

Study reveals generation gap regarding views of moral behavior

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Most older Americans say right and wrong never change. Younger Americans—not so much, according to a new study.

The study by LifeWay Research found a significant generation gap in how Americans view morality. More than six in 10 of those older than 45 say right and wrong do not change. For those 35 and younger, fewer than four in 10 make that claim, according to the study.

That's a huge shift between generations, said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research. Older Americans grew up at a time when ideas about morality were more stable, he said, and that's no longer true for younger Americans.

"We are shifting very fast from a world where right and wrong didn't change to a world where right and wrong are relative," McConnell said. "We are not all on the same page when it comes to morality. And we haven't reckoned with what that means."

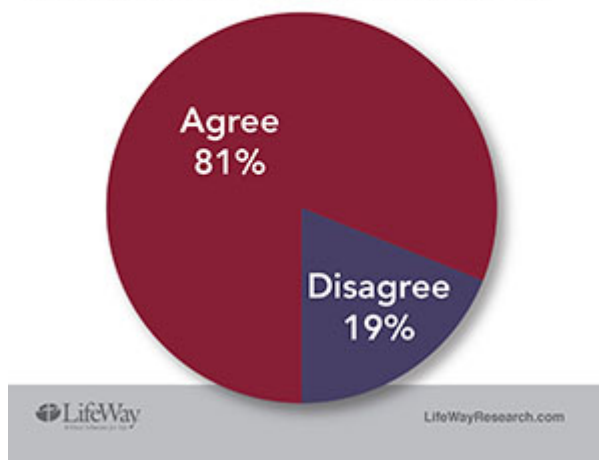
Most Americans concerned about moral decline

LifeWay Research's representative survey of 1,000 Americans found most worry moral behavior is on the decline.

Researchers found 81 percent of Americans agree with the statement, “I am concerned about declining moral behavior in our nation.” Nineteen percent disagree.

Among Americans:

I am concerned about declining moral behavior in our nation.



Worry about morals differs across demographic lines, but remains consistently high. Most Americans older than 65 (85 percent) are concerned about declining moral behavior, as are those 18 to 24 (71 percent.) Those with graduate degrees (72 percent) agree, as do those with a high school degree or less (85 percent).

So do Christians (85 percent), those of non-Christian faiths (70 percent) and nones, those with no religious affiliation (72 percent).

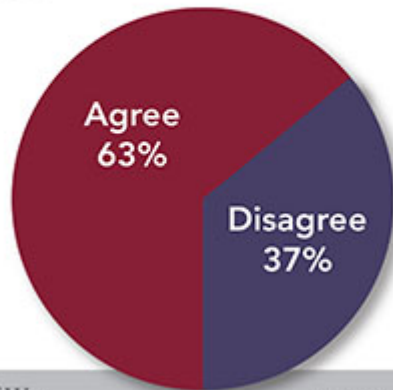
White Americans (82 percent), African-Americans (86 percent), Hispanic Americans (73 percent) and Americans of other ethnicities (75 percent) agree as well.

Can morality be legislated?

Yet Americans disagree over whether morality can be legislated.

Among Americans:

Implementing laws to encourage people to act morally is NOT effective.



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Almost two-thirds (63 percent) agree with the statement, “Implementing laws to encourage people to act morally is not effective.” Thirty-seven percent disagree.

On the other hand, fewer than half (44 percent) agree with the statement, “The fewer laws regulating moral standards, the better.” Fifty-six percent disagree. Men (49 percent) are more likely to agree than women (39 percent). Nones (55 percent) are more likely to agree than Christians (39 percent.)

Those who attend religious services less than once a month (48 percent) are more likely to agree than those who attend at least once a month (36 percent).

