A report from Public Agenda prepared for The Pew Charitable Trusts

Aggravating Circumstances

A Status Report on Rudeness in America

We dedicate this study to our founder, Cyrus Vance, a man whose integrity shone like a beacon throughout his long career of public service, and who epitomized the qualities of civility and respect that Americans yearn for.

Funding for this project was provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts

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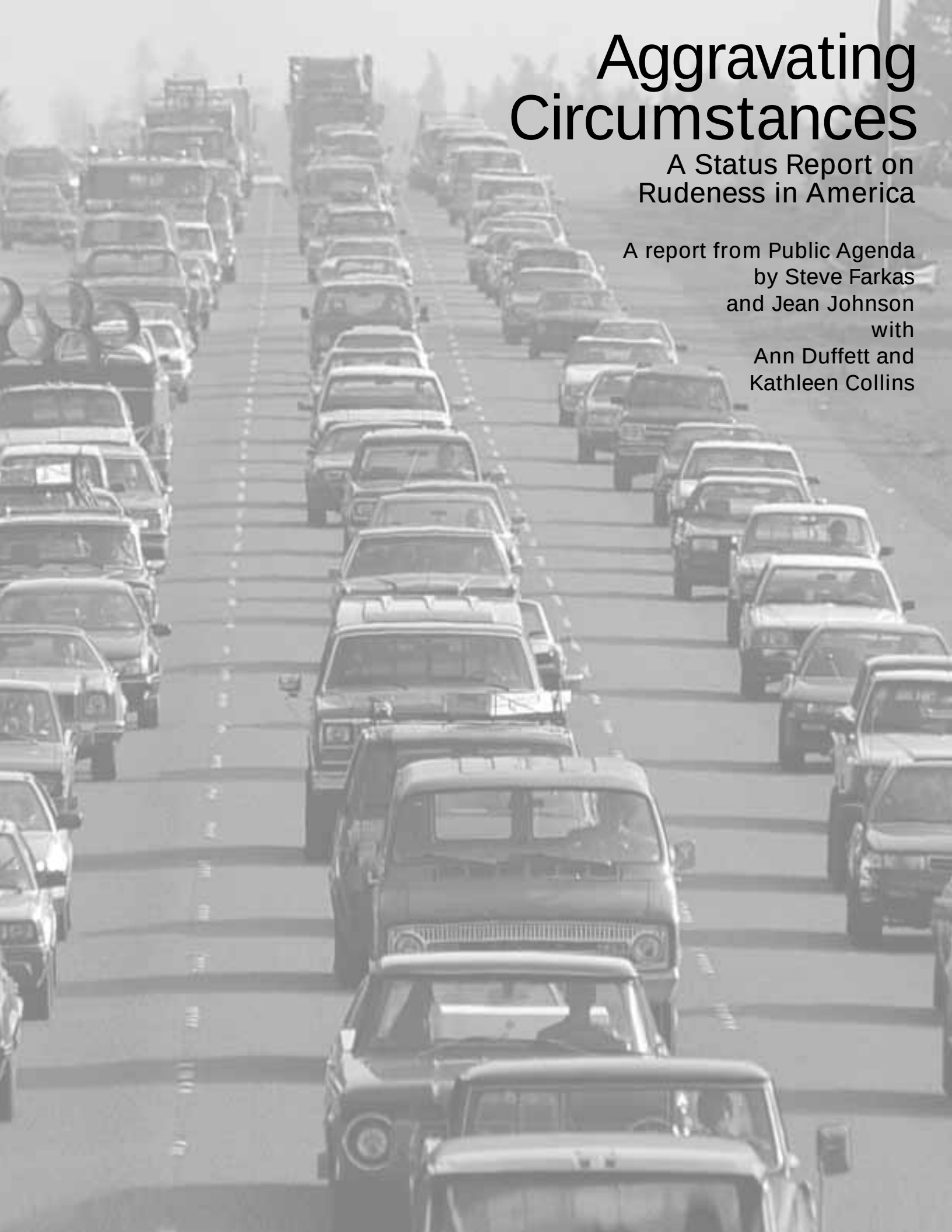

Aggravating Circumstances

A Status Report on Rudeness in America

A report from Public Agenda
by Steve Farkas
and Jean Johnson
with
Ann Duffett and
Kathleen Collins

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials, used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country, have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online, provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

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And Public Agenda's President, Deborah Wadsworth, whose dedication to the issues and remarkable insight guide our organization.

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Americans are particularly concerned about the discourteous and disrespectful conduct of children, and they hold parents primarily responsible for this phenomenon. People say that too many parents don't invest the energy needed to teach their children good behavior, and that too often they fail to set a good example themselves. But even when parents try hard, Americans say, social forces—especially in popular culture and the entertainment media—routinely undercut their efforts.

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Americans point to a confluence of different factors to explain the deterioration of courtesy and respectfulness in today's world. In part, they say, too much crowding, too much anonymity and the pressures of fast-paced lives invite rude behavior, and then rudeness begets more rudeness. Other explanations point to the times we live in and the values we live by—a declining sense of community, offensive and amoral entertainment media and an overall rise in selfishness and callousness.

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INTRODUCTION

It was a Jerry Seinfeld routine savored by millions of Americans angered by nightly telemarketing calls. The comedian picks up the phone and is greeted with yet another annoying sales pitch: "I'm sorry," Seinfeld answers, "I'm a little tied up now. Give me your home number, and I'll call you back later." There is a pause; then Seinfeld continues: "Oh, you don't like being called at home? Well, now you know how I feel." He hangs up.

Seinfeld's "turnabout is fair play" offer is rebuffed, but his message is clear. He doesn't appreciate people calling him at home trying to sell him something. He thinks it is rude and inconsiderate. Yet telemarketing is a multi-billion dollar business in the United States, a number that suggests that millions of Americans find the practice acceptable enough to purchase what is being offered. Even Public Agenda itself telephones people in their homes in the evening to ask them to respond to public opinion surveys.

From Cell Phones to Road Rage

So what counts as rudeness today? Do Americans have a shared definition of what is rude, what is polite and what is someone just doing his own thing? In *Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America*, Public Agenda offers some fresh insights on these topics. With support from The Pew Charitable Trusts, Public Agenda takes a detailed look at what Americans are thinking about courtesy, manners, rudeness and respect. Just how well do they feel people treat each other today? Coming up for examination in the study are topics ranging from profanity and table manners to cell phones and road rage.

At first, it might seem that conducting a survey on courtesy and rudeness is less serious and important than exploring citizens' views on, say, health care or education or retirement policy. Yet how people treat each other in their daily interactions—whether they take steps to be respectful of one another, whether they are willing to moderate their own desires and comfort to accommodate the needs of others—seems to us to be profoundly important and indeed central to the definition of a "civilized" society. Most human enterprises proceed more smoothly if people are respectful and considerate of one another, and they easily become poisoned if people are unpleasant and rude.

Disrespect that Poisons

From the very first moment of the very first exploratory focus group for this project, it was evident that typical Americans have a lot to say about the subject of civility. In fact, concerns about respectfulness and consideration of others surface frequently and spontaneously in almost any Public Agenda focus group on education, child care, parenting or other aspects of community life. In *Kids These Days*, Public Agenda's 1999 study for The Advertising Council, only about one in ten Americans said it was very common to encounter children or teenagers who treat others with respect.[1] And it's not just the adults "dissing" the kids. A Public Agenda study of high school students conducted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2002 shows youngsters echoing at least some of the adult complaints about their teenage peers. Fewer than a third of public high school students report that classmates typically treat their teachers or each other with respect.[2]

Most human enterprises proceed more smoothly if people are respectful and considerate of one another, and they easily become poisoned if people are unpleasant and rude.

A Loss of Civility?

Concerns about respectfulness and civility are not confined to members of the general public. A number of noted social observers and researchers have pondered these themes in explorations of the role of civility in contemporary American life. Newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have addressed the demise of civility and good manners. Journalists E.J. Dionne and George Will have chronicled what they see as a loss of civility in public life with a coinciding

rise in partisanship and divisiveness. Academics including Todd Gitlin and Alan Wolfe discuss the conflict between selfishness and the common good.

Are People Rude at the Mall?

In this Pew/Public Agenda study, Public Agenda addresses one overarching set of questions: Are Americans really encountering less courtesy and more rudeness in their daily lives? Do they find their fellow citizens routinely behaving in ways that upset and bother them? And if this indeed seems to be the case on a large scale, what, in the public's view, is the cause?

Like most Public Agenda research, *Aggravating Circumstances* grows out of a multilayered process that began with a review of existing survey work focusing on issues of civility. Public Agenda also conducted a series of one-on-one interviews with leaders in academia, media, public interest groups and customer relations, and seven focus groups with Americans in different regions across the country. The centerpiece of the study was a random sample telephone survey of 2,013 adults conducted in January 2002. The methodology section of this report includes detailed information about how the study was conducted.

September 11

Public Agenda had intended to field its survey on civility and respectfulness in the latter part of September 2001. Those plans changed after September 11 because the nation's attention was riveted by the tragedy and because Americans witnessed an outpouring of good will for one another that was virtually unprecedented. To insure that the immediate reaction to the terror attacks would not affect the research, Public Agenda postponed the survey until January 2002. Still, it is reasonable to ask whether there has been a significant shift in American thinking in this area given the September events.

To shed light on this issue, Public Agenda included in this study two items from surveys conducted before September 11, and comparisons of the before-and-after results suggest that the general public outlook has shifted only modestly. In July 2000, 78% of Americans told Gallup that "rude and selfish behavior" was increasing in places such as "highways, stores and airports." After September 11, Public Agenda found that the number had decreased to 61%. In 1999, ABC News found just 23% of Americans reporting that most people they meet had very good manners. Public Agenda's post-9/11 survey produced a virtually identical result (24%).[3]

These "pre/post" comparisons offer some insight on how much has changed since September 11, but *Aggravating Circumstances* also tackles the issue more directly. Public Agenda's research included a battery of questions that specifically ask Americans whether they believe that people are treating each other differently—with more respect and consideration—since September 11; we report on Americans' responses to these questions in Finding Six.

Rudeness and a lack of consideration for others are not matters of law, and the traditional legislative and policy solutions to these kinds of problems seem limited.

You Can't Just Pass a Law

As readers will learn in the following pages, large numbers of Americans are less than enthusiastic about the behavior of their fellow citizens in a variety of arenas. So the study raises yet one other central question: What, if anything, can and should be done to address the public's call for a more considerate, more respectful society?

Rudeness and a lack of consideration for others are not matters of law, and the traditional legislative and policy solutions to these kinds of problems seem limited, although we do ask people to respond to some concrete proposals for solutions in the survey itself. More promising perhaps are the multitude of nonlegal avenues—education, business practices, the work of local civic organizations, the bully pulpit and others. As part of our joint work with The Pew Charitable Trusts, Public Agenda will host a series of conversations over the next year asking key decision-makers in such industries as entertainment, business, advertising and education to discuss and analyze the results of the research.

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In the meantime, we believe that *Aggravating Circumstances* is one of the most fascinating explorations of American thinking that we have embarked on lately, and we are eager to share what we have learned. And, by the way, we did not ask our respondents for their opinions about being called at home in the evening to answer survey questions. As some wise person once suggested, If you think you might not like the answer, it's probably better not to ask.

FINDING ONE: JUST A LITTLE COMMON COURTESY

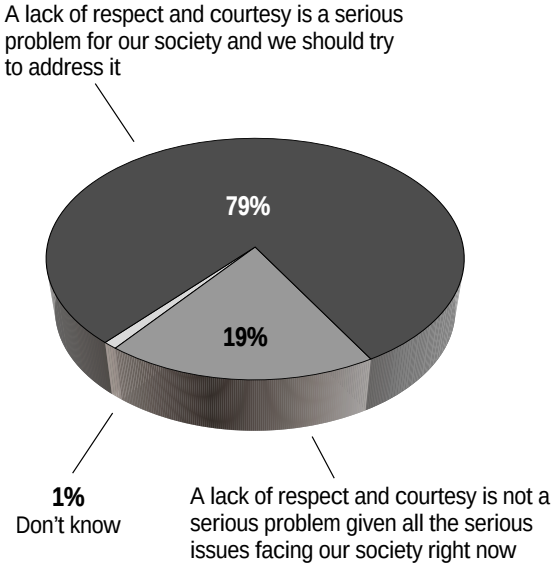
Americans say that disrespect, lack of consideration and rudeness are serious, pervasive problems that affect them on a personal, gut level. People acknowledge that Americans' behavior has improved in some areas, such as the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities and the disabled. But in many others areas, Americans say they are witnessing a deterioration of courtesy and respectfulness that has become a daily assault on their sensibilities and the quality of their lives.

In January 2002, Thomas Junta was convicted of involuntary manslaughter for beating another father to death during a kids' hockey practice in Massachusetts. A shouting match between the parents devolved into a harsh argument, escalated to fisticuffs and ended in tragedy.

In the same month, New York City police searched for a high school student who shot two fellow students in the hallway of his school. The facts of this case have yet to be settled but news accounts report this sequence: His girlfriend had apparently been insulted in a previous altercation, and when he came to her defense, he himself felt humiliated and was bent on retribution.

Lack of Respect Is a Serious Problem

Which statement comes closer to your own view?



Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

Although different in the details, these incidents escalated into violence in a similar fashion: A seemingly minor or controllable disagreement deteriorated into an in-your-face confrontation where heated language and unchecked anger ruled. Few would claim that rude behavior was the ultimate cause of these incidents—most people encountering such confrontations could bring themselves to walk away, at most muttering under their breath. But disrespectful talk and aggressive posturing can clearly cause minor incidents to spin rapidly out of control to the point where brutality becomes unexpectedly possible.

The real question is whether these headline-making stories are a warning sign that Americans are having serious trouble in terms of how they treat each other in public. In this study, we ask how real and extensive the problem is. It is, after all, always easy to say things used to be better. But are all of us truly behaving worse than before, or is it simply that context and circumstances make a difference? And, indeed, given the times we live in—the lingering pain of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the threat of terrorism, the lives of American soldiers at risk abroad, an economy mired in recession—is this an issue Americans are even willing to grapple with?

Apparently, yes. About 8 in 10 (79%) say lack of respect and courtesy is a serious problem in our society, one that we should try to address; only 19% say it is not an important consideration given all the other serious issues facing our society.

Seeking Random Acts of Kindness

It is clear that Americans are intensely frustrated—often angered—by the rude behavior and the lack of respect they encounter in their daily lives. Only 13%

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say that "people are basically treating each other with enough respect and courtesy" these days; 40% say things should be somewhat better, and 44% say they should be a lot better. Things have gotten so bad, that some—like this St. Louis woman interviewed as part of a series of focus groups conducted for this study—respond with shocked gratitude when they are treated nicely. "People are rude, unnecessarily rude," she said. "Oprah started this gratitude journal. The premise is, you have to write down five good things that happened to you. When someone has been extremely nice to me—just a random act of kindness—I always put that in my journal because I find it so rare that it happens."

