INSIDE

The Pew Charitable Trusts

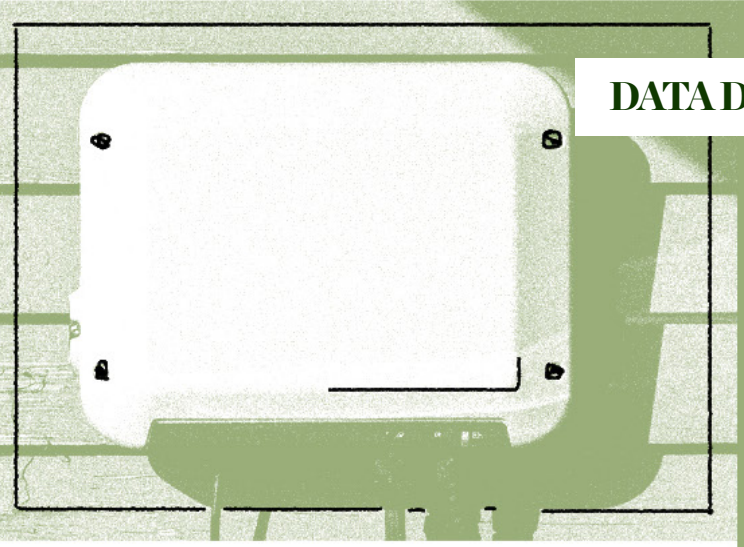
Trust

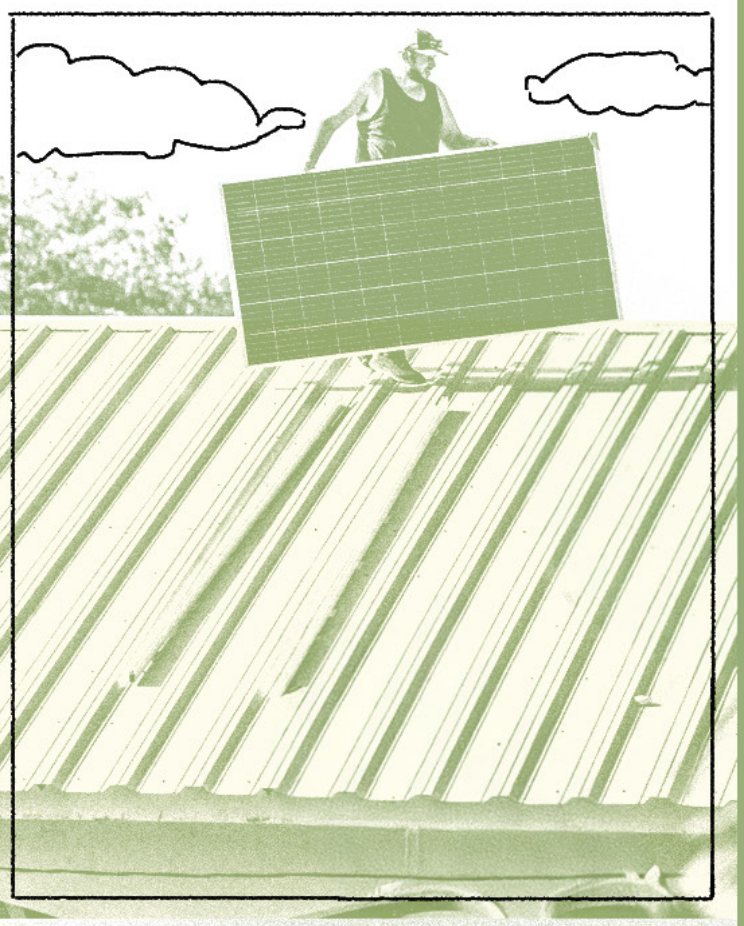
Conservation & Culture

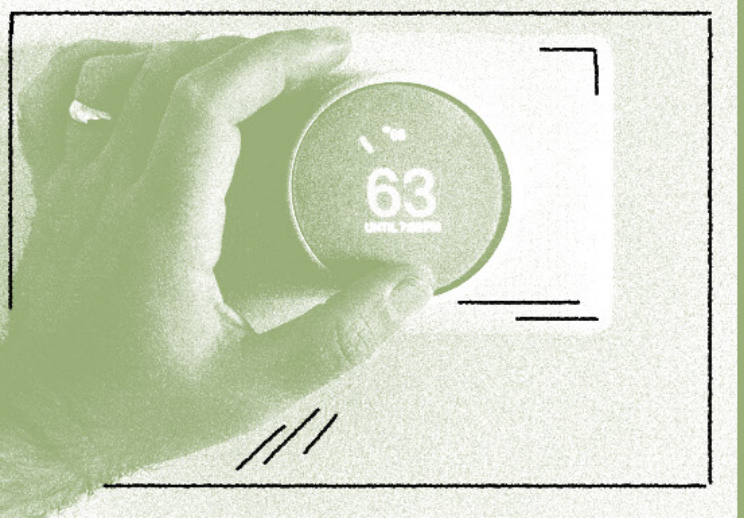
Chilean Patagonia

High in the Andes, land protections help support local herders' animal migrations.

Summer 2026 | Vol. 28, No. 2





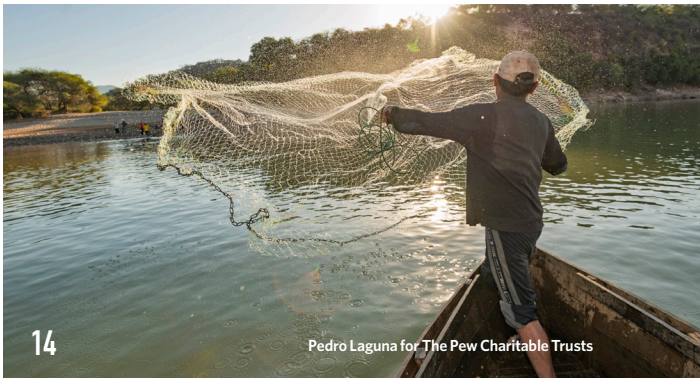


24

The number of states that enacted policies to promote microgrids—small local networks of distributed energy resources (DERs)—from 2021 through 2025.

These technologies can include rooftop solar, battery storage, and smart appliances and can help to reduce pressure on the U.S. energy grid and generate electricity nearer to the point of use. Distributed energy resources are a low-cost, readily available solution that can help to meet energy demand while providing affordable and reliable power. The Pew Charitable Trusts is working with state and federal policymakers to modernize the transmission grid and accelerate adoption of large-scale energy generation and the use of microgrids.

CONTENTS



Cover: In Chilean Patagonia, a herder and his dog cross a stream during a traditional animal migration. *Robinson San Martin ©Programa Austral Patagonia-UACh*

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Founded in 1948, The Pew Charitable Trusts uses data to make a difference. Pew addresses the challenges of a changing world by illuminating issues, creating common ground, and advancing ambitious projects that lead to tangible progress.

Building Communities

Since 1948, The Pew Charitable Trusts has helped build strong communities, starting with our hometown of Philadelphia. Through support for nonprofit organizations, strengthening local and state governments, and finding solutions to economic and environmental challenges, our work alongside partners has helped individuals, families, and neighborhoods thrive.

At the heart of this work is the belief that government performance is important—with a focus on implementing efficient and effective programs that reflect the priorities of a diverse citizenry. And there's only one way to get there: compromise. That's why we recently joined Disagree Better to host the "America at 250 Forum" with Utah Governor Spencer Cox (R), Maryland Governor Wes Moore (D), and Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt (R). The conversation focused on ways these governors have worked across party lines and highlighted how effective governance is central to their vision for a more prosperous future. The governors also agreed that communities thrive—and faith in democracy grows—when civility, partnership, and finding common ground guide government decisions. Gov. Stitt emphasized this point when he said, "Here's a Republican and a Democrat governor from different states that literally agree on probably 80% of things. And the things we disagree on, we can have honest conversations about."

