

# Survey shows Americans' personal misery has increased since early 1990s

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As Americans pause to reflect on time gone by on the threshold of a new year, many will have reason to think that their lives have not gotten better, according to a new study by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

In the decade-and-a-half since NORC first surveyed people's negative life events, researchers have found that the number of troubles people report has increased. Chief among those problems are more incidents of illness, inability to afford medical care, unemployment, pressure to pay bills, and unstable romantic relationships. On the positive side, fewer people reported having trouble getting a car, or having trouble with crime or legal issues.

Overall, the number of people reporting at least one significant negative life event increased to 92 percent from 88 percent in 1991, the last time the survey was done. Likewise, the total level of troubles grew by 15 percent. Individual problems were not evenly spread among the population, however. Troubles are greatest among those with low income and less education, younger adults, and families with a high child-to-adult dependency ratio (mostly unmarried mothers).

The report, “Troubles in America: A Study of Negative Life Events Across Time and Sub-groups,” is part of the General Social Survey, in-person interviews of 2,817 people 18 and older, randomly chosen to represent a cross section of Americans. Of that group, 1,340 were asked about negative events in their lives.

The questions were based on social science research that tracks the impact of negative life events. “Those events are associated with and apparently lead to depression and anxiety as well as physical illnesses, such as heart attacks and increased infections,” said study author Tom W. Smith, Director of the General Social Survey.

The negative life events, though personal in nature, have ramifications throughout society, research shows. “Essentially, since experiencing more negative events makes individuals less well off, then, in the aggregate, having more individuals suffering more negative events means society is less well-off,” Smith said. Research at the state and local level has connected negative life events with problems such as homicide, alcoholism, and suicide.

Researchers asked about the most wide ranging inventory of negative life events ever examined. They looked at over 60 problems in eight domains - health, work, finances, material hardships, family/personal, law and crime, housing, and other.

\* In health care, 17 percent of people reported being a patient in a health care facility, while 14 percent reported being a patient in 1991. Eleven percent reported being unable to afford needed medical care, compared with 7 percent in 1991, and 18 percent said they lacked health insurance, compared with 12 percent in 1991.

\* On employment questions, 15 percent said they were unemployed and looking for work for as long as a month in the latest survey, compared with 11 percent in 1991. Sixteen percent said they were being pressured by bill collectors, compared with 13 percent in 1991.

\* Nearly 7 percent said they were separated from a husband, wife or partner in the most recent survey, compared with 5 percent in 1991. The number reported breaking up with a steady boyfriend, girlfriend or fiancé went to 8 percent from 4 percent.

The few bright spots came in drops in problems with the law (from 2 percent in 1991 to .7 percent), being sued in a civil case (from 1.8 percent to .7 percent) experiencing infertility (from 3.3 percent to 2 percent), and not having a car for one month or more (from 12 percent to 8 percent).

The General Social Survey is a survey Americans 18 and older, and is conducted every one to two years with support from the National Science Foundation. The questions on negative life events were supported in 2004 with a grant from the Russell Sage Foundation and in 1991 with a grant from United Way of America.

Source: University of Chicago

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