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Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies

Most U.S. adults say bad things just happen, and that people are often the reason

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How we did this

In the midst of a global pandemic that has killed millions and altered the lives of billions around the world, Pew Research Center conducted this survey to explore how Americans make sense of suffering and bad things happening to people. To achieve this, researchers reviewed existing literature and received guidance from academic experts to help develop a questionnaire. Additionally, the Center sought to explore views of the afterlife, including whether it exists and what it is like.

For this report, we surveyed 6,485 U.S. adults from Sept. 20 to 26, 2021. All respondents to the survey are part of Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (ATP), an online survey panel that is recruited through national random sampling of residential addresses. This way nearly all U.S. adults have a chance of selection. The survey is weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population by gender, race, ethnicity, partisan affiliation, education, religious affiliation and other categories. For more, see the [ATP's methodology](#) and the [methodology for this report](#).

The questions used in this report can be [found here](#).

Acknowledgments

This report is a collaborative effort based on the input and analysis of the following individuals. Find related reports online at pewresearch.org/religion.

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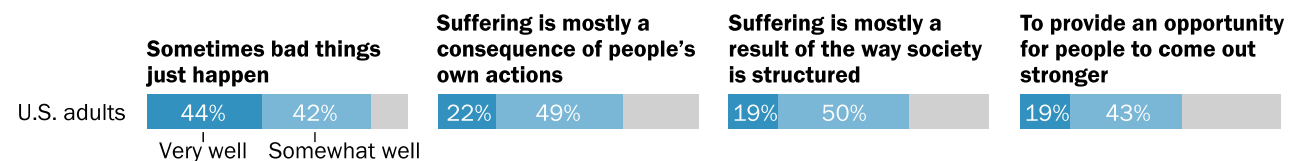
Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies

Most U.S. adults say bad things just happen, and that people are often the reason

For centuries, philosophers and theologians have attempted to answer a vexing question: If there is a good and all-powerful God, then why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? From the biblical Book of Job to the 18th-century satirist [Voltaire](#), the 20th-century Christian writer [C.S. Lewis](#) and the 1981 bestseller “[When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#),” both great literature and popular culture repeatedly have tackled this “problem of evil.”

When asked to explain suffering, majority of U.S. adults say that sometimes bad things just happen

% of U.S. adults who say _____ explains why suffering exists very/somewhat well



Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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The question takes on added significance amid a global pandemic that has killed 5 million people and recent natural disasters including floods, hurricanes and wildfires. Against the backdrop of these events and others, most Americans say they have spent some time in the past year thinking about big questions like the meaning of life, whether there is any purpose to suffering, and why bad things happen to people, according to a new Pew Research Center survey. Nearly a quarter of U.S. adults (23%) say they have mulled over these topics “a lot.”

In the new survey, the Center attempted for the first time to pose some of these philosophical questions to a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults, finding that Americans largely blame random chance – along with people’s own actions and the way society is structured – for human suffering, while relatively few believers blame God or voice doubts about the existence of God for this reason.

The survey gave respondents multiple opportunities to express their views on *why* terrible things happen – both in their own words [in response to an open-ended question](#), and by reading through a list of possible explanations for suffering and indicating whether each statement describes their views very well, somewhat well, not too well or not at all well. The answers to these questions were not mutually exclusive; respondents could assent to more than one statement, and many did.

For example, the vast majority of U.S. adults ascribe suffering at least partly to random chance, saying that the phrase “sometimes bad things just happen” describes their views either very well (44%) or somewhat well (42%). Yet it is also quite common for Americans to feel that suffering does not happen in vain. More than half of U.S. adults (61%) think that suffering exists “to provide an opportunity for people to come out stronger.” And, in a separate set of questions about various religious or spiritual beliefs, two-thirds of Americans (68%) say that “everything in life happens for a reason.”

Many Americans lay some blame for the suffering that occurs in the world at the feet of individuals *and* societal institutions. Roughly seven-in-ten adults (71%) say the following statement describes their views at least somewhat well: “Suffering is mostly a consequence of people’s own actions.” A similar share of all adults (69%) express support for the statement “suffering is mostly a result of the way society is structured.”

Asking about the causes and meanings of suffering

There are many different ways to understand the causes and consequences of human suffering. People may bring some suffering on themselves, through poor choices or misguided actions. Other suffering might be caused by the way society is structured. Some may believe that suffering can arise as a punishment or a lesson from God or for some reason they cannot understand. Others may come to doubt God’s existence because they cannot reconcile the fact that suffering exists with the idea that there is a kind and all-powerful God in control of the universe. And of course, some suffering may occur randomly, for no reason at all.

To give respondents an opportunity to describe their beliefs on these matters, Pew Research Center asked about a wide variety of ways to make sense of the causes and consequences of suffering and gave respondents the opportunity to indicate whether each one describes their own views very well, somewhat well, not too well or not at all well. The questions were not designed to be mutually exclusive, and respondents were not asked to choose which one *best* explained their own views, but rather could effectively say “yes” to more than one (or even to all) of the survey’s questions on these topics.

Finally, while the survey touched on many possible reasons for suffering, there is no way for such a list to be exhaustive. So, in addition to the survey’s closed-ended questions, it also included an open-ended question in which respondents were invited to [describe in their own words](#) why they think terrible things sometimes happen to people through no fault of their own.

For many people, views on suffering are connected to views about God. Religious thinkers have long attempted to reconcile the idea of an all-powerful, all-knowing and benevolent God as presented in the Abrahamic religious traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – with the existence of tremendous evil in the world. Skeptics like the 18th-century British philosopher [David Hume](#) have argued that there is a logical contradiction, while writers from [St. Augustine](#) to the 20th-century American philosopher [Alvin Plantinga](#) have offered various defenses, such as that God has reasons for allowing evil that humans cannot understand, or that free will inevitably makes suffering and evil possible.

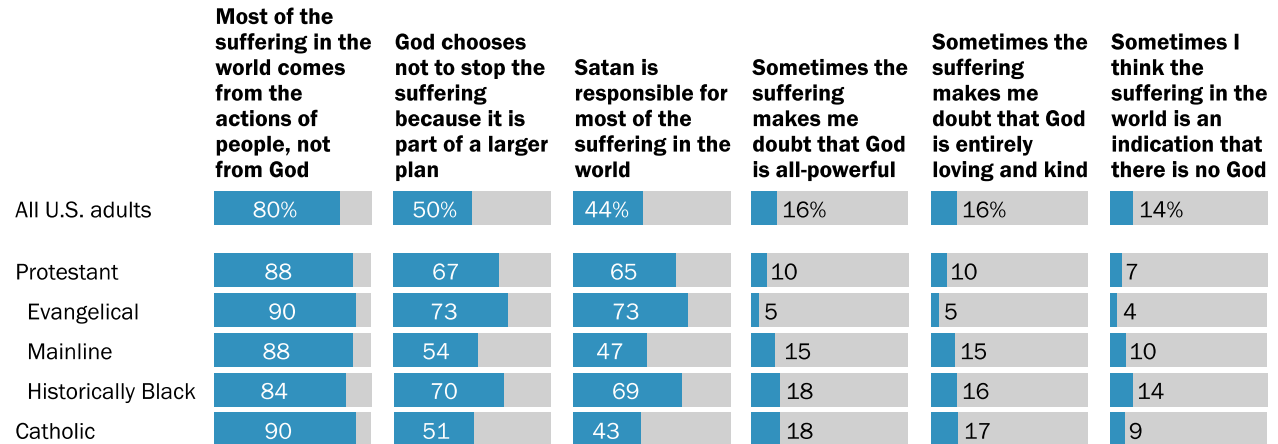
The new survey finds that nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults (58%) say they believe in God as described in the Bible, and an additional one-third (32%) believe there is some other higher power or spiritual force in the universe. The combined nine-in-ten Americans who believe in God or a higher power (91%) were asked a series of follow-up questions about the relationship between God and human suffering. (Those who do not believe in God or any higher power were not asked these questions.)

A large majority of U.S. adults (80%) are believers who say that most of the suffering in the world comes from people rather than from God. Relatedly, about seven-in-ten say that in general, human beings are free to act in ways that go against the plans of God or a higher power. At the same time, half of all U.S. adults (or 56% of believers) also endorse the idea that God chooses “not to stop the suffering in the world because it is part of a larger plan.”

Meanwhile, 44% of all U.S. adults (48% of believers) say the notion that “Satan is responsible for most of the suffering in the world” reflects their views either “very well” or “somewhat well,” with Protestants in the evangelical and historically Black traditions especially likely to take this position.

