

The Long Decline of Interpersonal Trust in America, 1972–2022

A Weighted Analysis of the General Social Survey Cumulative File, with an Educational Gradient in 2022

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Generalized Interpersonal Trust in America, 1972–2022

General Social Survey, weighted analysis

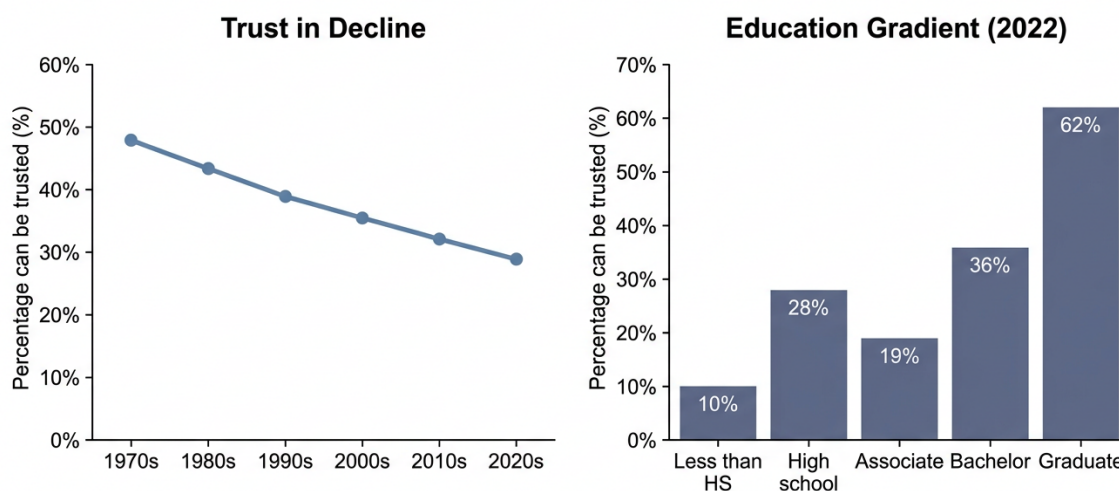


Figure 1: Graphical abstract. Generalized interpersonal trust in the United States, measured by the General Social Survey (GSS) item asking whether “most people can be trusted,” fell from roughly 48% in the early 1970s to under 30% by 2022 (left). In 2022, trust rose steeply with educational attainment, from about 10% among adults without a high-school credential to 62% among those holding a graduate degree (right). All estimates are weighted with the GSS person post-stratification weight (WTSSPS).

Executive Summary

Generalized interpersonal trust—the belief that “most people can be trusted” rather than that “you can’t be too careful”—is among the most widely used barometers of social cohesion and civic health in the social sciences. This report analyzes the full public trajectory of that indicator using the General Social Survey (GSS) 1972–2022 cumulative datafile (Release 3), the canonical repeated cross-section of the U.S. adult population. All estimates apply the GSS cumulative person post-stratification weight, WTSSPS, which is complete for every record in the file and is the weight NORC currently recommends for pooled analyses of the cumulative file.

The central finding is a sustained, statistically robust erosion of trust across half a century. On the primary indicator, which restricts attention to respondents choosing “can trust” or “cannot be too careful” and excludes the volunteered “depends” response from the denominator, the weighted share of Americans expressing generalized trust fell from 44.80 % in the 1970s to 28.70 % in the

2020s. A linear time trend fitted to the 29 survey years in which the item was fielded declines by 0.31 percentage points per year ($t = -7.98$, $p = 1.4 \times 10^{-8}$, $R^2 = 0.70$); an independent individual-level weighted regression with heteroskedasticity-robust (HC1) standard errors yields a nearly identical slope (-0.318 points/year, $p = 1.5 \times 10^{-53}$, $n = 40\,456.00$). An alternative coding that folds “depends” into the non-trusting category reproduces the same pattern, confirming that the decline is not an artifact of how the middle category is treated.

The second finding is a pronounced educational gradient in the most recent survey year. In 2022, weighted trust ranged from 9.59% among adults with less than a high-school education to 62.12% among those with a graduate degree—a spread of more than 52 percentage points across degree categories. The gradient is monotone at its extremes, though respondents holding an associate/junior-college credential (19.36%) fall below high-school graduates (28.16%), a modest non-linearity discussed below. Taken together, the results document both a broad secular decline in American social trust and a widening stratification of trust by education, patterns that align closely with five decades of sociological scholarship and carry meaningful implications for civic life, governance, and public health.

