aggressive behavior. (The researchers attempted to control for socioeconomic status and the quality of parenting; when they did, the correlation remained strong.) If there is a cause-effect relationship, the researchers speculate that excess caffeine and sugar (along with the subsequent blood-sugar crash) may leave soda drinkers irritable and prone to aggression; or maybe those who drink soda in place of healthier food miss out on nutrients that promote a calmer demeanor.

One public-policy implication is apparent already: colleges may want to think twice about promoting soft drinks as a safe alternative to alcohol. Although soda doesn't share alcohol's acute, motor-skill-impairing effect, it may have emotional effects that build over time—meaning it may be safer just to stick with water.

~ELIZABETH GUDBRAIS

AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

The researchers attempted to control for socioeconomic status and the quality of parenting; when they did, the correlation remained strong. If there is a cause-effect relationship, the researchers speculate that excess caffeine and sugar (along with the subsequent blood-sugar crash) may leave soda drinkers irritable and prone to aggression; or maybe those who drink soda in place of healthier food miss out on nutrients that promote a calmer demeanor.

One public-policy implication is apparent already: colleges may want to think twice about promoting soft drinks as a safe alternative to alcohol. Although soda doesn't share alcohol's acute, motor-skill-impairing effect, it may have emotional effects that build over time—meaning it may be safer just to stick with water.

~ELIZABETH GUDBRAIS

Mapping Cultural Change

The U.S. Census gathers a wealth of demographic data, providing a basic sketch of the American population. But since 1972, the General Social Survey (GSS) has been filling in the outlines of that sketch in living color.

The GSS asks about subjects the census cannot—such as religious affiliation (barred due to concern over separation of church and state)—or simply does not: sexual behavior, racial stereotypes, and attitudes about issues, including gay marriage, immigration, and much more. It even includes a vocabulary test to track trends in Americans' verbal knowledge. Among the findings: while the rate of "permissive disposition toward premarital sex" has remained steady among Americans since 1980, support for gay marriage rose from 12 percent in 1988 to 47 percent in 2010.

With funding from the National Science Foundation, a survey team fans out across the United States every two years, gathering data from 3,000 Americans during face-to-face interviews in their homes. (The project's home base is an opinion research center at the University of Chicago.) In its 40 years, the GSS has informed tens of thousands of research studies; its freely available data have been used by hundreds of thousands of students each year, and have become a crucial source of information on Americans' lifestyles and views. And it has Harvard roots—it is the brainchild of professor of sociology emeritus James Davis, who was the principal investigator until 2009—and continuing connections: Geisinger professor of sociology Peter V. Marsden has been co-principal investigator since 1997.

In each successive wave, the survey confirms some popular reports of social currents (there are more women in the workforce, but they still earn less than men do) and contradicts others. For example, the GSS finds that reports of Americans' increasing isolation (such as offered in Malkin professor of public policy Robert Putnam's Bowling Alone) don't get it quite right: Americans do spend less time with their neighbors than they did 40 years ago, but the frequency with which they see friends and relatives has grown, and the overall frequency of social interaction has remained relatively steady.

The survey sometimes highlights a turning point when a trend begins to change course. One example: Americans' openness—measured by gauging their level of tolerance for free speech when they don't agree with the viewpoint of the speaker—has risen steadily for most of the survey term, but that trend may be reversing. (The survey tests views from across the political spectrum: it includes questions about whether atheists and homosexuals, as well as racists and militarists, should be allowed to make speeches in public venues or college classrooms, or to express their views in books offered at the local library.) Americans' increasing educational attainment was responsible for a large part of the rise in tolerance, and now that educational gains are leveling off, tolerance may be following suit, Davis writes in Social Trends in American Life, a new volume (edited by

DAVID HEMENWAY E-MAIL: hemenway@hsph.harvard.edu
HARVARD INJURY CONTROL RESEARCH CENTER WEBSITE: www.hsph.harvard.edu/research/hicrc
Marsden) that anthologizes important GSS findings. Trust in institutions, on the other hand, may be rising. For almost every type—the media, the government, large corporations, and organized religion—the survey shows that Americans born in the 1960s or later are more trusting than their baby-boomer predecessors.

Another interesting change: cultural differences among Americans don’t map along regional lines as closely as they once did. Instead, says Marsden, when seeking to predict sociodemographic factors, or opinions on issues such as immigration and gay marriage, “It matters a whole lot more whether you’re in a city or a suburb than whether you’re in the Midwest or the South.”

The GSS chronicles change, but also produces sobering reminders of areas where change has come slowly. In the new book, Du Bois professor of the social sciences Lawrence Bobo and colleagues tally the progress made in Americans’ attitudes about race: so few people felt that white people should have the “first chance” at a job opening, or that black children and white children should attend separate schools, that these questions were dropped from the survey (in 1973 and 1985, respectively). Even so, positive attitudes have been slower to develop, as measured by white respondents’ perception of how intelligent or hardworking people of other races are, or by how commonly respondents report having friends of another race. “Very few whites embrace African Americans on an emotional level,” the scholars conclude. This, they argue, is the new form of prejudice: subtle rather than institutional, but nevertheless holding the country back from becoming a truly “post-racial” society.

Despite its wide range, the GSS doesn’t cover every facet of contemporary life. A panel of advisers suggests updates and new questions for each wave; Marsden sees attitudes about the environment as one possible area for expansion. But by and large, he says, the survey’s greatest strength is its consistency: “We can look at attitude change over a 40-year period because we ask the exact same question about the same topic each time.”

Elizabeth Gudrais

PETER MARS DEN E-MAIL:
pvm@wjh.harvard.edu
GSS WEBSITE:
www3.norc.org/GSS+Website

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746