

# CIVIC VIRUS

Why Polarization Is  
a Misdiagnosis

*By Richard C. Harwood*

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*Prepared by The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation*

*Civic Virus: Why Polarization Is a Misdiagnosis* was prepared by **The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation** in partnership with the **Kettering Foundation**.

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# Introduction

**THE NATION HAS BEEN BATTLING** *the worst pandemic in more than 100 years, which is wreaking havoc on our country and people's lives. But what if there is another virus infecting us as well—a civic virus that has been incubating and mutating for decades—one that is dangerously pervasive, contagious, and perilous to our nation's civic health?*

## Conventional Wisdom

This report comes at a time when the conventional wisdom is that Americans are polarized. All one has to do is turn on the nightly news, listen to political pundits, or go online and you'll hear the loud, constant drumbeat of this message. It echoes and reverberates throughout the land. We have heard it so much that we believe it. There is no doubt that animosity and sharp disagreements exist today; they clearly do. But conventional wisdom misdiagnoses what's really ailing us. When talking in depth with Americans from all walks of life and from communities all across this nation, there is something fundamentally different, deeper, and more disturbing happening in America. It begs our undivided attention.

“**TODAY, RATHER THAN BEING ‘POLARIZED,’ AMERICANS ARE PROFOUNDLY ISOLATED AND DISORIENTED, PRODUCING WITHIN PEOPLE A FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT RESPONSE.**”

Today is almost exactly 30 years since the 1991 release of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation's report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*. At that time, the conventional wisdom was that Americans were apathetic about politics

and public life. Conventional wisdom was wrong then just as it is today.

*30 years ago, rather than being “apathetic,” Americans felt pushed out and disconnected from “politics.” They said elected officials, news media, and special interests had taken politics hostage. Today, rather than being “polarized,” Americans are profoundly isolated and disoriented, producing within people a fight-or-flight response.*

In the time since *Citizens and Politics*, the conversation in the nation has shifted dramatically from “the problem is out there with the elected officials, news media, and special interests” to “the problem is now within each of us.”

EUGENE, OR



## A Civic Virus

While this current reality is troubling, it is not surprising. The maladies affecting us have been emerging and taking shape for years (see timeline on page 7). During the past three decades, or even longer, a *civic virus* has infected the body politic and spread rampantly. It is insidious. Based on 16 in-depth focus groups that make use of a typology of different US communities developed by the American Communities Project, here's the state of the union today:

- People are separating and segregating themselves from one another due to unrelenting fear and anxiety about what's happening around them and to them.
- Many leaders, news media, and social media are intentionally stoking polarization for their own self-interest—producing a ceaseless surround sound that is engulfing people, subjecting people to an alternate reality that confuses, disorients, and destabilizes them.
- Seeing no way out, people have an instinctive fight-or-flight response with many breaking up into smaller “tribes” and camps to protect themselves and gain validation, while others retreat from engaging at all.

People's defenses against this civic virus are now compromised and fast depleting. They have been fighting off the virus for years, but even though their will to carry on remains strong, their reserves are not unlimited. Today, people can no longer determine in public life what is true and what is not; their own personal sense of reality is shaken, too. They experience unrelenting noise and tension throughout their lives. Living through this is like being trapped in a house of mirrors with no visible way out. The extent to which people are anxious, angry, fearful, confused, and isolated cannot

be overstated. This toxic brew is dizzying, disorienting, and destabilizing. People across the nation feel a profound sense of a loss of control; many feel helpless and without hope. This state of affairs is untenable to sustain—for people and for the nation.

Some might say that the COVID-19 pandemic caused these troubles. Make no mistake, the pandemic upended people's lives and livelihoods. Yet people in these conversations repeatedly said the pandemic did not create the larger conditions they're wrestling with; rather, the pandemic laid them bare and exacerbated them. Again, the challenges people describe have been evolving and taking shape for decades.

“ DIVISIONS IN THE COUNTRY ARE INTRINSICALLY ABOUT SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONDITIONS—SUCH AS FEAR, ANXIETY, AND A LACK OF EMPATHY AND BELONGING— THAN ABOUT IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION.

## Drumbeat of Polarization

Some will wonder whether what we have found is really different from polarization. Our goal is not to become entangled in arguments over definitions. At the same time, it is important to distinguish what we heard from today's conventional wisdom because naming the challenge accurately has everything to do with what we ultimately do about it.

Polarization is often thought of as the public dividing into neatly defined, major groups that are in direct opposition to each other on public policy, ideology, and partisanship. In conversations for this study, people said with absolute clarity that such polarization is being spread by leaders, the news media, and in social media. And yes, among the public, the people



we talked with believe that more Americans have been moving to political extremes.

Yet people insist that the vast majority of everyday Americans are not polarized by ideology. Ample evidence also exists from public opinion surveys and work by The Harwood Institute and other groups that people can work through their differences on various policy concerns. Furthermore, the partisan divides we see today seem more about people wanting to “belong to a team” than about adhering to any political party ideology. And while people may be sorting themselves by where they live geographically, we held our conversations within such areas and found great diversity of views.

Something else is at work. Divisions in the country are intrinsically about social and psychological conditions—such as fear, anxiety, and a lack of empathy and belonging—than about ideological polarization. These conditions are triggering in people a fight-or-flight response. If we are to address the root causes of our troubles today, then we must seize this moment to understand what is really happening in the country and what to do about it.



## An Impasse

People are sick of—and sickened by—the current state of affairs. You can hear people throughout these pages—and throughout the country—saying, “Enough is enough!” The nation is at an impasse. We are stuck. People see no way out.

You can see this impasse in people’s inability to find productive ways to talk with each other or to work together to meet challenges. Debates over race and systemic racism, growing disparities in society, climate change, police brutality and safety, and entitlement are frequently raised by people in our conversations. But people start at very different places on these issues, and there are too few places to talk about them constructively.

And while being an American is an important part of who most people are, people also told us that being a part of America today is complicated and strained for them. The vast majority of those we talked with love this nation, but it’s not a blind love. People are struggling with what exactly our national identity is, and how to renew it at a time of tremendous tumult and uncertainty.

So, each of us are left asking: Just how does an imperfect union come together in a time when people are separating and segregating themselves from one another and are seized by a fight-or-flight instinct?

## Safe Passage to an Authentic Hope

People yearn for a more hopeful path forward. They no longer feel safe in approaching and engaging with others who are different from themselves or hold different views. They fear ending up in heated arguments or being invalidated, shut down, or ostracized; some even fear for their physical safety. They cannot make sense of reality. In this environment,



people resort to simplistic cues and preconceived notions to make quick judgments about whether to trust or even to acknowledge others. “It’s a hot mess,” one person told us.

**“ WHO AMONG US WILL HAVE THE COURAGE TO STEP FORWARD? WHO WILL HAVE THE HUMILITY TO REACH OUT ACROSS DIVIDES, WITH A SENSE OF DECENCY AND DIGNITY FOR ALL? WHO WILL BE STRONG ENOUGH TO EMBRACE EMPATHY AND LISTEN? WHO WILL BE VULNERABLE ENOUGH TO TAKE A RISK?**

If people are to step forward and join together, then there must be enough promise and possibility for them to cooperate. This will require intentional actions to fight the civic virus and inoculate society against future damage. More individuals, groups, and organizations will need to bring people together across dividing lines, rather than pitting people against one another, stoking and exploiting divisions. More safe spaces will need to be created so people can actually see and hear and listen to one another, instead of assuming each other’s intentions and beliefs. More doable and achievable actions will need to be taken to restore people’s belief that

we can get things done together, rather than offering more false hope about change. More leaders and news media will need to embrace a productive role in society and stop filling people with fear and anxiety and division. The detrimental effects of social media must be mitigated.

The issues we all face are real. People have different lived experiences and hold different views. Not everyone wants the same things. Some people won’t like each other. Trust can be fleeting. And yet, in a democracy, it is not complete agreement that we must find, but rather we must discover enough agreement to move forward.

Who among us will have the courage to step forward? Who will have the humility to reach out across divides, with a sense of decency and dignity for all? Who will be strong enough to embrace empathy and listen? Who will be vulnerable enough to take a risk?

The challenge before us is not to be underestimated. We ignore it at our own peril. It permeates our individual lives, and it envelopes our society as a whole. The civic virus has incubated and mutated for decades. It’s time to stop it. For those who believe we can do better, there is much work to be done. ■



# Listening to America

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**THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE** conducted 16 focus group conversations for this study, each consisting of a cross section of Americans by age, race, income, education, and party affiliation. To ensure that we engaged a diverse group of communities and people in this study, we forged a relationship with the American Communities Project (ACP), a combined social science/journalism effort based at the Michigan State University School of Journalism. Through rigorous research, ACP identified 15 types of counties across the nation, and we held a conversation in each type (with two being in rural counties). Each conversation lasted two hours and focused on such areas as:

- how people describe the nation today;
- who the individuals, groups, institutions, or leaders are that people believe and trust;
- where people get their information and news about what’s happening around them and in the larger world;
- what community actions people saw in response to COVID-19, and what, if any, lessons might these hold for the country moving forward; and
- what it means to be an American.

See Methodology (p. 61) to learn more about our approach for this study.





## Thank You to Our Partners

We wish to thank our local partners who co-convened these conversations with The Harwood Institute: Chillicothe and Ross County Public Library (Ross County, OH), Delaware Community Foundation (Dover, DE), Ferguson Library (Stamford, CT), Houston Public Library (Houston, TX), Kansas Alliance for Wellness (Rawlins County, KS), Kansas State University (Rawlins County, KS), Lane Workforce Partnership (Eugene, OR), Mesa County Public Library District (Grand Junction, CO), National Council on Agricultural Life and Labor Research Fund, Inc. (NCALL) (Dover, DE), NET Nebraska (Lincoln, NE), Pivot Architecture (Eugene, OR), Sloan Museum (Flint, MI), Spartanburg County Public Libraries (Spartanburg, SC), Stamford Public Education Foundation (Stamford, CT), The Patterson Foundation (Sarasota, FL), United Way Fresno and Madera Counties (Fresno, CA), United Way Heartland Region (Huron, SD), United Way of Southeast Louisiana (New Orleans, LA), United Way of Utah County (Provo, UT), United Way of Western Connecticut (Stamford, CT), and Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (Pueblo of Zuni, NM).

# The Evolution of America's Civic Virus

**STARTING MORE THAN 30 YEARS AGO**, in 1990, The Harwood Institute began traveling across the country every few years or so to engage Americans from all walks of life in in-depth conversations about the state of the nation, their lives, and their hopes and concerns. Our latest conversations underscore the fundamental nature of the challenge we face today—and its sheer depth. Understanding this reality can help us make sense of what's happening around us now and figure out what it will take to move forward effectively.

Here's a quick tour of what the Institute has learned from these conversations. Pay close attention to the shifting nature of people's core concerns and emotions of these three decades.

## 1991

### Anger

*Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America* was the first national study that revealed that Americans were not apathetic about politics but felt pushed out and impotent. People's rampant ire about politics was evident even amid the widespread sense of patriotism sweeping the country due to the nation's show of immense power in the first Gulf War.

## 1992

### Felt Unknown

People started to express what might be called a *felt-unknown*—an inkling that something more fundamental was off in the country and in their lives. But they couldn't fully articulate it or give it a name. People were no longer just angry about politics; they were worried the political system wasn't up to the task of addressing their growing concerns.

# 1995

## Sadness

People's anger and felt-unknown gave way to a fundamentally different emotion: a deep *lament* that the nation had not made progress on their nagging concerns. By now, they could more clearly define these as economic opportunity and security slipping away, unfair taxes and misguided government spending, and an emerging two-class society. People began to say that individuals would need to play a much more active role in the political process to reverse current trends.

# 2003

## False Hope

People had witnessed the vast display of patriotism that followed September 11, 2001. This had given them a sense of renewed hope that the country and their lives could move in a better direction. But, over time, they had become deeply frustrated that this show of patriotism offered nothing more than a *false start* to repairing the nation's politics and public life. Thus, people made the decision to retreat even further. They were looking for everyday heroes to help change the course of their communities and the nation.

# 1998

## Retreat

People had not seen any improvement in the conditions that troubled them, so they made the following decision: The only reasonable and rational action was to *retreat* into close-knit circles of families and friends. This step was an attempt to gain some semblance of control over their changing lives and remove themselves from the disdainful world of politics and public life. Still, there was a growing chorus that the individual must step forward to create the change people sought.

## 2015

### Back to Basics

When asked what would restore a sense of belief in our ability to get things done together with a can-do spirit, people said that Americans must return to being “builders”—to find a way to come together and put the country on a new path.

## 2021

### Fight or Flight

Our society has descended into dizzying, disorienting, and destabilizing noise and confusion in which many leaders, news media, and social media are stoking polarization for their own gains. People often feel helpless and without hope; they are separating and segregating from one another. Their instinct: fight or flight.