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1 Introduction and Background

Trust in strangers is the connective tissue of a large-scale society. When people believe that most others will deal with them fairly, they cooperate more readily with individuals outside their immediate circle, transact with lower monitoring costs, participate more fully in civic and political life, and support institutions whose benefits are diffuse and whose beneficiaries are anonymous. Since James

Coleman’s foundational treatment of social capital as a productive resource embedded in social relations [5] and Robert Putnam’s demonstration that dense networks of civic engagement undergird effective democratic government [29], generalized trust has occupied a central place in accounts of how societies achieve collective goods. Alejandro Portes’s synthesis of the social-capital tradition [25] and Peter Nannestad’s later review of the generalized-trust literature [22] both position the “most people can be trusted” question as the empirical workhorse of this research program.

The theoretical stakes are high because trust is thought to be simultaneously a cause and a consequence of well-functioning institutions. In the “moralistic” tradition associated with Eric Uslaner, generalized trust reflects an optimistic, egalitarian worldview learned early in life and sustained by a sense that society’s rewards are fairly distributed, rather than a running tally of one’s personal encounters [38, 39]. In the institutional tradition associated with Bo Rothstein and Dietlind Stolle, by contrast, trust in strangers is manufactured by impartial, uncorrupt public institutions that make it safe to extend the benefit of the doubt to people one has never met [32, 33]. Cross-national evidence lends support to both views: high-trust societies tend to combine wealth, income equality, ethnic homogeneity, and good government [3, 8], and fairness appears to matter more than homogeneity per se [41]. Whatever its ultimate source, trust is consequential. It is thought to enable the large-scale organizations and impersonal exchange on which modern prosperity depends [12], and it is empirically associated with stronger economic performance [18], greater support for democracy [42], and better population health and subjective well-being [16, 17].

Against this backdrop, Putnam’s “Bowling Alone” thesis—first advanced as a widely read essay [26] and later expanded into a book-length argument [27]—galvanized a generation of research by claiming that American social capital, including interpersonal trust, had been eroding since the mid-twentieth century. The claim was immediately contested. Pamela Paxton’s multiple-indicator assessment found decline in trust in individuals but not uniformly across every dimension of social capital [24], and Dora Costa and Matthew Kahn documented a broad but uneven weakening of civic engagement over the second half of the century [6]. Subsequent GSS-based work sharpened the picture: Jean Twenge and colleagues showed that both trust in others and confidence in institutions reached historic lows by the early 2010s [37], and age-period-cohort analyses—beginning with Robinson and Jackson [31] and revisited by Clark and Eisenstein [4] and by Schwadel and Stout [34]—attributed the long-run slide to a mixture of period effects and the replacement of older, more trusting cohorts by younger, less trusting ones. More recent panel evidence links the decline to lived economic experience and declining confidence in political institutions [21].

Two structural correlates of trust are especially germane to this report. The first is education. Schooling is one of the strongest and most consistent individual-level predictors of generalized trust, plausibly because it cultivates the cognitive skills needed to assess risk and information, sorts individuals into safer and higher-status social positions, and transmits civic and cooperative norms; the trust-forming role of socialization is well documented [14, 39]. The second is inequality. A large literature argues that economic inequality corrodes trust by weakening a shared sense of fate and signalling unfairness [2, 40], although the longitudinal U.S. evidence is genuinely mixed: some multilevel analyses find inequality effects [11] while others find little support once modeling choices are varied [15]. Contemporary accounts add political polarization [19], institutional trust [36], and ethnoracial diversity [1, 10, 28] to the roster of candidate drivers.

This report contributes a clean, transparent, and fully reproducible description of the two facts that any explanatory account must confront: the magnitude and shape of the long-run trend in the GSS trust item from 1972 through 2022, and the steepness of the educational gradient in the most recent survey year. We deliberately restrict ourselves to descriptive and simple regression evidence, applying the appropriate cumulative sampling weight and documenting every coding decision, so that the estimates can serve as a reliable empirical anchor for the richer causal debates summarized

above.

2 Data and Methods

2.1 Data source

The analysis uses the General Social Survey 1972–2022 cumulative datafile, Release 3, distributed by NORC at the University of Chicago [7]. The GSS is a nationally representative, repeated cross-sectional survey of non-institutionalized English- and Spanish-speaking adults (aged 18 and older) residing in U.S. households; it has been the principal source of long-run social indicators for the United States since 1972 [35]. The Stata distribution of the cumulative file (`gss7224_r3.dta`) was obtained directly from the official NORC repository, its archive integrity verified by SHA-256 checksum, and its variables and value labels read with the `pyreadstat` library (using `latin1` encoding to accommodate the non-UTF-8 labels in the source file). The distributed file spans 1972–2024 (75 699.00 records); we restricted the analytic file to survey years 1972–2022 as specified, yielding 72 390.00 records across 34 distinct survey years. The three years after 2018 that appear in the file are 2021 and 2022; the 2021 GSS did not field the trust item, and years such as 1979, 1981, 1992, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2020 are simply not GSS survey years or are absent from the cumulative file.