Fully 61% believe that rude and selfish behavior on highways and in stores and airports has increased in recent years. Frustrations mount as people go about their daily lives—working, shopping, driving—and the bad behavior of others amounts to a daily assault on their sensibilities. "Things are pretty bad—there's a lot of general rudeness, inconsideration, a me-first attitude," said a St. Louis man. "I get real aggravated with people who are into their cell phones at a public place. I don't really care to hear their conversation. Driving—they're more concerned about themselves, not whether they're running a risk of pushing you off the road."

One measure of how pervasive the problem is: Only 12% say they "practically never" come across people who are rude and disrespectful; the remainder see them either "often" (34%) or "sometimes" (54%). Moreover, this finding holds true regardless of the demographic background of respondents—it makes little difference if one is Southern or Northeastern, rich or poor, living in the city or a small town. Throughout this study we will report demographic differences when they are particularly noteworthy, but what is most interesting is how rarely such differences emerge.

Rude and Disrespectful Behavior Is Pervasive

% of respondents who say:	
They often or sometimes come across people who are rude and disrespectful	88
When they see rude and disrespectful behavior in public, it bothers them a lot	62
They themselves have behaved this way in the past	41

Mea Culpa

The most dramatic statistic is, arguably, the one revealing how many people confess to having been rude and disrespectful themselves—41%. When it comes to slippage on the courtesy front, at least some Americans are clearly ready, willing and able to talk candidly about their own shortcomings. "I'll stop traffic sometimes to let people cross, and then people will beep their horn behind me and then I get agitated. I curse, and I can get really aggressive. That's my way of letting it out," said a California woman. "I've done some very inappropriate things," said a Connecticut man. "I've been way too competitive—my son races bicycles and I went through a whole thing with him, and I went, 'Oh, I'm living vicariously through him…[In soccer] my kid started at four. He had fun but I started [thinking] 'My kid can pay his way through college with this, my kid can be a professional player.' And I've been red-carded and thrown out of games as a coach. I'm working my way through that." The American public, however, is split as to whether the problem is caused by many people (48%) or only a few (49%).

Nostalgia for an Imaginary Past?

Those who commission surveys—and those who report them—are notorious for overestimating the severity of problems troubling the public, and people have been known to idealize the past. Are people's memories playing tricks on them? In this case, apparently not. When asked directly, an overwhelming 73% believe that Americans actually used to treat each other with more respect in the past; only 21% say it's simply nostalgia for a past that never existed.

Perhaps a more convincing reason to take people's frustrations seriously is that they easily talk about the good experiences in their lives, the individuals who've

shown that kindness and consideration still thrive. Nearly half (48%) of our sample say they "often" see people being kind and considerate, and only 6% say they "practically never" see this (46% say "sometimes"). "I've been unemployed for seven months or so," said a Cleveland man. "I've seen some wonderful things from some people helping us out, through church or family.…I've seen some really good things come from people."

Good Ratings for Neighbors

And people apparently still count on their neighbors to be friendly and helpful—64% give them good or excellent ratings, and a relatively small percent (32%) say things have gotten worse in this regard. "When I first moved here eight years ago, about two days later, both of my neighbors came and gave me their telephone numbers. They welcomed me—if I needed anything, if I needed to know something about the community, to give them a call. I have very good neighbors," said a Cleveland woman.

Older and Better

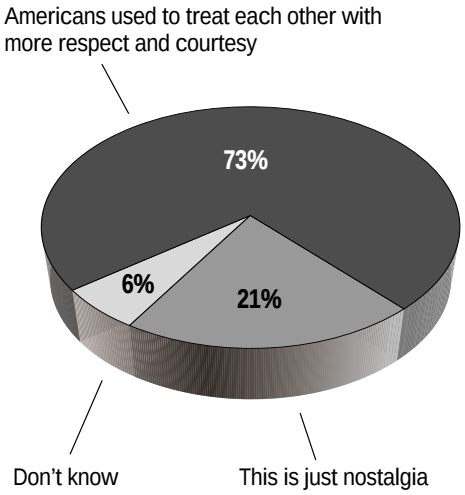
Interestingly, older Americans (65 or over) report somewhat better experiences on the civility front. Almost 6 in 10 older Americans (59%) give people excellent or good grades when it comes to treating the elderly with respect and courtesy, a better evaluation than the overall sample (43%). Older Americans are more likely than younger Americans—those under 30—to say they "often" see people who are kind and considerate (59% versus 39%). And they are less likely than younger Americans to say they "often" see people who are rude and disrespectful (27% versus 45%).

More Respectfulness toward Minorities

The general public also believes that people have become increasingly respectful and considerate in their dealings with African Americans. A 59% majority, for example, says things have gotten better when it comes to "treating African Americans with respect and courtesy"—and 51% would now give people good or excellent ratings on this front.

Americans More Courteous in the Past

Do you think that Americans used to treat each other with more respect and courtesy in the past, or is this just nostalgia for a past that never existed?



African Americans themselves, however, are not quite ready to applaud their fellow citizens: only 26% are ready to give people excellent or good grades when it comes to treating African Americans with respect and courtesy (64% give a "needs improvement" grade, 9% "failing"). While 41% say things have gotten better, 38% say they've stayed the same and 20% say they've gotten worse. "I'd hate to sound pessimistic, but… I still see race problems, the same race problems I came up with as a kid," said an African American man. "Each of the races has these misconceptions of one another, and those misconceptions exist because they don't really sit down and just talk….I think there's a surface improvement, but I mean, any improvement is worth it."

African Americans may have a harder time seeing the nation's progress over time when their daily experiences tell them how far there is still to go. Just one example: When asked if they had been "followed around in a store by an employee because they suspected you were about to shoplift," 44% of African Americans report that this has happened to them within the past year. Only 10% of white respondents say this has happened to them.

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The public's take on how well Hispanics are treated is slightly different. Only 42% of the general public—and 46% of Hispanics—give people good or excellent marks when it comes to "treating Hispanics with respect and courtesy." And only 41% of the general public say things have gotten better—interestingly, among Hispanics the number rises to 54%.

No Longer Hidden

About half (51%) say Americans have gotten better when it comes to "being kind and considerate toward people with physical handicaps"—and fully 61% would now give people in general good or excellent ratings. "I will tell you one thing that I think is a lot better now," said a woman in Frisco, Texas. "It's the way people with handicaps, be it physical or mental, are treated now. My father had a brother who had Down's syndrome, and Grandma and Grandpa always kept him hidden away. They made him go up to his room when people came over. Now…they are people like everybody else—they're out in the shopping centers, they're out in the parks doing fun things, they're being assimilated into the schools….This is a big, big improvement."

Respectful treatment of gay people—at a time when attitudes toward this group are still in transition—was another issue. Half (50%) think there has been improvement in "treating gay people with respect and courtesy." Still, only 31% would now give Americans overall good or excellent ratings—a suggestion there's still a long way to go on this front.

Personal Experiences with Rudeness

As these findings make clear, Americans have the capacity to make distinctions—they are aware of where American society has indeed progressed, and not blind to where it has fallen short. This capacity to make distinctions suggests that people should be taken seriously when they talk about the things that make them angry. The focus groups and the survey findings both make clear that lack of respect is something people personally experience and witness in their daily lives. Their views are not simply fueled by the media, nor are they merely a reaction to partisan infighting in Washington.

Some Improvements in Courtesy

Compared to the past, have things gotten better, worse or stayed the same?

% who say things have "gotten better" when it comes to:	
Treating African Americans with respect and courtesy	59
Being kind and considerate toward people with physical handicaps	51
Treating gay people with respect and courtesy	50
Treating Hispanics with respect and courtesy	41
The problem of littering	27
People being friendly and helpful toward their neighbors	19
Treating the elderly with respect and courtesy	18
Driving with care and consideration	8

It Bothers Me a Lot

Though it is difficult to put a price on the cost of disrespect to society as a whole, the harsh taste of such experiences lingers and accumulates over time. Sixty-two percent of people say it bothers them a lot when they see rude or disrespectful behavior. More than half (52%) of respondents also say that incidents of disrespect tend to stay with them for some time, that they are difficult to shrug off.

Most people, as we have seen, say their neighbors are generally kind and considerate. But a sizeable number (37%) have been so affected by rudeness that they have even thought about moving just so they can "live in a community where people are nicer to each other." "Where is the decency then?" asked a Connecticut

woman of the other focus group participants. "Where is the common courtesy? Where is it a given that you treat your fellow human being as a human being? What does it take to smile?" The realization that things should be better elicits the hope that perhaps elsewhere they are.

"For the Sake of Living Together"

One of the tough challenges involved in taking on the civility issue at the national level is the unconscious confluence of ideological voices raised against it. Some conservatives, for example, are quick to point to the decline of civility as a corrosive example of the unraveling of the ties that bind us. Yet they are also quick to belittle as mere political correctness people's wariness to judge or label others. They extol the civility of the past, ignoring the shortcomings of earlier decades—for example, the mistreatment of minorities or the handicapped. Some liberals, for their part, disparage the call to civility as a meaningless exercise in window dressing, a trifling concern. Even worse, they suspect that the call for nicer behavior is simply a way to forgo discussion about important issues facing our society.

What ordinary Americans have to say may offer a useful corrective that can move the argument beyond the terrain of pundits, if only because they are struggling and living with the consequences of the issue day in and day out. What truly bothers them is not questions such as which fork to use with the salad. It's not a matter of better etiquette. It is closer to what Stephen Carter, in a conversation about his book *Civility*, said: "…We tend to think about civility as being about manners," he said. "…I'd like to think of it as something larger, that civility is the sum of all of the sacrifices that we make for the sake of living together. And one of the things I think we're losing in America today is the sense of—to put it simply—going the extra mile, doing something we don't have to do that the law doesn't require of us in order to help someone else's life be a little better."[4]

> ***"Where is the decency then? Where is the common courtesy? Where is it a given that you treat your fellow human being as a human being? What does it take to smile?"***
>
> ***—Connecticut woman***

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FINDING TWO: BAD FOR BUSINESS

Americans say that the way they are treated by business and customer service employees is frequently exasperating, and sometimes even insulting. Too many workers, they complain, are careless, apathetic and unhelpful. Almost half of those surveyed say that they have walked out of a business specifically because of bad service, and the number is even higher among affluent Americans.

American businesses are widely acknowledged as the masters of marketing and advertising. Marketing to consumers is a substantial industry in and of itself, with an entire corps of professionals dedicated to specialized market research, advertising and sales. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to name a nation that has developed more tools and invested more resources in trying to understand—and deliver—exactly what customers want. Nor has the lavish attention spent on customers gone unnoticed. American customers do have high expectations about how they should be treated by companies.

At Least Say Thank You

But any business that depends on satisfied customers may be dismayed to find out that—notwithstanding all of the concern marketers place on pleasing consumers—nearly half of all Americans (46%) report they have walked out of a store in the past year just because of bad service. High-income respondents—those making more than $75,000 annually—are even more likely to say they've walked out (57%).

What's more, although people may look past the mistakes and missteps of their fellow citizens, they seem far less willing to excuse or ignore disrespect on the part of a company. One woman clearly articulated the difference between those expectations and her tolerance for rude treatment by fellow citizens: "It depends on where I am. If I'm just out and somebody is being ignorant, then I'm just going to ignore it, because I don't know this person—nobody has any type of authority over this person. But if you're in a store and someone is giving you bad service or at a restaurant, yes, then I have an issue. When you're in a store or restaurant, you expect a certain amount of consideration—you're spending your money, and you're expecting someone to at least be kind. At least say, 'Thank you,' or 'Have a good day.'"

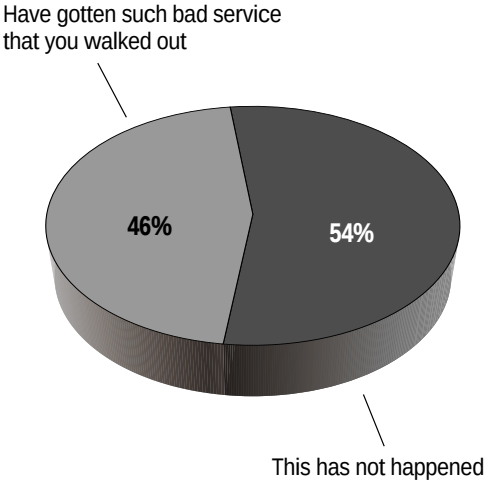
Hidden Costs but Very Real

The focus groups revealed the extent to which poor service has become a persistent point of irritation and a hot topic in ordinary conversation among Americans. A Connecticut man had so many disappointments that he developed a quick rule about what to do when confronted with bad service: "I just don't go back."

Most people know there are times when they should resort to the "squeaky wheel" strategy to get results: 67% say "I sometimes have to make a fuss to get a problem resolved." But consumers are at least as likely

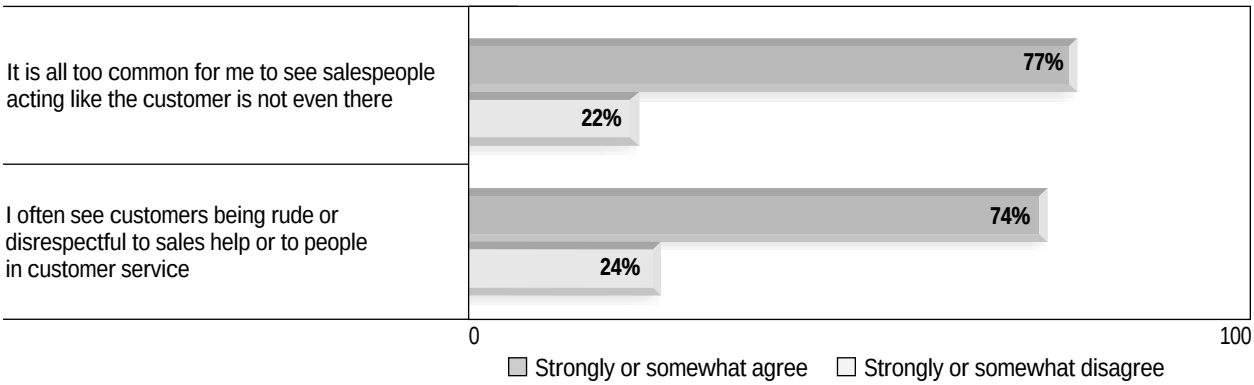
Walking Away from Bad Service

Within the past year, have you gotten such bad service from a store employee that you walked out, or has this not happened to you?