Most Americans say the suffering in the world comes from people – not God

% of U.S. adults who say each of the following reflects their views very/somewhat well



Note: Roughly one-in-ten respondents say they do not believe in God or a higher power of any kind, and they were not asked these questions. But the figures shown are calculated as a percentage of all U.S. adults, including those who do not believe in God or any spiritual force in the universe. The residual (gray) bars include respondents who say each statement reflects their views “not too well” or “not at all well” as well as those who don’t believe in God or any higher power.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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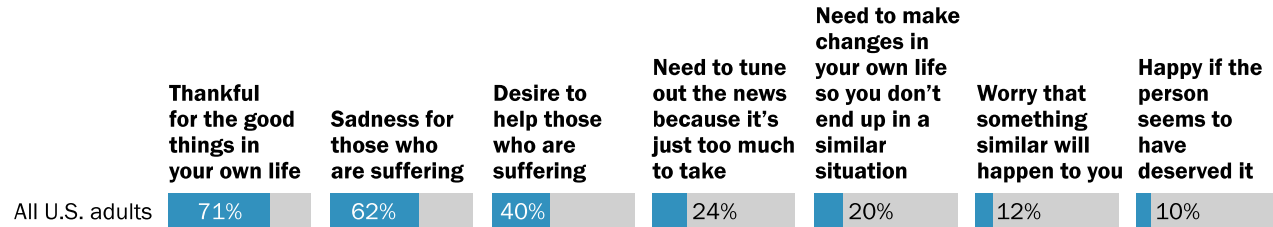
By comparison, relatively few Americans seem to question their religious beliefs because human suffering exists. For instance, 14% of U.S. adults overall (or 15% of believers) affirm that “sometimes I think the suffering in the world is an indication that there is no God.” Results are similar on questions about whether suffering has caused Americans to doubt that God is all-powerful or entirely loving.

In addition, fewer than one-in-five U.S. adults are believers who say they often (3%) or sometimes (14%) get angry with God “for allowing so much suffering.” And relatively small numbers view the suffering in the world as a punishment from God: Just 4% of U.S. adults overall are believers who say “all or most” suffering is a punishment from God, and 18% say “some” of it is. The remainder say that “only a little” (22%) or “none at all” (46%) of the suffering in the world is punishment from God, or they don’t believe in God or any higher power (9%).

Majorities of U.S. adults say that when they see or hear news about terrible things happening to people, they often feel gratitude for the good things in their own lives and sadness for those who are suffering. About one-quarter say they feel the need to tune out the bad news “because it’s just too much to take,” and one-in-ten admit to *schadenfreude*, or feeling happy “if the person [who is suffering] seems to have deserved it.”

What do Americans feel when they hear about human suffering?

*% of U.S. adults who say they **often** feel each of the following when they see or hear news about terrible things happening to people*



Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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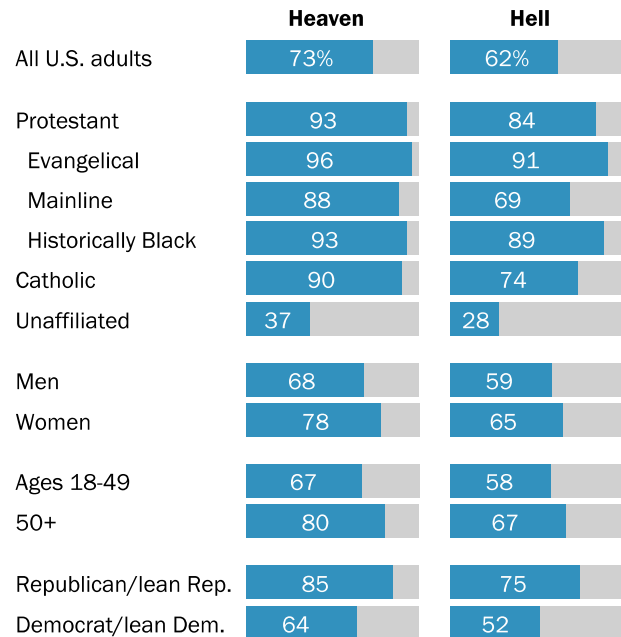
These are among the key findings from a new Pew Research Center survey of 6,485 U.S. adults, conducted on the Center's [American Trends Panel \(ATP\)](#). Although the survey was conducted among Americans of all religious backgrounds – including Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons and more – it did not obtain enough respondents from these smaller religious groups to report separately on their views.

The new survey also asked about views of the afterlife, finding that many Americans believe in an afterlife where suffering either ends entirely or continues in perpetuity.

Nearly three-quarters of all U.S. adults (73%) say they believe in heaven, while a smaller share – but still a majority (62%) – believe in hell. Both figures are similar to what the Center found when it last asked these questions, in 2017. Among Christians, overwhelming majorities of all major subgroups express belief in heaven, but Protestants who belong to the evangelical and historically Black Protestant traditions are more likely than mainline Protestants and Catholics to express belief in hell. Meanwhile, roughly a quarter of U.S. adults say they believe in neither heaven nor hell, including 7% who believe in some other kind of afterlife and 17% who do not believe in any afterlife at all.

Americans who expressed belief in heaven and hell were asked several questions about what they think those places are like. The vast majority of those who believe in heaven – which is most U.S. adults – say they believe heaven is “definitely” or “probably” a place where people are free from suffering, are reunited with loved ones who died previously, can meet God, and have perfectly healthy bodies. And about half of all Americans (i.e., most of those who believe in hell) view hell as a place where people experience psychological and physical suffering and become aware of the suffering they created in the world. A similar share says that people in hell cannot have a relationship with God.

Nearly three-quarters of Americans believe in heaven



Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. “Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

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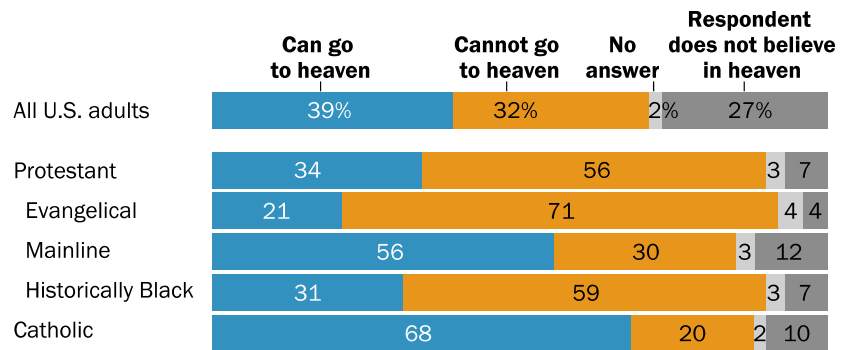
In addition to these questions about the nature of heaven, respondents who expressed belief in heaven were asked about who they think will be allowed to go there. Four-in-ten U.S. adults (39%) say they think people who do not believe in God can enter heaven, compared with about one-third (32%) who say only believers can gain access. (Again, 27% of adults do not believe in heaven at all.) Catholics are far more likely than Protestants to say that people who do not believe in

God can go to heaven (68% vs. 34%). Evangelical Protestants are especially restrictive in their view, with just 21% saying that people who do not believe in God can get to heaven.

There also is wide variance among Christians on the question of whether “many religions” can lead to eternal life in heaven or if their religion is the “one true faith” leading to heaven. Protestants are more than twice as likely as Catholics to say that their faith is the one true faith leading to eternal life in heaven (38% vs. 16%), with half of evangelicals expressing this view. On the other hand, 44% of evangelical Protestants say that many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven, though they are split on whether this reward is granted only to members of other *branches of Christianity* (19%) or if followers of some *non-Christian* religions also can go to heaven (23%).

Catholics twice as likely as Protestants to say people who don't believe in God can go to heaven

% of U.S. adults who say people who do not believe in God ...



Note: Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

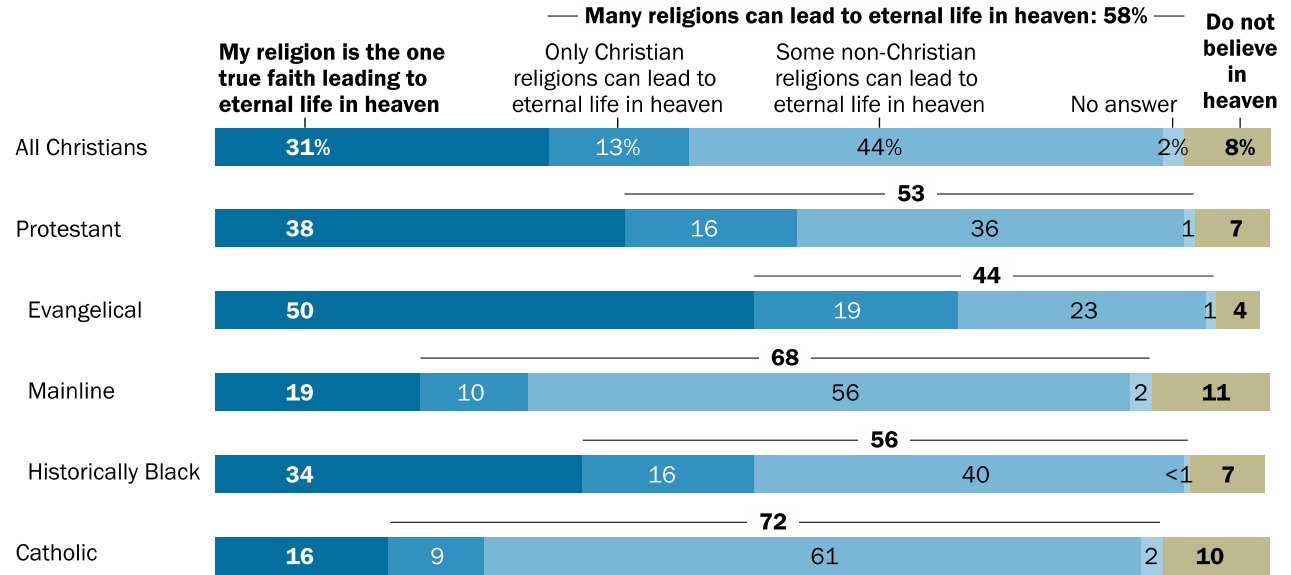
Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Most Catholics, but not most Protestants, say some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life in heaven

% of U.S. Christians who say ...