2.2 Variables

Three substantive variables and one weight variable are used, named here in the lower-case convention of the cumulative file.

Trust (TRUST). The generalized-trust item reads: *“Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”* The cumulative file codes responses as 1 = `most people can be trusted`, 2 = `can’t be too careful`, and 3 = `depends` (a volunteered category), alongside a set of non-substantive missing codes (`don’t know`, `no answer`, `refused`, `inapplicable/not-asked`, `skipped-on-web`, etc.). Across 1972–2022 the valid substantive responses number 15 687.00 “can trust,” 24 769.00 “cannot be too careful,” and 2000.00 “depends,” with 29 934.00 records carrying missing or not-asked codes because the item rotates across ballots and was not fielded every year.

Educational attainment (DEGREE). The highest degree earned is coded 0 = `less than high school`, 1 = `high school`, 2 = `associate/junior college`, 3 = `bachelor’s`, and 4 = `graduate`. This five-category variable was mapped to ordered labels and treated as an ordered categorical factor. Only 196.00 of the 72 390.00 records (0.27%) carry a missing degree code.

Survey year (YEAR). The calendar year of interview, used both as the grouping variable for decadal and annual estimates and as the continuous predictor in the time-trend regressions.

Weight (WTSSPS). A note on weight selection is warranted because the plan anticipated a possible `WTSSCOMP` variable. The composite weight `WTSSCOMP` used in some earlier GSS releases is *not present* in the 1972–2024 Release 3 cumulative file. NORC now distributes post-stratification weights in its place [23]. We audited every weight-like variable in the file and selected `WTSSPS`, the *person-level post-stratification weight*, as the cumulative analysis weight. `WTSSPS` is the currently

recommended cumulative weight: it is populated for all 75 699.00 records (zero missing, zero non-positive; mean ≈ 1.00 , range 0.074–14.27), it rakes the sample to Census population control totals, and it internalizes the historical corrections (for sub-sampling of non-respondents, the 2004 Spanish-language expansion, ballot/form assignment, and Black over-samples) that older analyses had to apply by hand. The legacy weight WTSSALL, by contrast, is missing for 7576.00 records within the 1972–2022 window and is retained by NORC mainly for comparability with older work. WTSSPS is therefore the appropriate “cumulative weight such as WTSSALL/WTSSPS” called for in the analysis brief.

2.3 Handling of the “depends” and missing categories

The volunteered “depends” response and the treatment of missing data require explicit decisions, because both bear on the denominator of the trust percentage. We adopt a dual-indicator strategy so that no single coding choice drives the conclusions.

The **primary indicator** (`trust_binary`) codes “most people can be trusted” as 1 and “can’t be too careful” as 0, and *excludes* “depends” from the analysis (set to missing, and hence dropped from the denominator). This mirrors the conventional treatment of the GSS item as a binary contrast between trust and caution and yields 40 456.00 valid observations over 1972–2022.

The **alternative indicator** (`trust_with_depends`) codes “most people can be trusted” as 1 and codes *both* “can’t be too careful” and “depends” as 0, on the interpretation that a respondent who will not commit to trusting most people is, for the purposes of generalized trust, not expressing trust. This indicator retains the 2000.00 “depends” responses in the denominator and yields 42 456.00 valid observations. Reporting both indicators throughout brackets the sensitivity of every estimate to the “depends” decision; because the “depends” share is small (about 4.7% of substantive responses), the two series differ by only 1.5–2.5 percentage points and move in lockstep.

All other missing values—non-substantive trust codes, the 196.00 missing degree codes, and any record lacking the analysis weight (none, for WTSSPS)—are handled by **listwise deletion**: a record contributes to a given statistic only if it has valid values on all variables that statistic requires. No imputation is performed. Survey years in which the trust item was not fielded (1974, 1977, 1982, 1985, and 2021) therefore contribute no trust estimate and appear as blank cells in the per-year table.

2.4 Estimation

All percentages are weighted by WTSSPS. For a binary trust indicator $y_i \in \{0, 1\}$ with weights w_i , the weighted percentage in any subgroup S is

$$\hat{P}_S = 100 \times \frac{\sum_{i \in S} w_i y_i}{\sum_{i \in S} w_i},$$

computed over records with non-missing y_i . Decadal estimates pool all survey years falling within each calendar decade (the 2020s bin contains only 2020–2022, and in practice only 2022 for the primary indicator). Annual estimates are computed year by year. The 2022 educational breakdown applies the same weighted-percentage formula within each of the five DEGREE categories, restricted to the 2022 survey.