Rude Clerks, Rude Customers

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about companies and customer service?



to simply decide to cut their losses. They either put up with bad service, or walk out, or put up with bad service and never come back. Indeed, nearly two-thirds (65%) say "I am the kind of person who hardly ever complains when they get bad service in a store or restaurant." Much of the problem may be concealed—the customer may always be right but she or he doesn't always complain.

A young woman working for a major home-supply store talked about how her department had just lost a big sale—and perhaps a customer—that very day because of bad service. "It was sad," she said. "Some guy just came up and said, 'I want to buy a tractor.' You don't get that that often. Then, the people who work in the lawn and garden [department] said, 'Well, you need this part to put on the tractor.' The customer said, 'OK. Can you show me where do I put it? What am I supposed to do with it?' [And they say] 'Oh, we don't do that. We don't know where it goes.' So then [the customer says], 'Isn't that your job? This is your product that you're selling. Is there a way that you can find out?' [And they say] 'No.'"

When the customer asked for the manager "the employee lied. He said, 'Oh, I am the manager,' just so that he couldn't go to anybody higher." Like the proverbial tree falling in a forest when there is no one to hear it, the manager or owner of the store will probably never find out about that day's unseen losses.

Just Not Enough People

Many of the people we interviewed attribute poor customer service to their sense that businesses are simply trying to squeeze costs and increase profits by hiring fewer service workers or paying them less. Eight in 10 (81%) say that "too many stores cut corners by not hiring enough sales help and forcing customers to wait for service."

"My wife and I talk about this all the time," said a Cleveland man. "Because the service just seems to get worse and worse and worse. In restaurants, or when you're waiting in line trying to get help in a grocery store or at [the movie theater] there just are not enough people. I don't think they're paying enough. They're not getting loyalty. Maybe that person will jump over to another store for a 10- or 15-cent raise."

In Florida, as focus group participants traded stories about horrible service, a woman who is a telephone customer service representative gave them an inside peek at what it's like to work on the other side of the phone. "Is it that they don't care, or are they under the stress and pressure of [needing] to take 500 phone calls in a day? ….Customer service people are told: 'You need to have so many calls in a day, or you're not doing your job, and you must be lollygagging.'"

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"You Get Barked At"

When people judge the quality of customer service, they zero in on the attentiveness, concern and engagement they get. One of the most frustrating things to happen—and it happens all too often, from their perspective—is to be waiting for help and to be simply ignored. Fully 3 in 4 (77%) say it is "all too common for me to see salespeople acting like the customer is not even there." A Cleveland man said, "There's just unwillingness to help, unwillingness to want to help, unwillingness to do their job. You ask for a glass of water, you get barked at. You ask them to come over and help you, 'That's not my department. That's not my job.'"

Perhaps a good indication of how eager people are for a remedy is to witness their response to a proposal in the survey for "companies to encourage customers to let them know about employees who are extremely rude or unhelpful so they can do something about it." An overwhelming 92% think this would be an effective measure for improving customer service, with 59% saying it would be "very effective." The flip proposal garners a notably similar level of enthusiasm. An overwhelming 94% think it would be effective for "companies to encourage customers to identify extremely helpful employees so the employees can be financially rewarded for a job well done," with 68% saying it would be "very effective."

High Tech, but Little More

It is instructive to hear what people have to say about good service that stands out in their minds. Here, for example, is a woman talking in glowing terms about her doctor: "My doctor is very good. When I come into his office, he will sit down and talk to me. It's not a rush job. That's what I like. He makes sure that I thoroughly understand everything he says. His accent is very thick. He can always tell if he says a word that I did not quite catch. He will repeat it. If I don't understand, he will sit there and draw me pictures." A doctor's sincere effort to communicate, to pay personal attention to the patient, creates a level of trust that may ultimately count more to the patient than a doctor's academic credentials.

The medical care analogy may be quite fitting. Just like this nation's health care industry, the products and services industry has achieved astonishing levels of sophistication; yet both often wind up with customers who are profoundly unhappy. That's because people's level of satisfaction—either with health care providers or with service providers—is critically dependent upon receiving unhurried, respectful attention—from doctors, from salespeople—that shows personal engagement with the task at hand. If both industries share an Achilles' heel, this seems to be it.

The Efficiency Boomerang

When it goes wrong, perhaps nothing embodies greater exasperation than customer service by phone. One would be hard-pressed to come up with a customer service innovation that is more likely to induce customer rage. What may be efficient for businesses very often boomerangs to their disadvantage in terms of customer relations. Nearly the entire sample—94%—say it is "very frustrating to call a company and get a recording instead of a human being who can answer my question directly."

"There's just unwillingness to help…unwillingness to do their job. You ask for a glass of water, you get barked at. You ask them to come over and help you, 'That's not my department. That's not my job.'"

—Cleveland man

"I Detest Them"

A St. Louis woman recapped the sorry scenario: "You get the menu, press 1 for this, and press 2 for this. If you stay on the line, punch 0, hold and an operator will come on—and then you get music for 15 minutes, and then you get disgusted, and you hang up." A Cleveland woman said, "None of the options are the options that you want to use. So, you choose the one that you think is closest to the option that you want, and of course, it's not. I hate the ones where it won't allow you to go back to where you were. You're finished. You had two times, you didn't respond to this by pressing whatever number. Goodbye."

The St. Louis focus group included a computer programmer who made a living creating these phone menus for companies—and he was more incensed than anyone, calling the customer service recordings "the worst thing that has come along." He said, "I detest them, but if they're done correctly, they can be of real

value. But when you start putting seven menu items on the first go-around, you get to the point where you say none of these were what I was wanting to call on. You're hitting 0 trying to get to that operator, and it won't even let you get to somebody." The programmer was getting so worked up that he began to openly fantasize about sabotage: "Some of them have a backdoor key that you can get in and do something. If I ever remembered some of those, I would delete everything in their system. I hate them, and I programmed them."

Nor does finally reaching a real human being guarantee responsive service. "Whenever you call customer service, you get the first line of defense," said a Florida man. "Half the time they have no idea what they're talking about. And they don't care. They'll tell you anything just to get you off the phone."

The final insult on the telephone front is to get telemarketing calls at home: Fully 77% call them "a rude and pushy way for companies to do business" while only 18% think of them as "a reasonable and effective way for businesses to reach customers."

Taking "Servant" Literally

It seems that the rudeness cuts both ways: nearly 3 in 4 (74%) say they "often see customers being rude or disrespectful to sales help or to people in customer service." Disgruntled customers bring frayed nerves, previous frustrations and their own personal shortcomings when they deal with those responsible for helping them. A woman in Connecticut said, "I'm a federal employee…People take 'civil servant' literally. They think that you're at their beck and call….They may want something, and they're not getting it as rapidly as they think they should. I answer the phone, and they just immediately go off on me."

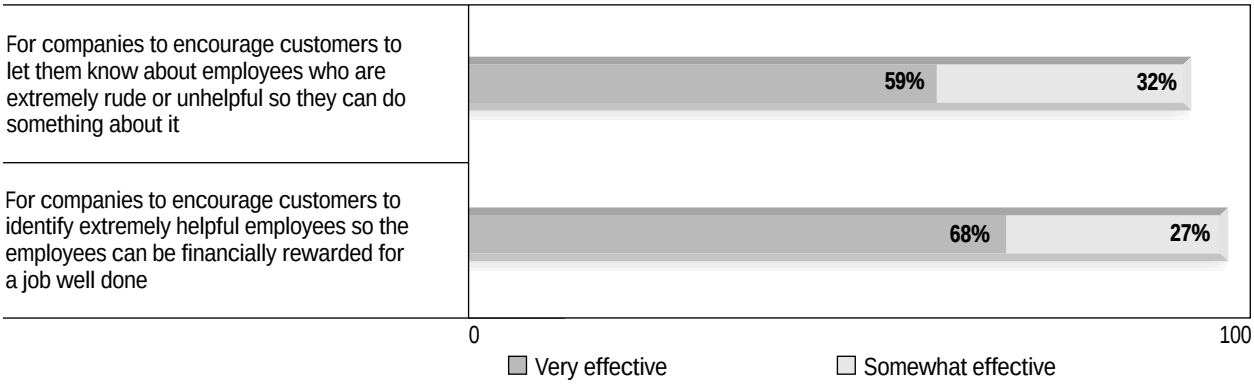
Few businesses will kick out any but the most offensive customers. But there is probably a fair bit of room for them to expect customers to behave according to minimal standards of courtesy. "My son took the business over. He'll pick up the phone, and someone is yelling at him before he can even say anything," said a Cleveland woman. "Just yesterday I heard him say, 'Sir, if you talk nice, I will listen; otherwise, I will hang up.' He was really in a rage, so my son hung up. Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. The guy calls and apologizes, because his wife told him, 'You deserved everything you got.'"

"Something They Didn't Have to Do"

Although unpleasant stories of bad customer service were far more plentiful in the focus groups, people would occasionally offer examples of good customer service—either as the exception that proved the rule or in response to the moderator's entreaty. In any case, they are revealing. One Florida woman recounted this story: "Just this morning I went to a business very early, 20 minutes before they opened up. It was an authorized dealer to fix my husband's razor. Do you know, I was sitting in the parking lot and they came out of the store, and came to my car—this was 20 minutes early, before

What Companies Could Do

How effective do you think each of these would be for improving people's behavior these days?



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they opened, and they said, 'You can come in.' I was stunned. I said, 'Thank you, thank you.' I would always go back there because they were so nice to me. They did something they didn't have to do."

When service people go the extra mile for their customers, it seems to leave an unforgettable impression. But companies get no points—and may even pay a price—if their customers suspect they are just going through the motions of being courteous or merely feigning concern. "Everybody is starting these closure sentences," said a Florida woman. "I think a lot of these larger corporations are starting to make their people say them—whether they mean it or not. Sometimes, I get to the bank; I hear that so much that, to me, it is almost a phony thing….If it doesn't seem genuine, if it seems forced, then it's like a scripting—they could care less if there's anything else you need." To win a customer's loyalty, courtesy and respect have to be sincere, not just lip service.

When service people go the extra mile for their customers, it seems to leave an unforgettable impression. But companies get no points if their customers suspect they are just going through the motions of being courteous or merely feigning concern.

FINDING THREE: DRIVEN TO DISTRACTION

If Americans are exasperated by the way that businesses and government agencies treat them, they are equally disenchanted with the behavior of many of their fellow citizens. Majorities of Americans complain about inconsiderate, even dangerous drivers; rude cell phone users; and a virtually ubiquitous onslaught of profanity and coarse language.

When Americans are frustrated with a company's customer service they have recourse—the perennial "I want to speak to the manager" strategy or the ultimate "you'll never see me here again" response. But what can they do—and who can they appeal to—when their fellow citizens violate their expectations with disrespectful, rude behavior? Perhaps because there is little recourse, perhaps because it happens so often, high levels of frustration abound as people talk about the specific daily violations they endure.

Road Warriors

By far, aggressive or inconsiderate driving provoked the most outrage and anger—this was something people immediately offered as proof positive that respectful behavior has been lost. Nearly 6 in 10 (58%) respondents say they often see drivers who are aggressive and reckless on the road. "When I have somebody come behind me at 90 and tailgate me, I want there to be something in the back of my car that blasts them off the road," said a Danbury, Connecticut, man. "So I react to their level of disrespect…But, if there are ten other cars in front of me, what's the point of riding my bumper at 80? I feel their behavior is threatening to me physically." Urban respondents (63%) are more likely than rural respondents (47%) to say they often see reckless drivers.

Whether it's recklessness, bullying or inconsiderate driving, the problem appears to be commonplace and growing. When asked to grade people "when it comes to driving with care and consideration," 62% say "needs improvement" while another 18% simply say "failing." More than 6 in 10 (64%) say things have gotten worse.

Yelling and Obscene Gestures

On the road, ordinarily calm citizens find themselves yelling, cursing, making obscene gestures and having fantasies of inflicting harm. There is a social price to be paid: 66% say reckless and aggressive drivers bother them a lot. Judging by their comments, the experience of being involved in conflicts on the road stays with people for a long time, jarring their sense of safety and undermining their trust in the people around them.

At one point, the frustrations of driving spilled over into a focus group discussion. People usually try to be on their best behavior during focus groups, but this time things got heated. One man thought he deserved to get an acknowledging wave of thanks from other drivers for allowing them to merge into his lane. But another person in the group challenged him: "I don't wave thank you. I'm one of the non-wavers…It's not your road. I have a right to drive there," she said. "But I don't have to let you in," he insisted. "Maybe next time if I can remember that white Corvette that you're driving, I'm not going to let you in."

> ***"When you're in your car, your relationship with the people around you is so impersonal.…I sometimes say things that I would never say to an individual face to face…"***
> ***—Cleveland woman***

"You Have this Shell around You"

Driving appears to bring out the worst in people—indeed, not a small number (35%) admit to doing wrong in this area themselves—and many struggled to explain why. Simple overcrowding was cited as one cause. A woman in Florida said, "They're just overpopulating areas. They're trying to make the roads bigger but everybody needs to be on these roads….There's just so many people."

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But people also thought that driving was an activity almost tailor-made to foster hostility and rudeness. Anonymity is virtually guaranteed—it's easier to get away with misbehavior when there is little chance of seeing that driver again. A misunderstanding can't be cleared up by pulling over to the side of the road and talking it through. A mistake is harder to apologize for. As a woman from the Cleveland area said, "When you're in your car, your relationship with the people around you is so impersonal, because you have this shell around you. I even notice it with myself. I don't do mean things, but I sometimes say things that I would never say to an individual face to face or if there was even the remotest chance that they would hear me or read my lips."