Note: Figures may not add to subtotals indicated due to rounding. Those who did not answer the question about whether their religion is the one true faith are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Other findings from the survey include:

- One-third of all U.S. adults say they believe in reincarnation, the idea that people will be reborn again and again in this world. Unlike the pattern on many religious beliefs – including belief in heaven and hell – younger adults (under age 50) are more likely than their elders to report holding this belief. Black and Hispanic adults also are more likely than White adults to say they believe in reincarnation.
- A larger share (44%) expresses belief in fate – the idea that the course of their life is predetermined – including roughly two-thirds of Black Americans (65%) who hold this view.
- More than eight-in-ten U.S. adults say they believe things can happen that cannot be explained by science or natural causes. And, in response to more specific questions, majorities say it is possible to feel the presence of someone who has died, to receive a direct revelation from God, to receive a definite answer to a prayer request and to have a near-death experience in which a person's spirit actually leaves their body.

The remainder of this report explores the survey findings in more detail.

1. Views on human suffering and God's role in it

How often do Americans ponder why bad things happen to people?

The survey asked Americans, in light of the coronavirus outbreak and other recent tragedies, how often in the past year they have thought about big questions such as the meaning of life, whether there is any purpose to suffering and why terrible things happen to people.

About six-in-ten U.S. adults (61%) say they have thought about these things at least “some,” including 23% who say they have pondered such weighty questions “a lot.”

Christians are somewhat more likely than religiously unaffiliated Americans (also known as religious “nones”) to say they have thought about these things. Also, Black (33%) and Hispanic (28%) Americans are more likely than White adults (20%) to say they have thought about big questions a lot in the past year.

Most U.S. adults have given at least some thought to life's big questions lately

In the last year, how much, if at all, have you personally thought about big questions such as the meaning of life, whether there is any purpose to suffering and why terrible things happen to people?

	A lot %	Some %	Not much %	Not at all %
All U.S. adults	23	38	26	14
Christian	24	39	25	12
Protestant	24	38	26	13
Evangelical	22	38	27	13
Mainline	21	37	28	14
Historically Black	32	38	19	10
Catholic	22	42	24	11
White Catholic	19	39	26	16
Hispanic Catholic	27	45	24	4
Unaffiliated	20	35	27	17
Atheist	18	25	31	25
Agnostic	24	37	27	12
Nothing in particular	20	37	26	17
Men	20	35	29	16
Women	25	41	23	11
White, non-Hispanic	20	37	27	15
Black, non-Hispanic	33	37	18	12
Hispanic	28	40	25	7
Republican/lean Rep.	17	37	28	17
Democrat/lean Dem.	27	39	23	11
Attend services monthly or more often	26	39	23	12
Attend services a few times a year or less	22	38	27	14

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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There is little to no variation on this question based on people's age, level of education or region of residence.

When they hear about terrible things happening to people, most Americans say they *often* feel thankful for the good things in their own lives (71%) and sadness for those who are suffering (62%). Christians are considerably more inclined than those without a religious affiliation to report experiencing such reactions regularly; the same is true of U.S. adults who typically attend religious services at least monthly compared with those who attend less often. Additionally, women are more likely than men, and older Americans are more likely than those who are younger, to say they feel both gratitude and sadness when they see news about terrible things happening to people.

Four-in-ten U.S. adults say they frequently feel a desire to help those who are suffering when they hear such news. Again, Christians – and especially Protestants – are more likely than religious “nones” to feel this way, as are women in comparison with men.

About a quarter of Americans (24%) say that when they hear about bad things happening to people, they often feel the need to tune out the news because it's “just too much to take.” And one-in-five Americans say they often feel the need to make changes in their own lives so they don't end up in a similar situation, with Black (33%) and Hispanic (32%) Americans about twice as likely as White Americans (15%) to feel this way.

When encountering bad news, roughly one-in-eight U.S. adults (12%) say they often worry that something similar will happen to them; this feeling is about twice as common among young adults (under age 30) than among those ages 50 and older. And one-in-ten say they often feel happy if a person seems to have deserved a bad outcome because of something they did or did not do (a feeling that might be described by the German word *schadenfreude*, which means taking pleasure in someone else's pain or misfortune).

Although the shares who “often” have these experiences vary widely, clear majorities of Americans say they at least “sometimes” have these feelings when they hear about terrible things happening to people on six of the seven questions. The only exception is *schadenfreude*: About two-thirds say they rarely (34%) or never (31%) feel happiness at someone else's suffering, even if the person seems to deserve it.

Hearing about terrible things happening to people often makes Americans feel thankful for what they have, sad for those suffering

% of U.S. adults who say they **often** feel each of the following when they see or hear news about terrible things happening to people

	Thankful for the good things in your own life	Sadness for those who are suffering	Desire to help those who are suffering	Need to tune out the news because it's just too much to take	Need to make changes in your own life so you don't end up in a similar situation	Worry that something similar will happen to you	Happy if the person seems to have deserved it
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	71	62	40	24	20	12	10
Christian	78	66	43	24	22	11	9
Protestant	79	68	45	27	21	9	8
Evangelical	81	71	49	28	18	7	6
Mainline	77	63	36	26	18	8	8
Historically Black	77	69	50	24	37	14	15
Catholic	76	62	36	19	24	16	11
White Catholic	75	66	37	19	16	10	9
Hispanic Catholic	77	56	33	20	40	26	13
Unaffiliated	58	55	35	24	16	15	12
Atheist	48	55	37	20	14	13	15
Agnostic	61	62	30	29	18	12	7
Nothing in particular	60	54	36	24	15	16	13
Men	67	53	34	20	18	11	10
Women	76	71	46	27	22	14	11
Ages 18-29	57	51	39	25	18	18	15
30-49	69	59	39	27	24	16	11
50-64	76	64	40	25	20	9	9
65+	80	75	44	19	17	6	7
Republican/lean Rep.	75	59	37	26	17	9	8
Democrat/lean Dem.	68	65	44	22	23	14	12
Attend services monthly or more often	80	69	49	24	22	11	8
Attend services a few times a year or less	67	59	36	24	20	13	11

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Explanations for why suffering exists in the world

The question of why suffering exists (as well as what suffering is, at its core) has been pondered by countless religious and secular thinkers. The survey offered several possible reasons for suffering, giving respondents the opportunity to say that each statement describes their own views “very well,” “somewhat well,” “not too well” or “not at all well.”

More than eight-in-ten Americans say that “sometimes bad things just happen” reflects their thinking either very well (44%) or somewhat well (42%). This perspective is especially common among atheists and agnostics, majorities of whom say the statement captures their views “very well” (68% and 61%, respectively).

Fewer U.S. adults (19%) – including just 5% of both atheists and agnostics – strongly identify with the idea that suffering exists “to provide an opportunity for people to come out stronger.” Still, 43% of Americans say this reflects their viewpoint “somewhat well.” Christians (relative to religious “nones”) and people

Most Americans say ‘bad things just happen’

% of U.S. adults who say _____ explains why suffering exists in the world ...

	To provide an opportunity for people to come out stronger			Sometimes bad things just happen		
	Very well	Somewhat well	Not too/not at all well	Very well	Somewhat well	Not too/not at all well
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	19	43	37	44	42	13
Christian	21	46	31	40	45	14
Protestant	22	47	30	40	45	15
Evangelical	23	48	28	39	43	18
Mainline	16	46	37	44	48	7
Historically Black	29	47	23	36	44	18
Catholic	19	46	34	42	44	13
White Catholic	16	46	36	43	44	13
Hispanic Catholic	23	43	32	38	45	16
Unaffiliated	13	35	49	51	37	11
Atheist	5	21	74	68	25	7
Agnostic	5	39	56	61	33	6
Nothing in particular	17	38	41	44	41	13
Men	17	42	40	47	40	12
Women	20	43	34	41	44	14
Ages 18-29	19	42	36	45	36	17
30-49	20	42	38	43	45	12
50-64	21	43	34	42	43	13
65+	14	45	40	45	41	13
Republican/lean Rep.	20	49	30	42	45	12
Democrat/lean Dem.	18	39	43	47	39	13
Attend services monthly or more often	23	48	28	39	45	16
Attend services a few times a year or less	17	40	41	46	41	12

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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who say they frequently attend religious services (compared with those who attend less often) are especially likely to feel this way.

Similar shares of Americans express agreement with the following two statements: “Suffering is mostly a consequence of people’s own actions” and “Suffering is mostly a result of the way society is structured.” About seven-in-ten people surveyed say each statement explains their views at least somewhat well, although in both cases, only about one-in-five say it captures their perspective “very well.”

