

# How Americans Responded: A Study of Public Reactions to 9/11/01

**Michael Traugott, Ted Brader, Deborah Coral, Richard Curtin, David Featherman, Robert Groves, Martha Hill, James Jackson, Thomas Juster, Robert Kahn, Courtney Kennedy, Donald Kinder, Beth-Ellen Pennell, Matthew Shapiro, Mark Tessler, David Weir, and Robert Willis,**  
*Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan*

## Introduction

On the afternoon of Tuesday, September 11, 2001, a group of social scientists at the Institute for Social Research (ISR) gathered to consider how we might employ their talents to help the country after the shocking events of that morning. The group included economists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, demographers, and survey methodologists. Based upon their previous research experience, each of us proposed hypotheses on aspects of American life and individuals' morale and behavior that were most likely to be affected. While we were relatively confident about expected relationships in the short term, we were uncertain about how temporary or permanent these changes might be or how intertwined and mutually reinforcing they could become.

We assumed a proliferation of media polls would provide the country quick snapshots of reactions to current events, but we also felt the scientific monitoring of the attitudes important to changing behaviors would be overlooked. And so the How Americans Respond (HAR) survey was born. From the beginning, the research had a dual focus: to measure attitudes quickly after the event and to explore the effects of the attack over time with a longitudinal design. To the maximum extent possible, the survey used measures from existing longitudinal data collections in order to facilitate comparisons over time. Whenever possible, HAR sought to compare pre-attack national estimates to post-attack estimates. While the indicators of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors about the attacks themselves had no possible premeasurements, we designed HAR to function as a monitoring device to see how they would change over time.<sup>1</sup>

A primary focus of the study was the resiliency of the U.S. population. A number of previous national traumas in the United States have been the focus of extended research, and general models of effects have been developed (Barton 1969; Canino, Bravo, and Rubio-Stipec 1990). But those events and study designs differed significantly from what we proposed to do. The most relevant events include the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963; the disturbances in urban areas in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Los Angeles in 1992; and the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995. There have, of course, been numerous natural and man-made disasters that have affected large numbers of citizens in local areas, but they have not had the same kind of national impact as September 11 (e.g., Wilkinson 1983). Other incidents, such as the Challenger disaster, have also had national consequences, but without equivalent international implications and the equivalent magnitude of loss.

In our studies, we were concerned about the reaction of the entire nation to the event. The incident itself represented an assault on national principles and ideals and was expected to affect the national psyche; and the news coverage, some of which provided a live, real-time view of events as they unfolded, was graphic and available to a large national audience, including children.

In an incident like Oklahoma City, the direct impact was primarily local and the perpetrators were U.S. citizens. Most Americans saw it as an isolated event by a single individual who was captured quickly. While there were several news polls conducted after the event (and many more subsequently about a trial and eventual punishment), there was little content that focused on either general social psychological attitudes in the nation or their potential political

and economic ramifications. Several studies measured the stress and coping abilities of children (Morland 1999; Pesci 1999; Pfefferbaum et al. 1999; Pfefferbaum et al. 2000), victims and their families (North et al. 1999), and other citizens in the area (Sprang 1999; Tucker et al. 2000). While no studies involved either a national or local panel of citizens, there were indications that symptoms of stress were still present in children living in the vicinity of Oklahoma City seven weeks after the incident (Pfefferbaum et al. 1999).

Some researchers have studied the dynamics and resiliency of attitudes about tolerance and civil liberties but not in relation to an equivalent national tragedy or to attitudes relating to international actors and foreign affairs. Going back to the Stouffer studies (1955), shifts in opinions on tolerance and civil liberties have been studied across years and decades. But very few studies have looked at how rapid these shifts might be across a short period of time when there is a particular triggering event for the change.<sup>2</sup>

The role of the media is a key element in this process. The media are an essential source of information about events (and their meaning) as they unfold, and previous research shows that those with the highest levels of media exposure are most affected psychologically and less likely to recover quickly (Morland 1999; Pesci 1999; Pfefferbaum et al. 2000). Only through repeated measures over time can this hypothesis be tested for September 11 and other related actions that followed.