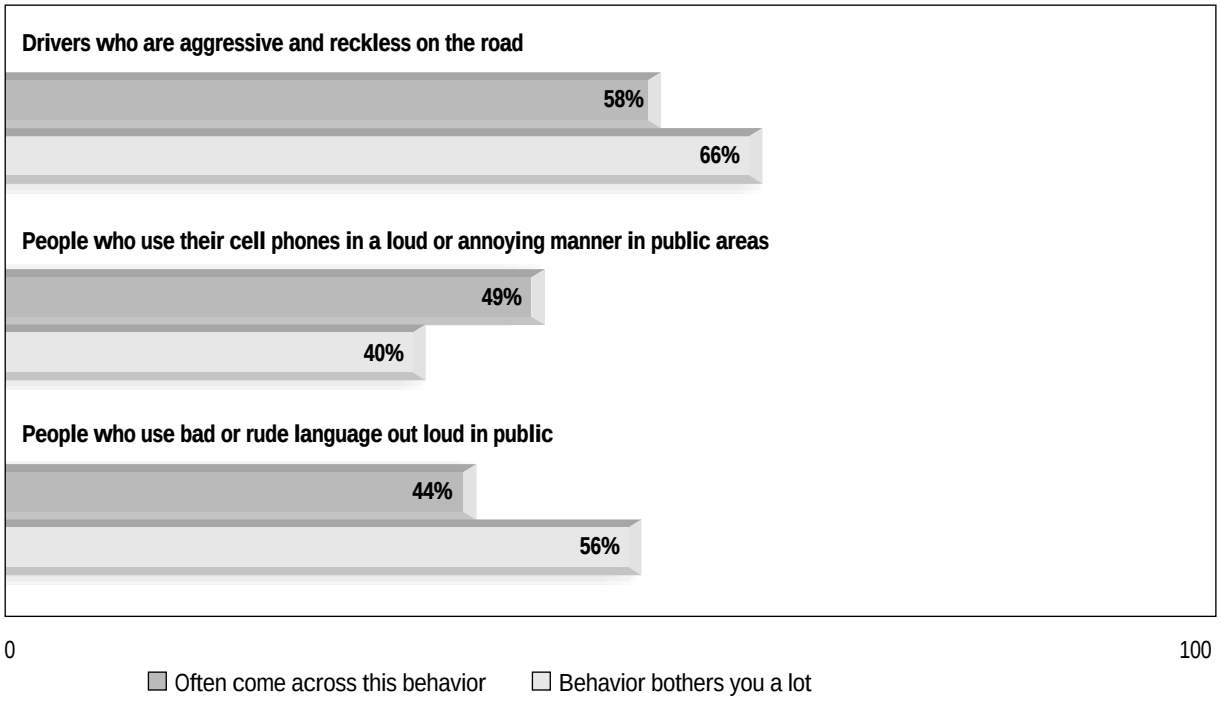
While many will still bring their off-road expectations —e.g., reciprocity and courtesy—to the highways, they also tend to read the worst motives into the behavior of other drivers. As this California driver's comment illustrates, perceived slights can trigger the harshest thoughts: "I tend to try to let people in all the time. I'll stop traffic sometimes to let people cross, and people will beep their horn or [the pedestrians] don't say anything. I think, 'F***ing rude b****, couldn't say thank you.' Excuse my expression. But I think that's part of the problem that we're having in the street—we construe things in a different way. Somebody's doing one thing and somebody's perceiving it in another way."

Road Rules

Solutions were rarely volunteered by focus group participants, but there is a prevailing sense that something concrete should be done. When solutions are offered, people respond. For example, almost 8 in 10 think that encouraging people to report extremely aggressive drivers to law enforcement would be an effective solution for improving people's behavior (45% very effective; 34% somewhat effective). A similar number also believes that a public service campaign to promote courtesy and consideration on the nation's roads would be effective (33% very effective; 41% somewhat

The Insults of Daily Life

% of respondents who say they "often" come across each of the following and that it bothers them "a lot"*



*Note: Asked of those who said they see behavior "often" or "sometimes"

effective). Said one Fort Lauderdale resident, "The government should have signs all over. That would do a lot. Just so people would see it while they're driving and realize maybe they need to be a little bit more courteous, or smile at another driver."

No Sense of Boundaries

As the number of users has skyrocketed, the cell phone appears to be making a great assault on the day-to-day ledger of courtesy. About half (49%) say they often see people using their cell phones in a loud or annoying manner in public areas; 40% say it bothers them a lot when it happens. "People will talk on the phone—like sit right here and talk on the phone—almost as though you don't exist. They have no sense of a boundary," said a California man. "I can't even believe the places that people leave them on," said a Connecticut woman. "Sometimes in theaters. Sometimes in restaurants. When a person just picks it up and starts speaking loudly in a restaurant, and the calls come in one after another…I think if you're going out to enjoy an evening to have dinner and relax, then why do that?" Close quarters seem to aggravate this problem: Urban residents are more likely than rural residents to report they often see annoying cell phone use (54% versus 38%).

Many Confess to Bad Behavior

Now I am going to ask you how often you see certain behaviors in your daily life.

Have you yourself ever done something similar, or not?

% who say they have done the following:	
Were rude and disrespectful in public	41
Used bad or rude language out loud in public	36
Driven aggressively and recklessly on the road	35
Used their cell phone in a loud or annoying manner in public areas	17

As people traded stories about cell phones going off during inappropriate times, they would shake their heads reliving the memory of violations of basic courtesy. One person talked about cell phones ringing at a commencement ceremony: "The speaker was speaking and the cell phones kept going off and the parents were taking the calls and saying, 'I can't hear you.' It got so disruptive…that the superintendent stood up and said, 'Can everyone please turn their pager and cell phone off? We're honoring the senior class.'" Only 17% of those who own a cell phone admit to having used it inappropriately.

Put Down that Cell Phone

Many movie theaters have taken to showing whimsical short clips that remind viewers to turn off their cell phones and beepers. There is every indication that the public thinks the theaters are right on target—if anything, people would probably like to see more establishments laying down ground rules on the proper use of cell phones. When asked what they think of a law to ban cell phone use in public places such as museums, movies and restaurants, 6 in 10 say they think it would be an effective measure for improving people's behavior (31% very effective; 29% somewhat effective). A St. Louis man wants restaurant managers to enforce cell phone etiquette because he thinks it's safer that way—there would be less opportunity for conflict to break out between individuals. "If I told someone: 'Get off the cell phone, I'm here with my wife trying to have dinner,' I don't know him from the next guy. He might get up, hit me in the head, and start a big fight. I think the manager needs to take the situation into his hands."

A Lethal Combination

People are already agitated about driving, so talking on a cell phone while driving is a particularly enraging mix. "Cell phones raise my blood pressure," said a St. Louis woman. "I'm so annoyed by them. My husband can be driving, and if he picks up his phone, he cannot be concentrating. To me it's just sickening to see people on the road talking and not paying attention." "People get on a cell phone and they forget where they are," said

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a Fort Lauderdale man. "They're not concentrating on driving. They just keep leaning to the right, keep leaning to the left. It's getting to be a very serious weapon."

Virtual Rudeness?

Much has been made of both the promise and the downside of computers and the Internet in terms of their impact on human interaction. The U.S. Department of Commerce reports that 143 million people currently utilize the Internet.[5] Although its effect may be less public than the cell phone, it seems that the Internet adds yet another channel for rudeness: 39% of survey respondents with online access report receiving crude or nasty e-mail or chat room messages in the past year. As with driving, the promise of anonymity may pave the way for disrespect: 57% believe "it's much easier for people to be rude on the Internet because they can hide their identity."

Watch Your Language?

One of the more intriguing questions that surfaced from the very beginning was the use of foul language. More than four in 10 (44%) often hear people using bad or rude language in public. More than a third (36%) admit to having done so themselves. "I'll admit it. I'm guilty," said a man in Texas.

People's tolerance of bad language is partly determined by context. "I definitely think it should be permissible on the golf course," said a Texas man, half-jokingly. And while an occasional slip by an adult may be overlooked, it appears far less acceptable when a child does it. "I don't appreciate it when adults do it, but when kids do it, it's a whole different ballgame as far as I'm concerned," said a St. Louis woman. Men are substantially more likely than women to admit to using foul language in public (45% to 26%), as are adults under 30 compared to those 65 or older (53% to 19%).

The Geography of Bad Language

More than half (56%) of respondents say it bothers them a lot when they hear people using bad language in public. Yet conventions about what is acceptable and unacceptable language seem to vary according to geographic location. When Public Agenda moderated a focus group in Connecticut, the word ***hole was tossed about by several people. The moderator was taken aback that people meeting for the first time would use the word so casually, but when he asked whether hearing it made others squirm it was clear that no one—save one woman who was a transplant from the South—was particularly disturbed.

In contrast, the moderator was surprised when a woman in Texas was offended by what seemed to him routine: "People say, 'Oh, my God,' too much in America. It's

Regional Differences

How do you feel about people using God's name in vain during ordinary conversation or when they're angry?

% of respondents who say:	South	Northeast	Midwest	West
It's always wrong to do	76	50	65	56
— **OR** —				
There's nothing really wrong with it	4	8	5	11
— **OR** —				
It's somewhere in between	19	42	30	33

in every other sentence. Why? Swearing, cuss words and such—that is the conversation and vocabulary. Taking God's name in vain is wrong—it's in the Ten Commandments."

A clear majority (64%) say that it's always wrong for people to use "God's name in vain during ordinary conversation or when they are angry." Only 7% say there's nothing wrong with it and 29% say somewhere in between. But using God's name in vain is one of the few questions in this study where geographic differences are substantial: in the South 76% say it's always wrong to do, compared to 50% in the Northeast. Also, African American respondents (75%) are most likely to say taking God's name in vain is always wrong to do, followed by whites (64%) and then Hispanics (54%).

Litter Doesn't Break Down

The public's concern for the environment has been high for several decades, so much so that one might have thought that casual littering was a long settled issue—something people had already resolved to avoid. But the vast majority of Americans are less than satisfied: more than half (55%) believe people need to improve when it comes to the littering problem—another 24% give people a "failing" grade.

It may be that, as the following quote illustrates, people's tolerance for littering has declined and that what used to be unobjectionable has now become intolerable. A St. Louis man said, "I think the litter campaigns have helped, but there's still a lot of stuff being thrown out. I guess the one that really gets me is the smoker who doesn't think a cigarette butt is litter. But it is, it's litter that doesn't break down. It doesn't go away.…Why don't they think about that? They may not throw a cup out the window, because they'll get fined for that, but they'll think nothing of tossing their cigarettes out the window." Aren't things better than they used to be? Only 27% think so; 31% see no change, and 40% say things have gotten worse when it comes to littering.

The Mathematics of Incivility

Americans are somewhat less likely to experience rude behavior at their workplaces, but the problem does exist for some. Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) who work outside the home say they have colleagues who are rude or disrespectful; 3 in 10 (31%) say their workplace has supervisors who behave in this way. Interestingly, other places where people are less likely to report that they "often" see rude or disrespectful behavior are: at shopping malls (34%); at government offices (19%); at the airport or on a plane (13%).

The mathematics of incivility are disturbing. If you don't face it at work there's a good chance you'll face it during your commute to work; if you don't face it in your immediate neighborhood there's a good chance you'll run into it going to dinner or at the movie theater.

But if one steps back to look at the range of locations in which Americans live, work and travel, the mathematics of incivility are disturbing. If you don't face it at work there's a good chance you'll face it during your commute to work; if you don't face it in your immediate neighborhood there's a good chance you'll run into it going to dinner or at the movie theater.

When it comes to defining offensive behavior, people have different standards, different levels of tolerance—and these may change according to the situation. What's unacceptably bad language for some may be a conversational convenience to others. On the golf course or with friends, some might use language they would never think of using in front of their children. It may therefore be tempting to simply throw in the towel and say, "Who's to judge?"

But if this study shows anything, it shows that few people can count on being consistently treated with respect and courtesy as they go about their daily lives. The cumulative social costs—in terms of mistrust, anger and even rage—are all too real to ignore.

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FINDING FOUR: AS THE TWIG IS BENT

Americans are particularly concerned about the discourteous and disrespectful conduct of children, and they hold parents primarily responsible for this phenomenon. People say that too many parents don't invest the energy needed to teach their children good behavior, and that too often they fail to set a good example themselves. But even when parents try hard, Americans say, social forces—especially in popular culture and the entertainment media—routinely undercut their efforts.

A society's highest hopes—as well as its fears and disappointments—are, arguably, projected onto its children. When the focus group conversations turned to the subject of kids' rude and disrespectful behavior, people became particularly agitated. As Americans decry the decline of respect and civility in their daily lives, they are especially upset by the way it manifests itself in children's behavior. To them, this key building block in the education of children is badly neglected today and the sad consequences are widely apparent. Parents are chiefly held responsible for this neglect, but society at large—the entertainment industry especially—gets a great deal of the blame. And, as is often the case, the schools are where much of this disrespectful behavior plays out.

Devastating Words

Daytime TV talk shows are replete with sleazy segments about disrespectful, out-of-control youth. But when ordinary Americans talk about "kids these days," they are speaking from personal experience and observation—not media images.

Very few Americans—only 9%—say that the kids they see in public "are respectful toward adults." About four in 10 (39%) say things should be somewhat better. Over half (52%) go further and say they should be a lot better. A California mom's first comment in the focus group was, "I don't think most of us are really rearing our children to be courteous and kind and to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' I find it offensive."

As one might expect, respondents' perceptions of the kids they are very close to are better, but they hardly indicate contentment. Three in 10 (31%) say the kids they personally know well are respectful; another 35% say they should be somewhat better and about one-third (32%) say they should be a lot better. "I just spent yesterday with my 9- and 12-year-old cousins, and the way that they talk to their mom would not be acceptable in my house….If she tells them to do something they'll talk back, saying, 'You can't tell me what to do.' We would never have talked to my mom that way when we were children," said a California woman.

> ***"I don't think most of us are really rearing our children to be courteous and kind and to 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' I find it offensive."***
>
> ***—California mom***

A California teacher's anguish over the behavior of her high school students could not have been more heartfelt: "What they say to each other is just hurtful. The name-calling and the making fun of each other because of physical disabilities or being overweight. Kids can burst out in tears and the others continue harassing them….especially in the teenage years. Those things are devastating."

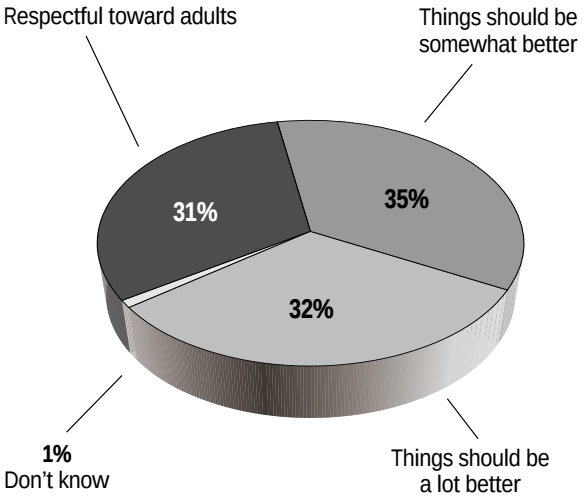
Teens Report from the Front Lines

Nor can these findings be easily dismissed as merely the judgment of adults with impossibly high—or old-fashioned—standards. As a recent Public Agenda survey of high school students indicates, teenagers themselves say that disrespect is common in the world they live in. Fully 3 in 4 high schoolers say they frequently hear cursing in the hallways and cafeteria of their schools. Less than a third of high school students say their classmates treat each other with respect; fewer

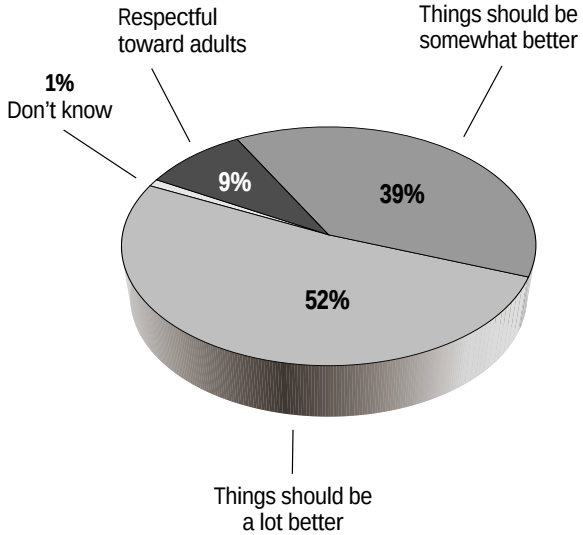
Disrespectful Kids Close to Home

Thinking about the following types of kids, would you say that they are respectful toward adults, should things be somewhat better or should things be a lot better?