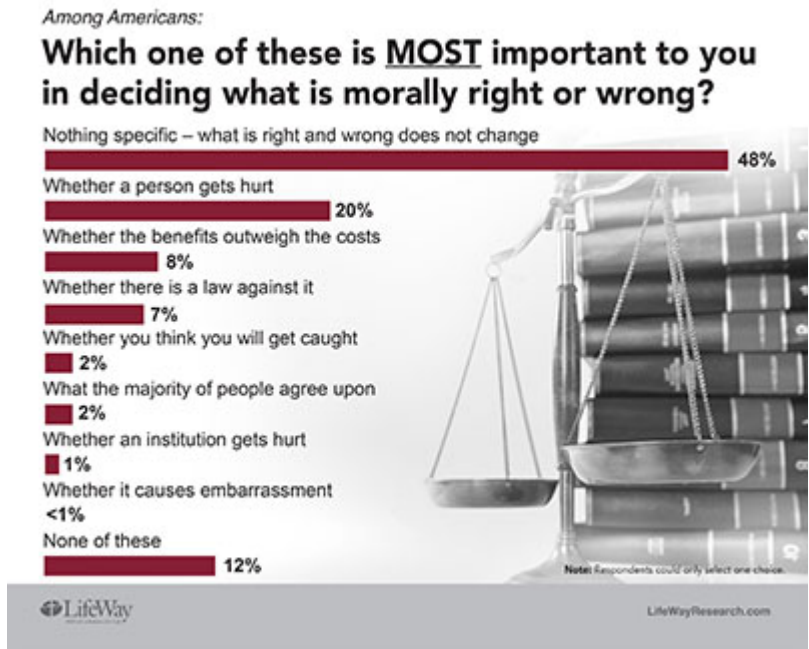
Half of Americans (51 percent) also think too many laws about moral standards have been removed. About half (49 percent) disagree. Those with evangelical beliefs (72 percent) are more likely to agree than Americans who don’t hold evangelical beliefs (46 percent). Christians (55 percent) are more likely to agree than those of other faiths (36 percent) or nones (42 percent).

How do Americans make moral judgments?

As part of the study, LifeWay Research also asked Americans how they

decide between right and wrong on a personal level.

Half (52 percent) say right and wrong never change. A third (32 percent) say whether or not someone gets hurt plays a role in determining if something is right or wrong. Americans also consider whether something is legal (24 percent) or whether the benefits outweigh the costs (20 percent) when thinking about morality. Fewer worry about what the majority of people think (8 percent) or whether an institution gets hurt (10 percent).



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Overall, according to the study, Americans seem guided more by their internal moral compass than by laws. Almost no one (4 percent) worries about getting caught when deciding between right and wrong.

Faith, geography, education and gender divide Americans when it comes to morals, the study shows.

That's especially true about the link between morality and preventing harm. Women (36 percent) are more likely than men (28 percent) to consider whether someone gets hurt when thinking about right and wrong. Midwesterners (37 percent) worry more about hurting others than Southerners (27 percent). So do those with a bachelor's degree (44 percent) or a graduate degree (38 percent), nones (44 percent) and those without evangelical beliefs (35 percent).

Those with a high school degree or less (26 percent), Christians (26 percent) and those with evangelical beliefs (16 percent) are less likely to consider whether someone gets hurt when looking at right and wrong.

LifeWay Research looked at the factors that shape the shared moral views Americans think society should hold.

Researchers asked the question two ways. First, they gave Americans a list of potential factors and asked them to select as many as applied. Among those influences: parents (64 percent), religious beliefs (50 percent), personal feelings (42 percent), friends (35 percent), teachers (26 percent) and media like books, movies and music (14 percent).

When asked which of those factors are most influential in shaping their moral views, Americans name their parents (39 percent), followed by their religious beliefs (26 percent) and their feelings (18 percent). Friends (4 percent), teachers (2 percent) and media (3 percent) are less influential.

Those with evangelical beliefs are most likely to point to their faith (64 percent), rather than their parents (22 percent). Those who attend religious services once or more a month also say faith (51 percent) has the biggest influence on their morals—as opposed to only 13 percent of those who attend less than once a month.

“For those with evangelical beliefs, the Bible is the ultimate authority,” McConnell said. “It trumps everything. So, it’s going to be the source for how they determine right from wrong.

“However, for Americans, there is no most influential source of morality embraced by a majority.”

LifeWay Research conducted the study Sept. 2–Oct. 1, 2016, using the Web-enabled KnowledgePanel, a probability-based pool designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen

scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. People in selected households then are invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the KnowledgePanel. For those who agree to participate but do not already have Internet access, the market research company provides at no cost a laptop and Internet connection.

Analysts use sample stratification and weights for gender, age, race/ethnicity, region, metro/non-metro, education and income to reflect the most recent U.S. Census data. The completed sample is 1,000 surveys, which provides 95 percent confidence the sampling error does not exceed plus or minus 3.1 percent. Margins of error are higher in subgroups.