The issue of the durability of initial reactions, including how they may have changed contemporary American civil society, is important too. Putnam (2002) presents an early summary of survey findings produced close to the September attacks, and he concludes that there is a possibility that both a period effect and a cohort effect develop among those who were affected directly by the events as well as by the continuous media coverage of them. He notes, "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" (22). Whether this renewal is taking place and how long it might last are key questions for analysts of the public reactions to September 11, and answers may be pursued through longitudinal analysis of the HAR study.

## **Relevant Findings**

One of the most important findings from Wave 1 of HAR was that a substantial number of Americans suffered a lost sense of personal safety and security. This loss was associated statistically with their economic attitudes and behavior, their support for various government policies, and their resulting psychological states. In the initial survey, about half of the respondents said their personal sense of safety and security was reduced "a great deal or "a good amount," while the other half indicated that it was affected "not too much" or "not at all" (see [Figure 1](#)).

Despite the government's actions since the attacks, including military action in Afghanistan and the establishment of the Office of Homeland Security, Americans' level of concern has not changed very much. The basic attitudinal measures were dichotomized to reflect "concerned" and "not concerned" and then compared in Wave 2 to Wave 1. These results, presented in [Figure 2](#), show that 39% of the respondents were "not concerned" at either time, and 37% remained "concerned" six months later. One in eight (13%) were "concerned" in September but were not six months later, while 11% were not "concerned" in Wave 1 but were in Wave 2.

Of course, the Bush administration is currently trying to reassure the public that it is fighting a war on terrorism which will extend far into the future, while trying to maintain an appropriate level of heightened alert about the possibility of additional attacks. In general, it has been difficult to measure the "success" in this effort. The data from Wave 1 show close attention to the media correlated with a shaken sense of personal safety. And there was a weaker relationship between attention to news about the war on terrorism, measured in Wave 2, and still feeling shaken or worse off. This is also true in Wave 2 for current attention to television

evening news (number of days watched in the last week). However, in Wave 2 a shaken sense of personal safety shows no association with reading the newspaper (number of days read).

## **Civic Engagement**

As in any study that involves indicators of civic engagement, there are a number of ever-present measurement issues. For example, Putnam (2002, 20–21) reports, "Occasional volunteering is up slightly, but regular volunteering (at least twice a month) remains unchanged at about one in every seven Americans. Compared with figures from immediately after the tragedy, our data suggest that much of the measurable increase in generosity spent itself within a few weeks." Assessments of survey responses like these depend on definitions that are given in the questions, including what a volunteer activity might be and what the relevant time period of reference is.

The HAR question is, "Thinking about the past month, have you spent any time participating in any sort of volunteer or charitable activity in your community?" When an AARP survey in 1996 asked a similar question with a time reference of "the past year," 43% of Americans reported that they had engaged in such activity. In both Wave 1 and Wave 2 of HAR, 39% of the respondents indicated that they had done some volunteer work "in the past month," indicating no significant difference from the earlier time period. When the responses of the panel participants are compared, one-quarter of the respondents (26%) indicated volunteering at both points in time and 47% at neither. A total of 15% indicated volunteering in the Wave 1 survey but not at Wave 2, while 12% indicated volunteering at Wave 2 but not at Wave 1. These data certainly do not indicate a surge in volunteering as a response to September 11. However, this reflects only the percentage of people volunteering and says nothing about the time that volunteers spend in such activity.

For a more comprehensive assessment of volunteering, we also asked a follow-up question to those who said they had volunteered about how many hours they spent volunteering in the past month, and these data suggest a slightly different picture. As illustrated in [Table](#), the average number of hours spent volunteering in the preceding month was greater in Wave 2 than in Wave 1, and it may be attributed to an increase in time spent volunteering by those who were already doing so. First-time volunteers in Wave 1 and Wave 2 spent about the same amount of time in the preceding month on this effort (11.7 compared to 12.0 hours). People who volunteered at both points in time reported more hours at Wave 1 (16.0) and at Wave 2 (21.8 hours). They increased their effort, on average, by 36% (21.8 compared to 16.0), and the time they reportedly spent in volunteering in Wave 2 was about 80% higher than the effort expended by first-time volunteers at either point in time.