## 2012

### Bereft

After the Great Recession ended in 2009, people said that politics and the political system had become increasingly irrelevant to them. The currency of public discussion had entirely shifted to be on people, their lives, and their daily concerns. Americans were now *bereft* of a sense of possibility about their lives and the country. They yearned to get back to basics—to ignite compassion, openness and humility, and concern for the common good in daily life. The solution was to kick-start a new path—a new way forward—for the people and the country.



1991 TO 2021

# Snapshot of Changes in America

**TODAY IS ALMOST EXACTLY 30 YEARS** since the 1991 release of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation's report, *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*. At the time, the conventional wisdom was that Americans were apathetic about politics and public life. Conventional wisdom was wrong then just as it is today.

*30 years ago, rather than being "apathetic," Americans felt pushed out and disconnected from "politics." They said elected officials, news media, and special interests had taken politics hostage. Today, rather than being "polarized," Americans are profoundly isolated and disoriented, producing within people a fight-or-flight response.*

In the time since *Citizens and Politics*, the conversation in the nation has shifted dramatically—from the problem is "out there" involving elected officials, news media, and special interests to the problem is now "within all of us."

IN 1991	IN 2021
Conventional wisdom is that people felt apathetic about politics, but we find that people feel disconnected and pushed out from politics.	Conventional wisdom is that people are polarized, but we find that people feel profoundly isolated and disoriented, producing within people a fight-or-flight response.
The problem is "out there," focused on "politics."	The problem is within all of us and is focused on people's lives and the very state of the country.
Political leaders, news media, and special interests have taken politics hostage.	Leaders and news media are imposing polarization to stoke division for their own benefit. Social media is creating and amplifying these divisions.
People want to be reconnected to politics as full participants.	People yearn for a sense of acceptance, empathy, and belonging in their lives.

# Key Findings at a Glance

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- 1 People say Americans have separated and segregated themselves, focusing on their differences and not what they hold in common. Human connection has frayed.
- 2 Many political leaders and news media are manufacturing polarization to stoke division and pursue their own self-interest, with social media helping to create and amplify these divisions. This is producing overwhelming “surround sound” that is engulfing people, pushing them apart, and creating deep anxiety.
- 3 People are experiencing a profound sense of loss of reality and control, leaving them dizzy, disoriented, and feeling helpless.
- 4 People’s response to the threatening cross-currents engulfing them is fight or flight.
- 5 Many people are quick to view their fellow Americans as “the other,” using simplistic cues and preconceived notions which are leading to even deeper feelings of isolation and instability.
- 6 People trust God, their faith, themselves, and those they personally know. No one else.
- 7 While being an American is an important part of who most people are, being a part of America is complicated and strained for many.
- 8 Across the country, there is a desperate search for acceptance and belonging.
- 9 Empathy, productive talk, and compromise are prerequisites for moving society forward. But who will feel safe enough to step forward?
- 10 Locally, people are working together. And they saw vivid examples of community action throughout the pandemic but are uncertain whether these responses will last. Still, most people believe that change must start in local communities.

# Key Findings

**LISTEN TO THE VOICES** *of Americans from across the nation and it becomes clear that people are deeply troubled by what is happening in our country and in their lives. Indeed, as you hear these voices, you may feel yourself becoming entangled in a very familiar story, one you know all too well. And along the way, you may even feel the sense of being isolated and disoriented.*

People describe a nation infected by a civic virus where fear, anxiety, and isolation undermine their sense of connection to one another. Where people are now in an instinctive fight-or-flight response. Where these conditions cripple our collective ability to see

and hear one another, and to come together and get things done. Where people yearn for a hopeful path out from all the noise and confusion surrounding them.

“ THIS STORY UNFOLDS, ONE FINDING UPON ANOTHER, WITH EACH ONE ADDING ANOTHER DIMENSION OF WHAT AMERICANS ARE EXPERIENCING AND IN SEARCH OF TODAY.

What follows are the main themes that emerged from our conversations with Americans. This story unfolds, one finding upon another, with each one adding another dimension of what Americans are experiencing and in search of today.

## KEY FINDING 01

**People say Americans have separated and segregated themselves, focusing on their differences and not what they hold in common. Human connection has frayed.**

Throughout these conversations, people told us again and again that Americans are separating and segregating themselves from one another. People say they don't talk and

“ I WOULDN'T SAY WE'RE POLARIZED, BUT I WOULD SAY THAT WE ARE SEGREGATED.”

engage with those who are different from themselves or who have different views. The result is an inability for people to see and hear each other, learn from one another, bridge divides, and find what they hold in common.

Listen to this Flint, Michigan, woman who makes a critical point that sits at the heart of what we found in our conversations: “I wouldn't say we're polarized, but I would say that we are segregated. We don't interact with people that are not in our same social economic situations. We don't interact with a lot of people who are not our same race. We think we know them because we're not talking to them.” A Eugene, Oregon, woman amplified this point: “We're not connected. We're very separate from one

another, and we're focusing on all of the things that make us so different, as opposed to the things that we have in common." She continued, "We're untethered from our core beliefs, and we're untethered from each other. So we're moving in our spaces, very separate from one another."

This emphasis on difference infects people's ability to see each other as fellow human beings and to work together to improve society. "We may look different, we may come from different places, but we're all still human," said a Flint man. "I'm pretty sure we'd all like to live and live a good life." But getting closer to this reality will be difficult to achieve under current conditions. A New Orleans woman said, "No one wants to compromise." A Houston woman added that this inability for people to see what they hold in common blocks progress. "We've lost our way. We have failed to remember how to compromise and look for workable solutions." Hundreds of miles away, a Utah County, Utah, woman

echoed a similar perspective. "People live in a vacuum. They're hearing certain things because of where they live. It's often hard for people to find middle ground."



**"WE'VE LOST OUR WAY. WE HAVE FAILED TO REMEMBER HOW TO COMPROMISE AND LOOK FOR WORKABLE SOLUTIONS."**

Amid this separation, people feel angst and uncertainty over a variety of significant issues, including racism and police brutality, economic insecurities, growing disparities, and reckoning with the nation's past and its current identity, among others. You will hear these issues discussed throughout this report. The sheer magnitude and lack of agreement on what to do about these issues makes people feel helpless; because people are separating and segregating from each other, the trust and relationships necessary to work through these issues do not exist.

Make no mistake, people do not believe the pandemic caused the challenges they're now wrestling with; rather, it laid them bare and often exacerbated them. Here's how a Stamford, Connecticut, man explained this: "This pandemic has put the system under a microscope. We're able to see all the cracks that are within this faulty machine." A Nebraska woman said these looming challenges make people feel helpless, causing them to further pull into







themselves. “There’s this helpless feeling of how can I fix it? The problems have gotten so big, it’s overwhelming. So, where do people go when they’re overwhelmed? They retreat in. Then what happens? You lose human connection. It becomes kind of a perpetual situation.” She then asked, “How do we pull ourselves out of that?”

The very relationships people might depend on to escape this predicament are increasingly frayed, worn down, and unreliable as people separate from one another. Participants in these discussions talked about how this separation has hit close to home in their families and places of worship. Disagreements turn into blow-ups or extended battles, serving to further isolate people from one another. A Huron, South Dakota, man said, “I have a great relationship with my brother, but we don’t talk politics because we just know that we’re on opposite ends of the spectrum and nothing good is going to come of it.”

Another Huron man, who spoke about how people in his community must rely on each other to make it in a small, rural town, relayed a personal story about having to leave the church he loved because of stories he wrote as

a local journalist. “My wife and I left the church we were a part of because my reporting got me such hate mail from members of my own church that we ended up leaving.” This was devastating to him. “It was very personal, family-directed, hate mail that we could no longer feel comfortable going back.”

The effects of people separating and segregating themselves from one another are felt in every facet of their lives, including on the roads and in local grocery stores. While people are living in close physical proximity to each other, they are also living apart from one another—which only fosters these toxic conditions. “You’re anonymous when you run someone off the road, you’re anonymous when you cut them off in traffic. If you’re the offended person, you’re anonymous when you fire a gun at the car that cut you off,” is how a Spartanburg, South Carolina, woman explained the situation. “In the grocery store, if someone ahead of you has a basket full and you’re in the express lane, 10 items or less, you feel anonymous if you bash them with your cart. There’s just a general rudeness going around, and people’s frustration is what feeds into it.”

When asked to describe the nation today, one individual said, “It’s a hot mess.” Others told us that the nation is “in turmoil,” “violent,” and “hostile.” In Nebraska, here’s how one woman summed up where things stand: “People are angry. They’re raw. There’s a lot of fear and anxiety and depression.”

## KEY FINDING 02

**Many political leaders and news media are manufacturing polarization to stoke division and pursue their own self-interest, with social media helping to create and amplify these divisions. This is producing overwhelming “surround sound” that is engulfing people, pushing them apart, and creating deep anxiety.**

In the first minutes of every conversation, people said, with intense anger and frustration in their voices, that political leaders and news media are purposefully stoking polarization in order to divide people, win arguments, gain raw power, and pursue their own self-interests. They said social media both creates and amplifies this overwhelming noise. Seemingly everyone we spoke with held this view regardless of the news media and social media they consume, their political affiliation, and the views they expressed. The net result: a rampant fear and anxiety growing within and among people, with an ever-expanding separation growing between them.

As part of this conversation, people railed against the idea that everyday Americans are polarized and instead asserted there are many more people “in the middle” than is widely recognized or accepted. Folks across these conversations insisted

on making their views crystal clear on this topic. A Huron man told us, “There’s loud extremes. The majority are silent in the middle. I really do believe that most people are in the middle, and the extremes are the loudest on either side.” A Houston woman echoed this sentiment. “What I’ve been seeing the last several years is that the liberals have gone very far one direction, the conservatives have gone very far the other direction. Then, there’s people in the middle saying, ‘I’m not that, and I’m not that. I’m somewhere in between.’”

“THERE’S LOUD EXTREMES. THE MAJORITY ARE SILENT IN THE MIDDLE. I REALLY DO BELIEVE THAT MOST PEOPLE ARE IN THE MIDDLE, AND THE EXTREMES ARE THE LOUDEST ON EITHER SIDE.”



Many people hold the view that what is often called polarization is a result of purposeful actions that seek to divide people into neatly defined opposing camps. Here’s how one Houston woman explained this situation: “A lot of the polarization is coming from the people who have a lot to gain from it. If you want power and control, one of the things you try to do

is make people think they have something to lose if they don't do what you're pushing them to do. They can push people into very strong, separate groups." Like that of many others, her anger about this situation was palpable during the discussion. "A lot of people are now standing up and saying, 'It's gone too far. It's gone too far this way, it's gone too far that way.' There has to be a common ground."

“WE’RE BEING DIVIDED PURPOSELY. THEY WANT US DIVIDED SO THAT THEY CAN TAKE CONTROL.”

In our conversations, people painted a picture of political leaders and the news media deliberately pouring gasoline on an open fire—a fire they started and nurtured themselves, a fire they want to keep burning so people remain in fear and leaders and media can divide people and claim more power. A New Orleans man explained the situation in this way, "The empathy is gone because the people that control the machine want us to fight one another. They want us to compete." He went on to say, "We do [compete] because we're afraid that the resources are limited. 'I have to be better than you because I have to get that thing.' The truth is it's not limited. If we actually worked together to improve different conditions, society will improve."

A Houston woman told us, "The leaders are more polarized than the people." She continued, "They get power by appealing to a smaller group of people and get them enraged, and they get power." A Stamford woman explained that by working to divvy up the public, leaders no longer even have

to pay attention to those who may disagree or who have different views from them—all to the detriment of society as a whole. "Now, since you've got these new silos, you can appeal just to your base," she said. "You never have to talk to the other side, you never have to expose the other side to your set of facts." A Ross County, Ohio, woman told us: "We're being divided purposely. They want us divided so that they can take control." Later in the conversation, this same individual said, "Everyone is angry and it's because they try to divide us. They try to pit us against each other."



We asked people what they wanted from leaders; their answers were clear and consistent in our conversations. People want leaders who genuinely listen; who are transparent and tell the truth, even if it's something people won't want to hear; who have a track record that demonstrates genuine intent and follow through; who are open and able to change their minds based on new information and insights; and who will compromise to get things done. In short, people are looking for a *relationship*, one built on give-and-take and trust, which unfolds and evolves over time. This is hardly what people say exists today.

Much of the news media are held with equal contempt. This is not to say there aren't news media outlets that people do trust. When asked, some people were quick to name news media they turn to, which often include local newspapers, public radio, and online sources that seek to provide information and ideas from different perspectives such as AllSides.org. Some people said they would channel surf from FOX to MSNBC to CNN. When they did mention sources they trusted, most people we talked with often turned first to local sources and aggregated sources, and then perhaps to investigative sources such as ProPublica, or even to foreign outlets such as the BBC; others looked to National Public Radio. They thought of these sources as balanced, where journalists know their topics, are in touch with people, include more voices, and often go in depth. People are actively searching for sources they can trust, and they told us they are often tapping into multiple sources to figure out exactly what to believe.