More than half of respondents (53%) say that *both* of these statements describe their views at least somewhat well, although just 8% say both reflect their perspective *very* well. More often, people say that one of these statements captures their views very well and the other somewhat well (15%), or that both reflect their views somewhat well (30%) – suggesting that many people do see both individual and societal reasons behind personal suffering, regardless of which is the primary cause.

Americans see personal, societal reasons for suffering

% of U.S. adults who say _____ explains why suffering exists in the world ...

	Suffering is mostly a consequence of people’s own actions			Suffering is mostly a result of the way society is structured		
	Very well	Somewhat well	Not too/not at all well	Very well	Somewhat well	Not too/not at all well
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	22	49	28	19	50	29
Christian	23	53	24	17	51	31
Protestant	22	55	22	17	50	31
Evangelical	23	55	21	16	47	35
Mainline	22	53	23	18	54	26
Historically Black	21	57	21	20	52	26
Catholic	25	48	26	16	56	28
White Catholic	17	48	34	13	53	33
Hispanic Catholic	40	48	12	19	61	20
Unaffiliated	18	43	37	23	50	26
Atheist	9	34	57	21	54	25
Agnostic	13	41	47	34	43	23
Nothing in particular	22	47	29	21	50	26
Men	24	49	26	19	50	30
Women	20	49	29	19	50	29
Ages 18-29	20	47	31	26	45	28
30-49	22	48	29	21	50	27
50-64	23	52	23	15	52	31
65+	22	49	28	14	52	32
Republican/lean Rep.	25	53	21	15	49	35
Democrat/lean Dem.	19	47	33	24	52	23
Attend services monthly or more often	23	53	23	14	52	33
Attend services a few times a year or less	22	47	30	22	49	28

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

“Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

Democrats and those who lean toward the Democratic Party are somewhat more inclined than Republicans and GOP leaners to see suffering as more of a societal problem, while Republicans are modestly more likely to see suffering as a result of people's own actions. Looked at another way, among all those who see suffering as a consequence of how society is structured but *not* of people's own actions, three times as many are Democrats (72%) as Republicans (24%).

Views on God’s role in human suffering

To help see how Americans’ views about God intersect with their perspectives on human suffering, the survey asked Americans whether they believe in God or not. More than half of U.S. adults (58%), including eight-in-ten Christians, say they believe in God as described in the Bible. An additional 32% of Americans believe in some other kind of higher power or spiritual force, while roughly one-in-ten (9%) do not believe in God or any higher power in the universe. (For full question wording, [see the topline.](#))

All respondents who expressed a belief in God or any kind of higher power were then asked whether, when they hear about terrible things happening to people, they get angry with God for allowing so much suffering in the world.

Relatively few U.S. adults (3%) say they feel this way “often,” while 14% say they “sometimes” experience such anger toward God. A majority of Americans say they “rarely” (26%) or “never” (48%) feel angry with God for allowing terrible things to happen to people.

Most believers say they rarely or never get angry with God for allowing so much suffering in the world

% of U.S. adults who say they _____ get angry with God for allowing so much suffering when they see or hear news about terrible things happening to people

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Do not believe in God or a higher power
	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	3	14	26	48	9
Christian	2	14	28	54	1
Protestant	2	13	29	55	1
Evangelical	1	11	28	59	1
Mainline	2	19	35	41	1
Historically Black	2	10	19	68	<1
Catholic	4	17	28	50	2
White Catholic	3	18	30	46	2
Hispanic Catholic	4	14	25	57	<1
Unaffiliated	4	13	20	35	27
Men	3	12	23	50	13
Women	3	16	29	46	6
Ages 18-29	6	15	31	36	12
30-49	3	16	28	42	12
50-64	3	13	22	56	7
65+	1	11	22	59	7
Republican/lean Rep.	2	14	27	53	4
Democrat/lean Dem.	4	14	25	43	14
Attend services monthly or more often	2	12	28	57	1
Attend services a few times a year or less	3	15	25	43	13

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Protestants in the historically Black tradition and Americans in older age cohorts are especially likely to say they *never* feel such anger toward God.

Respondents who believe in God or a higher power also were asked whether they experience doubts about those beliefs – or about certain attributes of God, such as kindness – because of the suffering they see in the world. Relatively few Americans echo such sentiments in a resounding way. For example, just 3% of U.S. adults say the following statement describes their own views *very* well: “Sometimes I think the suffering that exists in the world is an indication that there is no God.” Similarly, only 5% say that the statements “sometimes the suffering in the world makes me doubt that God is all-powerful” and “sometimes the suffering in the world makes me doubt that God is entirely loving and kind” describe their views very well.

Even a weaker resonance with these doubts is relatively rare. Fewer than one-in-five Americans say each of the three statements describes their views at least “somewhat well.” In each case, about three-quarters say it describes their feelings “not too well” or “not at all well.” (An additional 9% of Americans do not believe in God or any other higher power or spiritual force in the universe, and therefore were not asked these questions.)

Doubts about the existence of God or about God’s attributes based on the amount of human suffering in the world are somewhat more common among young adults, Democrats and religiously unaffiliated Americans who express a belief in God or a higher power. But even among these groups, believers are much more likely to say they do *not* have such doubts than to say they do.

Few U.S. believers say the suffering in the world has shaken their faith in God

Some people have struggled to make sense of their belief in God and the fact that suffering exists in the world. How well does each of the following reflect your own views?

	Sometimes I think the suffering that exists in the world is an indication that there is no God			Sometimes the suffering that exists in the world makes me doubt that God is all-powerful			Sometimes the suffering that exists in the world makes me doubt that God is entirely loving and kind			Do not believe in God/higher power
	Very well	Somewhat well	NET Not too/not at all well	Very well	Somewhat well	NET Not too/not at all well	Very well	Somewhat well	NET Not too/not at all well	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	3	10	76	5	11	74	5	12	73	9
Christian	2	7	90	4	9	86	3	10	86	1
Protestant	2	5	91	3	7	89	3	7	89	1
Evangelical	1	2	95	1	3	94	1	4	94	1
Mainline	2	8	89	3	12	83	3	12	83	1
Historically Black	4	10	84	7	11	80	6	9	82	<1
Catholic	1	8	88	5	13	80	4	13	81	2
White Catholic	1	8	87	3	10	83	2	11	84	2
Hispanic Catholic	1	7	91	7	18	75	8	16	76	<1
Unaffiliated	6	17	47	7	13	50	8	15	47	27
Men	4	10	73	5	10	71	5	12	70	13
Women	3	11	79	5	11	77	5	12	76	6
Ages 18-29	4	20	61	6	18	61	7	21	58	12
30-49	3	12	72	5	12	70	5	13	70	12
50-64	3	6	83	4	7	81	5	7	80	7
65+	3	5	85	4	7	81	4	7	82	7
Rep./lean Rep.	3	7	85	3	9	83	3	9	83	4
Dem./lean Dem.	4	14	67	6	13	65	7	15	63	14
Attend services monthly or more	2	5	92	4	6	89	3	8	87	1
Attend services less often	4	13	68	5	13	67	6	13	66	13

Note: Based on U.S. adults. Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Similarly, relatively few Americans see much of the suffering in the world as a punishment from God. Just 4% say that “all” or “most” of the suffering in the world is a punishment from God, while an additional 18% say that “some” is, and 22% say that “only a little” of the world’s suffering results from God’s wrath. Nearly half of U.S. adults (46%) say “none at all” of the suffering in the world is a punishment from God (in addition to the 9% who do not believe in God).

A [2017 Pew Research Center survey](#) found that 40% of U.S. adults said God had ever punished them. That is similar to the share, in the new survey, who say at least “a little” of the suffering in the world is a punishment from God (44%).

Protestants in the historically Black tradition are somewhat more likely than other Christians to say at least “some” of the suffering in the world results from God’s punishment. Still, fewer than half (43%) believe this, and just one-in-ten say that all or most suffering comes from the wrath of God.

Most do not see suffering as a punishment from God

% of U.S. adults who say they think _____ of the suffering of the world is a punishment from God

	All or most	Some	Only a little	None at all	Do not believe in God or a higher power
	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	4	18	22	46	9
Christian	4	22	25	47	1
Protestant	5	25	26	43	1
Evangelical	4	26	27	41	1
Mainline	2	18	27	51	1
Historically Black	10	33	22	33	<1
Catholic	3	16	23	55	2
White Catholic	<1	13	22	59	2
Hispanic Catholic	5	20	22	53	<1
Unaffiliated	2	12	15	42	27
Men	4	17	20	44	13
Women	3	19	23	47	6
Ages 18-29	4	19	28	33	12
30-49	3	19	24	42	12
50-64	5	18	19	51	7
65+	2	17	17	57	7
Republican/lean Rep.	3	23	25	44	4
Democrat/lean Dem.	4	16	20	45	14
Attend services monthly or more often	5	24	25	45	1
Attend services a few times a year or less	3	16	20	46	13

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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If the suffering in the world doesn't make people doubt God's existence, power or goodness, then how do people reconcile suffering with their beliefs about God? Most Americans largely place the blame for human suffering on people themselves. Eight-in-ten U.S. adults say the following statement describes their views at least somewhat well, including 44% who say it captures their perspective very well: "Most of the suffering in the world comes from the actions of people, not from God."