## **Trust in Others**

Another measure of civil society is the trust that Americans have in those around them. Putnam reports trust in government data showing that half (51%) of his respondents were more trusting in late 2001 than they had been one year earlier. On the basic item, "Most of the time, people try to be helpful rather than looking out for themselves," there was no difference in the distribution of attitudes measured in HAR in the Wave 1 and Wave 2 cross-sections; two out of three respondents "agreed" or "agreed strongly." Looking at shifts among the panel respondents from Wave 1 to Wave 2, there is a strong correlation ( $\gamma = .40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) with a slight tendency toward greater agreement at Wave 2.

There are other ways to measure trust. Recent research (Burns and Kinder 2000) shows that trust in others is domain specific. In Wave 2 of HAR, we asked three sets of questions each about trust in "people from other countries," trust in "Americans," and trust in "people in your neighborhood."<sup>3</sup> After September 11, we expected to find that trust in neighbors would be high, followed by trust in Americans, and then trust in foreigners. We constructed three additive scales, and they were intercorrelated, indicating a tendency for some respondents to be generally more trusting than others. However, the scores on the simple additive indexes

were distributed quite differently, as shown in [Table 2](#). The mean score for the Trust in Americans index was .34 points (19%) higher than the mean for the Trust in Foreigners index (2.10 compared to 1.76); and the mean Trust in Neighbors index was .49 points (23%) higher than the mean Trust in Americans index and .83 points (47%) higher than the mean Trust in Foreigners index.

The HAR survey suggests that these attitudes may reflect more patriotism and national pride than an opposition to foreigners. While some portion of these attitudes is probably inherently present in most respondents, September 11 undoubtedly played a role in the values measured in HAR. For example, the act of following the news about the war on terrorism "closely" was correlated with the Trust in Americans index ( $\gamma = .16, p < .001$ ), but not significantly with the Trust in Neighbors index ( $\gamma = .08$ ) or Trust in Foreigners index ( $\gamma = .02$ ).

## **Feelings toward Ethnic and Racial Minorities**

Both waves of the HAR survey also contained information from "feeling thermometer" questions that asked respondents how they felt about a variety of ethnic and racial groups. As shown in [Figure 3](#), we found that "American" groups such as African, Hispanic and even white Americans all received higher ratings in Wave 1 than they had in either the 1998 or the 2000 American National Election Study. These changes in group-favorability ratings are related to attention to the news about the war on terrorism. Those respondents paying close attention to the news on average were more likely to give favorable ratings to every one of these groups in Wave 2, while those who were not paying much attention to such news were less likely to give a positive rating.

Of course several ethnic groups composed of people most closely associated with the attacks on the World Trade Center received less favorable ratings, measured in the same way. The data presented in [Figure 4](#) show that the percent giving favorable ratings to Middle Eastern ethnic groups in the United States and overseas were generally lower than those for African, Hispanic, Asian, and white Americans. Larger proportions gave favorable ratings to Jewish Americans than to Arab Americans or Muslim Americans. And these proportions were greater in every case than the evaluations for similar groups outside of the United States. These relationships were unchanged in Wave 2 of the HAR study.

Attitudes toward immigrants have changed slightly, however. Last fall, 87% of those surveyed "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that immigrants make America more open to new ideas and cultures, compared to 81% surveyed in March. In Wave 1, about 24% agreed or strongly agreed that immigrants increase U.S. crime rates, compared to 29% surveyed in Wave 2.