KIDS YOU KNOW WELL



KIDS YOU SEE IN PUBLIC



still—only about 1 in 5—say their classmates treat teachers with respect.[6]

Picking Their Battles

When it comes to kids' conduct, people's concerns are far more likely to revolve around kids' actual behavior toward others than around their table manners. It's not that table manners are unimportant—in fact, 4 in 10 (41%) say the sight of older children chewing with their mouths open or unable to use their knife and fork properly would bother them a lot. But a substantially larger proportion of adults (59%) would be bothered a lot by older children "who couldn't sit still during dinner" and who constantly interrupt the conversation. The public has a hierarchy in its valuation of appropriate behavior.

To some, the pick-your-battles motto seems to be operating. As a Connecticut dad made clear, he was sometimes willing to accept sloppy table manners, saying, "Well, if I can just get my kid to eat, then I'm happy." Although earlier in the conversation he made the point: "I totally agree that table manners, opening the door for others, all those basics are important, but I think more important is that I teach my child to respect other customs, for example, to be more tolerant if a person comes from a different culture and eats in a different way."

Watch What You Say

The language kids use, however, is one area where the slippage is increasingly troubling adults, one where they have yet to accept compromise. Three in 4 (75%) want parents to teach kids that "cursing is always wrong." A St. Louis woman said, "Kids nowadays—if you're in a store, and you're walking behind three or four teenagers, you may hear the 'F' word every other word, every other sentence, and they think absolutely nothing about it. It is part of their vocabulary, along with other bad language. That's the thing that just sets my hair. They think nothing of it." As one might expect, older Americans (65 and over) and the religious (those who attend services at least once a week) are more likely to say that children should be taught never to curse (84% of older Americans; 88% of people who are religious).

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A 62% majority of the general public thinks "young people should be taught to address their elders as Sir or Ma'am," while 36% say "this is too formal and outdated." As a Texas man recalled, "I was raised by my grandmother. If anybody was older than me, being male or female, it was, 'Yes, sir. No, sir. Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am.' My sons are raised like that. I personally don't see anything wrong with that, but they have problems with some of their friends in school. They say, 'Why do you say that? That's so un-cool.'" African Americans are overwhelmingly in favor of the Sir/Ma'am salutation—81% favor it, compared to only 18% who say it's outdated. Southerners also are much more likely to endorse this degree of politeness—78% favor it, compared to 19% who think it's outdated. In other regions of the country people are more evenly divided on this issue: 49% to 49% in the West; 54% to 45% in the Midwest; and 56% to 42% in the Northeast. These regional differences echo those from the previous finding regarding using God's name in vain.

Talking out of Both Sides of the Mouth?

Yet, when it comes to using bad language, adults give themselves leeway that they are reluctant to grant kids. For example, only 19% claim to "never" curse. Still, the vast majority of Americans (71%) believe that a strict policy against cursing by students on school grounds would be an effective measure for improving kids' behavior. One focus group participant had a rationale for distinguishing cursing by kids from cursing by adults. "I'm guilty of it [cursing]," she said. "I don't appreciate it when adults do it, but when kids do it it's a whole different ballgame, as far as I'm concerned. It's all just part of how they're being brought up, what they're getting by with, what the parents are letting this kid say right in front of them. 'Oh, my God,' 'God****it,' 'Bull****'—any of it. The parents won't do anything about it."

What may shock some becomes understandable to others, given the circumstances. A Connecticut dad provided a telling example: "My son is nine-and-a-half. Our next door neighbor is the same age, a little girl…she can sometimes be a handful. Well, we get the story back that my son, in front of another kid, has called [her] a b****. Just once. Only one time. My son is a very polite kid. But we did not reprimand him for that, because we know the way she can get sometimes, and from what we heard from the other kid, she was being like that. So we did not condemn him for that....It's the only time I can ever remember him saying anything like that."

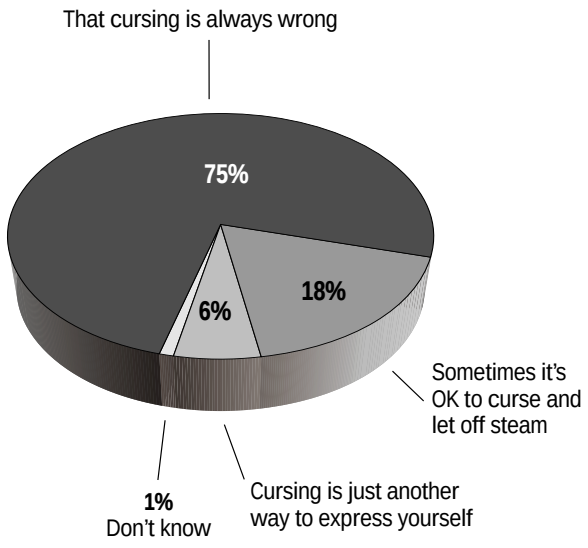
The Apple Doesn't Fall Far from the Tree

Any discussion of the social deficits of kids will be indelibly linked to parents, who immediately come in for some friendly—and not so friendly—criticism. Fully 84% say that a major cause of disrespect in our society is that "too many parents are failing to teach respect to their kids."

A St. Louis teacher made the connection clear: "I've noticed a change, not only in the children, but I've noticed a big change in the parents—the outright rudeness of the parents. I want to say sometimes, 'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.' I can see why children behave a certain way when I meet the parents. They demand stuff. They want it now. They use foul language to my principal."

Cursing Is Always Wrong

Which comes closer to your view about what parents should teach kids about cursing?



Nor does the American public need horrible headlines about out-of-control parents at sporting events to worry about the problem—fully 71% of those who have watched kids playing organized sports in the past year say they saw parents yelling and screaming at the coaches, referees or players; 67% say it bothered them a lot.

Previous Public Agenda research has shown that talk about the shortcomings of children will inevitably become a discussion about the failings of parents. But it's important to note that the parents join non-parents in the finger-pointing: 84% of non-parents say "too many parents are failing to teach respect to their kids" and 84% of parents say the same thing. As we saw in the focus group comments, this finger-pointing can come awfully close to home as people talk about their own communities, and sometimes, even their own families.

The Mom Test

On the other hand, many of the focus group participants talked about the success of parents who set clear expectations and rules. Kids may not always live up to them, they said, but when parents set standards, kids will often come around. One participant spoke about how his mom's expectations of him were paying dividends—at least for society—long after he became an adult: "I got it programmed into me that everything I do has to pass 'The Mom Test.' If Mom approved of the way I would do it, then it's a good thing to do. But if I turned around and she gave me that look—I just couldn't go on. Today, I'll see a can on the ground in front of my truck, and I'll look at it and go, 'Darn. I wish I hadn't seen that can there because I know what Mom would do now. She'd go down there, pick it up, and put it in that trashcan.'…If I don't go and do that—literally…I'll feel like I have to drive back around the block and pick it up."

A Hostile World

Most Americans also agree that even when parents try their best to teach their kids to be respectful, they must still compete with a hostile world busily working to undo their efforts. Fully 60% believe that the following is a major cause of bad behavior: "Even when parents try to raise their kids right, there are too many negative role models in society that teach kids to be disrespectful."

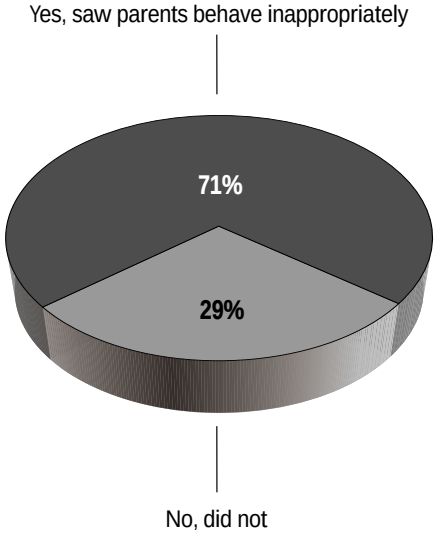
A Connecticut dad talked about raising kids in a hostile world, saying, "With both parents having to work, it's become very difficult for many to maintain that quality control and guidance at those critical junctures. If it's learning about sex or drugs they are going to come under different influences….I try to give my son the sense that the world is very complicated. There are people out there who are evil. I don't believe all people are inherently good. Somehow a child has to come into the world with all sorts of awareness and be vigilant in the world we live in."

A Florida school bus driver without kids was sympathetic: "Kids are under a lot of peer pressure. They're taunted. You get a couple of bad kids on the bus and they try to get everybody involved. If someone wants to try to stay out of trouble, it's very difficult for them."

But no matter how quick people are to acknowledge that these are hard times to raise kids right, ultimately they still expect parents to do their jobs. "What really disturbs me…I find that the big cop-out is that a lot of

Misbehaving Parents

When you watched kids playing organized sports in the past year or so, did you see any parents behaving inappropriately by yelling and screaming at coaches, referees or players, or not?



Base: People who have watched kids play organized sports (n=1,214)

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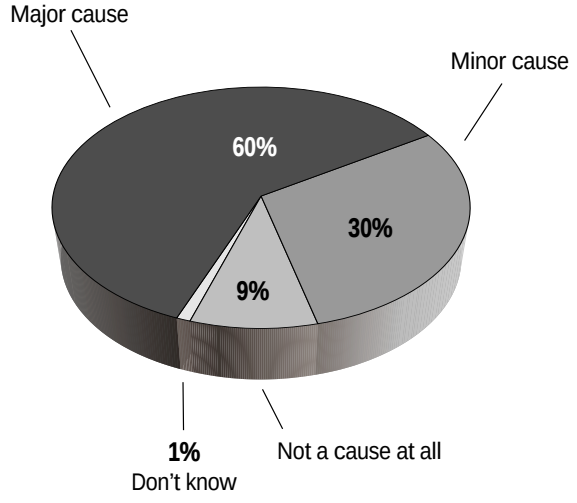
parents just say, 'That's just the way kids are nowadays.' That bothers me more than anything. It just burns me…a parent that doesn't want to be a parent and just wants to cop it off on society," said one Texas man.

Elvis and Professional Wrestling

In virtually all the focus groups, someone would bring up professional wrestling as an example of an entertainment industry that thrives by glorifying disrespect to kids. "My 5-year-old is in first grade and some kids were going around with these sexual holds—like professional wrestlers do—holding their crotch," said a Cleveland dad. "These are first-graders. They're exposed to this sort of thing." A California woman said, "I just recently stumbled onto the World Wrestling Federation craze, and I find it really offensive, because I think they're teaching young kids to be really rude and it's a very degrading thing. It's just really, really scary that a lot of young people watch this all the time." Elvis also came up in virtually every focus group, epitomizing for people how far society had slipped down the slippery slope. A Texas woman said, "It comes back to Elvis. It was shocking when Elvis was shaking his hips up there, but now we see whole naked bodies. It started with Elvis, and that was a little overboard, but that was the beginning of what we have today." A Cleveland woman said, "With Elvis, it was just the shaking of the hips. Now, you see women half dressed on the video. We didn't see that happening before. I think it's a progression. Each generation is getting worse. Elvis wasn't undressed. He wasn't half clothed."

Undermining Parents' Best Efforts

Even when parents try to raise their kids right, there are too many negative role models in society that teach kids to be disrespectful. Do you think this is a major cause, a minor cause or not a cause at all of rude and disrespectful behavior in our society?



"Very, Very Short and Practically Strapless"

The idea of implementing dress codes in schools to prevent students from wearing sloppy or revealing clothing enjoys wide support, with over 8 in 10 (84%) saying it would be an effective measure for improving people's behavior. Several parents in the Texas focus group were thankful for the dress code adopted by their school district, welcoming the support it gave them in dealing with the "dressing" issue with their children.

Not only did it simplify the daily decision about what to wear, it gave parents added ammunition in their effort to resist today's revealing fashion trends. "It's very difficult to find clothes that are appropriate, because the clothing manufacturers make things that are low cut, show tummies, are very, very short and practically strapless. The real blessing is that the high school my daughter goes to is really cold, and so she goes off in jeans and a sweater every day. I thank heaven daily for that," said a mother from Texas. Another parent was quick to point out that sometimes parents themselves fail to measure up to the dress code: "Sometimes, the parent gets out of the car and wouldn't be caught dead going in, because she doesn't meet the dress code. That's sad."

An Uncomfortable Silence

Most people probably can't identify the list of "intelligences" in Harvard University professor Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences.[7] But to such things as linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligence, for example, they would probably want to add measures of people's aptitude when it comes to

courtesy, thoughtfulness, following the Golden Rule and respecting people you know as well as those you don't.

Many parents' groups, public policy foundations and child advocacy organizations may be reluctant to talk about the state of civility among today's kids. Their reluctance could be driven by a conviction that the physical well-being or the quality of education of America's children are far more pressing concerns. It could also be driven by ambivalence about making value judgments in tricky areas that are best left to parents themselves. But parents and non-parents, teachers and students, are more than willing and ready to talk about the problem. To cede the conversation to daytime TV talk shows is to diminish—and ultimately trivialize—public discussion of the issue.

Many may be reluctant to talk about the state of civility among today's kids. To cede the conversation to daytime TV talk shows is to diminish—and ultimately trivialize—public discussion of the issue.

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FINDING FIVE: WHY ARE SO MANY PEOPLE SO RUDE?

Americans point to a confluence of different factors to explain the deterioration of courtesy and respectfulness in today's world. In part, they say, too much crowding, too much anonymity and the pressures of fast-paced lives invite rude behavior, and then rudeness begets more rudeness. Other explanations point to the times we live in and the values we live by—a declining sense of community, offensive and amoral entertainment media and an overall rise in selfishness and callousness.