Many also see human suffering as part of a larger plan. About half of U.S. adults endorse the idea that God chooses not to stop human suffering because it is part of a larger plan; 21% say this reflects their views very well, and an additional 29% say it is a somewhat accurate description of their feelings. Evangelical Protestants are more likely than other Americans to express strong agreement with the idea that human suffering is part of God's larger plan.

Fewer than half of U.S. adults say that Satan is responsible for most of the human suffering in the world, including 19% who say this reflects their viewpoint very well and 25% who say it does somewhat well. Again, evangelical Protestants, along with members of the historically Black Protestant tradition, are especially inclined to hold these views about Satan, while Catholics are less likely to see the work of Satan in human suffering. And most religiously unaffiliated believers reject the idea that Satan is behind human suffering.

Americans with higher levels of education and young adults also are less likely than those with lower levels of education and older Americans to see Satan as primarily responsible for human suffering.

U.S. adults say suffering comes primarily from the actions of people, not God

Some people have struggled to make sense of their belief in God and the fact that suffering exists in the world. How well does each of the following reflect your own views?

	Most of the suffering in the world comes from the actions of people, not from God			God chooses not to stop the suffering because it is part of a larger plan			Satan is responsible for most of the suffering in the world			Do not believe in God/higher power
	Very well	Somewhat well	NET Not too/not at all well	Very well	Somewhat well	NET Not too/not at all well	Very well	Somewhat well	NET Not too/not at all well	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	44	36	10	21	29	38	19	25	45	9
Christian	50	39	10	27	35	36	25	32	40	1
Protestant	48	40	10	30	37	31	30	35	33	1
Evangelical	52	38	9	38	35	25	37	36	25	1
Mainline	47	41	11	17	37	43	15	32	50	1
Historically Black	40	44	14	28	42	27	34	35	29	<1
Catholic	52	38	8	19	32	46	14	28	54	2
White Catholic	50	39	8	19	34	43	12	26	58	2
Hispanic Catholic	53	38	9	18	27	55	15	34	50	<1
Unaffiliated	31	30	9	10	19	41	6	10	55	27
Men	45	32	8	20	28	37	16	24	46	13
Women	43	39	10	23	30	39	21	26	45	6
Ages 18-29	35	37	13	15	26	44	10	26	49	12
30-49	41	37	10	19	29	40	16	24	47	12
50-64	48	36	8	28	31	32	25	25	41	7
65+	51	34	7	23	31	37	24	24	44	7
Rep./lean Rep.	47	39	9	28	35	32	24	31	40	4
Dem./lean Dem.	42	33	10	16	24	44	14	20	50	14
Some college or less	45	37	10	22	30	37	22	26	42	8
College graduate	42	34	9	19	26	41	12	22	52	14

Note: Based on U.S. adults. Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Relatively few say God directly influences everything that occurs

In a forced-choice question asking which of two positions comes closer to their views, Americans overwhelmingly say that human beings are “free to act in ways that go against the plans” of God or a higher power (71%), rather than that “God or a higher power directly influences everything” that occurs in the world (18%).

Black and Hispanic Americans are more likely than those who are White to say that God directly impacts everything that happens. In an overlapping pattern, people with college degrees are less inclined to believe this.

Strikingly, young adults (ages 18 to 29) are somewhat *less* likely than their elders to say that people have free will and can act contrary to God’s plans.

Most Americans say human beings have free will against God’s plans

% of U.S. adults who say each of the following comes closer to their views, even if neither is exactly right

	God or a higher power directly influences everything that occurs in the world	Human beings are free to act in ways that go against the plans of God or a higher power	They do not believe in God or a higher power
	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	18	71	9
Christian	20	77	1
Protestant	21	76	1
Evangelical	22	75	1
Mainline	16	81	1
Historically Black	26	71	<1
Catholic	20	77	2
White Catholic	13	82	2
Hispanic Catholic	30	69	<1
Unaffiliated	10	60	27
White, non-Hispanic	14	73	11
Black, non-Hispanic	26	70	1
Hispanic	23	69	5
Ages 18-29	22	62	12
30-49	18	69	12
50-64	17	73	7
65+	14	77	7
College graduate	13	73	14
Some college or less	20	70	8
Republican/lean Rep.	18	76	4
Democrat/lean Dem.	17	67	14

Note: Those who did not answer are not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

“Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

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2. Views on the afterlife

Majorities of U.S. adults say they believe in heaven, hell

Nearly three-quarters of U.S. adults say they believe in heaven. (The survey did not immediately offer a definition of heaven, though subsequent questions explored what respondents think heaven is like.)

Large majorities of all Christian subgroups say they believe in heaven, while belief is much less common among religiously unaffiliated Americans (37%). This unaffiliated group includes those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” – half of whom believe in heaven – as well as agnostics (26% of whom believe in heaven) and atheists (3%).

While most U.S. adults also believe in hell, this belief is less widespread than belief in heaven. Roughly six-in-ten American adults (62%) say they believe in hell, though once again there are notable differences across subgroups of the population.

Across most Christian subgroups, smaller shares say they believe in hell than heaven. While roughly nine-in-ten Protestants in the evangelical and historically Black traditions believe in hell, only about seven-in-ten mainline Protestants (69%) and 74% of Catholics share this belief.

More Americans believe in heaven than in hell

% of U.S. adults who say they believe in ...

	Heaven %	Hell %
All U.S. adults	73	62
Christian	92	79
Protestant	93	84
Evangelical	96	91
Mainline	88	69
Historically Black	93	89
Catholic	90	74
White Catholic	88	70
Hispanic Catholic	92	79
Unaffiliated	37	28
Atheist	3	1
Agnostic	26	14
Nothing in particular	50	39
Men	68	59
Women	78	65
Ages 18-29	63	55
30-49	69	59
50-64	81	70
65+	79	62
Republican/lean Rep.	85	75
Democrat/lean Dem.	64	52
White, non-Hispanic	72	58
Black, non-Hispanic	88	80
Hispanic	78	66
Northeast	68	51
Midwest	79	67
South	77	69
West	65	54

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. “Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

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Roughly a quarter of all U.S. adults (26%) say that they do not believe in heaven *or* hell, including 7% who say they do believe in some kind of afterlife and 17% who do not believe in any afterlife at all.

One-in-six Americans do not believe in any afterlife

% of U.S. adults who ...

	%
Believe in both heaven and hell	61
Believe only in heaven	13
Believe only in hell	1
Believe in neither heaven nor hell	26
<i>Believe in an afterlife</i>	7
<i>Do not believe in any afterlife</i>	17
<i>No answer</i>	1

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. "Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies"

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Respondents who believe in neither heaven nor hell but do still believe in an afterlife were given the opportunity to describe their idea of this afterlife in the form of an open-ended question that asked: “In your own words, what do you think the afterlife is like?”

Within this group, about one-in-five people (21%) express belief in an afterlife where one’s spirit, consciousness or energy lives on after their physical body has passed away, or in a continued existence in an alternate dimension or reality. One respondent describes their view as “a resting place for our spirits and energy. I don’t think it’s like the traditional view of heaven but I’m also not sure that death is the end.” And another says, “I believe that life continues and after my current life is done, I will go on in some other form. It won’t be me, as in my traits and personality, but something of me will carry on.”

An additional 17% of respondents who believe in neither heaven nor hell (but do believe in some kind of afterlife) express a belief in people enduring a cyclical existence or becoming enlightened after death. As one individual puts it, “Maybe something like nirvana or enlightenment? I like to imagine that the living world we inhabit is like a cradle for the soul. We spend our lifetime (or maybe many lifetimes) learning and growing, and then in the afterlife we retain all those memories from our life(/lives), and the lessons we’ve learned, and that we exist for some greater purpose that living prepares us for.”

Among many other responses, some people believe that people’s energy rejoins the universe in some form, while others feel that people simply enter a period of peace without suffering. And many people in this group (42% of everyone who says they believe in an afterlife but not in heaven or hell) did not offer a response.

Among those who believe in an afterlife other than heaven or hell, what do they believe?

Among the 7% of U.S. adults who say they do not believe in heaven or hell but do believe in some kind of afterlife, % who describe the afterlife as ...

	%
NET Spirit/energy lives on	21
Spirit/energy continues to live on	14
Consciousness continues	2
Another dimension/reality	6
NET Reincarnation/coming back	17
Reincarnation/enlightenment	9
Cyclical existence/rebirth	8
NET Rejoin universe/universal energy	8
Spirit/energy is changed/transformed	4
Rejoin universe/God	6
Learning/growth	4
NET Peaceful/happy/without suffering	11
Reunited with loved ones	2
Peaceful/happy/without suffering	10
Other/unclear	9
No response	42

Note: Subcategories do not sum to NET totals shown because respondents could give multiple responses.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Believers largely see heaven as free from suffering, hell as just the opposite

In addition to asking about general belief in heaven and hell, the survey asked about specific characteristics of these two destinations to determine what Americans think they are like. In the case of heaven, respondents were presented with nine prospective traits, and asked whether heaven is “definitely like this,” “probably like this,” “probably not like this” or “definitely not like this.”