The linear time trend is estimated two independent ways to guard against artifacts of aggregation.

1. **Aggregate-level OLS.** We regress the annual weighted trust percentage on survey year across the 29 years with valid data, $\hat{P}_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{year}_t + \varepsilon_t$. The slope β_1 is the average change in percentage points per calendar year.

2. **Individual-level weighted OLS.** We regress the individual binary trust indicator on survey year across all valid respondents using weighted least squares with WTSSPS. Following standard practice for probability weights, the weights are normalized to sum to the non-missing sub-population size, and heteroskedasticity-consistent (HC1) robust standard errors are reported, because survey weights do not satisfy the inverse-variance assumption of textbook WLS and using raw weights as if they were frequency weights would spuriously deflate standard errors. The slope is reported in probability points per year and multiplied by 100 for comparability with the aggregate model.

Analyses were conducted in Python with `pandas`, `numpy`, `statsmodels`, and `matplotlib`; the random seed was fixed for reproducibility, and the complete analysis script is distributed with this report (see Section 6).

3 Results

3.1 Decadal trends

Table 1 reports the weighted percentage answering “most people can be trusted” by calendar decade, for both indicators. The decline is steady and cumulative. On the primary indicator, trust stood at 44.80 % in the 1970s and 43.23 % in the 1980s—broadly stable through the Reagan era—before falling to 36.88 % in the 1990s, 35.75 % in the 2000s, 33.38 % in the 2010s, and 28.70 % in the 2020s. The net movement is a loss of roughly 16 percentage points, or about 36% of the original level, over five decades. The alternative indicator that counts “depends” as non-trusting is uniformly 1.5–2.5 points lower but traces the identical downward path, confirming that the trend does not depend on the treatment of the middle category. The sharpest single-decade drop occurs between the 1980s and the 1990s, consistent with the period in which the “Bowling Alone” debate crystallized [24, 26].

Table 1: Weighted percentage answering “most people can be trusted,” by decade, GSS 1972–2022. Estimates weighted by WTSSPS. “Primary” excludes “depends” from the denominator; “Alternative” codes “depends” as non-trusting. n is the unweighted number of valid responses on the primary indicator.

Decade	Primary (%)	Alternative (%)	Unweighted n
1970s (1972–1979)	44.80	43.07	7311.00
1980s (1980–1989)	43.23	41.64	8702.00
1990s (1990–1999)	36.88	35.11	8764.00
2000s (2000–2009)	35.75	33.40	7058.00
2010s (2010–2019)	33.38	31.82	7524.00
2020s (2020–2022)	28.70	26.17	1097.00

3.2 Annual trend and fitted time trend

Figure 2 plots the annual weighted trust percentage for every survey year in which the item was fielded, together with the fitted ordinary-least-squares trend line and its 95% confidence band for each indicator. The annual series exhibits year-to-year sampling variability—1984, for instance, is a visible high-trust outlier at 50.58 % on the primary indicator—but the secular downward drift is unmistakable and highly linear, as the shaded confidence bands make clear.