Pew's commitment to nonpartisanship has also led us to find novel ways to make life safer, healthier, and financially secure for Americans who struggle with rising costs. One of these potential solutions is reducing red tape in multifamily housing construction. A recent study by Pew found that tall multistory buildings are now safer from fire than single-family homes—making some government requirements for multiple stairwells in apartments both costly and obsolete. This may come as a surprise to many readers, but as Alex Horowitz, director of Pew's housing policy initiative, explains in this issue of *Trust*, "If we look at the newest apartments built since 2010, they're 17 to 18 times safer than pre-1970 homes." And for housing built since 2000, deaths from fires in apartment buildings is one-fourth the rate for homes built for a single family. That means that government has a relatively easy way to make construction of affordable housing easier.

Ensuring that workers have a secure retirement is another nonpartisan tool for building communities. That's why Pew has been helping states to develop auto-IRA programs for many years. These innovative retirement plans automatically enroll private sector employees in a state-facilitated savings program if they do not have a workplace retirement plan.

The first auto-IRA was created in Oregon in 2017, and since then, nearly 1.2 million workers across 15 states have saved close to $3 billion for retirement. However, even with this noteworthy progress, most small businesses cannot afford to provide their employees with a pension or alternative plan such as a 401(k). This means that for 60 million Americans, Social Security and personal savings—if they have any—are the only retirement income they can expect to have.

Auto-IRAs are portable from job to job, and although workers are automatically enrolled, they can opt out at any time. And, as you'll read in this issue of *Trust*, the benefit of these programs goes beyond retirement security for individuals and their families. They also support a financially secure labor force that, in turn, improves the fiscal health of state and local governments by reducing the cost of public assistance programs like Medicaid. With both Republican and

Democratic governors in favor, there are now proposals in Congress to create a national version of state auto-IRA plans that would give every worker in America the chance to save for retirement.

Pew's role as a global organization also brings its community-building mission to remote and environmentally endangered places around the world. That includes the Gran Chaco region of Bolivia, where Pew is helping Indigenous communities regain stewardship of their ancestral lands and waters by promoting three new protected areas; partnering with the Enduring Earth initiative and other organizations to advance the Indigenous component of Bolivia's Project for Permanent Finance, which will be led by the Guaraní people of Charagua Iyambae; and strengthening Indigenous territorial governance. And Pew is helping to establish long-term financing mechanisms to ensure the longevity of these conservation measures.

In addition to learning more about Pew's environmental work in Bolivia, readers in this issue of *Trust* will be able to enjoy photos of herders moving animals across Andean mountains in Patagonia through rich landscapes Pew has worked to safeguard.

Building communities, making government more effective, and helping people have been in Pew's DNA from the start. We will continue this work with dedication and rigor as we prepare to celebrate America's 250th birthday—and long into the future.

Susan K. Urahn, *President and CEO*

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Summer 2026 | Vol. 28, No. 2