Of the items listed, U.S. adults are most likely to say that in heaven, people are definitely or probably free from suffering, with roughly seven-in-ten members of the general public holding this view. This perspective is nearly unanimous among the 73% of Americans who express belief in heaven.

Majorities of Americans also express confidence in the ideas that in heaven, people are reunited with deceased loved ones (65% of all U.S. adults say this), can meet God (62%) and have perfectly healthy bodies (60%). Roughly half of all U.S. adults (48%) believe that people in heaven are reunited with pets or animals that they knew on Earth, while more than four-in-ten say that people in heaven can see what is happening on Earth (44%) and can become angels (43%).

Smaller shares believe that people in heaven are able to have relationships with people who are still living on Earth (25%), or that they can choose whether they want to stop existing (15%).

Two-thirds of U.S. adults believe deceased people are reunited with loved ones in heaven

% of U.S. adults who believe that in heaven, people definitely/probably ...

	%
Are free from suffering	69
Are reunited with loved ones who died previously	65
Can meet God	62
Have perfectly healthy bodies	60
Are reunited with pets or animals they knew on Earth	48
Can see what is happening on Earth	44
Can become angels	43
Are able to have relationships with people who are still living on Earth	25
Can choose whether they want to stop existing	15

Note: Only respondents who said they believe in heaven (73% of all respondents) received these questions, but the figures shown are calculated as a percentage of all U.S. adults.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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In the case of hell, the survey asked about five different traits. About half of all U.S. adults – the vast majority of the 62% who believe in hell – say that people in hell definitely or probably experience psychological suffering, become aware of the suffering they created in the world, experience physical suffering, and are prevented from having a relationship with God. A slightly smaller share (44%) say they believe people in hell definitely or probably can meet Satan.

Half of U.S. adults think people in hell are cut off from a relationship with God

% of U.S. adults who believe that in hell, people definitely/probably ...

	%
Experience psychological suffering	53
Become aware of the suffering they created in the world	53
Experience physical suffering	51
Cannot have a relationship with God	49
Can meet Satan	44

Note: Only respondents who said they believe in hell (62% of all respondents) received these questions, but the figures shown are calculated as a percentage of all U.S. adults.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

“Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

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Who can get to heaven? No consensus on whether belief in God, being Christian is required

While most U.S. adults believe in heaven, there is disagreement about who can go there. Among all Americans, about four-in-ten (39%) say that people who do not believe in God can go to heaven, while roughly a third (32%) say that nonbelievers cannot enter heaven. (Again, 27% do not believe in heaven at all.)

Catholics are twice as likely as Protestants to say that people who do not believe in God can still go to heaven (68% vs. 34%). Evangelical Protestants are especially likely to view access to heaven as exclusive in this regard, with 71% saying that only those who believe in God can go to heaven, compared with 21% who say nonbelievers can gain entry. A majority of members of the historically Black Protestant tradition (59%) also say that nonbelievers are excluded from heaven, while most mainline Protestants (56%) say that people who do not believe in God *can* go to heaven.

About four-in-ten U.S. adults say people who do not believe in God can go to heaven

% of U.S. adults who say people who do not believe in God ...

	Can go to heaven %	Cannot go to heaven %	No answer %	Respondent does not believe in heaven %
All U.S. adults	39	32	2	27
Christian	45	44	3	8
Protestant	34	56	3	7
Evangelical	21	71	4	4
Mainline	56	30	3	12
Historically Black	31	59	3	7
Catholic	68	20	2	10
White Catholic	69	17	2	12
Hispanic Catholic	67	22	2	8
Unaffiliated	27	9	1	63
Atheist	2	<1	<1	97
Agnostic	21	5	0	74
Nothing in particular	35	13	2	50
Men	36	30	2	32
Women	42	34	3	22
Ages 18-29	40	21	2	37
30-49	39	29	1	31
50-64	38	41	3	19
65+	40	35	4	21
Republican/lean Rep.	39	44	2	15
Democrat/lean Dem.	41	21	1	36
Some college or less	39	35	3	23
College grad+	39	25	2	35
Northeast	47	18	4	32
Midwest	44	32	3	21
South	33	42	2	23
West	38	26	2	35

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

"Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies"

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Most religious “nones” do not believe in heaven at all, but those who do are much more likely to say that people who do not believe in God can go to heaven (27% of all religious “nones”) than that they cannot (9%).

More than four-in-ten Republicans (44%) believe in heaven and say that people who do not believe in God cannot go there – twice the share of Democrats who hold the same view (21%). Additionally, Americans who live in the South are more likely than those in other regions to believe in heaven and to say that people who do not believe in God are excluded.

About three-in-ten U.S. Christians (31%) say that their religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life in heaven, while nearly twice as many (58%) say that there are multiple religions that can lead to heaven.

Once again, there are differences on this question across subgroups – including between Protestants and Catholics. Roughly four-in-ten Protestants (38%) say that theirs is the only faith leading to eternal life in heaven, a view that is especially common among evangelical Protestants (50%). Among Catholics, meanwhile, just 16% say that their religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life in heaven, while about seven-in-ten (72%) instead say that many religions can lead to eternal life.¹

Christians who believe that many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven were asked whether they believe that this privilege is reserved only for members of other Christian religions, or that some non-Christian religions can also lead to eternal life in heaven. Among all Christians, a majority (58%) say that many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven, and within this group, the prevailing view is that members of some non-Christian religions are able to attain eternal life in heaven (43% of all Christians express this view). Just 13% of U.S. Christians say that many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven, but that only Christian religions qualify.

Catholics are more likely than Protestants to say that many religions can lead to heaven and that non-Christians are included (61% vs. 35%), although most mainline Protestants (55%) also say this. Members of the evangelical and historically Black Protestant traditions, however, are more likely to say either that theirs is the one true faith leading to eternal life in heaven or that only Christian religions can lead to heaven.

¹ The question was worded as follows, and when posed to Christians, did not specify whether it was referring to Christianity broadly or the respondent’s specific denomination: “Which of these two statements comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right? My religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life in heaven, or many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven.”

Many Christians say some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life in heaven

% of U.S. Christians who say ...

	Many religions can lead to eternal life in heaven	<i>Only Christian religions can lead to eternal life in heaven</i>	<i>Some non-Christian religions can lead to eternal life in heaven</i>	<i>No answer</i>	<i>Not asked</i>	My religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life in heaven	No answer	Do not believe in heaven
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
All Christians	58	13	43	2	1	31	3	8
Protestant	53	16	35	1	1	38	3	7
Evangelical	44	19	23	1	<1	50	3	4
Mainline	67	10	55	2	1	19	2	12
Historically Black	56	16	38	<1	2	34	2	7
Catholic	72	9	61	2	0	16	2	10

Note: Due to the way the questionnaire was programmed, a small number of Christian respondents were not asked this question.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Fewer than half of Americans believe in reincarnation, fate

The survey also asked respondents about a few other concepts associated with the afterlife or the supernatural.

Though the share of adults who believe in reincarnation – i.e., that “people will be reborn again and again in this world” – is much lower than the share who believe in heaven or hell, it is a view held by a substantial minority of the population (33%).

Just as with heaven and hell, women are more likely than men to believe in reincarnation (38% vs. 27%), but the age pattern on this question differs from the ones observed on the prior two questions. Whereas younger Americans are less likely than their elders to believe in heaven and hell, younger adults are *more* likely to believe in reincarnation. Nearly four-in-ten adults under the age of 50 (38%) believe in reincarnation, compared with 27% of those ages 50 and older.

Overall, Catholics are more likely than Protestants to say that they believe in reincarnation (38% vs. 26%), but there is wide variance within these groups. Nearly half of Hispanic Catholics (47%) believe in reincarnation, compared with a third of White Catholics. The gap among Protestants is even more pronounced: 48% of members of the historically Black Protestant tradition say they believe in reincarnation, while just 31% of mainline Protestants and only 16% of evangelical Protestants say the same. Among religiously unaffiliated Americans, belief in reincarnation is on par with belief in heaven, with 37% of respondents in this group saying that they believe that

Younger Americans more likely than older adults to believe in reincarnation

% of U.S. adults who believe in reincarnation

	%
All U.S. adults	33
Christian	30
Protestant	26
Evangelical	16
Mainline	31
Historically Black	48
Catholic	38
White Catholic	33
Hispanic Catholic	47
Unaffiliated	37
Atheist	12
Agnostic	32
Nothing in particular	44
Men	27
Women	38
Ages 18-29	40
30-49	37
50-64	30
65+	23
White, non-Hispanic	28
Black, non-Hispanic	45
Hispanic	42

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.
Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. “Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

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people will be reborn again and again in this world – higher than the share of Protestants who hold this view.

Overall, 44% of U.S. adults say they believe in fate, defined as the course of their life being predetermined. This group includes half of women (51%) and 35% of men. There also are differences based on levels of educational attainment, with college graduates significantly less likely than those without a degree to say they believe in fate (32% vs. 49%).