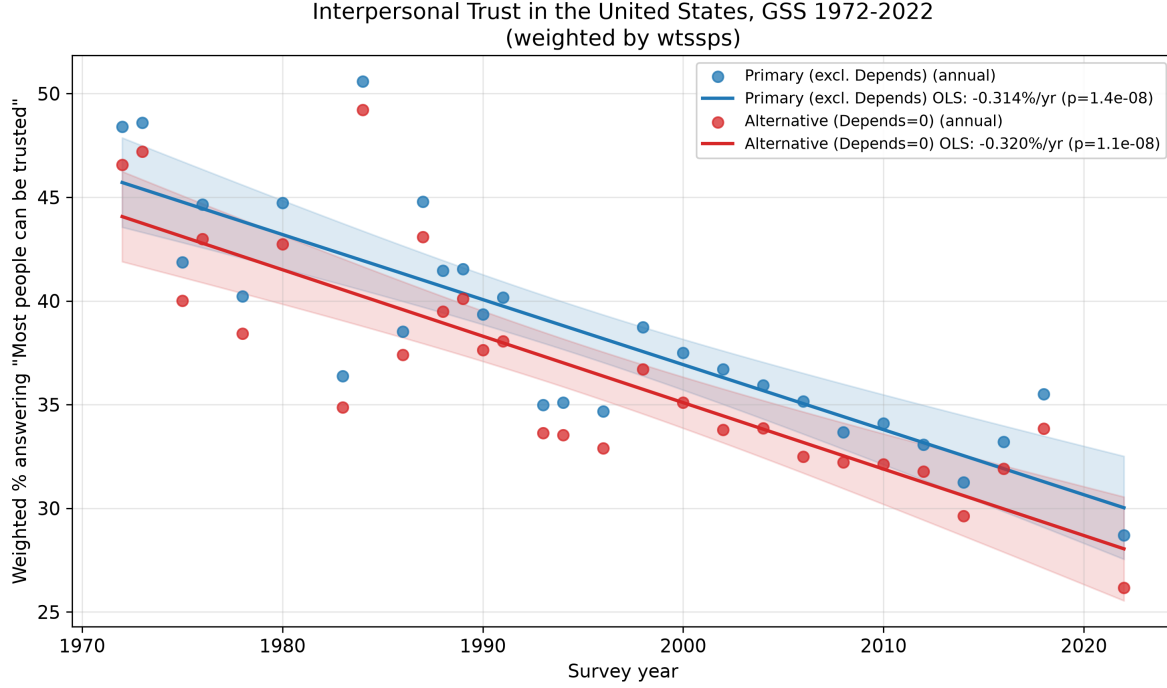


Figure 2: Interpersonal trust in the United States, GSS 1972–2022. Points are annual weighted percentages answering “most people can be trusted”; lines are ordinary-least-squares fits with 95% confidence bands. Blue: primary indicator (“depends” excluded); red: alternative indicator (“depends” coded as non-trusting). Both series decline by approximately 0.31–0.32 percentage points per year. Weighted by WTSSPS.

The fitted trends are summarized in Table 2. The aggregate-level model, in which the 29 annual weighted percentages are regressed on survey year, yields a slope of -0.314 percentage points per year for the primary indicator (standard error 0.039; $t = -7.98$; $p = 1.4 \times 10^{-8}$), explaining 70% of the between-year variance ($R^2 = 0.70$). The alternative indicator gives an almost identical slope of -0.320 points per year ($p = 1.1 \times 10^{-8}$, $R^2 = 0.71$). Over the 50-year span, a slope of -0.314 points/year implies a modelled decline of roughly 15.7 percentage points, closely matching the observed decadal movement in Table 1.

The individual-level weighted regression, estimated over all 40 456.00 valid respondents with HC1 robust standard errors, corroborates the aggregate result with far greater precision: the slope is -0.318 percentage points per year (robust $t = -15.4$; $p = 1.5 \times 10^{-53}$) for the primary indicator and -0.324 points per year ($p = 2.6 \times 10^{-59}$, $n = 42\,456.00$) for the alternative. The near-perfect agreement between an aggregate model that gives each survey year equal weight and an individual model that gives each (weighted) respondent equal weight indicates that the estimated decline is not driven by a handful of unusually large survey years or by the changing sample sizes across the series. The very small R^2 of the individual-level model (below 0.01) is expected and not concerning: calendar year explains little of the person-to-person variance in a binary attitude, yet the central tendency of that attitude shifts downward with great regularity, which is precisely what the trend coefficient captures.

Table 2: Linear time-trend estimates for the weighted trust percentage, GSS 1972–2022. Slopes are in percentage points per year. Aggregate-level OLS regresses annual weighted percentages on year ($n = 29$ survey years); individual-level weighted OLS regresses the individual trust indicator on year with WTSSPS weights (normalized to the subpopulation size) and HC1 robust standard errors.

Model	Indicator	Slope	Std. error	t	p -value	n
Aggregate OLS	Primary	−0.314	0.039	−7.98	1.4×10^{-8}	29
Aggregate OLS	Alternative	−0.320	0.040	−8.09	1.1×10^{-8}	29
Individual WLS (HC1)	Primary	−0.318	0.021	−15.41	1.5×10^{-53}	40 456.00
Individual WLS (HC1)	Alternative	−0.324	0.020	−16.24	2.6×10^{-59}	42 456.00

For the individual-level models the standard error is reported on the same percentage-point scale as the slope (i.e., the probability-scale robust standard error multiplied by 100), so that all four rows of Table 2 are directly comparable. Whichever model and indicator one prefers, the conclusion is the same: American generalized trust has declined by about one-third of a percentage point per year, every year, for fifty years, and the probability that this reflects mere sampling noise is vanishingly small.

