

Denise Bellows, PhD, Senior Director of Insight Region®
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what is social trust?

Though the constructs that define trust have been examined since the 1940s, there is still disagreement among experts about how to define social trust, and how it should be measured.¹ In the literature, social trust is often defined as an expectation about the general cooperativeness and helpfulness of individuals and organizations. Relational trust (i.e., the trust between two individuals) is also thought to impact social trust.² One of the more commonly accepted definitions of social trust is:

Social Trust is a faith in people. It is a belief in the honesty, integrity, and reliability of others outside of your close family or friends.³

a national measure of social trust: the general social survey

The General Social Survey (GSS) is a project of the independent research organization NORC at the University of Chicago, with principal funding from the National Science Foundation. The GSS is a nationally representative, cross-sectional interview survey of the U.S. adult household population. Since 1972, the GSS has included three core questions pertaining to trust, which are asked every other year, most recently in 2022. These questions are:



Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try and be fair?

Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?



Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?



WHY social trust matters

Studies have repeatedly found a causal relationship between trust, economic growth and better public institutions.⁴

Declining optimism and growing economic inequality account for the well-documented decline in generalized trust in the United States over the past 50 years.^{3, 5, 6, 7, 8}

Americans' belief that most people can be trusted declined 23 percentage points between 1984 and 2022. The Virginia Trust Index reached a 7-year low in May 2023.

Exhibit 1 shows trends in the three trust questions from 1972 through 2022. Based on these data, we can see that trust has declined over the past 50 years, specifically:

- **Fairness:** Belief that others will be *fair* peaked at 65 percent in 1978, declined to 53 percent in 2016 (i.e., down 12 percentage points over 38 years) and then had a sharp decline to 44 percent in 2022 (down 9 percentage points in only 6 years).
- **Helpfulness:** Belief that others will try to be *helpful* fell 18 percentage points over 44 years. It peaked at 60 percent in 1978 and continues to trend downward, reaching lows of 44 percent in 1987, 1996, 2006, and an all-time low of 42 percent in 2022.
- **Trust:** Belief that most people can be *trusted* has historically been lower than the measures of fairness and helpfulness; however, this measure has also declined in recent years. After a peak at 48 percent in 1984, belief that most people can be trusted fell 23 percentage points to 25 percent in 2022.

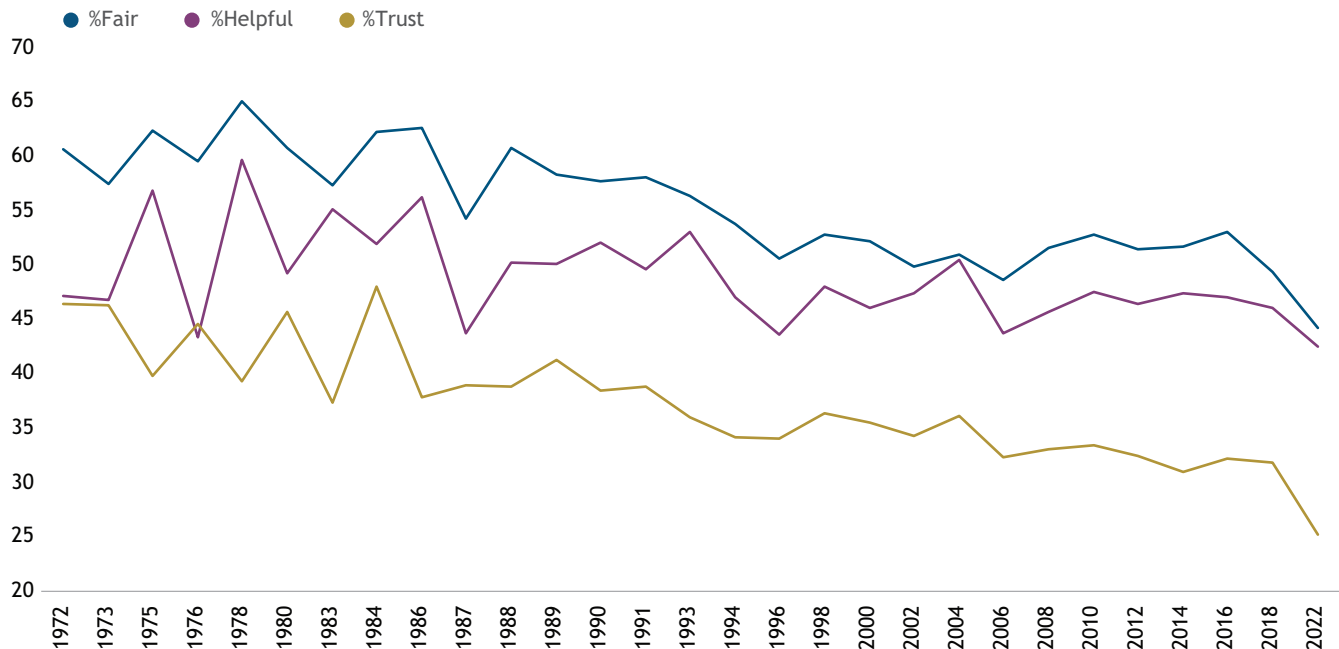
While these GSS data have many strengths (i.e., nationally representative, collected over 50 years, includes representation from Spanish-speaking populations), analysis of data at the city or neighborhood level is limited. Fortunately, for the past 7 years the Virginia Trust Index has been asking Virginians these same GSS questions about trust.