The focus group participants tried to make sense of what they saw as the rise in rude and disrespectful behavior. One source—what kids are learning and what parents are teaching them—was the subject of the previous finding. But people came up with other compelling explanations for why things are so badly off track. No one had a Ph.D. in sociology, but seasoned by plenty of insights and experiences from their daily lives—and, often, their own personal behavior—they had a lot to say.

A Rushed Life

One of the more interesting explanations was their sense of overload: People simply have so many obligations and so much on their to-do lists that basic courtesy is often an afterthought. Nearly half (47%) believe a major reason for disrespectful behavior in our society is that "life is so hectic and people are so busy and pressed for time that they forget to be polite."

People are willing to undertake honest self-assessment: fully 6 in 10 (61%) admit that "sometimes I'm so busy and pressed for time that I'm not as polite as I should be." A Florida man said, "People want to pack as much as possible into 24 hours. The day hasn't grown, but people want to do more and more and something has to give…people are very impatient in relationships and interactions. It's always 'cut to the chase.'"

One participant made the connection between top-heavy agendas and some of the problems that arise between parents and children: "Parents are so busy running them to dance classes, and here and there, that they're not really giving them the time they need at home. Children grow up that way, and they become rushed adults." In St. Louis, one dad confessed to overscheduling his child: "He was going from this sport to that sport, this season to that season, from here to there. Finally, he said, 'I want to see my friends.' We realized that he was not happy. It was my fault. Let them grow up."

"I Pushed Him with My Elbow"

Not only are people feeling pressed by rushed lives, the places they go often end up being so congested that it's all they can do to get through the experience—much less get through it with grace. Half (50%) believe a major explanation for rude behavior is that people are often in overcrowded places or long lines, they get frustrated and they lose their cool.

The possibility of looking at civility—and incivility—as epidemics driven by contagion is also tempting, if only because the public itself talks about courtesy—and rudeness—as infectious.

A Florida woman found herself using elbows and body language to create some space for herself. "We were out dancing, it was crowded, and people were leaning on you to push you out of the way. So, I started leaning back. It's very rude. I mean, everybody's dancing close, and one guy's butt kept hitting me in the back, so I'm trying to elbow him—I pushed him with my elbow. When people are crowding you and you need room, you kind of have to do that."

"Back in My Stressed-out Mode"

People intuitively understand what social science researchers have long concluded—that when population density goes up, crankiness also rises and cooperation and helpfulness go down. Nearly 7 in 10 (67%) believe that people living in rural areas and small towns tend to

be more polite than others. In fact, respondents in rural areas were more likely than those living in urban areas to say they "practically never" see rude or disrespectful behavior in their own neighborhood (74% versus 57%).

A Texas man talked about the differences between living in Los Angeles and rural Texas. "Imagine us, a family of Texans in Los Angeles. We're accustomed to driving down the road and waving at people. You see them, and you smile; you're out on the street and you say, 'Hey, how are you doing?' There, it's totally different. People—they don't look at you. Your neighbors—they don't talk to you. It's just a totally different mindset."

A Connecticut man recalled how context relieved the pressures of the daily grind and how context quickly brought it back. "It's that everyday pace," he said. "I went to a retreat a couple of weeks ago….It was on the ocean, it was a beautiful setting, and I actually sat down and I thought, 'Oh, my God. I can breathe.' I actually was aware that I was breathing and I just let it go. I left the retreat, got lost coming back, and that spirituality just left me. It was gone. I was back in my stressed-out mode just like that. It's all based on society's pressures on me and the pressure I put on myself."

I Just Walk Away

With people talking about getting offended so often, it was natural to ask them how they as individuals typically reacted. Most admitted they were reluctant to challenge rude behavior—and fear was most typically behind that reluctance. Even a minor confrontation could easily escalate and get out of hand, they believed. "With what happens today—you're afraid to say something," said a man in St. Louis. "Now, if you say something to a child, to a parent, you don't know what they're going to do. If you blow your horn at them or make any type of comment, there are enough crazy people out there that you're afraid for your safety." But many believe that a useful social corrective is lost as a result: 45% say that a major explanation for disrespect is that "fewer and fewer people are willing to take a chance and question rude behavior when they see it."

Only 20% say that "when someone is being rude in a public area, such as a store or restaurant, it is usually best to let the person know they're doing something wrong;" 42% say it's usually best to simply walk away. Interestingly, another 36% say the best thing to do with a rude person is to treat them "especially politely in the

Why Are People Rude?

Please tell me if you think each of the following is a major cause of rude and disrespectful behavior in our society, a minor cause or not a cause at all.

% who say "major cause" of rude and disrespectful behavior in our society:	
Too many parents are failing to teach respect to their kids	84
Values and morality are in decline in our society and this means people are also less likely to be polite and respectful	62
Even when parents try to raise their kids right, there are too many negative role models in society that teach kids to be disrespectful	60
People are often in overcrowded places or long lines so they get frustrated and lose their cool	50
Life is so hectic and people are so busy that they forget to be polite	47
There is a declining sense of community – it's easier to be impolite and disrespectful when people don't know each other	47
Fewer and fewer people are willing to take a chance and question rude behavior when they see it	45
Rude behavior is so common that people stop being nice and start acting like everyone else	41

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hope that they learn by example." When asked what they themselves are most likely to do, more than half (53%) say they would walk away.

Catching the Incivility Bug

People also see rudeness itself as a contagious disease, something passed on from person to person. It's harder for people to respond with saintly understanding when they are pushed or shoved or cut off on the road—resentment is a far more typical response. Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) say "I am less likely to be nice when I have to deal with someone who is very rude and impolite." More than 4 in 10 (41%) say that a major cause of such behavior is that "rude behavior is so common that people stop being nice and start acting like everyone else."

A woman in Connecticut believed that much of the rudeness she encountered was a reflection of people's defensiveness—they were either wary or tired of being treated rudely. "I think people who are rude have a feeling that everyone feels like that, so they have to protect themselves," she said. "You ask something and they're very defensive immediately. I've found myself saying to people, 'Why are you so angry?' I'll speak to someone and they'll be really kind of short, and I'll say to them, 'Did I just say something to offend you?' and they'll say, 'Oh, no. I'm sorry. It's the person I just spoke to.'" Incivility may be a particularly contagious bug.

Show Your Love?

But people also believe that good behavior—like being civil and respectful—is something that can be passed along. Fully 92% say that "respect and courtesy are contagious—the more people do it, the more it spreads."

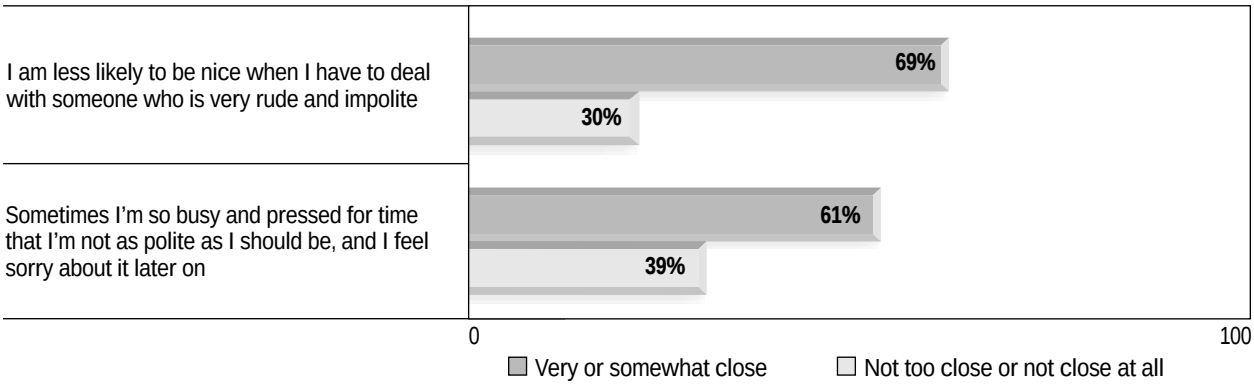
And many people also believe that it pays to be courteous. Nearly half (49%) expect that "someone who is especially respectful and kind will often be better treated by other people." Said a Connecticut man, "We really try and be nice to people. My wife too—I find that you're rewarded for it. It pays to do it." But sizeable numbers are doubtful: 3 in 10 (30%) say that especially respectful and kind people "will often get taken advantage of," and 18% say there would be no difference in how they are treated. In virtually every focus group there was at least one individual who explicitly said what this Texas woman said: "You get what you give."

Selfish and Self-centered

People see growing disrespect as a negative consequence of broader trends in society—a decline in morality, loss of community and the harmful impact of the entertainment media. More than 6 in 10 (62%) say a major cause of rising rudeness is that "values and morality are in decline in our society and this means people are also less likely to be polite and respectful."

Provoked and Rushed into Rudeness

How close do these statements come to describing how you feel?



A Florida woman talked about the impact of materialism, saying, "People have become more selfish and self-centered. They act like family support is important, but really, that's starting to go on the back burner." "We want more and more quick fixes," said a Texas woman. "Everything is instant gratification, instant family, instant sex."

Perhaps as a signal of the importance people place on values, most (54%) think that being deeply religious will make one more likely to be polite and respectful (only 35% of non-religious respondents—those who never attend services—agree). In contrast, only 28% think that being well-educated makes one more likely to be polite and respectful—and 35% of college graduates concur.

"Just How Far They Will Go"

The media came in for a fair bit of criticism as part of the conversation on deteriorating morals. People often singled out television for going overboard in the search for ratings. Fully 85% say "there's far too much sex and crude language on TV these days." "Look at these reality TV shows," said a Texas man. "They had one where they were outwardly promoting promiscuity, sin and so forth, where they had all these people going to an island, 'Temptation Island.' …In the business of TV, everything is based on numbers. It lets you see just how far they will go to get the numbers."

Some people thought it was up to viewers to stay alert and change the channel when something offended them; others thought there was just too much of it to avoid. Indeed, 54% say that TV viewers can avoid shows with sex and crude language with a little effort, but nearly half (45%) think there's so much of it on TV that it's almost impossible to avoid. More than 4 in 10 (43%) "often" see rude or disrespectful behavior on TV when they are flipping through the channels.

Do You Know Your Neighbors?

People also believe that community connections are fraying and that an important antidote to incivility—knowing your neighbor—is getting lost. Nearly half (47%) believe a major cause of disrespect is the loss of a sense of community. It's easier to be disrespectful, they say, when people don't know each other. A Florida man said his state "is a melting pot for a million different cultures, and people lack communication. There's just no cohesiveness. People tend to stay within their own groups and stay away from other groups. It causes a lot of tension." A St. Louis woman was nostalgic: "I think there's a lot of indifference. 'You do your thing. I'll do my thing. You leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone.' Years ago, you had neighbors, and you knew everybody on the block."

The Tipping Point?

It may be hard to envision how to respond to some of the public's broader explanations for rudeness in a practical and prompt fashion. If morality or sense of community is in decline, as so many believe, how do we quickly reverse the trends? It may be easier, on the other hand, to imagine practical responses to the public's more contextual explanations of rudeness, such as overcrowding. The possibility of looking at civility—and incivility—as epidemics driven by contagion is also tempting, if only because the public itself talks about courtesy—and rudeness—as infectious. If these things are so catching, the actions of even a handful of citizens in a given setting can make a difference.[8]

Who's Rude, Who's Not

Is it your impression that the following types of people tend to be more polite and respectful than other people, less polite and respectful or is there no difference?

% who say the following people are "more polite and respectful":	
People living in rural areas and small towns	67
People who are deeply religious	54
People in the South	39
People who are well-educated	28

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FINDING SIX: THE DAY THINGS CHANGED

The shock and loss of September 11 changed the behavior of Americans for the better, most people believe, but they also suspect that the change will be relatively short-lived. Many expect that we'll soon return to business as usual, if we haven't already done so.

Shock was only one of the first reactions triggered by the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States. Other powerful sentiments quickly followed: the commitment to care for the victims' families, a determination to bring the attackers to justice, gratefulness for those in uniform who sacrificed their lives and renewed patriotism.

Surveys also detected increased confidence in the nation's institutions.[9] But what of people's confidence in each other? To the point of this study, did September 11 change how people deal with each other—did they become more respectful, less rude in their interactions with strangers? If so, do people think it will last?

From the Bad, Good

There is a widespread sense among Americans that as a result of September 11 people have treated one another better and care more about their country—even that politicians are more likely to put the nation's interests ahead of their own.

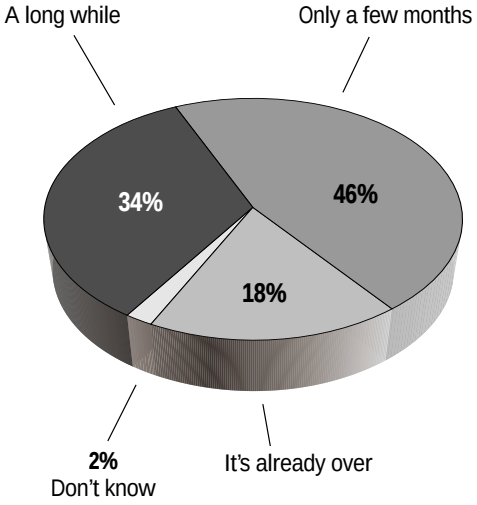
Almost 3 in 4 (74%) say that people became "more caring and thoughtful toward one another as a result of the terrorist attacks." "In any emergency or tragedy, there is an innate pulling together of people. We put aside frictions and animosities," said a Florida man. Almost 9 in 10 (87%) also believe that Americans "appreciate their country more" in the aftermath. "I've always appreciated my country, but I appreciate it even more now. You have to respect what everyone did—the Red Cross, the firemen, police, the volunteers, the guys who died on the plane outside Pittsburgh—and what they're doing now in Afghanistan. There's a camaraderie that you can't take away from us," said a Connecticut man.

Americans believe that even their politicians were better behaved following the attacks. Although not an overwhelming majority, 55% do think America's elected officials "put politics aside" and paid "more attention to what was good for the country as a result of the terrorist attacks." But about 4 in 10 (39%) don't think this has actually happened.

The nation's airports were obviously transformed by new security arrangements. But the long lines and greater personal scrutiny apparently triggered more patience and understanding than resentment among the flying public. The vast majority (73%) of people who've flown think passengers have become more patient and courteous since September 11. Half (50%) also say that the people working for the airlines have become more patient and courteous; another 36% say there has been no change.

More Caring for a While

Some people thought that people would become more caring and thoughtful toward one another as a result of the terrorist attacks. Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?



Base: People who believe this actually happened (n=1,475)

But How Long Will It Last?