One Commerce Square
2005 Market Street, Suite 2800
Philadelphia, PA 19103-7077

901 E Street NW
Washington, DC 20004-2037

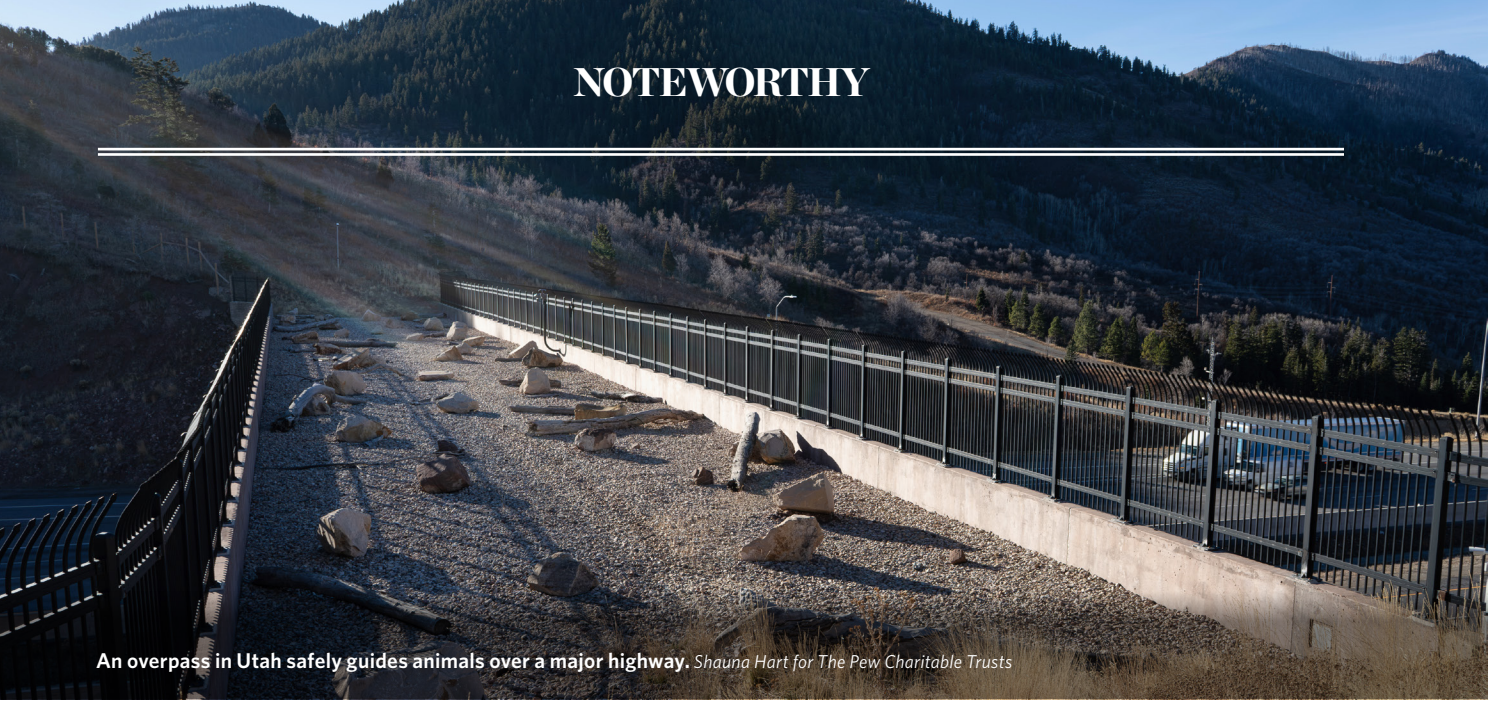
pew.org

THE BIG PICTURE

A burst of cherry blossoms decorates the panorama of Washington, D.C.'s Jefferson Memorial and Tidal Basin, the 107-acre human-made reservoir that helps control water that rushes in from the nearby Potomac River during high tides. But the Tidal Basin's surrounding sea wall had been crumbling for decades, allowing river water to flood the historic walkway beneath the famous cherry trees twice a day, damaging their roots. And due to billions of dollars in repair backlog, the National Park Service did not have the money to fix this and hundreds of other American landmarks.

This spring, the Tidal Basin was restored thanks to funding from the bipartisan Great American Outdoors Act passed in 2020, which The Pew Charitable Trusts' restore America's parks campaign worked to support. The Tidal Basin restoration also included plantings of some new cherry trees that bloom slightly earlier than the ones gifted to the U.S. by Japan in 1912.

The Pew Charitable Trusts



An overpass in Utah safely guides animals over a major highway. *Shauna Hart for The Pew Charitable Trusts*

States Act to Reduce Wildlife Collisions

BY CAROL KAUFMANN

It's shaping up to be a banner year for humans and migrating animals that cross paths.

That's because in 2026, four states—Utah, Virginia, Idaho, and Oregon—have made significant legislative progress on wildlife crossings. These overpasses and underpasses and strategically placed fencing allow animals to safely traverse busy highways and roads along their natural corridors in search of food, shelter, and mates.

Wildlife-vehicle collisions—most often with deer, elk, and moose—can result in costly damage and injuries as well as deaths for the people and animals involved. More than 1 million such incidents occur annually in the U.S., although that number is probably much higher due to unreported crashes. These accidents cause about 26,000 injuries and more than 200 deaths, and they cost more than $10 billion in repairs, medical care, and lost productivity, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. In addition, infrastructure, such as highways that block migration paths, can lead to animal population declines and reduced biodiversity.