## **Conclusions**

The HAR survey results paint a picture of Americans rallying around each other, concerned and even distrustful of some groups of foreigners. This is a kind of patriotism of mutual support more than a jingoistic reaction to all foreigners or even immigrants. The concept of social trust is complex. On the one hand, data from the trust indexes suggest that there is a differentiation among those who can be trusted as a function of proximity to the respondents' daily lives. Respondents place greater trust in neighbors than in Americans generally and in Americans relative to people from other countries. This relationship is mirrored in the favorability data derived from feeling thermometers. Some Americans seem more inclined to help others since September 11. While the number of volunteers does not seem to have grown, the panel data suggest that people who ordinarily help others are spending more time doing so without increased assistance from a new cohort of volunteers.

With additional or different question wordings employed in other studies, we will be able to understand better the conditions and implications of these tendencies. Only continued longitudinal data collection can monitor changes in civic engagement in response to September 11. That is our primary goal with the HAR survey project.

## Notes

1. The data for the HAR study derive from a two-wave panel survey. The first wave was conducted in September–October of 2001, and the followup survey was conducted in March–April of 2002. A total of 752 interviews were completed in the first wave of HAR, based upon a nationwide RDD sample. In Wave 2, we recontacted 613 respondents from Wave 1 and conducted new interviews with 151 RDD respondents, for a total sample size of 764 respondents. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes on average.

2. One notable exception is a study of English-speaking Canadians' reactions to the assassination of a political figure by French Canadian terrorists which suggests that citizens' restricted views of civil liberties returned to their normal levels by seven months after the incident (Sorrentino and Vidmar 1974).

3. The items included "Generally speaking, would you say that most (people from other countries/ Americans/ people in your neighborhood) can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" "Do you think that most of the time (people from other countries/ Americans/ people in your neighborhood) would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance or would they try to be fair?" and "Would you say that most of the time (people from other countries/ Americans/ people in your neighborhood) try to be helpful or that they are just looking out for themselves?" A reliability analysis for each scale produced alphas of .74 for Trust in Foreigners, .67 for Trust in Americans, and .73 for Trust in Neighbors.

## References

- Barton, Allen H. 1969. *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*. New York: Doubleday.
- Burns, Nancy, and Donald Kinder. 2000. "Social Trust and Democratic Politics: A Report to the National Election Studies Board." Ann Arbor, MI.
- Canino, Glorisa, Milagros Bravo, Maritza Rubio-Stipec. 1990. "The Impact of Disaster on Mental Health: Prospective and Retrospective Analyses." *International Journal of Mental Health* 19:51–69.
- Morland, Leslie Anne. 1999. "The Oklahoma City Bombing: An Examination of the Relationship between Exposure to Bomb-related Television and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms Following a Disaster." Ph.D. diss. Pepperdine University.
- North, Carol S., et al. 1999. "Psychiatric Disorders Among Survivors of the Oklahoma City Bombing." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 282:755–62.
- Pesci, Marianne. 1999. "The Oklahoma City Bombing: The Relationship among Modality of Trauma Exposure, Gender, and Posttraumatic Stress Symptoms in Adolescents." Ph.D. diss. Pepperdine University.
- Pfefferbaum, Betty, et al. 1999. "Clinical Needs Assessment of Middle and High School Students Following the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing." *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 156:1069–74.
- Pfefferbaum, Betty, et al. 2000. "Posttraumatic Stress Two Years After the Oklahoma City Bombing in Youths Geographically Distant from the Explosion." *Psychiatry* 63:358–70.
- Putnam, Robert. 2002. "Bowling Together." *The American Prospect*, February 11, 20–22.
- Sorrentino, R.M., and Neil J. Vidmar. 1974. "Impact on Events: Short- vs. Long-Term Effects of a Crisis." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 38:271–79.

Sprang, Ginny. 1999. "Post-Disaster Stress Following the Oklahoma City Bombing: An Examination of Three Community Groups." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 14:169–83.

Stouffer, Samuel.A. 1955. *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties*. New York: Doubleday.

Tucker, Phebe, et al. 2000. "Predictors of Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms in Oklahoma City: Exposure, Social Support, Peri-Traumatic Responses." *The Journal of Behavioral Health Services & Research* 27:406–16.

Wilkinson, C.B. 1983. "Aftermath of a Disaster: Collapse of the Hyatt Regency Skywalks." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 140:1134–39.