measuring social trust in the commonwealth: the virginia trust index

The Virginia Trust Index, by the Institute for Policy and Opinion Research (IPOR) at Roanoke College, is an ongoing, quarterly telephone and web-based survey which started February 2017.¹⁰ The survey asks the three core GSS questions about trust, which are combined to create the index.¹ The Virginia Trust Index shows that trust in the commonwealth peaked between February 2020 and May 2021, then began to decline through the middle of 2021, reaching an all-time low in May 2023.¹⁰

Exhibit 1.

National trends in trust, according to GSS data, 1972-2022



Source: Insight Region® analysis of the General Social Survey, 2024

Note: From 1972 through 1994, the GSS was conducted almost annually. Since 1994, the GSS has been conducted in even numbered years. Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the trust questions were not asked in 2020.

TRUST in Northern Virginia

Insight Region® at the Community Foundation for Northern Virginia obtained raw data from the Virginia Trust Index to analyze these data for Northern Virginia.ⁱⁱ

FAIRNESS: BELIEF THAT MOST PEOPLE WOULD BE FAIR VERSUS TRY TO TAKE ADVANTAGE

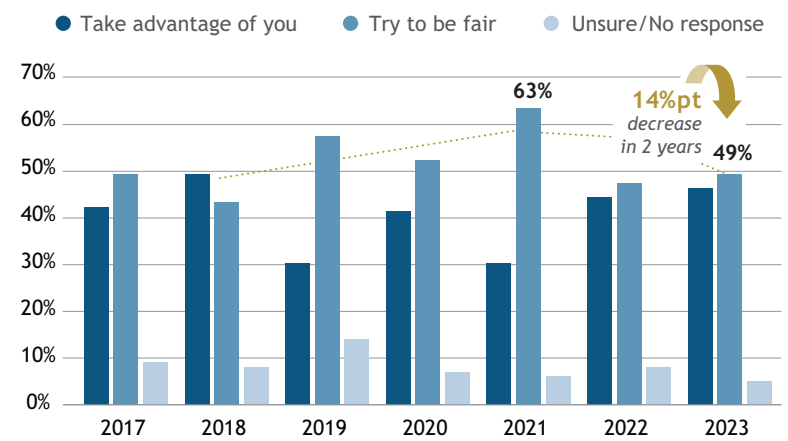
Exhibit 2 shows how Northern Virginians responded to the question, “Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance, or would they try to be fair?”

- Northern Virginians’ belief that others would be fair increased 13 percentage points from 2017 to 2021.
- However, this belief in the fairness of others declined 14 percentage points in only the past 2 years (i.e., from 63 percent in 2021 to 49 percent in 2023).

Belief that others will try to be fair declined 14 percentage points in the past 2 years.

Exhibit 2.

Northern Virginians’ belief that most people will be fair



Source: Insight Region® analysis of the Virginia Trust Index data, Roanoke College Institute for Policy and Opinion Research and Alice Louise Kassens (Roanoke College, Economics).