But Americans are very skeptical about whether much of this goodwill will last. Of those who thought that people actually became more caring and thoughtful toward one another, only 34% believe the good feelings will last for a long while. "It's a temporary reaction," said a Florida man about the goodwill he experienced. "The biases we all have, the frustrations and irritations are always there."

Of those who thought elected officials put aside their differences for the good of the country, only 30% believe this new attitude will last for a long while. "They came together for a short time but only because of the popularity of Bush. The outward appearance is that politicians are coming together but it doesn't seem that they are really. It's the age-old Republicans versus Democrats," said a Montana woman.

The one change people had greater faith would stick was that Americans will appreciate their country more—most (54%) thought this attitude would last a long time.

People's skepticism also extends to whether the money donated to charities will be put to good use. By a 55% to 37% margin, people think that "much of the money will be misused or get to the wrong people," not that "these organizations are making sure that almost all the money will get to the people who deserve it."

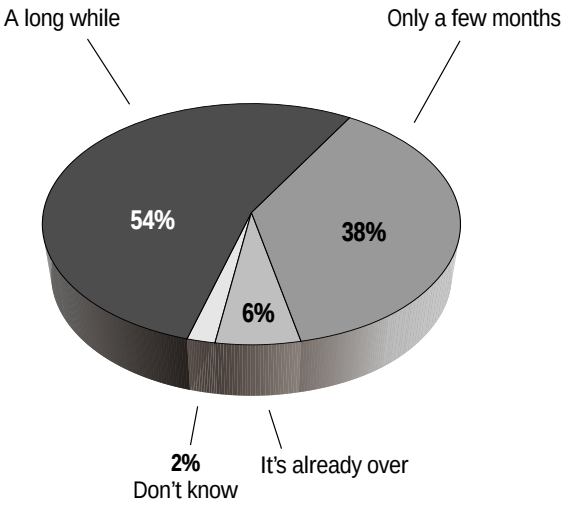
Follow-up interviews suggest that the lack of confidence in the work of charities is a function of a buildup of suspicions over time, not merely a reaction to initial media coverage of missteps in helping the families of victims. "You look at the payroll of [charity organization], you see the officials with their nice cars and big salaries," said a New York man. "You can figure it out yourself."

Scrutiny of Arab Americans

One consequence of the terrorist attacks is that the nation is struggling with how to be fair to Arab Americans and Muslims who live here while still being

Patriotic Feeling May Last

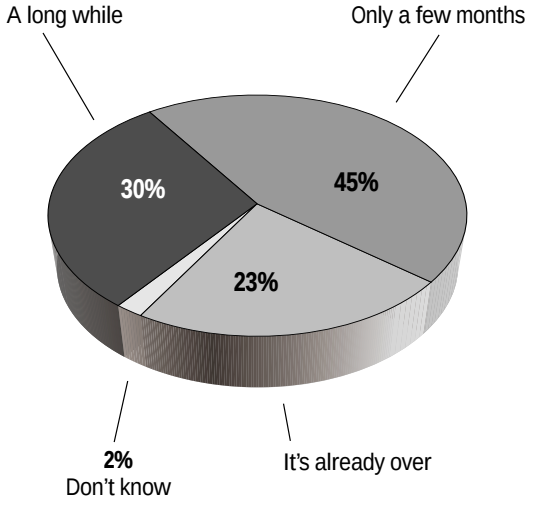
Some people thought that Americans would appreciate their country more in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?



Base: People who believe this actually happened (n=1,729)

But Partisan Politics Is Coming Back

Some people thought that America's elected officials would put politics aside and pay more attention to what was good for the country as a result of the terrorist attacks. Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?



Base: People who believe this actually happened (n=1,105)

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vigilant against terrorist threats. Memories of the mistreatment of Japanese Americans during World War II, and a basic desire to be fair toward innocent people, clash with the realization that the terrorists used the nation's lack of vigilance and its freedoms against it.

Twenty-one percent say there is "no excuse" for law enforcement officials to look at people with Middle Eastern accents or features with greater suspicion and scrutiny because they are concerned about terrorism, but 11% see nothing wrong with it. Two in 3 (67%) say it's understandable but wish it didn't happen. A woman from South Carolina said, "People may complain about racial profiling, but the fact is that if you fit a particular description of someone who has committed a crime—and God knows September 11 is a crime—you have to realize that you're going to be stopped. If I fit that description, I would expect to be stopped—and treated with respect, of course. In the long run it's for everybody's safety."

People are somewhat less willing to countenance teasing or verbal abuse. Asked how they feel about people making "jokes or negative remarks about Arabs or Muslims," 51% say there's "no excuse" for it; 44% say it's understandable but wish it didn't happen. "We all came from different origins in this country," said a Montana woman. "Many times our different ethnic groups were ridiculed. It's the same thing, it shouldn't happen." Barely a handful (4%) say there's nothing particularly wrong with doing this.

In contrast, the public is much less likely to accept racial profiling of African Americans. A majority (52%) say there's "no excuse" for law enforcement officials to look at African Americans with greater suspicion and scrutiny because they believe they are more likely to commit crime. Only 4% say there's nothing particularly wrong with this and 41%—not an insubstantial number—say it's understandable but wish it didn't happen.

Much of the Money Will Be Misused

As you probably know, Americans have donated a lot of money to organizations dedicated to helping the families of the victims of the terrorist attacks. Which comes closer to your own view?

Blacks on Profiling

The attitudes of African Americans on profiling issues are particularly interesting, given how close the profiling issue hits home. It is hardly surprising that blacks are much more likely than whites to say that there's "no excuse" for law enforcement officials to racially profile African Americans (73% to 48%)—but how do they feel when Middle Easterners are the issue?

Black respondents are almost twice as likely as whites to say there's "no excuse" for profiling Middle Easterners (35% to 18%). Nevertheless, most African Americans (59%)—and most white Americans (69%)—take the middle position: profiling Middle Easterners is understandable but they wish it didn't happen. Finally, African Americans are more likely to flatly reject verbal teasing or abuse of Arabs—65% say there's "no excuse" for it compared to 48% of whites.

Should We Walk in Lockstep?

Given the magnitude of the tragedy and the scope of the threats to the country, are people looking for their representatives and fellow citizens to walk and talk in lockstep, without disagreement over policies? The survey was conducted in January in the midst of the military campaign in Afghanistan. Even then, 72% said

it was "as important as ever that people speak their minds" regarding war in Afghanistan, "even if they disagree with the government's policy." Twenty-four percent said it was wrong to publicly criticize the government's policy. "One of the big reasons we're over there is to fight for democracy and freedom," said a South Carolina woman. "And one of those freedoms is freedom of speech." A Connecticut man said much the same thing: "That's what our country's all about. If we can't speak our mind, we're losing everything."

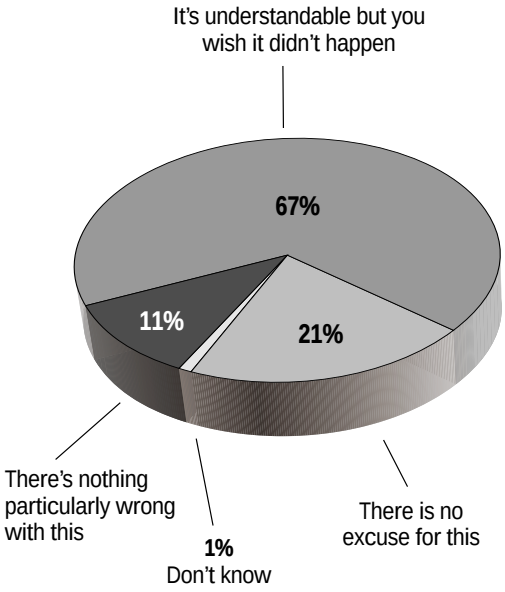
Is There a Trend?

Our analysis here cannot be taken as the last word on the issue of how September 11 and its aftermath affected our society. For one thing, this was designed to be a study of the state of civility in the United States, not a study of the effects of the attacks. For another, the fact that people are anticipating decay in goodwill may only be a measure of ingrained skepticism, not a measure of what is actually happening.

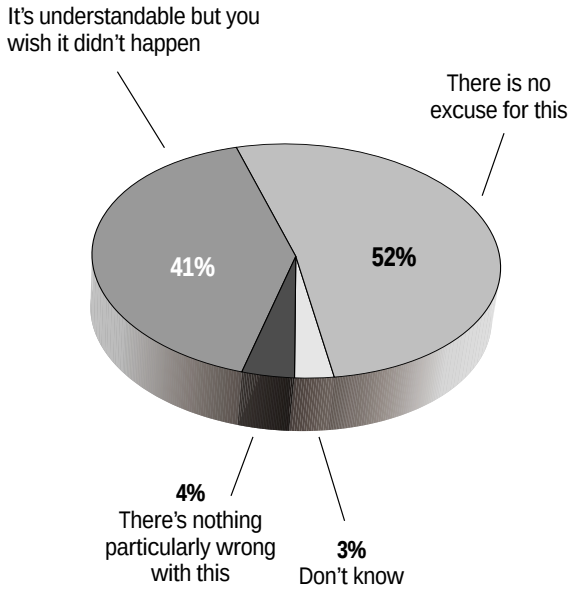
More importantly, the survey is a snapshot of a still-evolving episode in the nation's history. Some social commentators see the event as a potential watershed in the life of the nation, an opportunity for people to reconnect with each other and with the values they hold dear. As public policy professor Robert D. Putnam wrote, "In the aftermath of September's tragedy, a window of opportunity has opened for a sort of civic renewal that occurs only once or twice a century. And yet, though the crisis revealed and replenished the wells of solidarity in American communities, those wells so far remain untapped….Changes in attitude alone, no matter how promising, do not constitute civic renewal."[10] For their part, ordinary Americans seem to be taking a "we'll see how long this lasts" attitude—more than willing to acknowledge that something good happened, but doubting that it will take root.

Profiling

Law enforcement officials these days may look at people with Middle Eastern accents or features with greater suspicion and scrutiny because they are concerned about terrorism. Which comes closer to your own view?



Law enforcement officials may sometimes look at African Americans with greater suspicion and scrutiny because they believe they are more likely to commit crime. Which comes closer to your own view?



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AFTERWORD

By Deborah Wadsworth

Aggravating Circumstances grew out of a Pew/Public Agenda initiative that originally set out to explore American attitudes about ethics, morality, civility and manners. People had much to say about all of these concerns, and we at Public Agenda realized that each aspect of the problem was undoubtedly worthy of a full study of its own. But we were especially intrigued by what some might consider a "less important" topic—respect and courtesy. Participants in our focus groups were clearly incensed by what they perceived as a widespread lack of civility and decline in respect among their fellow citizens. The Pew Charitable Trusts was open to Public Agenda's suggestion that we refocus our sights on such issues, which, to our knowledge, have not yet received attention in a thorough public opinion study.

In truth, we were not totally surprised by the outpouring of concern about these issues, because earlier Public Agenda studies had documented an overwhelming agreement among adults about disrespectful behavior by the young; among high school students about their acknowledged incivility toward each other; and even, in the public overall, over the lack of concern for others in so many situations.

Rudeness on the Rise

What we did not anticipate was the level of unhappiness expressed by those interviewed for this study—and their honest appraisal of their own behavior—admitting that they themselves are frequently guilty of the transgressions that most upset them in others. Large majorities said they believe rude and selfish behavior has increased (6 in 10) and that Americans really did treat each other with more respect in the past (7 in 10).

Most focus group participants had stories to tell based on evidence in their daily lives. Some talked about being intimidated on the highway by a bullying SUV driver; others of being interrupted by an incessantly ringing cell phone in the midst of a quiet dinner in a restaurant. One man even described the rush of adrenaline he felt in attempting to avoid being run down by a skateboarding teenager at the mall, and most had stories of sales clerks who refused to acknowledge one's existence.

Lip Service to Service

Nearly half (46%) of all those we interviewed for this study reported that they have walked out of a store in the past year due to bad service. People describe their exasperation with clerks paying lip service to civility, even as they behave carelessly, insulting customers by going through the motions while delivering rude and unintelligible answers to requests for help. To be fair, rudeness cuts both ways, and large numbers of those we interviewed (74%) confirm that they also often see customers being rude or disrespectful to people in customer service. Moreover, people believe that customer service has undoubtedly suffered from cost-cutting and efforts to maximize productivity. It appears to many, however, that organizations and businesses are investing too little in what matters most—treating customers with courtesy and respect. Rude employees with inadequate training are unacceptable to many who believe that although some improvements may be costly, basic courtesy need not come at the expense of the bottom line.

It appears to many, however, that organizations and businesses are investing too little in what matters most—treating customers with courtesy and respect.

Kids Mimicking Parents?

Participants in this and earlier Public Agenda studies are particularly troubled by the behavior of the young and are quick to make clear that they hold parents responsible for not educating their children on these matters. Any discussion of the social deficits of young people—their lack of manners, courtesy and respect—is inexorably linked, people say, to parents. Anyone who has raised a child knows just how talented youngsters are at mimicking their parents' behavior. In focus groups parents themselves often acknowledge that they're not parenting as well as they might, and with adults confessing their own shortcomings, the question might be, "How can society help in this regard?" Rudeness probably begets rudeness, whatever the

setting, and adults might be asked if they'd be willing to rein in their own behavior, guard their own venting as a means of mitigating this contagion of disrespect.

Collective Grousing

The question begging for an answer, the study suggests, is, Given these "aggravating circumstances," this accumulation of rudeness that seems to linger and grow in its impact, what are people willing to do to improve the current situation? For it is just that—a situation which we appear to have grown accustomed to and, despite our collective grousing, a situation we appear to be tolerating. Surely, it is not a problem without a solution. We undoubtedly have the capacity to imagine that circumstances might be otherwise. Perhaps it comes down to whether or not we have the will to change our attitudes and modify our behavior so that we no longer lose our cool and behave with utter disrespect for others.

I believe there is precedence for such resolve. Not very long ago, our society concluded that racism, disrespect for those who are gay and insensitivity to those with handicaps were no longer acceptable. We began to teach respect for diversity, not to fear or hate those who are different. We even had the courage to challenge behavior assumed to be "personal" and therefore "off-limits," such as smoking in public places, which is no longer accepted as an inherent, inalienable right of the individual. While we've still not achieved all we would wish, no one would deny that America has made progress on these fronts.

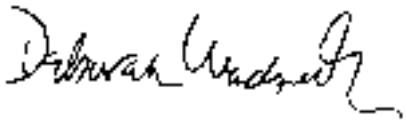
Can Policy Makers Help Us?