But here's the bottom line: the overwhelming sentiment when it comes to the news media is utter contempt. Similar to how they see political leaders nowadays, people view the news media as a massive menacing force in society seeking to create polarization to stoke divisions for their own gain. A Fresno, California, man said, "They don't cover the full story with all the facts about what's going on. They're not giving the whole details." He added, "They are scared of the backlash that they would get from the audience they're trying to capture."

The way the news media operate gives people reason to stay in their own realities as they are

enveloped by messages that keep them in their comfort zones, creating their own worlds where they can take cover from all the noise surrounding them. A Grand Junction, Colorado, man suggested, "The media sells a package of outrage and fear and hate. If you're in your bubble, that's what you like to hear. You like to hear things that agree with you." He continued,



"Especially if you're in a tribal situation like we are now, and you'll have to go against your friends, if you change your opinion on things. That makes it very difficult to change." A Huron man added, "Sometimes, people have a narrative set for politics and stuff. The media feeds into that and feeds them what they want to hear. So then they believe that and they think it matches what they've known their whole life. So they think this is the 'right way.'"

As noted, the ability to take cover in one's own world gives people a sense of comfort—even a kind of protective, personal armor—amid all the noise and confusion, and thus it can lead people to just accept what they are hearing. A Ross County man suggested that "if you're told something for long enough, you're going to start to believe it. People that



**Separated  
and  
Segregated**



watch the news every morning and every night start to say, 'Well, yeah, I'm part of this particular political party. So I guess we're polarized. I'm polarized now!' They start feeling in certain ways about the other side, instead of trying to have face-to-face conversations with people. They get their point of view, they just stick to it."

While people believe that social media has its own positive benefits, they are quick and forceful in saying it has been a significant contributor to the nation's ills. A Utah County woman explained, "There's a lot of publicity or platforms given to people on the far ends of the extremes on any issue. It ends up leaving people feeling like there's just one side or the other on different issues and that there's not much middle ground or common ground with the other side on things that we might disagree about." This creates, as a Nebraska man said, "tribalism" where "you get into this echo chamber." Like others, he talked about how social media leads people down pathways they may never have intended to go, only adding to the noise and divisions in society. "There's so much social media that's actually being purposely misleading or trying to get people to fall down into these rabbit holes."

As the Nebraska man suggested, social media platforms often intentionally take people down

"rabbit holes," a phrase we heard a lot. Here's how a Spartanburg man put it: "With all the electronic devices we have, we're overwhelmed with information or news. You can go down rabbit holes, following trails on the internet. With so much information, it's hard to know what to think. What's the right thing?"

Indeed, it's not only a challenge of "what's the right thing" but the possibility of people believing they have all the facts they need, a belief that can produce further separation and segregation among people. "Technology makes us jump the gun to where we assume we have all the information because we heard about it somewhere," a Stamford man said. "Now, we're just ready to say, 'Oh, I already have these sets of facts, so you all are wrong!'" A Eugene woman echoed this dilemma, "These algorithms have been on my radar. I try to check myself on this. Because we are reading a voracious amount of information, we believe we're experts in the matter. Except oftentimes, we may not know at all or know the whole picture."

At a time when people feel so separated from one another, are people even truly connecting with others via social media? Those in these conversations wondered. Said a Spartanburg woman, "We've become a culture where our dopamine is getting hit when we get 'likes.' That's what's become important." She added, "It's not important to hear somebody in real life. It's how many 'likes' you get, how many followers you get. That's just changed the whole dynamic." A Sarasota, Florida, woman asked, "How are we connecting? We have Facebook, but you are connecting on only what that other person wants to show on their social aspect?"

Many people said that social media affords people more outlets for more acrimonious and divisive behaviors, much like people experienced in grocery stores and with road rage. “You can blast somebody in a discussion group because you’re not going to see them at work the next day. You feel you’ve got this anonymity to really land into somebody no matter what opinion or what points or what the discussion is. It has allowed for a lot of rudeness,” said a Spartanburg woman.

One Huron man summed up his group’s conversation on social media in this way:

There’s been a lot of talk in this discussion about division. A big part of it is we pick a side, Republican or Democrat. We consume that media. We ‘like’ those stories on social media. We get more of those stories on social media. We both kind of pull back into our echo chambers and we go down those rabbit holes. So we’re just consuming two completely different stories. Two alternate realities. We’ve got two completely different outlooks on the same things that are

happening. Then the media personalities that we consume, they’re going to get the likes, they’re going to get the views by embracing those viewpoints. There is some truth to most of us being mostly in the middle. But the loud ones and the vocal ones are pulling to the extremes.

In this environment, what do we really know about each other, especially as people become more and more separated from one another? “Most of us have access to hundreds of TV channels, hundreds of magazines. We have the internet. We even now have Zoom,” said a Sarasota man. “But what we don’t really know is everybody’s backstory. So what you see with your eyes, you interpret with your brain. And we all bring with us so much of our own preconceived ideas.” A Eugene woman perhaps best summed up what so many people we talked with said about the polarization being stoked by social media, the news media, and political leaders. “We’re being dishd up a lot of opportunities to latch onto something to fight for.”

### KEY FINDING 03

## **People are experiencing a profound sense of loss of reality and control, leaving them dizzy, disoriented, and feeling helpless.**

People said that all the noise and confusion imposed upon them—by leaders and news media, and generated and amplified by social media—along with their sense of separation from others, shakes and shatters their sense of reality and control. This produces a deeply disorienting effect

on people, leaving them feeling dizzy and destabilized in their daily lives and unable to make sense of what’s happening around them. Feelings of insecurity and instability leak into people’s lives, leaving them feeling lost, struggling to make decisions and navigate life.

A Eugene woman spoke to us about this troubling reality. “We don’t know who to trust, and we don’t know what’s right and what’s real.” Everything has been turned upside down in people’s lives. “It just seems like what was black is now called white and what was white is now called black,” a Sarasota woman told us. A Huron woman talked about feeling as if she’s living in an “alternate reality.” There’s a lot of misinformation,” she said. “Nobody really knows what to believe, what is fact, and what is alternate reality.”

“WE DON’T KNOW WHO TO TRUST,  
AND WE DON’T KNOW WHAT’S RIGHT  
AND WHAT’S REAL.”

The once reliable signals or guides that people have used over time to make sense of their lives and the world around them have been upended. Here’s one Sarasota woman describing how she’s experiencing life today: “Everybody is so stressed out. We’ve reached that limit of disinformation and misinformation. Nobody knows what’s going on anymore.” She added, “All the labels don’t even mean anything anymore. Words themselves don’t mean anything. We’ve devolved into a society where we use emojis to communicate our ideas and thoughts. People don’t articulate. They don’t listen.”

These current conditions have left people feeling “untethered,” “in survival mode,” and “confused.” It’s hard for people to form a stable sense of reality and make daily life choices. “Should I get a vaccine? Should I not? Is it scientific? Or is it just somebody getting rich off it? That’s just one example. People don’t know what to do,” a Zuni man in New Mexico said.

When people’s sense of reality comes into question, they lose their bearings, their sense of direction. This dynamic is enormously disorienting and destabilizing. It can make you feel like you’re in a house of mirrors with no visible way out. “All of the misinformation that’s out there . . . that’s warping what’s going on,” a New Orleans man said. This creates a toxic brew of anger and lack of control. “Sometimes we’re mad because we feel helpless. We don’t have control. And it’s our simple everyday life!” a Rawlins County, Kansas, woman lamented. In Nebraska, a woman told us, “Because of the speed and the chaos, and the number of issues, we’ve got so many issues that are bombarding us. And if it’s not an issue, it’s ‘I need a donation for this. Or I need something for that. Or what’s the solution going to be? Or what can I even do to make a difference?’” Added another Nebraska woman, “I am frustrated with not knowing what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s truthful, what’s not.”

“SOMETIMES WE’RE MAD BECAUSE  
WE FEEL HELPLESS. WE DON’T HAVE  
CONTROL.”

A Rawlins County man used language similar to what we heard from many people throughout these discussions. “No one knows what to believe, what we’re doing today, or who’s doing it.” In Huron, a woman also spoke about a lack of trust in what she is hearing nowadays and its negative effects on her. “Nothing is truthful. You don’t know who to trust.” Echoing an earlier point highlighted about many Americans not being polarized and holding views somewhere other than the extremes, she said, “You’re like, ‘Who should I trust?’ There’s a lot of things going on, and



**Confused**

“THIS CHAOS IS DISRUPTIVE. IT MAKES YOU QUESTION YOURSELF LIKE, ‘IS IT REAL?’”

you’re like, ‘What?’ You’re just in the middle, you don’t know who to trust!” A Sarasota woman talked about all the “noise” that comes from news media that undermines her sense of reality. “If you’re just listening to any of the stations in America, there’s so much noise. It’s hard to really get to the truth. There’s so much confusion and noise that I just want someone who reflects the reality of different people.”

This feeling of helplessness—a deep sense of a loss of control—permeated our conversations; we heard it everywhere we

went. “Everyone feels like there’s a loss of control. You can’t control the pandemic, you can’t control the housing market, wages, living wages, the job markets,” said a Utah County woman. “There’s so much that’s out of control.” A Grand Junction woman added, “This chaos is disruptive. It makes you question yourself like, ‘Is it real?’” And a New Orleans woman made this observation about what is happening today and how it makes her feel: “I feel like we’ve been robbing ourselves of agency.”

During this part of the conversation, amid frustration and despair, a Grand Junction woman pleaded, “What people need is hope.”

#### KEY FINDING 04

### People’s response to the threatening cross-currents engulfing them is fight or flight.

People’s sense of being threatened, disoriented, isolated, and relentlessly pushed to take a position triggers an instinctive reaction in them: fight or flight. This is an act of self-protection by people trying to preserve themselves, their perspectives, and their identities. In such a contentious society in which there is little room for so-called middle ground—with few chances to be truly seen, heard, and understood—there’s a binary choice: stand up and fight, or turn away and take flight. In a way, this is how people remain sane in this topsy-turvy world of ours.

Here’s how a Sarasota man put it: “We’ve been pushed to things that we’re unfamiliar with, less comfortable with. So, there’s that

human nature fight or flight. People pick one side or the other. We don’t allow ourselves to do something in between.” Instead, people want to engage without being immediately threatened or alienated, but they do not see a way to do this. So the very place where many people seem to want to be—someplace other than in fight or flight—seems unavailable to them. Thus what can appear to be polarization is something fundamentally different. Rather than being polarized on issues, people feel they must either pick a side and fight, or retreat altogether. Either way, there is little productive engagement; there is no path to deal with the issues and concerns in people’s lives and in the nation.

"Fight or flight" is not a phrase we introduced into these conversations; people across the country repeatedly invoked the term on their own. "When you posed the first question [i.e., "How would you describe the country today?"], what I wrote down was fight or flight," another Sarasota man said. He explained further, "I was having a conversation with some individuals recently and talking about how we can help other individuals and ourselves turn off our fight or flight so that we are able to sit, listen, and absorb and hear opposing views or details that we weren't aware of, or the definition or history of some concept or idea without that fight or flight engaging."

But the people we spoke with are not finding it possible to "turn off" their fight-or-flight response to what's happening around them. Indeed, people's innate instinct to either fight or flight only seems to be getting stronger with the passing of time. One reason people are in fight mode is because they want to protect themselves from feeling fear and vulnerability.

**"WE'VE BEEN PUSHED TO THINGS THAT WE'RE UNFAMILIAR WITH, LESS COMFORTABLE WITH. SO, THERE'S THAT HUMAN NATURE FIGHT OR FLIGHT. PEOPLE PICK ONE SIDE OR THE OTHER. WE DON'T ALLOW OURSELVES TO DO SOMETHING IN BETWEEN."**

Listen to this Eugene woman: "We're dysregulated because we're in isolation, we're not in community. We're in a virtual place in our head and disembodied." She then talked about her interactions with her teenage child and the implications for society at large. "I



watch my teen and there's this energy that feeds on being right, fighting, standing up, defending." Then broadening her lens, "We're almost addicted to it. It protects us from feeling vulnerable and truly connecting."

Others in these conversations said people are in fight mode because they are in a struggle to bring about long-desired changes in society. Speaking about historical inequities and racism in society, a New Orleans woman said, "We continue to say that we want to change, and that 'we' want to see a change in our society, but who else is listening? Who else is helping us to make that change?" She continued, "No matter how much you want it to be, we are still not there. We vote, we talk the talk, we try to walk the walk, but it's still just not equal. So how do you overcome that? How do you fix it? 'Cause I'm not the only one that thinks like that."

There are still others who are fighting because they feel they've been pushed into a corner by either those who insist they're right about an issue, or by those who are seeking change in society. As one Utah County woman put it, "Sometimes people feel backed into a corner. Maybe it's not even

a subject they put that much thought into, but that there's a lot of pressure because of social media and things within your community to have an opinion about something, even if maybe you haven't even thought about it before." A Spartanburg man explained his perspective on this dynamic, "I just want to be upfront about where I'm coming from: I'm a conservative and I feel like many times that the liberal positions, people state them as not only is this a good idea, but morally, this is the right thing. And if you're not for that, then you are morally not as good a person. That leads to some of our strife instead of an exchange back and forth of ideas." A Flint woman observed that these kinds of interactions can lead to anger and fear. "Anger makes you fight back at what scares you."