3.3 The 2022 educational gradient

The relationship between educational attainment and trust in the most recent survey year is displayed in Figure 3 and tabulated in Table 3. The gradient is steep. On the primary indicator, weighted trust rises from 9.59 % among adults with less than a high-school education, to 28.16 % among high-school graduates, to 36.21 % among holders of a bachelor’s degree, and to 62.12 % among those with a graduate degree. The distance between the least- and most-educated groups—more than 52 percentage points—exceeds the entire fifty-year secular decline documented above, underscoring how powerfully education stratifies trust at a single point in time. The overall weighted trust level in 2022 was 28.70 % (primary), so that only the two highest degree categories sit above the national average while the three lower categories sit below it.

Table 3: Weighted percentage answering “most people can be trusted” by educational attainment, GSS 2022. Estimates weighted by WTSSPS. n is the unweighted number of valid responses on the primary indicator. Overall weighted 2022 trust: 28.70% (primary), 26.17% (alternative).

Highest degree	Primary (%)	Alternative (%)	Unweighted n
Less than high school	9.59	9.35	155
High school	28.16	25.77	542
Associate/Junior college	19.36	16.98	89
Bachelor’s	36.21	32.22	183
Graduate	62.12	53.51	128

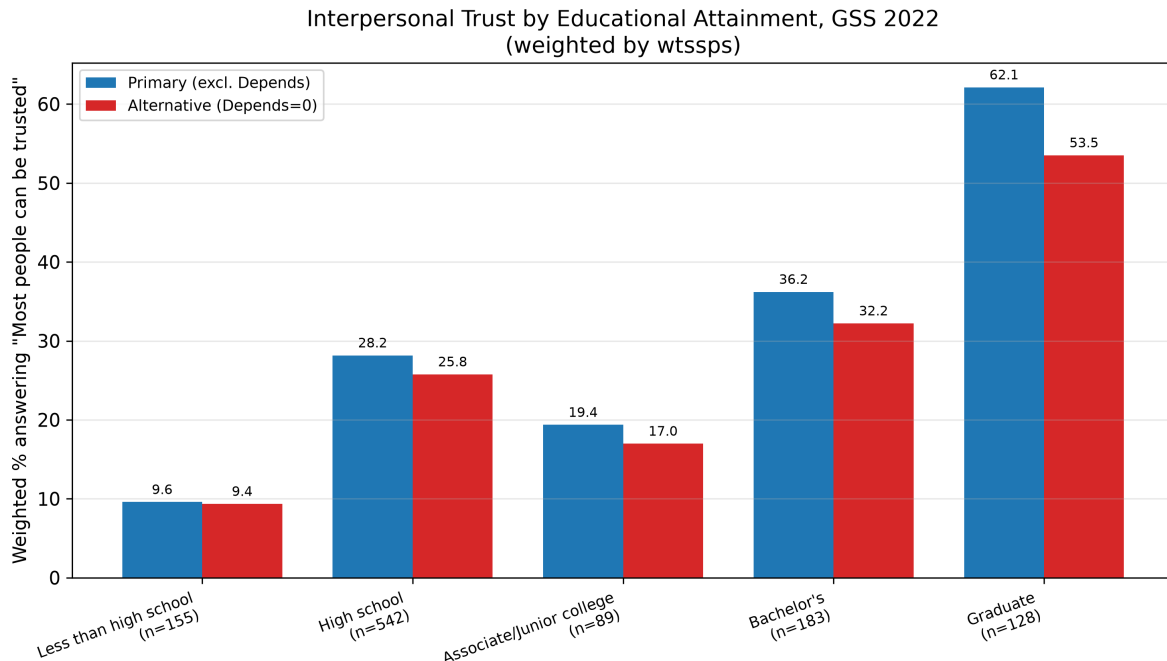


Figure 3: Interpersonal trust by educational attainment, GSS 2022. Weighted percentage answering “most people can be trusted” within each degree category. Blue: primary indicator (“depends” excluded); red: alternative indicator (“depends” coded as non-trusting). Unweighted category sample sizes are shown on the horizontal axis. Weighted by WTSSPS.

One departure from strict monotonicity deserves comment. Adults whose highest credential is an associate or junior-college degree report lower trust (19.36 %) than high-school graduates (28.16 %), producing a small dip in an otherwise ascending gradient. This category is the smallest of the five ($n = 89$ valid primary responses), so its estimate carries the widest sampling uncertainty; the same non-monotonicity is faintly visible in the alternative indicator. It may also reflect genuine compositional features of the sub-baccalaureate credential population. Because the present analysis is descriptive, we flag the pattern rather than over-interpret it; the dominant and statistically unambiguous feature of Figure 3 is the strong positive association between education and trust at its endpoints, with graduate-degree holders roughly six-and-a-half times as likely as adults without a high-school credential to say that most people can be trusted.