Protestants and Catholics overall are identical on this question, with 50% in each group saying they believe in fate. But there is again wide variation along racial and ethnic lines within each group: Protestants in the historically Black tradition (70%) are much more likely than evangelical or mainline Protestants to believe in fate (46% for both evangelical and mainline Protestants), as are Hispanic Catholics compared with White Catholics (63% vs. 43%). One-third of religiously unaffiliated adults believe in fate, with those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular”

much more likely than atheists and agnostics to hold this view.

Large majority of Americans believe things happen that can't be explained by science or natural causes

% of U.S. adults who believe ...

	The course of their life is predetermined (fate) %	Everything in life happens for a reason %	Things happen that can't be explained by science or natural causes %
All U.S. adults	44	68	83
Christian	49	77	90
Protestant	50	78	91
Evangelical	46	80	93
Mainline	46	69	90
Historically Black	70	87	88
Catholic	50	77	92
White Catholic	43	72	91
Hispanic Catholic	63	85	92
Unaffiliated	33	49	69
Atheist	11	13	34
Agnostic	22	37	65
Nothing in particular	42	62	80
Men	35	60	80
Women	51	75	86
White, non-Hispanic	38	64	83
Black, non-Hispanic	65	85	87
Hispanic	54	75	86
Some college or less	49	73	84
College degree	32	56	82

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Differences among religious “nones” are even bigger on a question about whether everything happens for a reason. Most of those whose religion is “nothing in particular” (62%) say that everything in life does happen for a reason, compared with just 13% of atheists and 37% of agnostics. Overall, 68% of U.S. adults hold this view, including 78% of Protestants and 77% of Catholics.

An even larger majority of Americans (83%) believe things happen that cannot be explained by science or natural causes. Atheists are again a notable exception, with only a third (34%) saying they believe things happen that cannot be explained by science or natural causes.

Most Americans believe people can communicate with God or other higher power

The survey also gave examples of various supernatural occurrences and asked respondents to say whether they think each is possible, and if so, whether they had ever personally experienced it.

Fully two-thirds of U.S. adults believe it is possible for people to receive a “definite answer to a specific prayer request,” and the same share (67%) think it is possible to receive a “direct revelation” from God.

Americans are more likely to say they have experienced the former (46%) than the latter (29%).

Overwhelming majorities of Protestants report believing both experiences are possible (85% on each question), and most even say that they personally have received a definite answer to a specific prayer request (64%). This experience is especially common among evangelical Protestants (73%), although members of the historically Black Protestant tradition are more likely than evangelicals to say they have experienced a direct revelation from God (56% vs. 46%).

Most Americans believe prayers can be answered

% of U.S. adults who say they believe it is possible to experience/have personally experienced a ...

	Definite answer to a specific prayer request		Direct revelation from God or other higher power	
	Is possible to experience	Have experienced	Is possible to experience	Have experienced
	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	67	46	67	29
Christian	82	59	81	36
Protestant	85	64	85	42
Evangelical	90	73	88	46
Mainline	74	47	76	27
Historically Black	90	64	92	56
Catholic	75	47	77	23
White Catholic	74	47	76	20
Hispanic Catholic	79	51	77	25
Unaffiliated	37	20	39	14
White, non-Hispanic	65	44	66	25
Black, non-Hispanic	83	59	85	53
Hispanic	70	49	67	29

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Indeed, Black Americans are more likely than White and Hispanic Americans to say it is possible to have one’s prayers definitely answered and to receive a direct revelation from God or a higher power. Black Americans also are more likely to report having experienced these spiritual phenomena personally.

Most Catholics in the U.S. express belief that it is possible to receive a definite answer to a specific prayer request (75%) and a direct revelation from God (77%), though they are somewhat less likely than Protestants to say so. Fewer than half of religiously unaffiliated Americans say the same (37% and 39%, respectively).

Most believe some interaction is possible between the living and the dead

About seven-in-ten Americans say it is possible to feel “the presence of someone who has died,” while roughly half say that living people can be helped by those who have passed (51%) or communicate with them in some way (47%). When asked about their personal experiences with the deceased, 44% of U.S. adults say that they have felt the presence of someone who has died, while smaller shares say that they have received help from (20%) or communicated with (14%) someone who has died.

Contrary to the questions about interaction with God, Catholics are more inclined than Protestants to say it is possible for people to feel the presence of someone who has died (86% vs. 71%), with two-thirds of religious “nones” (66%) also expressing this view. Catholics also are most likely to believe it is possible to get help from the departed (68% vs. 49% of Protestants and 43% of “nones”) and communicate with them (57% vs. 46% and 42%, respectively). Evangelical Protestants, meanwhile, are no more likely than religiously unaffiliated Americans to report believing in or experiencing all of these interactions with the deceased.

Fewer than half of Americans say they have felt presence of the deceased, but most say it is possible to do so

% of U.S. adults who say they believe it is possible to experience/have personally experienced ...

	Feeling the presence of someone who has died		Getting help from someone who has died		Communicating with someone who has died	
	Is possible to experience	Have experienced	Is possible to experience	Have experienced	Is possible to experience	Have experienced
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All U.S. adults	72	44	51	20	47	14
Christian	76	47	55	22	49	15
Protestant	71	44	49	18	46	15
Evangelical	63	37	38	15	35	11
Mainline	79	50	59	19	53	16
Historically Black	83	55	66	28	66	25
Catholic	86	53	68	29	57	17
White Catholic	86	52	70	31	56	19
Hispanic Catholic	87	55	65	27	62	15
Unaffiliated	66	39	43	15	42	10
White, non-Hispanic	73	44	50	19	45	13
Black, non-Hispanic	78	50	61	24	61	20
Hispanic	73	46	55	23	51	14

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults.

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Almost three-quarters of all U.S. adults (72%) think it is possible for people to have “a near-death experience in which their spirit actually leaves their body.” Protestants (82%) and Catholics (83%) are more likely than the religiously unaffiliated (55%) to believe that such an experience is possible, as are Black Americans compared with Americans of other races.

The survey did not ask about whether people have actually had such an experience.

Eight-in-ten U.S. Christians believe in near-death experiences

% of U.S. adults who believe in near-death experiences in which a person’s spirit actually leaves their body

	%
All U.S. adults	72
Christian	81
Protestant	82
Evangelical	81
Mainline	81
Historically Black	84
Catholic	83
White Catholic	85
Hispanic Catholic	80
Unaffiliated	55
White, non-Hispanic	73
Black, non-Hispanic	79
Hispanic	71

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race.

Source: Survey conducted Sept. 20-26, 2021, among U.S. adults. “Few Americans Blame God or Say Faith Has Been Shaken Amid Pandemic, Other Tragedies”

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Methodology

The American Trends Panel survey methodology

Overview

The American Trends Panel (ATP), created by Pew Research Center, is a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. Panelists participate via self-administered web surveys. Panelists who do not have internet access at home are provided with a tablet and wireless internet connection. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish. The panel is being managed by Ipsos.

Data in this report is drawn from the panel wave conducted from Sept. 20 to Sept. 26, 2021. A total of 6,485 panelists responded out of 7,252 who were sampled, for a response rate of 89%. The cumulative response rate accounting for nonresponse to the recruitment surveys and attrition is 3%. The break-off rate among panelists who logged on to the survey and completed at least one item is 1%. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 6,485 respondents is plus or minus 1.9 percentage points.

Panel recruitment

The ATP was created in 2014, with the first cohort of panelists invited to join the panel at the end of a large, national, landline and cellphone random-digit-dial survey that was conducted in both English and Spanish. Two additional recruitments were conducted using the same method in 2015 and 2017, respectively. Across these three surveys, a total of 19,718 adults were invited to join the ATP, of whom 9,942 (50%) agreed to participate.

American Trends Panel recruitment surveys

Recruitment dates	Mode	Invited	Joined	Active panelists remaining
Jan. 23 to March 16, 2014	Landline/ cell RDD	9,809	5,338	1,604
Aug. 27 to Oct. 4, 2015	Landline/ cell RDD	6,004	2,976	939
April 25 to June 4, 2017	Landline/ cell RDD	3,905	1,628	470
Aug. 8 to Oct. 31, 2018	ABS	9,396	8,778	4,433
Aug. 19 to Nov. 30, 2019	ABS	5,900	4,720	1,627
June 1 to July 19, 2020; Feb. 10 to March 31, 2021	ABS	3,197	2,812	1,701
May 29 to July 7, 2021	ABS	1,085	947	728
	Total	39,296	27,199	11,502

Note: Approximately once per year, panelists who have not participated in multiple consecutive waves or who did not complete an annual profiling survey are removed from the panel. Panelists also become inactive if they ask to be removed from the panel. The 2021 recruitment survey was ongoing at the time W96 was conducted. The counts reflect completed recruitment interviews up through July 7, 2021.

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In August 2018, the ATP switched from telephone to address-based recruitment. Invitations were sent to a stratified, random sample of households selected from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File. Sampled households receive mailings asking a randomly selected adult to complete a survey online. A question at the end of the survey asks if the respondent is willing to join the ATP. Starting in 2020, another stage was added to the recruitment. Households that do not respond to the online survey are sent a paper version of the questionnaire, \$5 and a postage-paid return envelope. A subset of the adults returning the paper version of the survey are invited to join the ATP. This subset of adults receives a follow-up mailing with a \$10 pre-incentive and invitation to join the ATP.