Whatever the particular reason, a pervasive anger and an inability to process it have engulfed the country and are causing many people to stand up and fight. "There's a huge push in this country that anger is the only thing you can feel, whether we're yelling at each other, we're excited about our football teams, whatever," a Grand Junction woman said. "Like the boiling pot analogy, you have that boiling under the surface, the heat won't dissipate. People don't know how to process their own issues and then it explodes and it comes out as anger." A Grand Junction man said, "We feel like we have to fight so we can win." Sounding a common theme in these conversations, he added, "Even though there's 20 percent of things that people really disagree on."

But this boiling pot has not led everyone to fight; some are in a flight response—to disconnect, to opt out entirely. "I try not to listen

to anything," said a Ross County man. "It's the best way to go." Fatigue, fear of repercussions from speaking up, and self-preservation are prompting a flight response in some. A Nebraska woman put it this way: "People have just quit. There's no dialogue. It's just too difficult. They're afraid they're going to be targeted." In New Mexico, a Zuni woman said, "Society is in a fight-or-flight mode, and that just makes us very guarded." When this part of the conversation came up, she told us, "I immediately went to 'Who do I not trust, and why?' Because I want to protect myself. I want to make sure I'm not putting myself out there to be a target." This theme of being fearful of putting oneself out there was sounded by many. Here's a Fresno man who said that even violence can result from engaging with others: "So much of the time, people decide not to speak because they are dealing with someone who is going to get violent, or they are not going to like what the other person is saying."

A deeply emotional thread of the New Orleans conversation dealt with individuals, namely people of color, feeling pushed down in society—which can lead to a kind of flight. "The other side of the fear is complacency, or people refusing to respond." Like others in these conversations, this woman used a vivid depiction of how society operates for many people of color in the US. "It's because I'm afraid of the stick, I'm going to keep my mouth quiet, not to upset the stick holder." This individual went on to say that even though "we have to fight our way into the polls, once you get out of the polls, you're not going to walk around the streets and voice your political opinion, because society itself will hit you with that stick."

**Fight  
or  
Flight**



In Rawlins County, a woman said that this flight response has led many good people into retreat. “Good people are just giving up. They’re tired of fighting and they’re tired of being picked apart.” She continued, “There’s a lot of one-sided issues where we’ve lost sight of what a debate is. We’ve lost sight of what opinions and facts are. You reach a breaking point. A lot of people have reached that point.” A Dover man said that for many people, “we’re in safe mode or protective mode right now.”

“GOOD PEOPLE ARE JUST GIVING UP. THEY’RE TIRED OF FIGHTING AND THEY’RE TIRED OF BEING PICKED APART.”

In virtually every conversation, people talked openly about how this fight or flight is undermining Americans’ ability to work

together to solve common problems, while simultaneously fraying societal and family relations. No one likes this state of being; everyone feels trapped by it. Many believe the caustic nature of society is leading to extreme responses like gun violence, the January 6th insurrection, riots, and other significant societal challenges. As a Ross County man said, “We’re being told that we’re polarized. People start to believe it and start to act on it. And that’s why we have so many violent issues, riots, and killings.” As a Grand Junction woman quoted earlier said, “Like the boiling pot analogy, you have that boiling under the surface, the heat won’t dissipate. People don’t know how to process their own issues, and then it explodes and it comes out as anger.” So, people either fight or take flight.

## KEY FINDING 05

**Many people are quick to view their fellow Americans as “the other,” using simplistic cues and preconceived notions which are leading to even deeper feelings of isolation and instability.**

Throughout these conversations, people talked about how the divisions being stoked in the country have created insidious fear, suspicion, and mistrust of others who seem different from themselves. These alienating feelings lead people to reflexively seek out simplistic or superficial cues to make quick judgments of others. This leads people to assume they know the other person, what they think, and what they believe. Making such instantaneous judgments undermines people’s sense of

connection and further erodes our collective ability to meet common challenges. This has been both a cause and an effect of people separating from one another, only furthering people’s sense of isolation and instability.

“Certain things have become markers where we think we can tell something about other people, whether it’s wearing a mask or other things that just further the divide and make it hard to have a conversation,” said a Eugene woman. “It’s just a really strange place to be

where some of those things are so visible and we use them as ways to judge or make assumptions about others.” Indeed, people in these conversations said they make judgments based on all sorts of cues. Here’s one exchange between two Dover, Delaware, women. “I see it here in my neighborhood based on who’s flying what flag.” The response: “I agree. Another label is the vaccinated and the unvaccinated. It seems like everything has a separation. It’s either one thing or the other.”

**“WE HAVE PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS OF EACH OTHER. WE DON’T SEE EACH OTHER.”**

A Huron woman told us, “You can tell what side of the coin someone’s going to fall on just by seeing one person they support, or one person they like.” The problem with this approach? “Everyone is pretty sure that the opposite side is evil, and hates the country, and is going to burn it to the ground.” A Eugene woman said that these cues are misleading, creating all sorts of misplaced assumptions about people. “We have all these symbols—a mask, or Black Lives Matter T-shirt, or whatever, and we think that states very clearly what your stance is across the board.”

It is if people have convinced themselves into believing they are knowledgeable about each other based on these cues and preconceived notions. A Grand Junction woman made a similar point to the one made by the Flint woman: “We have preconceived notions of each other. We don’t see each other.” She said that people use their differences as a way to purposefully separate themselves from one another. “We don’t understand the differences between one another. When somebody is different from me, I have to

push them off and create some kind of way of differentiating them. My biases get in the way. I don’t understand or value those differences. So, we lose the respect for one another.”

The reality is that people regularly make quick judgments about each other nowadays. Listen to a refugee who came to the US and who now lives in Huron talk about her own experiences with other community members: “Until now they didn’t even know the reason why the refugees came here. The reason why Asian people are here. They thought we were illegal. That we came here and took their jobs. They think that people that come here get the money through the government, and then buy a house, buy a good car.” She said, “They have no idea how hard the people have to work. So I have to start explaining to them so they understand.”

A Utah County woman underscored the earlier point that many Americans had lost the ability to see the whole person and that people are more complex than just one indicator or signal. “I’m thinking about just people being multifaceted and being allowed to be multiple things at the same time, rather



than just being labeled.” She continued, “If you have one identity, you’re ascribed all of these other opinions and beliefs and then ‘that’s who you are’ versus ‘that’s a piece of my pie, but I’ve got other parts of me or my ingredients list. That’s probably number 10.’” A Flint man held a similar concern about “us not knowing enough about the other person that basically doesn’t look like us, that doesn’t come from the same background.”

The problem is that casting people as the other prevents folks from attempting to learn about one another and from one another. Casting people as the other prevents folks from getting to know others for who they are, rather than for who they think they are. Listen to this New Orleans man: “We don’t have exposure, and if we don’t have exposure, then we don’t have experience, and if we don’t have experience, then we can’t learn.” He finished by saying, “Then, we don’t have the empathy that’s necessary to kind of create a place where we’ve got community.” A Ross County man, when asked what is preventing people from crossing various divides, made the following observation: “I have to say it’s a lack of understanding. People are not trying to take the time to listen to each other, from whichever side you’re on, about any subject, or how you want to deal with the subject. Everybody either wants you to agree with them, or you have to disagree with them.”

The problem of seeing people as the other cascades into a set of deepening divisions that question who is American and who is not. A Houston man said, “It’s amazing. They try to paint people on the other side—liberals—as un-American. Like, ‘We are the Americans.’ That’s wrong to me. We’re all Americans.”

Recall the Spartanburg man who described himself as a conservative and who felt exactly the same as this Houston man who described himself as a liberal.

And here’s a Flint woman who spoke about her experience when she did cross certain divides and the benefits that she felt she and others had gained. “I lived in Houston for a couple of years, and I had neighbors from El Salvador and Vietnam. We found out we have all these different backgrounds, but we all want the same things in life. We were a really close-knit neighborhood, but I don’t think everyone gets that experience.” She continued, “Once you start talking to people, those walls come down and you figure out that, hey, we want mostly the same stuff. We might disagree on some details on how to get there, but let’s keep moving in the same direction and figure out the details as we get there.”

“ “WHEN YOU THINK OF YOUR  
COMMUNITY, DO YOU SEE ME?”

As our conversations evolved, people would sound similar views regarding the need to see and hear and know one another. In New Mexico, a Zuni woman highlighted this view when speaking about her Native American roots: “Culturally, when you listen to our prayers, we don’t just pray for us as Zunis. We pray for everybody in the world.”

The problem today is that so many people have decided only to engage with those that look like them, sound like them, or believe what they believe. As a New Orleans woman asked, “When you think of your community, do you see me?”

# Quick to Judge

## People trust God, their faith, themselves, and those they personally know. No one else.

At a time when people's sense of reality has been upended; when they feel polarization is being stoked by leaders, news media, and in social media; when they are isolated and their lives are destabilized; the question is: Who do they trust? When asked what organizations, groups, institutions, and leaders people trust or believe, there would be either dead silence or nervous laughter. At first, people would not name anyone. They would simply shake their heads like they were stumped. This occurred in nearly each conversation.

Upon probing, people would offer initial comments that demonstrated just how difficult this simple question was to answer. Like this response from a Spartanburg man: "I don't know. That one you've got me stumped on." Another man from that discussion said, "It's hard to say. I really don't know. This is a tough one." In New Orleans, a woman first repeated the question aloud, like she had to ask herself again. "Who do I trust?" Her reply: "I don't know." The silence in the discussions would often last for a full minute or more. A Utah County woman responded to the silence by saying, "That silence tells it all, doesn't it?" And in Rawlins County, after a long silence, a woman stated plainly, "Got a pretty solid 'none' going all around here."

Oftentimes people would then want to explain reasons for their initial silence and their lack of trust. A Stamford man quoted earlier wondered about why a leader or someone else would be telling him something. "Pretty much anything I hear I

take with a grain of salt. There's always: Are you telling me these facts for what reason? Are you excluding some facts? Is there something missing from that? So who do I trust?" A Sarasota man told us, "I find it hard to trust most institutions or organizations which are representing different groups, different viewpoints, and different priorities. Whereas individuals on an individual basis, I can get to know you. I can build trust with you. Trust is something I have to give to an institution that I may not be as willing to do, or because that institution has done wrong in some way in the past."

**“ WHEN ASKED WHAT ORGANIZATIONS, GROUPS, INSTITUTIONS, AND LEADERS PEOPLE TRUST OR BELIEVE, THERE WOULD BE EITHER DEAD SILENCE OR NERVOUS LAUGHTER.**

In New Orleans, which has seen more than its share of disasters and challenges, a woman responded to the question with a palpable sense of pain and sorrow. "We've seen institutions fail us. So, how do we trust? The next storm will come and then it'll all fall apart again. Then we'll talk about all the things that should have been done that weren't." In Nebraska, a man shared that his trust had run dry, too. "The people who I thought I trusted have throughout this past year proven me wrong. So that's just a really hard question for me right now." The degree to which people





held little or no trust in any one individual leader or group cannot be overstated. It cannot be overemphasized. It should not be overlooked. There is widespread mistrust and contempt for leaders and organizations of all kinds. People make little distinction between who they are speaking about. Their beliefs are deep and strongly held. At this point, people paint those they do not trust with a broad brush.

So who do people trust? Many in these discussions—from Flint to Rawlins County, from Ross County to New Orleans, from New Mexico to Sarasota, and from Stamford to Huron, and all the other places we visited—frequently said they trust in God and in the Bible. People often hesitated for a moment before giving this reply, perhaps wondering how others in their discussion would respond to their statements. But once someone broke the silence, others quickly joined in.

Many people also said they trust their spouse, partner, parent, or a close friend, or maybe a past teacher or their current pastor—all people they intimately know. A Utah County man amplified this point, “This is a tricky one. I’ve been talking about this actually with a

family member over the past few weeks. The tendency is to just rely on those that you’ve got personal relationships with, where you feel like you’ve got that connection. There’s no ulterior motive embedded in what they’re saying.” And many people talked about trusting themselves, as this Flint woman did, “I trust myself.” A Spartanburg woman stated, “I’ve always just trusted myself.” And a Huron man said, “When you’re talking about when it comes to belief, in anyone . . . I don’t know. I guess, a belief in yourself.”

### “I TRUST MYSELF.”

Beyond these responses, there was just a smattering of other individuals or organizations mentioned. One response we would typically hear from a single individual, possibly two, in each group involved science or public health organizations. A Dover woman said, “I guess being able to believe in science.” In Flint, a woman told us, “I’m a fan of data. I’m trained in STEM fields.” But listen to her next point: “So, if I can see data and I can look at it myself, I like to be able to take that data into account.”



