Survey Finds Americans Have Dim View of Nation's Moral Values

Flip on the TV, peruse the Internet, or page through the average magazine on the newsstand today, and it is difficult to ignore the obvious: America's moral values seem to be slipping to new lows every year. Images that would have rated swift condemnation from our nation's religious leaders (and likely a fine from the FCC) just a few short years ago are now standard fare on today's television screens. Profanity that few sailors would have been caught uttering in mixed company in previous generations now falls freely from the lips of teens and young adults. And behaviors that once would have been unthinkable in civilized society are now embraced by whole communities as basic rights.

While it may seem that a majority of Americans are turning a blind eye to this moral slide — or view it as the normal evolution of an enlightened society — a recent national survey suggests that many Americans are taking note, and harbor concerns over the direction our nation is headed.

Each year the Gallup organization polls a cross section of the American population on the state of the nation's moral values, and this year the study found that Americans are three times more likely to describe the current moral state as "poor" than as "excellent" or "good." While the opinion the average American has about U.S. morality "has never been positive," an official summary of the Gallup study noted, this year's assessment ranks "among the worst Gallup has measured over the past nine years."

According to this year's survey, which polled 1,029 adults nationwide in early May, over 75 percent of Americans think that the nation's moral values are worsening, compared to 14 percent who say they are improving. Those Americans who think the nation's moral values are getting worse cited a variety of reasons for the slide, including a decline in parents instilling solid values in their children, negative moral values being demonstrated by the nation's government and business leaders, a rise in crime and violence, a decreasingly positive influence by religious institutions, and the breakdown of the traditional two-parent family.

Those polled also cited a range of reasons among individuals for a decline in values, including people not taking responsibility for the own behaviors, the average person being out for himself, and individuals not caring for the needs of others.

Interestingly, such issues as abortion, homosexuality, teen pregnancy, and drugs were not cited by those surveyed as among the significant factors in America's moral slide.

While the majority of Americans think values are slipping in the United States, the poll found that a small minority (14 percent) think moral values are actually improving, with respondents citing such

things as an improvement in the understanding between peoples from different backgrounds and cultures, a decline in racist attitudes, and Americans working together and helping those in need during tough times.

Overall, the poll found that 45 percent of Americans think that the state of the nation's moral values is poor, compared to 15 percent who think that they are in good or excellent shape. While the figures have remained fairly consistent over the years that Gallup has been taking the annual survey, this year's numbers are among the most negative evaluation from those surveyed over the past nine years.

Gallup is not the only organization that has monitored the state of America's moral values. In 2008, evangelical Christian pollster George Barna quizzed adults on their involvement in eight different behaviors with moral implications: exposure to pornography, use of profanity in public, gambling, gossiping, engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, retaliating against another person, getting drunk, and lying.

In his study Barna found that a majority of adults had engaged in at least one of those eight behaviors during the week previous to being surveyed, with 28 percent admitting to using profanity, 20 percent having gambled (which included purchasing a lottery ticket), 19 percent admitting to intentional exposure to pornography, 12 percent having participated in gossip, 12 percent having gotten drunk, and 11 percent having lied.

One of the most significant findings from the Barna survey was the moral lapse in individuals under 25 years of age. According to Barna, this younger age group "was more than twice as likely as all other adults to engage in behaviors considered morally inappropriate by traditional standards."

Among the stunning statistics for Americans under 25: 64 percent had used profanity in public, compared to just 19 percent of the age group Barna referred to as Baby-boomers (those between the ages of 44 and 62). Similarly, the under-25 group was nine times more likely than baby-boomers to have engaged in sex outside of marriage (38 percent versus four percent); six times more likely to have lied (37 percent versus six percent); nearly three times more likely to have gotten drunk (25 percent versus nine percent) and to have gossiped (26 percent versus ten percent); and twice as likely to have used pornography (33 percent versus 16 percent) and to have retaliated upon someone (12 percent versus five percent).

Barna noted that the results of his survey indicate the disturbing acceptance of a new moral code in America. By and large, those Americans under the age of 25 "have had little exposure to traditional moral teaching and limited accountability for such behavior. The moral code began to disintegrate when the generation before them … pushed the limits that had been challenged by their parents." The result, Barna pointed out, "is that without much fanfare or visible leadership, the U.S. has created a moral system based on convenience, feelings, and selfishness."

Barna concluded that as Americans have stepped away from the Judeo-Christian truths of Scripture as the ultimate guide for moral behavior, more and more individuals have based their moral choices on things like feelings and circumstances. "It is not likely that America will return to a more traditional moral code until the nation experiences significant pain from its moral choices," he wrote.

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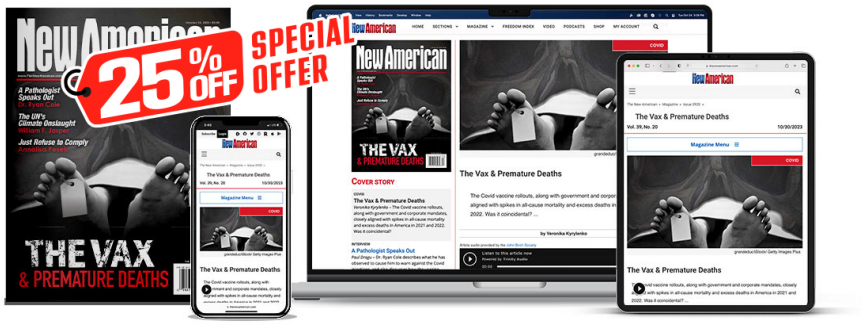

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