4 Discussion

The two findings of this report—a half-century decline in generalized trust and a steep 2022 educational gradient—are mutually reinforcing and consonant with a large body of sociological scholarship. The secular decline replicates, on the full 1972–2022 cumulative file and with the current post-stratification weight, the trajectory that Twenge and colleagues traced through 2012 [37] and that the age–period–cohort literature has repeatedly documented [4, 31, 34]. That this decline is recovered almost identically by two independent estimation strategies, and is invariant to the treatment of the “depends” category, gives us considerable confidence that it is a real feature of American public opinion rather than an artifact of weighting, aggregation, or coding.

The interpretation of the decline remains genuinely contested, and our descriptive results cannot adjudicate among the competing accounts—but they do constrain them. The age–period–cohort

tradition attributes much of the long-run slide to cohort replacement, as more trusting Americans born early in the twentieth century are succeeded by less trusting Americans socialized in more skeptical eras [4, 31]. Period-based accounts emphasize contemporaneous shocks to the social and institutional environment; the recent panel study by Mewes and colleagues attributes roughly half of the decline to unemployment scarring and eroding confidence in political institutions [21], and institutional-trust dynamics have been shown to shape social trust directly [36]. The rise of affective political polarization offers a further, more recent mechanism: when Americans perceive their compatriots as politically distant and hostile, their willingness to extend generalized trust falls [19]. The inequality thesis—that the widening income distribution of the past half-century has corroded the shared sense of fate on which trust depends [2, 40]—remains theoretically attractive but empirically unsettled, with supportive multilevel evidence [11] counterbalanced by null longitudinal findings [15]. The balance of evidence suggests that no single mechanism suffices and that cohort replacement, institutional performance, economic insecurity, and polarization operate jointly.

The educational gradient speaks directly to these mechanisms. Education is theorized to build trust through several channels: it sharpens the cognitive capacity to evaluate strangers and information, it sorts individuals into safer neighborhoods and more secure occupations, and it socializes cooperative and civic dispositions [14, 25, 39]. A more than fifty-point spread between the least- and most-educated Americans in 2022 is consistent with all three channels operating together. It also intersects with the inequality thesis in a troubling way: if trust is increasingly concentrated among the highly educated and economically secure, then the secular decline in average trust may partly reflect the growing social distance between educational strata. The educational gradient in trust is, in this light, both a cross-sectional fact and a plausible ingredient of the longitudinal decline.

The stakes of a low-trust equilibrium are not merely academic. Generalized trust underwrites economic exchange and growth [18], sustains support for democratic institutions [42], and is associated with better population health and higher subjective well-being [16, 17]. A society in which fewer than three adults in ten believe that most people can be trusted, and in which that belief is increasingly the preserve of the credentialed, faces real headwinds in solving collective problems that require cooperation among strangers—from public-health compliance to the maintenance of civic institutions. At the same time, the comparative literature offers a note of qualified optimism: because trust is substantially a product of fair and impartial institutions and of the fairness of the income distribution [32, 33, 41], it is in principle amenable to policy, and the cross-national record shows that high-trust equilibria are attainable rather than culturally fixed [3, 8].

5 Limitations

Several limitations qualify these results. First, the analysis is descriptive: it documents associations and a temporal trend but does not identify causal effects, and the observed education–trust gradient may partly reflect selection (more trusting individuals may pursue more schooling) rather than a causal effect of education. Second, missing data are handled by listwise deletion. Because the GSS trust item rotates across ballots and was not fielded in every year, only 29 of the 34 survey years in the 1972–2022 window contribute a trust estimate, and the years 1974, 1977, 1982, 1985, and 2021 are necessarily absent from the trend; if the item’s presence or absence were correlated with the underlying trust level, this could in principle bias the trend, though there is no obvious reason to expect such a correlation. The 196.00 records with missing degree codes (0.27%) are likewise dropped from the educational analysis. Third, our weighted regressions use HC1 robust standard errors and weights normalized to the subpopulation size; this correctly avoids the spuriously small

standard errors that would result from treating probability weights as frequency weights, but it does not incorporate the full GSS complex-sample design (clustering within primary sampling units and stratification). Design-based standard errors that account for clustering would likely be modestly larger than those reported here, though given the extremely small p -values this would not alter any substantive conclusion.