Here's another example from Flint: "I look more for the independent experts. But you want to be able to see some of the data for yourself and verify it." Those who mentioned science professionals or some other expert would invariably follow up their comments by saying that they personally wanted to be able to check out and verify whatever data was being collected.

In a few instances, people would say they trust law enforcement. A Rawlins County man said, "I trust our law enforcement. I still respect the police. If they tell me to do something I'm going to do it." But for every group mentioned, there were others who held a different view. An African American woman

from New Orleans summed up what many people in her group and in several others felt about the police: "When it comes to police brutalities and killings, it's more often people who look like me. So it's kind of like, how do you overcome this? Go back to the trust. Who do you trust?" Across the discussions, trusting law enforcement proved to be one of the fault lines in American society that we encountered.

What is most striking about how people answered the question of trust is just how small and personal their circle of trust is. For many people—indeed, for the vast majority of people we talked with—real trust lies only with God, their faith, themselves, and those they personally know. No one else.

## KEY FINDING 07

### **While being an American is an important part of who most people are, being a part of America is complicated and strained for many.**

As people told us they felt disoriented and fearful and separated from one another, we wondered to what extent people's feelings about being an American was something that brought them together—or could help to bring them together. There is a path forward, but it is filled with challenges. Most people in these conversations expressed a deep love for this nation, saying that being an American means "freedom," "land of opportunity," "voting," "freedom of religion," "the ability to express oneself," and "to make personal choices." Many also talked about a responsibility they felt in being a part of the country and helping it to move forward.

These sentiments were expressed across all communities and all demographic groups. At the same time, many people also said that their love of and for the nation is not a blind love and that they struggle with being a part of America today.

Some people we spoke with hold a love for the nation firmly and fervently. "We're fortunate to be in a country where we have more freedoms than what you see in a lot of countries. It's the beacon of individual rights and freedoms in the world," a Huron man said. In just about every discussion, some people talked about their experiences living or traveling abroad,

# **Loss of Trust**

as this Houston woman did: “I’ve had the opportunity to live in other countries, and to see how they compare to America. America’s not perfect, but it’s really better than a lot of other places.” She continued, “It gives people the freedom to say the things that they say. We don’t have to agree with them, but they do have the freedom to say what they want to say.” In a Spanish-language conversation in Fresno, a woman said, “It’s the idea of all of us being one, like the name the United States. All of us being one.” And in New Mexico, a Zuni woman said, “Being American, of course, I thought, Native American. Also being a woman, being able to vote. In a lot of countries woman can’t do anything.”

“**I’M STILL GRATEFUL TO BE AN AMERICAN. I LOVE MY COUNTRY. BUT I’M EMBARRASSED OF WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO US GLOBALLY, OUR FOREIGN POLICY, AND WHAT’S HAPPENING IN THE COUNTRY WITH THIS DIVISION AND THE HATE IN IT.**”

In many of the conversations, individuals whose families immigrated to the US expressed a deep affection and appreciation for the country. “It means a lot to me because my family immigrated to this country,” a Huron woman said. “This is a new start of life. This is an opportunity.” A Stamford woman said, “I’m originally from Cameroon. America is a land of opportunity. You have all these opportunities and you have freedom, which we don’t always have in certain countries.” A Eugene woman shared this story about her family. “Both of my parents immigrated from Mexico. I was

raised to believe that this was the land of opportunity. My parents always ingrained in us that there’s almost like a sanctuary in the United States, being an American versus where they felt were oppressed in Mexico.”

But amid this love for the nation, there was a decisive undercurrent of an awakening among some people to a nation falling short of its ideals. “My feelings have changed about what it means to be an American,” said a Grand Junction woman. “My father is a veteran. My grandfather was a veteran. But I don’t feel a sense of pride as much anymore because I see what we’ve become and I’m not proud of it.” She continued and in doing so raised a word—*embarrassment*—that we heard over and over again. “I’m still grateful to be an American. I love my country. But I’m embarrassed of what has happened to us globally, our foreign policy, and what’s happening in the country with this division and the hate in it.” Many felt this mix of pride and embarrassment. A Utah County woman said, “I have really complex feelings about being an American—a lot of concern around imperialism and the war focus.” A Dover man added, “We need to understand that US history has some large warts on it. The land of opportunity it is, but it’s certainly not as much for everyone.” He continued, “It’s part of the history. We can’t deny it, and it will always be there. We have to come to grips and face that.”

Indeed, some people don’t like what they see happening in the nation as a result of the current tumult and divisions. Here’s how a Stamford man put it: “A segment of this country has declared, ‘Okay, we’re in the boat now. It’s time to pull up the oars.’ That’s just not what this country is.”

In Nebraska, a man said that he did not like how patriotism is being wielded to define who is an American. “My viewpoint is so clouded right now in terms of people in my life who claim patriotism, and it is in a very negative way,” he told us. “It’s a ‘we are better than you’ mindset. That’s not what that word is supposed to mean.”

“WHEN YOU’RE GROWING UP, YOU HAVE THAT BLIND LOYALTY TO COUNTRY AND WAVE THE FLAG. BUT AS YOU GET OLDER AND EXPERIENCE THINGS, ESPECIALLY AS A BLACK WOMAN, YOUR VIEWS CHANGE A LITTLE . . . WELL, DRASTICALLY.”

There were some in these conversations who struggled with their fundamental relationship to America. When speaking about African Americans in the nation, an African American man from New Orleans said, “If we make a mess, we get too loud, we don’t listen to the house rules, then we need to go. That’s what I think of when I think of America.” He continued, “It is a country born of oppression. We don’t like to believe that. We like to believe in this romantic ideal of this piece of paper that is supposed to be humanistic and allow everybody this opportunity for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” In New Mexico, a Zuni man who served in the US military said, “If someone wants to mess with the flag, that’s their right. Just don’t do it anywhere near me.” But he also said, “Growing up on the reservation, the reservation feels like it’s boundaries. There’s that sense that you’re American,

but maybe you don’t exactly belong to the rest of America.” And a Nebraska man—who had a totally different experience, but nonetheless still raised fundamental questions about his relationship to America—said, “My ancestors were slave owners. If I don’t acknowledge that, then perhaps I’m not what I need to be.”

There is a sense of deep disappointment in the US among many we spoke with. A Dover woman recounted her personal pain from years of lived experience. “When you’re growing up, you have that blind loyalty to country and wave the flag. But as you get older and experience things, especially as a Black woman, your views change a little . . . well, drastically. Just from personal experiences. I mean, down to even the most profound thing that’s been brought to light in the past two years, having a relative die at the hands of law enforcement. I’ve seen everything. So yeah, my views changed drastically about this country. Not angry, but I’d just say disappointed.”





In Rawlins County, people also felt a mix of disappointment and embarrassment, but for different reasons: the country they have known is slipping away from them. “We didn’t get this country just by luck and happenstance. It’s worked for 200 years. Now suddenly it seems like a huge group of the population wants to just tear everything down and put it in the way they want it. Everybody here is thankful to be in America. God, there’s no place better than this.” Yet, he added, “For the first time, in my lifetime, I’m actually a little embarrassed right now to be an American.” Another Rawlins County man said, “To be an American to me means to be free, to work for your values, and you get what you pay for. If you earn something you will be rewarded. As long as you do your part, you’ll be just fine. Nobody’s going to step on your toes or anything like that.” He continued, “Now you can get screwed over real easy by being a good person.” A Spartanburg man rounded out this perspective by summing up what some people felt about the current debate over the meaning of America today: “I don’t have a problem with you telling us what you think, or how we need to try to fix stuff.” He continued, “But don’t be the one who complains all the time. We have it better in the United States than any other place in the world. I love this country. I really love this country. I am all-in. But don’t tell me how bad things are all the time; tell me how good things are, too. Let’s hear both sides of it.”

Amid the different perspectives, what is clear is that virtually everyone we talked with is struggling with what it means to be American today, what the country needs to do to right itself, and perhaps through

all this tumult there is a path forward. The vast majority of people we spoke with love this country but also believe it must work through the fundamental changes now occurring and continue to build on the nation’s progress over time. A Stamford man put it this way: “We have to begin to look at ourselves as all of us as Americans, and that we all have a piece of this franchise. For all of us to be successful, the franchise has to be successful, and we can’t leave it to a few people to determine a direction for the franchise.” In Spartanburg, a man said, “Critiques are needed to grow. A lot of people have been able to be the head honcho, and so they don’t know how other people feel or have been feeling for a long, long, long, long time about things, because they’ve always been in that top dog spot. So, critiques are definitely necessary.”

“FOR ME, WHAT IS AT THE CORE OF BEING AN AMERICAN IS HAVING OPPORTUNITY AND DOING OUR BEST TO MAKE SURE THAT OPPORTUNITY IS EQUALLY AVAILABLE. IT’S A STRUGGLE. IT’S A CHALLENGE. IT’S SOMETHING WE HAVE TO DEAL WITH EVERY SINGLE DAY.”

And a Stamford man reflected what we heard in nearly all of the conversations: “I hear what is being said that we haven’t lived up to our ideals. At the end of the day, it’s a marathon, not a sprint.” He continued, “For me, what is at the core of being an American is having opportunity and doing our best to make sure that opportunity is equally available. It’s a struggle. It’s a challenge. It’s something we have to deal with every single day.”

# **A Desperate Search**

## Across the country, there is a desperate search for acceptance and belonging.

We cannot overstate the depth to which people feel isolated and disoriented: everyone seems to be struggling nowadays. This thread runs throughout all that we learned from talking in depth with Americans from many walks of life. People are in a desperate search for an antidote to these prevailing social and psychological conditions. At the heart of what people seek is acceptance and belonging. Though feelings of intense isolation undoubtedly surged during COVID-19 times, this search didn't just begin as a result of the pandemic.

"The real deep feeling is about loneliness. It's about disconnection and about a lack of a sense of belonging," a Eugene woman told us. "COVID-19 has exacerbated all that." A New Orleans woman held a similar view of things, "I don't think the pandemic was what drove people apart. That division was coming beforehand." She went on to explain that the connective tissue of society had frayed over many years and that fewer and fewer people turn to gathering places like churches and neighborhood groups to build bonds—and in their place are alternatives like social media, which often divides and separates people rather than connecting them.

This troubling trend of people feeling isolated and alone—which can lead to fear and division—was sounded time and again. "We're not connecting anymore," another New Orleans woman observed. "And because we're not connecting, then the pandemic heightened that isolation.

When you disconnect, then it leads to fear." In some cases, it leads to outcomes even more profound than fear. Listen to this young person from Eugene who talked about devastating events in her life. "There were at least half a dozen young teenagers that I personally know that committed suicide." When asked why, she responded, "It was about a feeling of loneliness."



**"THE REAL DEEP FEELING IS ABOUT LONELINESS. IT'S ABOUT DISCONNECTION AND ABOUT A LACK OF A SENSE OF BELONGING."**

We asked, "What is a reasonable and meaningful response to these current conditions?" What people said is clear: they are looking for community and connections with others. "I was going to use the word *community*," a Spartanburg man said. "Looking for common bonds." In Fresno, a woman talked about her urge to find people that she could openly express herself with. "I just need a community around me and to feel that I am able to express myself." A Nebraska man talked about the need for "a human connection," saying, "the holistic part of life from the physical to the emotional, the psychological, the mental, the spiritual. I'm not sure we are as a society balanced in all those dimensions. There's this helpless feeling of 'How can I fix it?'" In Houston, a man kept repeating this mantra, "Everybody needs community, everybody needs community."

Furthermore, across these conversations, people said that they and others are seeking “validation” and “acceptance”—a sense that *I am here, I am seen, and I matter*. Too often, people said that they and others they know do not feel seen or heard. Without this, people can feel threatened and turn to a fight-or-flight response. A Spartanburg woman explained, “People want validation. People want to feel like they matter. And when you’re discussing your opinion, people just want to know that they’re being listened to.” She went on to say, “It goes back to acceptance. People need to know that they matter.” A Utah County woman talked about this need for validation and community, “People are looking for some form of validation and connection.” In a society in which division and acrimony rule, people tell us they are in a desperate search for acceptance. “Everybody wants that. Everyone wants to be accepted,” said a Zuni woman.



Listen to this exchange between a Spartanburg man and the conversation moderator:

**Man:** “They’re looking for acceptance.”

**Moderator:** “Acceptance. What do you mean?”

**Man:** “Everybody at work is pissed off at them because they didn’t do something right. Everybody’s mad at them wherever they end up. At the grocery store, somebody’s mad at them because they got the parking spot. People are actually just searching to be accepted. They want somebody to want them. But since they’re not getting it, they’re lashing out. Even if it is just the line at the grocery store, it’s enough to really aggravate somebody and it can kind of push them over the edge.”