I would submit that, given the strength of Public Agenda's findings, consideration of civility as an alternative to rudeness is a response that many would embrace. We even had a brief intimation of what is possible immediately after the tragic events of this past September. But, some will maintain, we don't have the staying power to curb our individual behavior without reinforcements from the rest of society. Our natural proclivity in the face of social problems is to hope legislation might help to save us from ourselves. In this particular instance, however, policy makers themselves probably need help. At a bipartisan retreat held under the auspices of the Aspen Institute several years ago, members of Congress decried the loss of civility in their daily transactions and acknowledged that it has led to a rise in partisanship and divisiveness—behavior which many agree undermines our ability as a society to tackle common problems.[11]

Daily life, from the perspective of those we interviewed, appears to be littered with unacceptable behavior, which has grown worse over time and shows no sign of abating on its own.

Individual and Collective Will

So, we face a dilemma. Daily life, from the perspective of those we interviewed, appears to be littered with unacceptable behavior, which has grown worse over time and shows no sign of abating on its own. The concept of a "tipping point"[12]—that moment in an epidemic when it reaches a critical mass—probably is an apt description of what we've come to in terms of our incivility and disrespect for one another. We would probably all agree that it will take significant individual *and* collective resolve to challenge this epidemic of rudeness. Surely, we can muster the effort, the focus and the creativity to reach out in ways small and large to remedy this situation. Perhaps, the amount of energy participants describe it takes to cope with the stress our present situation produces could be the very fuel that is needed to make the necessary changes.



Deborah Wadsworth
President
Public Agenda

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SUPPORTING TABLES

TABLE ONE: Rating People's Behavior

I am going to ask you to rate how good a job people are doing when it comes to the way they behave toward different groups of people. Please think about the people you generally come across when answering these questions. What grade would you give people when it comes to [INSERT ITEM]? Would you say excellent, good, needs improvement or failing?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
Driving with care and consideration	
Excellent	2
Good	19
Needs improvement	62
Failing	18
The problem of littering	
Excellent	2
Good	19
Needs improvement	55
Failing	24
Treating gay people with respect and courtesy	
Excellent	3
Good	29
Needs improvement	45
Failing	11
Treating the elderly with respect and courtesy	
Excellent	7
Good	36
Needs improvement	48
Failing	8
Treating Hispanics with respect and courtesy	
Excellent	3
Good	39
Needs improvement	45
Failing	5
Treating African Americans with respect and courtesy	
Excellent	4
Good	47
Needs improvement	42
Failing	4
Being kind and considerate toward people with physical handicaps	
Excellent	12
Good	50
Needs improvement	34
Failing	4
Being friendly and helpful toward their neighbors	
Excellent	15
Good	49
Needs improvement	32
Failing	3

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

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TABLE ONE: Rating People's Behavior (continued)

And compared to the past, have thing gotten better, worse or stayed the same?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
Driving with care and consideration	
Gotten better	8
Gotten worse	64
Stayed the same	27
The problem of littering	
Gotten better	27
Gotten worse	40
Stayed the same	31
Treating gay people with respect and courtesy	
Gotten better	50
Gotten worse	15
Stayed the same	24
Treating the elderly with respect and courtesy	
Gotten better	18
Gotten worse	43
Stayed the same	36
Treating Hispanics with respect and courtesy	
Gotten better	41
Gotten worse	13
Stayed the same	37
Treating African Americans with respect and courtesy	
Gotten better	59
Gotten worse	9
Stayed the same	29
Being kind and considerate toward people with physical handicaps	
Gotten better	51
Gotten worse	12
Stayed the same	35
Being friendly and helpful toward their neighbors	
Gotten better	19
Gotten worse	32
Stayed the same	47

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE TWO: Prevalence of Rude Behavior

Now I am going to ask you how often you see certain behaviors in your daily life. For each, please tell me if you see it happening often, sometimes or practically never. How about [INSERT ITEM]? Do you see this often, sometimes or practically never?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
Drivers who are aggressive and reckless on the road	
Often	58
Sometimes	34
Practically never	8
*And have you yourself ever done something similar?**	*35*
People who use their cell phones in a loud or annoying manner in public areas	
Often	49
Sometimes	31
Practically never	19
*And have you yourself ever done something similar?***	*17*
People who are kind and considerate	
Often	48
Sometimes	46
Practically never	6
People who use bad or rude language out loud in public	
Often	44
Sometimes	41
Practically never	15
And have you yourself ever done something similar?	*36*
People who make sure to say please and thank you	
Often	36
Sometimes	48
Practically never	16
People who are rude and disrespectful	
Often	34
Sometimes	54
Practically never	12
And have you yourself ever done something similar?	*41*

General Public: n = 2,013

* Asked of those who drive (n=1,997)
**Asked of those who have cell phones (n=1,512)

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

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TABLE TWO: Prevalence of Rude Behavior (continued)

When you see [INSERT ITEM] how much does it bother you – a lot, some or only a little?

% RESPONDING THEY SEE BEHAVIOR "OFTEN" OR "SOMETIMES"	GENERAL PUBLIC
Drivers who are aggressive and reckless on the road* (n=1,836)	
A lot	66
Some	24
Only a little/[(VOL) Not at all]	10
People who are rude and disrespectful* (n=1,773)	
A lot	62
Some	27
Only a little/[(VOL) Not at all]	10
People who use bad or rude language out loud in public* (n=1,711)	
A lot	56
Some	28
Only a little/[(VOL) Not at all]	17
People who use their cell phones in a loud or annoying manner in public areas* (n=1,610)	
A lot	40
Some	32
Only a little/[(VOL) Not at all]	29

*Asked of those who said they see behavior "often" or "sometimes"

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE THREE: Attitudes about Customer Service

Now please tell me how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements about companies and customer service. Do you agree or disagree? [PROBE: Is that strongly or somewhat?]

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
It is very frustrating to call a company and get a recording instead of a human being who can answer my questions directly	
Strongly agree	84
Somewhat agree	11
Somewhat disagree	4
Strongly disagree	2
Too many stores cut corners by not hiring enough sales help and forcing customers to wait for service	
Strongly agree	55
Somewhat agree	26
Somewhat disagree	13
Strongly disagree	5
It is all too common for me to see sales people acting like the customer is not even there	
Strongly agree	44
Somewhat agree	32
Somewhat disagree	16
Strongly disagree	6
I often see customers being rude or disrespectful to sales help or to people in customer service	
Strongly agree	39
Somewhat agree	35
Somewhat disagree	18
Strongly disagree	6
I am the kind of person who hardly ever complains when they get bad service in a store or restaurant	
Strongly agree	36
Somewhat agree	29
Somewhat disagree	18
Strongly disagree	17
As a customer, I sometimes have to make a fuss to get a problem resolved	
Strongly agree	35
Somewhat agree	32
Somewhat disagree	20
Strongly disagree	13

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

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TABLE FOUR: Where Rudeness Takes Place

Now please tell me how often you come across rude or disrespectful people in each of the following places. If you don't spend time in one of the places I mention, just say so. How often do you see rude or disrespectful behavior [INSERT ITEM] – often, sometimes or practically never?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
When you are flipping through the channels on TV (n=1,903)	
Often	43
Sometimes	36
Practically never	20
In stores or shopping malls (n=1,963)	
Often	34
Sometimes	49
Practically never	17
At work (asked of those employed outside home; n=1,152)	
Often	30
Sometimes	38
Practically never	33
When dealing with a government office (n=1,884)	
Often	19
Sometimes	33
Practically never	38
At the airport or on a plane (n=1,280)	
Often	13
Sometimes	36
Practically never	49
In your immediate neighborhood (n=2,000)	
Often	9
Sometimes	24
Practically never	66

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE FIVE: Causes of Rude or Disrespectful Behavior

Please tell me if you think each of the following is a major cause of rude and disrespectful behavior in our society, a minor cause or not a cause at all.

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
Too many parents are failing to teach respect to their kids	
Major cause	84
Minor cause	12
Not a cause at all	3
Values and morality are in decline in our society and this means people are also less likely to be polite and respectful	
Major cause	62
Minor cause	27
Not a cause at all	10
Even when parents try to raise their kids right, there are too many negative role models in society that teach kids to be disrespectful	
Major cause	60
Minor cause	30
Not a cause at all	9
People are often in overcrowded places or long lines so they get frustrated and lose their cool	
Major cause	50
Minor cause	40
Not a cause at all	9
Life is so hectic and people are so busy that they forget to be polite	
Major cause	47
Minor cause	38
Not a cause at all	15
There is a declining sense of community – it's easier to be impolite and disrespectful when people don't know each other	
Major cause	47
Minor cause	37
Not a cause at all	15
Fewer and fewer people are willing to take a chance and question rude behavior when they see it	
Major cause	45
Minor cause	38
Not a cause at all	13
Rude behavior is so common that people stop being nice and start acting like everyone else	
Major cause	41
Minor cause	40
Not a cause at all	17

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

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TABLE SIX: Politeness among Different Groups

Is it your impression that [INSERT ITEM] tend to be more polite and respectful than other people, less polite and respectful or is there no difference?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
People living in rural areas and small towns	
More polite and respectful	67
Less polite and respectful	4
There is no difference	24
People who are deeply religious	
More polite and respectful	54
Less polite and respectful	6
There is no difference	37
People in the South	
More polite and respectful	39
Less polite and respectful	4
There is no difference	41
People who are well-educated	
More polite and respectful	28
Less polite and respectful	21
There is no difference	49

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE SEVEN: General Attitudes about Civility, Respect and Public Behavior

Now I am going to read you some statements and ask how closely they come to describing how you feel. [INSERT ITEM] Does this come very close, somewhat close, not too close or not close at all to describing how you feel?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
Respect and courtesy are contagious – the more people do it, the more it spreads	
Very close	69
Somewhat close	23
Not too close	5
Not close at all	3
There's far too much sex and crude language on TV these days	
Very close	67
Somewhat close	17
Not too close	8
Not close at all	6
It is much easier for people to be rude on the Internet because they can hide their identity	
Very close	40
Somewhat close	17
Not too close	8
Not close at all	15
I am less likely to be nice when I have to deal with someone who is very rude and impolite	
Very close	37
Somewhat close	32
Not too close	14
Not close at all	16
Sometimes I'm so busy and pressed for time that I'm not as polite as I should be, and I feel sorry about it later on	
Very close	27
Somewhat close	33
Not too close	18
Not close at all	21
I have thought of moving just to live in a community where people are nicer to each other	
Very close	23
Somewhat close	14
Not too close	13
Not close at all	50

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

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TABLE EIGHT: Possible Solutions for Improving Public Behavior

Here are some ideas for improving people's behavior these days. For each, please tell me if you think it would be an effective solution for improving people's behavior or not. [INSERT ITEM] Do you think this would be very effective, somewhat effective, not too effective or not effective at all?

% RESPONDING	GENERAL PUBLIC
For companies to encourage customers to identify extremely helpful employees so the employees can be financially rewarded for a job well done	
Very effective	68
Somewhat effective	27
Not too effective	3
Not effective at all	2
For companies to encourage customers to let them know about employees who are extremely rude or unhelpful so they can do something about it	
Very effective	59
Somewhat effective	32
Not too effective	5
Not effective at all	2
Setting dress codes in public schools that stop students from wearing clothes that are too revealing or sloppy	
Very effective	55
Somewhat effective	29
Not too effective	8
Not effective at all	7
Encouraging people to report extremely aggressive drivers to law enforcement officials	
Very effective	45
Somewhat effective	34
Not too effective	13
Not effective at all	8
Enforcing a strict policy against cursing by students anywhere on school grounds in public schools	
Very effective	42
Somewhat effective	29
Not too effective	16
Not effective at all	12
Creating a public service campaign to promote courtesy and consideration on the nation's roads and highways	
Very effective	33
Somewhat effective	41
Not too effective	15
Not effective at all	10
Making it against the law to talk on a cell phone in public spaces such as museums, movies or restaurants	
Very effective	31
Somewhat effective	29
Not too effective	21
Not effective at all	17

General Public: n = 2,013

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

TABLE NINE: Views on Changes in Americans' Behavior Since September 11

The next questions are about the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States. As far as you can tell, did each of the following actually happen, or not? Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?

Some people thought that Americans would appreciate their country more in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks.

As far as you can tell, did this actually happen or not?		Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?* (n=1,729)	
Yes, this actually happened	87	Will last for a long while	54
No, it did not	12	Will last for only a few months	38
		It's already over	6

Some people thought that people would become more caring and thoughtful toward one another as a result of the terrorist attacks.

As far as you can tell, did this actually happen or not?		Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?* (n=1,475)	
Yes, this actually happened	74	Will last for a long while	34
No, it did not	24	Will last for only a few months	46
		It's already over	18

Some people thought that America's elected officials would put politics aside and pay more attention to what was good for the country as a result of the terrorist attacks.

As far as you can tell, did this actually happen or not?		Do you think this will probably last for a long while, for only a few months or is it already over?* (n=1,105)	
Yes, this actually happened	55	Will last for a long while	30
No, it did not	39	Will last for only a few months	45
		It's already over	23

*Asked of those who said this actually happened

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing categories. Rounding may also cause slight discrepancies between numbers in the text and numbers in the tables.

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9. See, for example: The Harris Poll #59, a survey of 1,011 adults surveyed by telephone between November 14-20, 2001; The Gallup Organization's survey of 1,011 adults surveyed by telephone between October 11-October 14, 2001; Hauser Center on Non-Profit Organizations at Harvard University/ Rapoport Foundation survey of 751 adults by telephone, October 17-November 18, 2001 [http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/saguaro/Press.html].
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METHODOLOGY

Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America is based on a telephone survey of 2,013 adults aged 18 years or older. The survey was preceded by seven focus groups conducted in sites across the country as well as in-depth interviews with leaders in academia, media, public interest groups and customer relations.

The Survey

Telephone interviews were conducted with a representative cross-section of 2,013 adult members of the general public between January 2 and January 23, 2002. The interviews averaged approximately 29 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error is plus or minus two percentage points; the margin of error is higher when comparing percentages across subgroups.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

The survey was fielded by Robinson and Muenster Associates, Inc. of Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Sample was provided by Survey Sampling, Inc.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from these groups were important to the survey design, and quotes were drawn from them to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the survey interviews.

A total of seven focus groups were conducted in Spring 2001 in the following cities: Cleveland, OH; Danbury, CT; Fort Lauderdale, FL; Frisco, TX; St. Louis, MO; Berkeley, CA; Fort Lee, NJ. The focus groups were augmented by a series of in-depth, one-on-one interviews both before and after the survey was fielded.

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Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade? Michael deCourcy Hinds. This guide gives regular citizens an overview of different strategies to improve schools such as voucher and charter school proposals, greater parental involvement, higher standards and more equitable funding. Published for the National Issues Forums with the Kettering Foundation. 1999. 28 pp. $5.50 ISBN 0-7872-6394-X

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