Across the four address-based recruitments, a total of 19,578 adults were invited to join the ATP, of whom 17,257 agreed to join the panel and completed an initial profile survey. In each household, the adult with the next birthday was asked to go online to complete a survey, at the end of which they were invited to join the panel. Of the 27,199 individuals who have ever joined the ATP, 11,502 remained active panelists and continued to receive survey invitations at the time this survey was conducted.

The U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File has been estimated to cover as much as 98% of the population, although some studies suggest that the coverage could be in the low 90% range.² The American Trends Panel never uses breakout routers or chains that direct respondents to additional surveys.

Sample design

The overall target population for this survey was non-institutionalized persons ages 18 and older, living in the U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii.

This study featured a stratified random sample from the ATP. The sample was allocated according to the following strata, in order: tablet households, White mainline Protestants who attend religious services monthly or more, White evangelical Protestants who attend religious services a few times a year or less, White Catholics who attend monthly or more, Black Protestants, White Catholics who attend a few times a year or less, Hispanic Catholics, White mainline Protestants who attend a few times a year or less, atheists and agnostics, White evangelical Protestants who attend monthly or more, those with no religious affiliation in particular, foreign-born Hispanics, U.S.-born Hispanics, not registered to vote, high school education or less, foreign-born Asian

² AAPOR Task Force on Address-based Sampling. 2016. "[AAPOR Report: Address-based Sampling.](#)"

adults, people ages 18 to 34, non-Hispanic Black adults, uses internet weekly or less, nonvolunteers, and all other categories not already falling into any of the above.

All strata were sampled at rates designed to ensure that the share of respondents in each stratum is proportional to its share of the U.S. adult population to the greatest extent possible. Respondent weights are adjusted to account for differential probabilities of selection as described in the Weighting section below.

Questionnaire development and testing

The questionnaire was developed by Pew Research Center in consultation with Ipsos. The web program was rigorously tested on both PC and mobile devices by the Ipsos project management team and Pew Research Center researchers. The Ipsos project management team also populated test data that was analyzed in SPSS to ensure the logic and randomizations were working as intended before launching the survey.

Incentives

All respondents were offered a post-paid incentive for their participation. Respondents could choose to receive the post-paid incentive in the form of a check or a gift code to Amazon.com or could choose to decline the incentive. Incentive amounts ranged from \$5 to \$20 depending on whether the respondent belongs to a part of the population that is harder or easier to reach. Differential incentive amounts were designed to increase panel survey participation among groups that traditionally have low survey response propensities.

Data collection protocol

The data collection field period for this survey was Sept. 20 to Sept. 26, 2021. Postcard notifications were mailed to all ATP panelists with a known residential address on Sept. 20.

Invitations were sent out in two separate launches: Soft Launch and Full Launch. Sixty panelists were included in the soft launch, which began with an initial invitation sent on Sept. 20, 2021. The ATP panelists chosen for the initial soft launch were known responders who had completed previous ATP surveys within one day of receiving their invitation. All remaining English- and Spanish-speaking panelists were included in the full launch and were sent an invitation on Sept. 21.

All panelists with an email address received an email invitation and up to two email reminders if they did not respond to the survey. All ATP panelists that consented to SMS messages received an SMS invitation and up to two SMS reminders.

Invitation and reminder dates

	Soft Launch	Full Launch
Initial invitation	Sept. 20, 2021	Sept. 21, 2021
First reminder	Sept. 23, 2021	Sept. 23, 2021
Final reminder	Sept. 25, 2021	Sept. 25, 2021

Data quality checks

To ensure high-quality data, the Center’s researchers performed data quality checks to identify any respondents showing clear patterns of satisficing. This includes checking for very high rates of leaving questions blank, as well as always selecting the first or last answer presented. As a result of this checking, two ATP respondents were removed from the survey dataset prior to weighting and analysis.

Weighting

The ATP data is weighted in a multistep process that accounts for multiple stages of sampling and nonresponse that occur at different points in the survey process. First, each panelist begins with a base weight that reflects their probability of selection for their initial recruitment survey. Among respondents to this survey, the base weights for panelists recruited in different years are scaled to be proportionate to the effective sample size for all respondents in their cohort. To correct for nonresponse to recruitment surveys and panel attrition, the base weights for all active panelists are calibrated to align with the population benchmarks in the accompanying table to create a full-panel weight. If only a subsample of panelists was invited to participate in the wave, the full-panel weight is adjusted to account for any differential probabilities of selection.

Among the panelists who completed the survey, this weight is then calibrated again to align with the population benchmarks identified in the accompanying table and trimmed at the 1st and 99th percentiles to reduce the loss in precision stemming from variance in the weights. Sampling errors and tests of statistical significance take into account the effect of weighting.

Some of the population benchmarks used for weighting come from surveys conducted prior to the coronavirus outbreak that began in February 2020. However, the weighting variables for panelists recruited in 2021 were measured at the time they were recruited to the panel. Likewise, the profile variables for existing panelists were updated from panel surveys conducted in July or August 2021.

This does not pose a problem for most of the variables used in the weighting, which are quite stable at both the population and individual levels. However, volunteerism may have changed over the intervening period in ways that made panelists' 2021 measurements incompatible with the available (pre-pandemic) benchmarks. To address this, volunteerism is weighted using the profile variables that were measured in 2020. For all other weighting dimensions, the more recent panelist measurements from 2021 are used.

Weighting dimensions

Variable	Benchmark source
Age x Gender	2019 American Community Survey (ACS)
Education x Gender	
Education x Age	
Race/Ethnicity x Education	
Born inside vs. outside the U.S. among Hispanics and Asian Americans	
Years lived in the U.S.	
Census region x Metro/Non-metro	2020 CPS March Supplement
Volunteerism	2019 CPS Volunteering & Civic Life Supplement
Voter registration	2018 CPS Voting and Registration Supplement
Party affiliation	2021 National Public Opinion Reference Survey (NPORS)
Frequency of internet use	
Religious affiliation	

Note: Estimates from the ACS are based on non-institutionalized adults. Voter registration is calculated using procedures from Hur, Achen (2013) and rescaled to include the total U.S. adult population.

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For panelists recruited in 2021, plausible values were imputed using the 2020 volunteerism values from existing panelists with similar characteristics. This ensures that any patterns of change that were observed in the existing panelists were also reflected in the new recruits when the weighting was performed.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey.

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
All U.S. adults	6,485	1.9 percentage points
Christian	4,310	2.3 percentage points
Protestant	2,745	2.8 percentage points
Evangelical	1,421	3.9 percentage points
Mainline	911	4.9 percentage points
Historically Black	413	6.9 percentage points
Catholic	1,375	4.3 percentage points
White Catholic	857	4.8 percentage points
Hispanic Catholic	432	9.4 percentage points
Unaffiliated	1,814	3.7 percentage points
Atheist	339	8.3 percentage points
Agnostic	334	8.8 percentage points
Nothing in particular	1,141	4.7 percentage points
Attend services monthly+	2,162	3.3 percentage points
Attend services less often	4,302	2.3 percentage points
White, non-Hispanic	4,334	2.2 percentage points
Black, non-Hispanic	662	5.6 percentage points
Hispanic	975	6.0 percentage points
Ages 18-29	618	6.0 percentage points
30-49	2,130	3.2 percentage points
50-64	1,831	3.4 percentage points
65+	1,876	3.1 percentage points
Ages 18-49	2,748	3.0 percentage points
50+	3,707	2.3 percentage points
Men	2,844	3.0 percentage points
Women	3,585	2.4 percentage points
Some college or less	3,260	2.6 percentage points
College degree or more	3,208	2.3 percentage points
Northeast	1,029	4.6 percentage points
Midwest	1,428	3.9 percentage points
South	2,571	3.2 percentage points
West	1,457	4.0 percentage points

	Unweighted sample size	Weighted %	Plus or minus ...
Republican/lean Rep.	2,958	42	2.8 percentage points
Democrat/lean Dem.	3,342	51	2.6 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request. In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

Dispositions and response rates

Final dispositions	AAPOR code	Total
Completed interview	1.1	6,485
Logged on to survey; broke off	2.12	89
Logged on to survey; did not complete any items	2.1121	48
Never logged on (implicit refusal)	2.11	626
Survey completed after close of the field period	2.27	2
Completed interview but was removed for data quality		2
Screened out		0
Total panelists in the survey		7,252
Completed interviews	I	6,485
Partial interviews	P	0
Refusals	R	765
Non-contact	NC	2
Other	O	0
Unknown household	UH	0
Unknown other	UO	0
Not eligible	NE	0
Total		7,252
AAPOR RR1 = $I / (I+P+R+NC+O+UH+UO)$		89%

Cumulative response rate	Total
Weighted response rate to recruitment surveys	12%
% of recruitment survey respondents who agreed to join the panel, among those invited	69%
% of those agreeing to join who were active panelists at start of Wave 96	42%
Response rate to Wave 96 survey	89%
Cumulative response rate	3%

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