Indeed, we know from other parts of this report that people are not finding the sense of community and acceptance and validation they are in search of. So, instead they turn to what they call “tribes” or “factions”—groups of like-minded people who offer them their own smaller community, in which they can gain a sense of safety and control at a time when so many things are so confusing and disorienting. A Houston woman told us, “They’re finding their own tribes, for lack of a better word, that they feel comfortable with.” When asked why, she explained, “Well because they feel like everything or everybody’s against us, so we need to band together as like-minded people. They want to feel comfortable in their own little niches, their own little enclaves so that they can feel free to be, or trust themselves, and feel safe.” In Grand Junction, a man said that when people feel threatened they naturally,

reflexively band together. “That’s the nature of humans, we’re tribal-based.” He went on, “The problem is we need to expand our tribe and include the whole country.”

These points are vital to remember in terms of why there is so much separation and segregation in the nation. What is happening is rooted much less in polarization—when people hold a steadfast commitment to ideological positions—and much more in the human need for community and belonging. Right now, people feel too threatened to include the “whole country” as the Grand Junction man talked about. Instead, people are hunkered down in groups of like-minded folks, seeking protection from those with different views, different perspectives, and different experiences.

“ WHAT IS HAPPENING IS ROOTED MUCH LESS IN POLARIZATION—WHEN PEOPLE HOLD A STEADFAST COMMITMENT TO IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS—AND MUCH MORE IN THE HUMAN NEED FOR COMMUNITY AND BELONGING.

And yet, people express real concerns about the toll joining these like-minded groups has on them and others. Even when a perspective of a like-minded group is deemed to be false or inadequate “people cannot go back because they’ve allied with the group that says, ‘This is true,’” a Flint woman explained. “If they stop allying with that group, then they are out, and they are on their own again.” A Houston man said, “You know how they say birds that flock together. Well, it goes like that. People often stay together and believe

what they do is right, but a lot of times it’s wrong.” Yet people are stuck having to tow the line with their group. The Flint woman, just quoted, also said, “To ally with a group, you have to join and try to represent that you believe everything that everybody in that group believes. Just going along with the group, so that they’re part of something.”

This desire for acceptance and validation—for some semblance of community—was a constant and consistent theme in all of our conversations; people will go to great lengths to find it. A Spartanburg woman described how sticking with tribes or factions can come at a high cost. Speaking about how people have to go along to get along, “Maybe you’re not wanting to engage in conflict. Maybe you’re wanting to take an easy way out by agreeing with them.” In New Mexico, a Zuni woman said that people join groups even though they may not believe everything that the group stands for. “A whole bunch of people think this way: ‘The group must be right, so, I’m going to go with it. I believe some parts of it. I’m not going to challenge it. I’m just going to go with it.’” Finally, a Nebraska woman said, “As a society, we have a lack of confidence in ourselves. So, to have people agree with us is one way to build up our confidence.”

So, this is the mood of Americans. Many are desperately feeling a deep sense of isolation and loneliness, and the only place they seem to be able to find safety and security is by joining fractured groups. What they really want is acceptance and validation as part of a larger community. Here’s a Eugene woman who was in search of this: “How do we get to a place



**Belonging**

“PEOPLE DO WANT TO COME TOGETHER AND HELP EACH OTHER. BUT THEY DON'T REALLY KNOW HOW TO DO THAT ANYMORE. I DON'T KNOW.”

where we all feel like we belong? And not looking at just one side of an issue. It's okay for us to disagree.” Speaking directly to another participant in her discussion, she said, “John, I think you're a great guy, right? I want to know what you believe. Tell me. Let's talk about it. And just have the conversations. Be courageous. How do we

fix that?” But fixing this situation will not be easy given the prevailing conditions in the nation. “People do want to come together and help each other,” said a Nebraska woman. “But they don't really know how to do that anymore.” She added in exasperation, “I don't know.”

What people do know is that they want to get on a path that creates a greater, healthier sense of acceptance and belonging. The urgent need is there, and our well-being depends on it. As a Spartanburg woman said, “A lot of people have a lot of things that have been bottled up.”

## KEY FINDING 09

### **Empathy, productive talk, and compromise are prerequisites for moving society forward. But who will feel safe enough to step forward?**

People say that to combat the isolation and disorientation they feel—to place their lives and the nation on a healthier course—they and others will need to exercise greater empathy, talk with one another more, genuinely listen, and work together for some higher common benefit. This will require greater openness. And along the way, people must relearn how to compromise with each other in order to make our lives and society work better. But who will step forward first? And if they step forward, will anyone else meet them to engage?

“There's a way to say stuff to people without being nasty and rude and ignorant,” a Dover

woman said, reminding us of how people are acting harshly toward one another, pushing away others. But rather than push others away, a Houston woman said that people must more fully engage with one another. And we must be willing, and open enough, to know each other. “There's such a shallowness about us. Right? That's the thing also that doesn't lead to compromise. Because we don't want to look deeper. We don't want to know.”

According to discussion participants, “to know” would start by seeing each other's humanity and exercising greater empathy toward one another. A Sarasota woman made this point during her discussion.

"There's a lack of empathy. People are in need of having empathy. There's this destruction of respect." A New Orleans man poignantly asked, "How do we become more human? How do we get the empathy back? We have to identify as human beings. We're so separated and so segregated." He went on to say, "We're all being affected by so many of the same things. We have to be able to have conversations. To compare how we are human. The perspective people need is one of 'This is affecting me as much as it's affecting you.' Doesn't matter where you live. Doesn't matter how much you make. Doesn't matter what your education is." He then said that this approach will require people to interact especially with those "we don't want to be in the same room with, or are maybe uncomfortable to be in the same room with. That's where it starts!"

**"HOW DO WE BECOME MORE HUMAN?  
HOW DO WE GET THE EMPATHY BACK?  
WE HAVE TO IDENTIFY AS HUMAN  
BEINGS. WE'RE SO SEPARATED AND SO  
SEGREGATED."**

Many people suggested that creating a new path forward will also require making a commitment to work together; this means being less doggedly competitive and more collaborative. "We have lost the desire to collaborate because our society has become more competitive," a Nebraska woman told us. "Those situations of collaboration become more of a platform for someone rather than true collaboration. It becomes a competitive situation in many cases instead of a give-and-take collaboration." A New Orleans woman put this perspective plainly: "It's like

competition has replaced community." This idea of the nation becoming overly competitive is a theme that came up time and again. "We forgot what compromise is. We don't have to agree on everything. But we do have a responsibility to figure out how to become a better society," an African American woman from Houston stated. "I'm in my 60s. I've seen segregation, racism, illnesses. But now we're at a place where nobody gives each other respect. At some point, we've got to find a way to realize we're not going to ever always agree on everything, but we've got to find a level of respect for each other's opinions. Then we might be able to find a common ground."

Moving in *this* direction will take people finding ways to ease their fight-or-flight response; only then can folks find a way to approach one another and engage. "We've lost the social norm of being able to have a consensus; either has to be one way or another way. We can't do that sort of thing working together on a larger basis," a Sarasota woman implored her group. In Utah County, a woman who immigrated to the US from Tonga told her group, "I grew up in Tonga. Dialogue there was dismal."



But she pointed out, “That’s our way out of our anger and also of our own ideologies, because we don’t own the truth. We’re trying to find the truth, whatever opposition that we may have.”

In Ross County, two men had this exchange. “We’re just not willing to listen to anybody. We really need to just be coming together and figure out what’s really happening.” The second man said, “We’ve got to come together on a lot of things and understand that we have to agree to disagree.” He continued, “That’s the biggest thing in my opinion. People are having a problem that they don’t want to agree to disagree.” A Nebraska woman said that at the root of this challenge is people’s inability to think critically. She told us, “We’re not only losing the ability to have a conversation, but also to think critically. It’s become super easy for me just to see the news and not search for facts versus opinions because it just comes to us.” To this point, a Huron man said, “We all need to delete social media and talk to each other a little bit more.”

“WE AS A COUNTRY ARE TRYING TO  
PUT A BAND-AID ON A BULLET HOLE.”

A Rawlins County woman made the point that significant actions are needed to get the nation out of the situation that it finds itself in: “We as a country are trying to put a Band-Aid on a bullet hole.” She added, “It’s just so much easier to do. But all we’re doing is kicking this can down the road. Eventually it’s going to blow up.” But who will step forward first to make a move? Here’s how a Nebraska woman put it: “There’s a prisoner’s dilemma, the concept of I can be competitive and out for myself. But the



group is going to win more as a whole—I’m going to win more as a whole—if we all work together. People have lost sight of that.”

Perhaps it’s worthwhile to tell a brief story from the African American woman from Houston who talked earlier about the need for people to give each other greater respect, which might then open more possibilities to find more common ground. In her comments, she explained how she had a falling out with a long-time friend over a particular issue and how they struggled to bridge their divide. But she knew that her friend’s child was having difficulties in school. She had been a school teacher and saw this as an opportunity to reach out to this friend. “So, I said to her, ‘You know what? Why don’t we meet halfway? You drive halfway, I’ll drive halfway, and I’ll tutor him.’” Her message: “So look for the common ground. That’s what I’m finding for me is working. Try to go back to people that I know have had workable solutions before and find the common ground. We have got to go back to the fundamentals.”

**Empathy**

## KEY FINDING 10

### Locally, people are working together. And they saw vivid examples of community action throughout the pandemic but are uncertain whether these responses will last. Still, most people believe that change must start in local communities.

Many people said the place to start putting the country on a more hopeful, healthier course is in their local communities. There, people tend to have more productive relationships, or at least have better odds of overcoming their sense of isolation and feeling disoriented. And locally, people feel a greater sense of control and ability to effect positive change. Indeed, many people in these conversations talked about positive examples of their communities pulling together to address challenges such as COVID-19. Yet a potent question lingers; Is this movement of coming together sustainable or will it be fleeting as the shock of the pandemic wears off?

“OUR COMMUNITY IS REALLY PULLING TOGETHER IN SO MANY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. WHAT I’M SEEING ON TV IS NOT WHAT I’M SEEING RIGHT IN MY OWN COMMUNITY.”

Here’s a Nebraska man who said a positive response to the division in the US resides in local communities: “That lack of civility, how do we get rid of it?” Answering his own question, he said, “We look to our own community and say, ‘We get along well here. We still have each other. We know each other.’” A Grand Junction woman agreed, “I look more towards our local leaders and those in our community that are doing what they can to help our community. That’s where my focus is.” She added that the

positive energy in local communities generates ripples in all directions. “It’s their passion for making change. As they begin to shine as local community leaders, other people just automatically are like them.”

Making a similar point, here’s how a Eugene man described his experience: “At the national level, it’s just a drumbeat of bad news. Then I get together with people here and say, ‘Hey, let’s work on this thing in the community.’ No one ever asks the table, ‘What’s your political affiliation?’” A Huron man said that in many rural communities people still need to rely on each other to get by in daily life, and what





someone thinks about a particular issue or political figure must be set aside for this to happen. “When you live in an environment that’s rural, you have to rely on your neighbor,” he told us. “It doesn’t matter if your neighbor agrees with Biden or your neighbor agrees with Trump. If your air conditioner goes out and you need an extra fan, you rely on your neighbor to give you an extra fan. You don’t care which political party he supports.”

People across the conversations talked proudly of shared efforts that their communities have accomplished. There is one effort in which people expressed particular pride. On the Zuni reservation in New Mexico, the conversation participants gathered in a recently built community youth center filled with Native American art. Speaking about the role of the community in building the center and then expanding to how change in society can come about, a Zuni man said, “This was probably a 10-, 15-year plan to have this building along with all the programming.” He went on to describe the community and other partnerships that needed to be forged to create the center. Speaking about how to create larger change in the nation, he stated, “Ideally it starts with community.” A Dover woman underscored that it is still possible for people to come together in their local communities to work on common challenges. “Our community is really pulling together in so many different directions. What I’m seeing on TV is not what I’m seeing right in my own community.”

In many of our conversations, we asked people to describe their community’s responses to COVID-19 and what insights, if any, these responses might offer about



moving the nation forward. One individual from Sarasota told this story: “We had a local business that was an organic farm that had to close down, but they had all these fruits and vegetables.” She explained that the farm owners decided to donate the food to the community, and local community members then got together to take action. “So local community members actually bought boxes [and filled them with the food]. Then we went out and delivered them to families—and they knew it was coming from their neighbors.” The Sarasota woman then said, her voice filled with joy, “People were painting their windows saying, ‘Thank you!’ They felt really, really connected. Some of them said they felt more connected during the pandemic than they did outside of the pandemic because they saw support coming from someone else.” In Utah County, it was a group of college students who stepped forward. “I got a message pretty early in the pandemic from someone just saying, ‘We

just have a bunch of college students that are willing to grocery shop for people who are at high risk.” This woman continued, “They feel safe doing this, and all they need is an address and a shopping list, and they’ll do it and drop it off!”

“I can rattle one off pretty quick!” exclaimed a Huron man. “We had a pretty restrictive ordinance put in place in April of 2020 that restricted all restaurants to be take-out only. Even with that, the sales tax for restaurants within the city of Huron was higher in April of 2020 than it was in April of 2019.” How did that come about? “The people of Huron came out and supported its local restaurants in such a way that more sales were made to local restaurants in 2020 in that month than had been made the previous year, which was a really positive thing to see.” He explained further, “When we had this ordinance put in place, we all said, ‘Oh hey, we’re not going to let our restaurants die just because we have this. We’re not going to let our town go under, just because of this. We’re going to make sure we come closer together.’”

