we be better informed and avoid misinformation while also protecting freedom of the press and free speech?
- How can we reduce murder, violence, and suicide—measures that long placed our country among the worst in the world—while protecting the Second Amendment right to bear arms?
- How can we improve our physical health given our increasingly sedentary jobs and lives and the draw of television, video games, and other screen time? How can we prevent illness and improve public health while respecting individual autonomy?
- How can we help children get off to a better start in life?
- How can we do any of the above in a media landscape designed to play on our worst fears, stoke our anger, and make us feel like we are constantly missing out on something?

These questions reflect some of our core findings as well as the connections and tensions we see between them. They are not the only questions we might ask. You no doubt have some of your own “how can we ...?” questions to add.

We do not attempt to answer any of the above questions here. But we are also much more likely to choose the right answers and cures when we ask the right questions and have the right diagnoses. In that spirit, we hope our analysis, built on both expert knowledge and the views of the American people, can push us to work together and focus on our most pressing needs.

In some respects, this progress report shows that United States is doing very well. In other respects, the report shows serious cause for concern. But it does help us see more clearly where we stand. Where we see areas of concern, we—America’s citizens, parents, elected officials, and leaders of our churches, schools, colleges, businesses, charities, and governments—can all help turn this ship in the right direction. We each have rights but also responsibilities. Every one of us has a role to play.

We called this the State of the Nation Project because the United States has always been a project. We have to work to reach our high aspirations and uphold our founding principles. In the years ahead, we hope to report back and show that we have moved the American project forward.

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“So, with all the creative energy at our command, let us begin an era of national renewal. Let us renew our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope. We have every right to dream heroic dreams.”

**- Ronald Reagan, Inaugural Address 1981**

“The future we want—opportunity and security for our families; a rising standard of living and a sustainable, peaceful planet for our kids—all that is within our reach. But it will only happen if we work together. It will only happen if we can have rational, constructive debates.”

**- President Barack Obama, State of the Union 2016**

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## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the funders of this project. Tulane University provided a variety of resources, directly and indirectly. We are especially appreciative of Tulane’s Murphy Institute for Political Economy for direct financing of this work. (Murphy’s Director, Dr. Gary Hoover, is also on the Board of Directors.)

The project involved immense data work. For this, we thank Anjana Nair and Emilia Nordgren of Tulane University. We thank YouGov for their support with the public opinion poll and John Stevenson for his assistance in designing that survey and interpreting the results.

For their advice on some of the content of the report, we thank Mark Davis at Tulane University, Jonathan Ladd at Georgetown University, Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations, and Christa Hasenkopf at the University of Chicago’s Energy Policy Institute.

For their excellent work on the report and website design, we thank Meg Cotter Mazzola of Cabin 10 Communications, Eric Arcacha of Chart+Foster Co., and Philip Newswanger of Modo Design Group. The research analysts and contractor were the only ones who were paid for their time on the project. The board members and supporters were entirely volunteers.

## Citation:

Douglas N. Harris, Bradley Birzer, Carol Graham, Mona Hanna, Frederick M. Hess, Gary Hoover, Ariel Kalil, Anna Lembke, Joseph Romm, Patrick Sharkey, Heidi Shierholz, Kiron Skinner, Michael Strain, Scott Winship, Anjana Nair, and Emilia Nordgren (2025). *The State of the Nation: 2025 Report*. State of the Nation Project, Tulane University.