Adding wildlife crossings can reduce collisions by more than 90%, according to Scioto Analysis. A single wildlife crossing can prevent some 1,400 accidents over a 70-year lifespan, which translates into billions of dollars.

To build support for the state wildlife crossing bills, The Pew Charitable Trusts provided technical assistance to lawmakers and officials, including translating and leveraging data on wildlife-vehicle collisions, migration patterns, and project costs, to show the scale of the problem and demonstrate the value of dedicated funding. "Pew worked with state legislators over multiple sessions to help them understand the issues at stake and the options for effective, durable solutions," says Nic Callero, who works on Pew's U.S. conservation project.

With bipartisan support, the Utah Legislature and Governor Spencer Cox (R) enacted major legislation that establishes a designated wildlife crossing fund, which will receive $2 million a year. Residents will also be able to contribute to this fund when applying for vehicle registrations, hunting licenses, and other permits. In addition, another law stipulates that new solar and wind projects must consider environmental impacts and consult with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources before breaking ground. Vehicle collisions with animals—particularly mule deer—have cost Utahns nearly $138 million a year in health care and property damage, according to the Utah Department of Transportation.

In Virginia, costs and collisions are even higher: Some 60,000 crashes cost more than $533 million a year. In April, Governor Abigail Spanberger (D) signed legislation that designates a permanent fund for wildlife corridors. It can attract private grants and federal matching funds and also allows Virginians to make voluntary contributions through their DMVs and individual tax returns—all without tapping the state's general fund or raising taxes.

In Idaho, where more than a thousand crashes each year cost nearly $150 million, lawmakers passed a resolution that supports investment in wildlife crossing infrastructure and helps address habitat fragmentation from roads, energy exploration, and residential construction that keeps animals from vital migration routes. Momentum for the move was fueled by a recently constructed wildlife overpass outside of Boise—a bridge with natural terrain that guides migrating elk, deer, and other animals away

from State Highway 21's 14,000 daily drivers and is expected to reduce collisions by 80%.

Farther west, Oregon is increasing a lodging tax by 1.25% beginning in January 2027 that will benefit nine conservation programs, which will fund, build, and improve wildlife infrastructure, undertake research to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions, and reconnect bisected habitat. A bipartisan coalition of hunters, anglers, landowners, conservationists, and community leaders worked for more than a decade on the landmark act.

"These states offer blueprints for others to follow," said Callero. "By dedicating resources to ensuring that wildlife corridors remain intact, state lawmakers are helping animal populations—and the humans who share their space—safely reach their destinations."

Notifications Can Increase Court Participation

Americans are accustomed to being notified when their latest online purchase has been delivered, but they may not receive confirmation for something far more important—being informed of a lawsuit, eviction, or divorce filed against them.

"Service of process"—the mechanism for notifying individuals that they're being sued—remains one of the least standardized and documented parts of civil court proceedings. And people can't participate in a civil case when they aren't aware of being involved with one. For example, in debt collection lawsuits (the most common type of civil cases), when people who have been sued don't appear for their hearing, courts can automatically rule in favor of the plaintiff, a decision known as a default judgment.

Some locales are taking steps to better ensure that people being sued have actually been notified of the lawsuit. For example, in 2025, California enacted legislation requiring GPS verification that service has occurred.

State research also shows that when people are served in person (rather than by mail), default judgment rates may be lower. In Oregon, for instance, an analysis found that counties that required serving court documents in person had lower default judgment rates (65%) than those with mail service (74%).

Requiring in-person service and GPS verification are relatively easy to implement and can have meaningful effects—reducing disputes over notification and ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in their court cases.

— Mabel Yu

Sounds of Freedom

This summer, Philadelphia's famed Liberty Bell will have to share some of its popularity with a nearby bell tower. As part of celebrations for the country's 250th anniversary, artist Paul Ramírez Jonas' interactive sculpture Let Freedom Ring will be installed at Cherry Street Pier, on the Delaware River waterfront.