Many people in these discussions recounted their own stories about how their churches had stepped up. Here’s just one: A Fresno man spoke about the “compassion of an elder” who recognized that other elders in his church had felt isolated and disconnected. He said, “We started a support group for those elders to help them come together and find a healthy way for them to get together and socialize and reunite and just reunify.” Others told stories about how people in their community were pulled together across different groups. A Ross County woman said, “Our community



came up with a recovery response team,” which was made up of the mayor, local organizations, and community members. Two outcomes, among others: “School districts got the bus drivers to volunteer to deliver food, and nonprofits worked together to help with funding to get supplies and different things out to community members.” In Grand Junction, the local library took the lead. “The library did a wonderful thing during COVID-19 for artists and writers,” a Grand Junction woman told us. “It was a project seeking submissions about the pandemic experience.” She said with rising

**Community**

pride in her voice, “The projects that the library did, that was for the community!”

These stories of positive community action are uplifting, but will these and other steps taken in response to COVID-19 have a lasting effect? Will they change how people feel about what’s happening in their lives and the country today? People were hopeful but not certain. “I like to hope that they’re permanent,” a Grand Junction woman said. “People are changing. Some people have been changed from this experience and see the need to reach out and help others more. And reach out not just to help others but also reach out for the community.” Notice how this Huron man framed his response in terms of what he hopes for. “I don’t think that we’re going to go back to where we were before the pandemic.” He then continued, “In this last year and a half, people have come closer together. I hope that we don’t go backwards. I hope that we can go forward to just being good people, and trustworthy people.” And in response to his comment, another Huron man explained how the community’s response to COVID-19

“gave people a better appreciation of the interconnectedness of the community. The hope is that we would continue to keep that community-based idea and understand that we need to work together and be respectful of one another, and helpful.”

A woman talked about the compassion she saw in Stamford during the pandemic. She exuded cautious hope, explaining, “I tend to be a pessimistic person. But, I’m a little optimistic now. In today’s environment, everybody got a free pass. Everybody, no judgment. If you are applying for a job, we’re not going to ask you why you have that gap on your resume, right? I just feel there’s a little more leniency today around what people need and there’s a little less judgment about why people need it.” She finished by saying, “We know that they’re not bad people. They’re still hard workers. I hope that that carries forward.” In Spartanburg, a man told us, “I’m hopeful. People don’t like this disagreement and arguments and stuff. We can’t keep ongoing, becoming more and more divisive. I’m still hopeful that we’ll see our way through this.”







**“I WAS AROUND AFTER 9/11, AND WITH THE [RECENT] HURRICANE AND KATRINA, AND YOU SAW THE COUNTRY COME TOGETHER. EVERYBODY WAS JUST WORKING TOGETHER AND ON THE SAME PAGE. THEN WE WENT RIGHT BACK TO NORMAL.”**

While everyone shared the hope that changes made during COVID-19 would last, not everyone was as optimistic. “It’s a big mix,” a Utah County woman said. “As we’ve gone 15 months into it, and things are opening back up and returning to ‘normal,’ it’s kind of back to, ‘You’ve had plenty of time, pull up your bootstraps. Why aren’t you working again? Why can’t you survive and make it on your own?’ So at least to some extent, we’re already seeing quite a lot of that compassion fatigue.” A Spartanburg woman lamented what she fears will be a lost sense of common purpose as the country moves ahead. “I worry that the loss of a concept of shared commitment, which we had during the pandemic will sort of have us revert back to what we had before.” She went on, “I mean, we’ve had massacres in elementary schools and that hasn’t changed anything. So I worry that the lack of local involvement and a shared commitment about a particular issue won’t bring us forward more positively.” Then, acknowledging other comments made in her discussion, “I hear the optimistic comments from many of you. I pray that that happens. But that lack of shared commitment is affecting us culturally and politically and socially.”

Despite the positive efforts made in Grand Junction, a woman said she didn’t necessarily believe the lessons or insights that came from them would last. “I don’t think it’s something we’ve necessarily learned. There’s plenty of examples throughout history, different cultures that this is what humans do at some points.” Her point: We rise collectively when called to face active challenges, and once things settle, we revert back to long-held practices. This is a common perspective that we heard. Said a Sarasota woman, “I was around after 9/11, and with the [recent] hurricane and Katrina, and you saw the country come together. Everybody was just working together and on the same page. Then we went right back to normal.” And here’s an exchange between two Spartanburg men, also invoking September 11, 2001, when speaking about what lessons the country might learn from its experience with the pandemic:

**Man 1:** 9/11 is a great picture of what may happen. I’m afraid that as we go through the next year or next couple of years, people are going to do like they did with 9/11. They’re just going to start forgetting it. They’re still going to appreciate the things that have been done and the things that are being done. But I think that it’s going to just start easing away, and that’s sad.

**Man 2:** I’d like to disagree with that. I hope that it will carry forward in people appreciating the grocery store clerk or whatever. The more contact you have with other people outside your normal social group, the more it broadens your horizons and makes you a better person. So I’m hopeful in that regard.



**Man 1:** I totally agree with you. I'm very hopeful. I really am. I hope and I pray that you're right. I hope that it does continue. I'm afraid that it's not going to.

**“WE CAN START HERE AT OUR COMMUNITY LEVEL. AND THEN GRADUALLY, YOU WILL TAKE IT TO OTHER COMMUNITIES LIKE STATE, NATIONAL, THINGS LIKE THAT. BUT WE NEED TO START SOMEWHERE. OUR COMMUNITY IS THE BEST PLACE TO START.”**

As people wrestle with what might emerge from the local efforts in response to the pandemic, they also struggle with even larger trends that are increasingly infecting their local communities. Listen to this woman from rural Rawlins County: “We’re bickering with everything: 4-H, school system, the cheerleading squad. Bickering church groups where we just are having a real lack of getting along as human beings.” She added, “Just the arguments and pettiness. It’s more for personal good when it used to be civic-minded. ‘What’s good for the community is good for the group.’ Now, it’s ‘What can I get out of it?’” A Flint woman described a political campaign that was taking place at

that time: “We have a local election going on right now. In my 44 years of voting I’ve never missed an election.” And yet, she went on to explain that “the framing, the drama, the name calling . . . it’s very sad to me to see this. It’s horrible. I can’t wait till it ends.”

Even amid these challenges, most people still feel that it is in their local communities that positive change can—and *must*—start in order to move the country forward. A Zuni woman told us, “We can start here at our community level. And then gradually, you will take it to other communities like state, national, things like that. But we need to start somewhere. Our community is the best place to start.” A Houston man talked about what happens when people see others step forward to work together: “You see that when a lot of different other groups see that, they say, ‘Oh, I got to pitch in and do something similar to what they’re doing!’” He explained further, echoing the point made by the Zuni woman, “And then you start seeing all these groups accumulate and move about the country doing these sorts of things.” Harkening back to the discussion about what it means to be an American, he said, “They haven’t forgotten how to be an American, and that is to care about each other.”



**Hope**

# A Postscript from the Conversations

**AS EACH CONVERSATION WOUND DOWN**, we asked people what they were thinking about and what they might tell others happened during our conversation. Their reflections often had two themes, which perhaps will not be a surprise to some reading this report, but they're important nonetheless.

“THIS FORUM HAS OPENED MY EYES TO SOME NEW THINGS, AND I'M VERY GLAD ABOUT THAT. I DO FEEL THAT THERE'S HOPE.”

People said they were surprised by how their group was able to have a productive conversation given how they felt about the state of their lives and the country; there was a deep sense of gratitude for the conversation and each other. Second, there were always people in each group who invariably expressed, with confidence, that their discussion must have been much different from all the others we were holding. They were convinced that they and their fellow community members had expressed perspectives totally different from those in other communities across the country.

Speaking about the productive tone and spirit of his group's conversation, a New Orleans man offered this reflection: “It has been a distinct pleasure and an honor to be with folks because to me it's about dialogue. Dialogue versus debate. Debate is not going to get us anywhere because somebody wants to win.” He continued, “But if we have a dialogue and come into it with an open mind and can listen to one another we can hear the perspectives and know that there is always another perspective. So I'm grateful for the

opportunity.” Then, another New Orleans man jumped in. “Good point. Excellent point. Excellent!” he said, “Open forums like this are good. If you could have more of them, in different communities, where people could come together and express their thoughts about what's going on, that would help. I feel positive about this conversation, listening to everybody. It gives me a little hope.”

In Houston, a woman offered, “This conversation was good for me. I would hope that other forums happen because I'm afraid that we're really in a real crisis.” Another Houston woman built on this comment, “This forum has opened my eyes to some new things, and I'm very glad about that.” She finished by saying, “I do feel that there's hope.”

A Ross County woman said about the conversation, “I'm leaving with the fact there are people young and old—everybody—who has thoughts to try and really correct what's going on. That's the biggest thing I'm taking away. Because a lot of times you get the impression that nobody really cares. Then the ones that are making noise, they're being destructive to





a point that you don't want to try to correct anything." She finished by saying, "Regardless of whether you got different opinions, at least if you care enough, if you're willing to do what it takes to try and make some kind of corrections, try to make some difference, that's what I'm taking away from this."

In New Mexico on the Zuni reservation, a woman said about their conversation, "It was actually refreshing to sit around a table like this and be able to say what I believe. It was nerve-racking." She continued, "This actually goes a long way to learning how to trust somebody else in our own community. You have to start local and then you spread that out. Thank you for getting us around the table." Another Zuni woman noted that she felt "overwhelmed with knowledge, but it's in a good way. I've never been a part of conversations like this." And a third Zuni woman shared, "It makes us all feel closer." She then observed, "We didn't know each other, but I think with just talking and speaking our mind and our feelings, this group has gotten a little closer. We shouldn't stop here. Let's continue these kinds of discussions." She suggested that if each community would do this, "each community will slowly heal. Eventually we'll heal our whole country."

Some people wondered whether their conversations were actually different from other communities we were engaging in this study;

this was particularly true from those who live in smaller communities. "Based on everybody's responses tonight, I don't feel like we're very polarized at all," a Huron man said. Then he posited, "Well, maybe that comes down to being in a small community. So it depends on the area you are in." He ended his comment by saying that the conversation "leaves me feeling hopeful about the future." A Rawlins County man told us, "I'm sure it's different every place you go. We got almost a consensus of opinion here on almost everything. Go somewhere else, you're going to hear a lot of different stories with the same questions." A Stamford man mused, "I'll be interested at the end to see the report after you've done all the other communities. I would love to hear from somebody that's got a totally different lifestyle than I do."

“ “**BASED ON EVERYBODY'S RESPONSES TONIGHT, I DON'T FEEL LIKE WE'RE VERY POLARIZED AT ALL.**”

Yes, there were differences between the different groups we talked with, but there were more similarities than differences. When we told people about these similarities once their particular discussion ended, they often said, "I would never have expected that" and "That gives me hope."

Finally, we can feel the sense of hope that came from these conversations by ending this postscript with the voice of a New Orleans woman:

The best thing about this for me was to see so many different people who are from different backgrounds and we still have an actual clear understanding of what's happening in this world. So it kind of makes me feel like I'm not alone. Especially seeing the age variations too. I've been around for quite a long time and nothing really changed. And so I think that was very important for me to hear. ■

# Let Us Create Authentic Hope

## THE URGENT CHALLENGE AT HAND

*is to find ways to combat the civic virus and inoculate the nation moving forward. This civic virus has created a disorienting, destabilizing environment in which people are surrounded by unrelenting noise and confusion, their reality is up for grabs, they are separating and segregating into small tribes and camps, and these and other factors are triggering an instinctive state of fight or flight. The question is: What will it take to create authentic hope amid these relentless conditions?*

Unlike with COVID-19, there is no vaccine available to treat a civic virus. There is no prepackaged, replicable solution that can be efficiently distributed far and wide. We cannot buy our way out of this predicament. There is no magic solution, no wand to wave, no wishful thinking.

“ THESE CONDITIONS ARE INTRINSICALLY ABOUT THE *HUMAN* CONDITION—WHAT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE, WHAT THEY FEEL, WHAT THEY ARE IN SEARCH OF. WE MUST MEET PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE.

Instead, we must begin to spread a positive contagion of authentic hope that boldly declares, “We each matter. We don’t need to agree on everything, but can find enough agreement to move forward. We can create a new trajectory of hope.”

The findings in this report help point the way forward to a more hopeful society. Where people feel seen and heard and understood. Where acceptance and belonging count. Where

empathy, productive talk, and compromise are possible. Where shared action is taken to address common challenges.

These conditions cannot be created through technical solutions, such as enacting new policies, rigging up sophisticated civic engagement processes, or imposing new comprehensive plans on communities. Let’s be clear: These conditions are intrinsically about the *human* condition—what people experience, what they feel, what they are in search of. We must meet people where they are.