Fourth, the analysis inherits the well-known measurement limitations of the single-item GSS trust question. Methodological research shows that the dichotomous “most people can be trusted” format is coarser and psychometrically weaker than multi-item or multi-point alternatives [13, 20, 30], and that the referent of “most people” may itself vary across respondents and contexts—the “radius of trust” problem [9]. Apparent changes in trust could in part reflect drift in how respondents interpret the question rather than change in an underlying disposition. We mitigate, but cannot eliminate, sensitivity to the “depends” category by reporting two indicators; the small size of that category (4.7% of substantive responses) and the near-identical behavior of the two series limit this concern in practice. Finally, the 2020s decade estimate rests on comparatively few years and, for 2022, on a single survey administered in the unusual post-pandemic period, when survey mode changes may have affected comparability; the 2022 estimates should therefore be read as the most recent reliable reading rather than as a settled new plateau. None of these caveats disturbs the central, robustly estimated conclusions: trust has declined substantially and steadily since 1972, and it rises sharply with education.

6 Data and Code Availability

The analysis is fully reproducible. The input is the public GSS 1972–2022 cumulative datafile (Release 3), `gss7224_r3.dta`, obtainable from NORC [7]. The complete analysis script (`analyze_gss_trust.py`) reads the preprocessed data, applies the WTSSPS weights, constructs both trust indicators, and regenerates every table, figure, and statistic in this report. The per-year weighted-trust table is distributed as a CSV file (`gss_trust_trends.csv`); the decadal and educational breakdowns are distributed as `gss_trust_decadal.csv` and `gss_trust_education_2022.csv`; and a machine-readable summary of all estimates is provided in `analysis_summary.json`. Computations used Python 3.12 with `pandas`, `numpy`, `statsmodels`, `pyreadstat`, and `matplotlib`, with a fixed random seed. The full per-year weighted-trust table is reproduced for convenience in Appendix A.

A Per-Year Weighted-Trust Table

Table 4 reports, for every survey year in the 1972–2022 cumulative file, the unweighted number of respondents, the unweighted number of valid trust responses on each indicator, and the weighted percentage answering “most people can be trusted” on each indicator. Blank cells in the percentage columns denote survey years in which the trust item was not fielded (1974, 1977, 1982, 1985, 2021); these years contribute records to the file (and thus to the “Total n ” column) but no trust estimate.

Table 4: Annual weighted percentage answering “most people can be trusted,” GSS 1972–2022. Weighted by WTSSPS. “Primary” excludes “depends”; “Alternative” codes “depends” as non-trusting. Dashes indicate years the item was not fielded.

Year	Total n	n (prim.)	n (alt.)	Primary (%)	Alt. (%)
1972	1613.00	1541.00	1597.00	48.40	46.57

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Year	Total n	n (prim.)	n (alt.)	Primary (%)	Alt. (%)
1973	1504.00	1455.00	1499.00	48.60	47.21
1974	1484.00	0	0	—	—
1975	1490.00	1414.00	1478.00	41.87	40.00
1976	1499.00	1439.00	1495.00	44.65	42.98
1977	1530.00	0	0	—	—
1978	1532.00	1462.00	1528.00	40.22	38.42
1980	1468.00	1406.00	1461.00	44.72	42.74
1982	1860.00	0	0	—	—
1983	1599.00	765	800	36.38	34.86
1984	1473.00	1424.00	1461.00	50.58	49.22
1985	1534.00	0	0	—	—
1986	1470.00	1427.00	1466.00	38.52	37.40
1987	1819.00	1742.00	1808.00	44.78	43.09
1988	1481.00	947	990	41.46	39.48
1989	1537.00	991	1030.00	41.54	40.11
1990	1372.00	859	898	39.35	37.63
1991	1517.00	963	1013.00	40.16	38.05
1993	1606.00	1007.00	1052.00	34.98	33.63
1994	2992.00	1910.00	1995.00	35.10	33.53
1996	2904.00	1816.00	1915.00	34.67	32.89
1998	2832.00	2209.00	2346.00	38.73	36.70
2000	2817.00	1755.00	1879.00	37.51	35.09
2002	2765.00	838	910	36.71	33.78
2004	2812.00	821	875	35.93	33.86
2006	4510.00	2335.00	2509.00	35.16	32.49
2008	2023.00	1309.00	1365.00	33.67	32.22
2010	2044.00	1297.00	1372.00	34.09	32.12
2012	1974.00	1278.00	1331.00	33.07	31.77
2014	2538.00	1595.00	1683.00	31.26	29.62
2016	2867.00	1867.00	1946.00	33.21	31.91
2018	2348.00	1487.00	1556.00	35.51	33.85
2021	4032.00	0	0	—	—
2022	3544.00	1097.00	1198.00	28.70	26.17

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