HELPFULNESS: BELIEF THAT MOST PEOPLE WOULD TRY TO BE HELPFUL

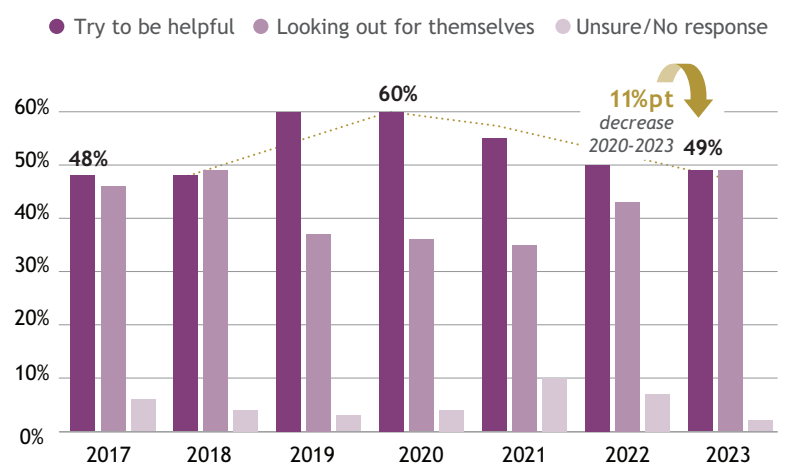
Exhibit 3 shows how Northern Virginians responded to the question, “Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?”

- While belief that others will try to be helpful increased 12 percentage points in the three years between 2017 and 2020, it has declined just as steadily between 2020 and 2023, erasing gains from the prior three years.
- Belief that others will try to be helpful declined 11 percentage points in the past three years: from 60 percent in February 2020 to 49 percent in February 2023.

Belief that others will try to be helpful declined 11 percentage points between 2020 and 2023.

Exhibit 3.

Northern Virginians’ belief that most people will try to be helpful



Source: Insight Region® analysis of the Virginia Trust Index data, Roanoke College Institute for Policy and Opinion Research and Alice Louise Kassens (Roanoke College, Economics).

ⁱ Data are weighted by age, race and gender using the American Communities Survey (ACS).

ⁱⁱ IPOR’s definition of Northern Virginia is broad, including the counties of Fauquier and Stafford and the City of Fredericksburg. The sample size for NOVA is approximately 180 respondents.

TRUST IN OTHERS: BELIEF THAT MOST PEOPLE CAN BE TRUSTED

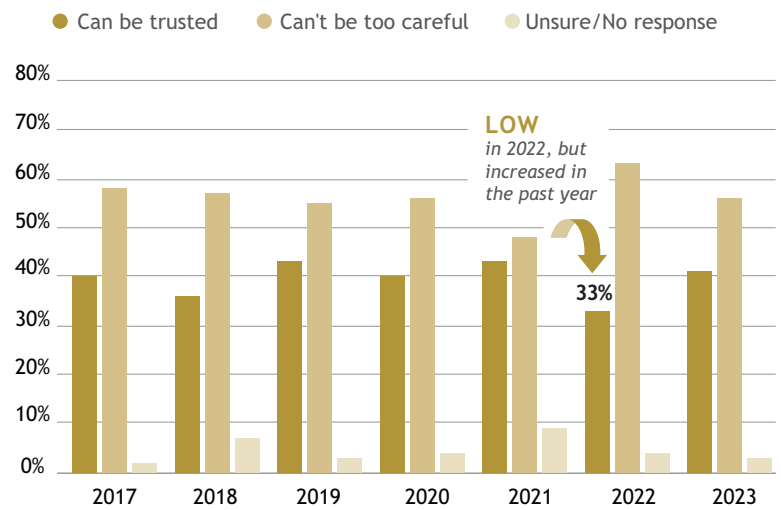
Exhibit 4 shows how Northern Virginians responded to the question, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?”

- Across all years, the majority of survey participants believed that you cannot be too careful.
- The percentage of respondents who believe others CAN be trusted has hovered between 30-40 percent, reaching an all-time low of 33 percent in 2022.
- This metric has increased back to 41 percent in 2023.

Belief that most people can be trusted reached a low of 33% in 2022, but increased in the past year.

Exhibit 4.

Northern Virginians’ belief that most people can be trusted



Source: Insight Region® analysis of the Virginia Trust Index data, Roanoke College Institute for Policy and Opinion Research and Alice Louise Kassens (Roanoke College, Economics).

CONCLUSIONS

- Trust among Northern Virginians mirrors National and State trends.
- Increased trust can lead to economic growth and better public institutions.
- Northern Virginian’s belief that others will strive to be fair and helpful has declined in recent years.
- Belief that others can be trusted reached a 5-year low in 2022, but increased slightly in 2023.
- All of us in Northern Virginia can shape future trends in social trust.

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