The danger is merely turning up the volume even more, pushing even harder to divide people, spreading even more fear—all just to win. But win what? *This* well-worn path will only lead people to feel more isolated and disoriented. It will only lead to more fight or flight. It will only lead to more lost hope, frustration, even cynicism.

Many changes must occur to shift the prevailing conditions. We offer seven steps to lay a foundation for a more hopeful trajectory. Each step requires intentional action. Each step reduces the need for a fight-or-flight response. But, in pursuing this path, let us always keep in mind: There is no quick fix for the perilous situation we find ourselves in. Any suggestion otherwise is a march of folly—and a dangerous one. The last thing people need are more broken promises and false hope. Here, then, are seven steps to create authentic hope.

## 1. Start in local communities.

Recall the Zuni woman from New Mexico who said, “We can start here at our community level. And then gradually, you will take it to other communities like state, national, things

like that. But we need to start somewhere. Our community is the best place to start.” It is clear from this study that people believe building trust, relationships, and shared action must occur in their local communities, where it is already taking place to varying degrees, and spread from there. What’s more, people in this study were able to name concrete examples of such actions occurring in response to COVID-19, which gave at least some people additional hope about moving ahead. We should build on this community-based foundation. After all, it is in our local communities where people can come to see and hear and understand each other, and where a sense of community and belonging can be reignited and reinforced. Our local communities are the place to start. Efforts can then ripple outward.

“ IT IS CLEAR FROM THIS STUDY THAT PEOPLE BELIEVE BUILDING TRUST, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SHARED ACTION MUST OCCUR IN THEIR LOCAL COMMUNITIES.

## 2. Bring people together across dividing lines.

People told us they have separated and segregated themselves from one another, and often make quick judgments about each other based on simplistic cues and preconceived notions. Relying on these behaviors only deepen isolation and misunderstanding. This was the point of the Eugene woman who told us, “We’re not connected. We’re very separate from one another, and we’re focusing on all the things that make us so different, as opposed to the things that we have in common.” Thus it is essential to create more spaces within communities for people to come together across real and perceived differences. These spaces must be safe, where people feel able to express themselves, especially views that

“ THERE IS AN URGENT NEED IN THE COUNTRY FOR PEOPLE TO REDISCOVER WHAT THEY ARE FOR AND NOT SIMPLY WHAT THEY ARE AGAINST, AND FOR THEM TO IDENTIFY WHERE ENOUGH AGREEMENT EXISTS TO MOVE FORWARD TOGETHER.

may not be fully formed. A premium must be placed on listening and empathy, where people seek to understand one another’s perspectives and lived experiences. These conversations should begin with people focusing on their *shared aspirations*. There is an urgent need in the country for people to rediscover what they are for and not simply what they are against, and for them to identify where enough agreement exists to move forward together.

## 3. Get people building together.

Genuine conversations can help people feel seen and heard and understood, but there are limits to what conversations alone can yield in terms of helping people and the nation break out of the noise and confusion engulfing us.





People must also *build together*. They must cocreate solutions to the challenges that beset us. As a New Orleans man said, “If we actually worked together to improve different conditions, society will improve.” Building together can take numerous forms: from developing and implementing new efforts to address common problems, to taking part in the arts (which can engage people’s imagination and enable them to see and articulate new thoughts, emotions, and paths forward), to coming together with others to build homes, give out food, and visit shut-ins. Make no mistake: we are not urging more volunteerism; what we are urging is more common efforts. Nothing replaces discovering the innate capabilities of other people in action, their talents and humor, their struggles and vulnerability, and their shared humanity.

#### **4. Develop a new breed of leaders who are turned outward.**

As the noise and confusion spreads, not only do everyday Americans turn inward, leaders do as well. When this happens, further fragmentation takes hold, shared interests get pushed aside for narrower agendas, and building bridges gets stymied in lieu of growing chasms between people. People are saying, “Enough is enough.” As a Houston woman put it, “A lot of people are now standing up and saying, ‘It’s gone too far. It’s gone too far this way, and it’s gone too far that way.’ There has to be common ground.” We must take intentional steps to develop leaders with different mindsets and practices, who are turned outward toward their communities, and who reflect the leadership characteristics that people in these and other conversations seek—

**“ MAKE NO MISTAKE: WE ARE NOT URGING MORE VOLUNTEERISM; WHAT WE ARE URGING IS MORE COMMON EFFORTS.**

**“ WE MUST TAKE INTENTIONAL STEPS TO DEVELOP LEADERS WITH A DIFFERENT MINDSET AND PRACTICES, WHO ARE TURNED OUTWARD TOWARD THEIR COMMUNITIES.**

such as bringing people together across dividing lines, listening deeply to all voices in a community and knowing what really matters to people, developing actions that address people’s real concerns, and living up to pledges and promises made, among others. A new breed of leader is needed, one who exhibits the courage and humility to step forward in these turbulent times.

#### **5. Invest in and support local journalism and media.**

It’s clear from this report that people are worried about the effects of various news media on society and their lives. Recall the Grand Junction man who said, “The media sells a package of outrage and fear and hate. If you’re in your bubble, that’s what you like to hear.” As the news media landscape has changed dramatically in recent decades, there has been a growing movement to invest in and grow local journalism and media. These efforts are vital, and they must be expanded—for it is clear from these conversations that some of the most trusted news media sources are local sources. People believe these news media are closer to their communities, know their communities better, and focus on things that matter to people. These local sources are critical for enabling people to see and hear different perspectives, understand different people’s lived experiences, engage in discussions about how to address hard issues, and see and celebrate positive achievements. All this is key to helping people ease their fight-or-flight instinct and to the very forming of human connections and community.



## 6. Create more boundary-spanning organizations and groups.

In this study—as well as in other Harwood Institute research and on-the-ground work—people have a hard time identifying organizations and groups that they trust, even local ones. Recall the New Orleans woman who said, “Who do I trust? I don’t know.” Indeed, in communities there are fewer and fewer organizations and groups that span boundaries; so many are focused on narrow agendas and work in silos. Boundary-spanning entities make it their mission to bring people together across dividing lines, generate shared agendas, and catalyze and support collective action. They focus on creating a shared sense of purpose in communities and forging more productive norms for engagement and common work. They tend to be deeply rooted in their communities. These entities are needed now more than ever. Organizations and groups that take a broader view will gain deeper trust, relevance, and significance in their communities.

“ BOUNDARY-SPANNING ENTITIES MAKE IT THEIR MISSION TO BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER ACROSS DIVIDING LINES, GENERATE SHARED AGENDAS, AND CATALYZE AND SUPPORT COLLECTIVE ACTION.

## 7. Generate a new can-do counternarrative.

The dominant narrative in America today is one of polarization. In The Harwood Institute’s work, a community’s shared narrative—for that matter, a nation’s shared narrative—shapes people’s mindset, attitudes, behaviors, and actions. As a Ross County man suggested, “If you’re told something for long enough, you’re going to start to believe it.” Yet in local communities all across the country, people are taking shared



“ THE AMERICANS WE TALKED WITH FOR THIS STUDY ARE YEARNING TO CHOOSE A NEW PATH—A PATH OF AUTHENTIC HOPE.

actions, and if we focus on the building blocks highlighted here, more can occur. But these actions alone are not enough. The dominant narrative of polarization will overshadow, indeed overwhelm, these actions without putting into play some counterforce. What’s needed: generating a new can-do counternarrative. But let’s be clear: This must not be yet another inauthentic public relations campaign that dangerously hypes certain actions, oversells results, and promises quick fixes. Instead, the stories told as part of this counternarrative must emerge out of *genuine* local community efforts. Stories must make visible what is often invisible. And we must weave together these stories into a coherent narrative for people to see that we are moving in a new, more hopeful direction.

“ WHAT’S NEEDED: GENERATING A NEW CAN-DO COUNTERNARRATIVE.

We have a choice in how we respond to the civic virus. We can either throw up our hands in frustration at the current conditions, or we can step forward to create a positive contagion of authentic hope. The Americans we talked with for this study are yearning to choose a new path—a path of authentic hope. ■

# Methodology

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**THE HARWOOD INSTITUTE** used focus groups—or group discussions—to conduct this study. These are an ideal research method for this type of study. They provide people with the opportunity to think about various issues and topics over the course of a discussion lasting a couple hours, to talk about their views and feelings in their own words, and to describe the underlying assumptions behind their views. Moreover, this research approach helps identify the language people use to talk about specific topics, dig deeper into various questions, and return to various topics over time, allowing people to engage with new information and insights during the course of the discussion. Such interaction is difficult—often impossible—to obtain through public opinion surveys.

There are, of course, limitations to group discussions. The research is qualitative. Thus, the observations in this report should not be mistaken for findings from a random sample survey. They are, technically speaking, hypotheses or insights. Still, these insights are strongly suggestive of how people view what is happening in the country today.

Each of the group conversations conducted for this study comprised approximately 10 to 18 people, representing a cross-section of age, race, income, education, and party affiliation. The participants were recruited by local organizations such as public libraries, community foundations, United Ways, committed individuals, a local public media organization, a museum, and a youth organization, among others. Each group meeting lasted for about two hours and was led by a trained moderator and recorded. Participants were promised that their names would not appear in this report in order to respect their privacy.



To ensure that we engaged a diverse group of communities and people in this study, The Harwood Institute forged a relationship with the American Communities Project (ACP), a combined social science/journalism effort based at the Michigan State University School of Journalism. Working with academics, ACP used a wide range of different factors—everything from income to race and ethnicity to education to religious affiliation—and a clustering technique to identify 15 types of counties across the nation.

The Harwood Institute used ACP to conduct conversations in each of the 15 types of counties in the US. These conversations were held during 2021. ■

COUNTY	NEARBY CITY	STATE	ACP COUNTY TYPE	DATE OF CONVERSATION
Fairfield	Stamford	Connecticut	Urban Suburbs	6/7/21
Utah	Provo	Utah	LDS Enclaves	6/23/21
Sarasota	Sarasota	Florida	Graying America	6/24/21
Lane	Eugene	Oregon	College Towns	7/27/21
Fresno	Fresno	California	Hispanic Centers	7/24/21 (English) and 9/11/21 (Spanish)
Mesa	Grand Junction	Colorado	Exurbs	8/2/21
Spartanburg	Spartanburg	South Carolina	Evangelical Hubs	8/10/21
Lancaster (and surrounding counties)	Lincoln	Nebraska	Rural Middle America / College Towns	8/11/21
Kent	Dover	Delaware	Military Posts	9/14/21
Beadle	Huron	South Dakota	Rural Middle America	9/22/21
Harris	Houston	Texas	Big Cities	9/27/21
Orleans (Parish)	New Orleans	Louisiana	African American South	9/28/21
McKinley	Pueblo of Zuni	New Mexico	Native American Lands	9/29/21
Ross	Chillicothe	Ohio	Working Class Country	10/4/21
Genesee	Flint	Michigan	Middle Suburbs	10/12/21
Rawlins	Atwood	Kansas	Aging Farmlands	10/13/21

**NOTE:** Two conversations were held in “Rural Middle America” to ensure rural voices were clearly understood and represented.

# Acknowledgments

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I want to thank my colleague **John Conroy**, who tirelessly forged and managed our partnerships with our local partners. John was instrumental in helping to frame the group conversations, understand what we discovered in those conversations, and provided insightful comments on numerous drafts.

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# About the Author

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**RICHARD C. HARWOOD** is an innovator, writer, and speaker. For over three decades, he has devoted his career to revitalizing the nation's hardest hit communities, transforming the world's largest organizations, and reconnecting institutions to society.

He has developed a philosophy by which people can learn to solve common problems, create a culture of shared responsibility, and deepen Civic Faith—and has put it into practice in communities around the globe. The Harwood practice of Turning Outward has spread to all 50 US states and is being used in 40 countries. His

experience working on the ground to build capacity and coalitions for change gives him a unique and powerful insight on bridging divides and creating resilient communities.

Dedicated to providing a trusted civic voice, Rich's leadership has helped people in communities see and hear one another, afford dignity to every individual, and find ways to do common work. In Newtown, Connecticut, after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Rich led the process for the community to collectively decide the fate of the school building.

An inspiring and sought-after speaker, Rich regularly keynotes major conferences and events. He has written five books, scores of articles, and groundbreaking reports, and frequently appears in national media. He is the founder and president of The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation, located in Bethesda, Maryland.

More information about Rich Harwood can be found at [www.theharwoodinstitute.org](http://www.theharwoodinstitute.org). You can connect with Rich Harwood on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. ■



Hope. Belonging. Community.  
Possibility. Empathy.  
Connection. Solutions.  
Trust. Heard. Seen. Compassion.  
Dignity. Understanding. Hope. Belonging.  
Community. Possibility.  
Connection. Trust. Seen.  
Empathy. Compassion.  
Understanding. Dignity.  
Heard. Hope. Empathy.  
Solutions. Belonging.