

# What's it like to be an average American?

Chicago Tribune · 22 Nov 2023 · By Sheldon H. Jacobson Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D., is a founder professor in computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He applies his expertise in data-driven, riskbased decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy and pu

One of the best ways to get a picture of a nation is through its numbers and, perhaps more importantly, its averages.



But Americans like to believe that their nation is exceptional. And in some ways, it is. Yet what transpires on an “average day” for the “average person” tells a story that each of us should listen to.

Americans love their cars. In fact, we drive an average of 32 miles every day, which translates into about one hour per day behind the wheel. Some of that time can be dangerous. More than 14,000 automobile accidents occur each day, with more than 4,000 causing injuries; just under 100 result in one or more fatalities. Taking the time to buckle up has reduced this last number to current levels.

Americans spend even more time in front of the television. The average American adult spends nearly three hours per day watching television. Yet when it comes to time spent doing things, the winner is smartphone time, which exceeds three hours per day. In fact, the average person checks their phone 58 times every day, or around once every 17 minutes they are not sleeping.

Americans love to eat and drink.

In 2011, the average American ate around 1 ton of food per year, or around 5.5 pounds per day. A decade later, that number is likely even higher. The average American adult consumed more than 700 alcoholic beverages each year, or almost two per day (as of 2017). Given that 60% of adults do not engage in the recommended level of activity, the net effect is more people struggling to maintain healthy weights.

The summer travel season was busy, with airports and airplanes packed. This holiday travel season is likely to set new records.

Last year, on average, a little more than 2 million people were screened at airport security checkpoints each day, with this year's numbers even higher so far. There are around 87,000 flights on average scheduled per day, with around 30,000 of them commercial flights. There may be as many as 5,000 airplanes in the air over the United States at any one time, keeping air traffic control operations busy to ensure that every traveler is kept safe.

How about population growth and decline?

On an average day, 10,000 babies are born, and 9,500 people die (as of 2021). The death number was pushed higher by COVID-19, with more than 1.1 million deaths attributed to the virus since February 2020. To put this into perspective, a bit more than 7,800 people died on average each day in 2019. The bump in deaths during the pandemic is a significant factor in why life expectancy in the United States has dropped over the past two years.

Immigration has been in the news this year, given that Title 42 expired.

In 2021, an average of a little more than 4,000 people immigrated to the United States each day. This was down from a peak of a little more than 7,400 people in 2016. Data on annual emigration is harder to track, though as many as 9 million Americans live abroad, more than double the amount from 1999.

Government spending and fiscal management are out of control. The federal government spent on average a little more than \$17 billion each day last year, while taking in on average a little more than \$13 billion each day. It does not take a degree in advanced economics to know that such an imbalance is unsustainable, and it explains why debt ceiling debates keep happening. It also explains why Fitch lowered the nation's default rating from AAA to AA+.

A week does not go by without the media reporting yet another mass shooting, defined as four or more people shot, excluding the shooter. In an average week in 2021, the deadliest year on record for firearm deaths, there were about 13 mass shootings each day, resulting in about 13 people killed and 54 people wounded. These numbers are dwarfed by the 123 people on average killed by firearms each day, with 66 deaths on average each day classified as suicides.

The data on drug overdose deaths is even worse, with an average of 294 deaths per day in 2021 and 289 deaths per day last year. The common denominator across all these deaths is that they are avoidable. We must develop effective policies or interventions to reduce such deaths. The list of daily averages is nearly unending. Everyone has their pet statistic by which they like to measure themselves or anchor their beliefs.

What is indisputable is that with a population of 335 million people, no one person is average, and no one day is average. Every person, and every day, offers their own unique opportunities. Using the weather to illustrate this point, If there is a 10% chance of rain, then most people will stay dry. Yet given enough such days, and a large enough area of land over which the weather forecast is made, someone may eventually find themselves wet.

So the next time you get into your car, turn on the television, look at your phone or take an airplane, know that you are contributing to what defines an average, even if you are anything but average.