The piece consists of a tower with 32 bells that play all but the final note of the song "My Country 'Tis of Thee." To complete the melody, passersby pull a lever to ring the 600-pound bell at the base of the artwork—a metaphor for civic engagement and cooperation. "The only person who can finish the melody is you," said Ramírez Jonas, in an article from the National Bell Festival. "The song, like the promise of our country, remains incomplete without participation." Much of Ramírez Jonas' work aims for audience interaction. The installation includes inscriptions of partial lyrics to the song and statements meant to encourage conversation and reflection, such as "I want to be free from … " and "I want to be free to … ."

The sculpture was originally commissioned by Philadelphia's Monument Lab and exhibited in 2023 in Washington, D.C., as part of the Beyond Granite exhibition on the National Mall.

Let Freedom Ring will be on display from June 4 to Sept. 27. It is presented by Philadelphia's Association for Public Art in partnership with the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation and is supported in part by a grant from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

— Mabel Yu

A digital rendering shows how the Let Freedom Ring installation will appear. *Image courtesy of Paul Ramírez Jonas*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FIRE SAFE

Research shows newer multifamily buildings are safer from flames than single-family homes and older complexes.

By Carol Kaufmann
Photos by The Pew Charitable Trusts

AT a time when the nation is facing a severe housing shortage, more multistory apartment buildings would offer more homes to more people. And there's a big added benefit: Residents would be much safer from fires.

A new study by The Pew Charitable Trusts found that people living in big, tall, multistoried buildings—or any modern, multifamily complex—are much safer from fire than those living in a single-family house.

Pew tracked all publicly reported residential fire deaths in the United States in 2023 (when the most extensive data was available) and found that modern multifamily housing is six times safer than the rest of available housing, either multifamily housing built before 2000 or single-family housing.

"New apartments are the safest type of housing there is in the U.S.," says Alex Horowitz, project director of Pew's housing policy initiative. "In fact, if we look at the newest apartments built since 2010, they're 17 or 18 times safer than pre-1970 homes."

Data shows that multifamily housing in the U.S. has been getting safer over time. Since 1980, fire safety researchers have documented a downward trend in injuries and deaths in apartment building fires. In that year, the rate of deaths was 7.1 per 1,000 reported fires. In 2023, the rate was 5.2 deaths per 1,000 reported fires. Pew also found that the results were similar across multiple states, indicating a consistent trend. But what is truly striking is that just looking at housing built since 2000, the deaths from fires in apartment buildings was one-fourth the death rate in modern single-family homes.

It would seem that multifamily dwellings bring more risk. After all, they have separate kitchens for every unit, more heating and electrical equipment posing hazards, and all those residents using hazardous materials—from cigarettes and candles to lithium-ion battery-powered vehicles. And close proximity could cause the fires to spread from one unit to another. Combined, these perceptions often turn policymakers away from making zoning laws friendly for multifamily construction.

But they shouldn't.

These buildings constructed since 2000 have far better fire safety records, in part, because of the way they are constructed. They're made with layers of built-in safety measures, many that go largely unnoticed by policymakers—and those who live in them.

"This standpipe? This is the Cadillac of pipes," says Village of Caledonia, Wisconsin, Fire Department Battalion Chief Erich Roden as he points to an innocuous-looking red pipe rising vertically in the

Completed in 2022, the Ascent MKE, a 25-story apartment building in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is the world's tallest building made from mass timber, a sustainable, fire-resistant wood construction material. "New apartments are the safest type of housing there is in the U.S.," says Alex Horowitz, project director of Pew's housing policy initiative.

Battalion Chief Erich Roden looks over the fire damage to a townhome after lightning struck an external gas meter in the early hours of the morning during a storm.

stairwell of his own apartment building, located about 30 minutes south of Milwaukee. Looking closer, he gives it an upgrade: "I'd say it's a Ferrari."

The water pipe is 6 inches in diameter, larger than the required 4-inch diameter in modern apartment buildings in his community. A thousand gallons of water a minute will rush through the 6-inch pipe and into the firefighters' hose should a fire erupt. And that's just one feature most people wouldn't notice. But Roden knows what makes homes safer from his 32 years of experience fighting fires, and that, in part, is why he chose to live where he does.

Continuing his safety tour, Roden points out all of the smoke detectors and sprinklers lining the hall ceilings outside of his third-floor 1,000-square-foot, one-bedroom unit. Inside, silver circles dot his ceilings. "Eight sprinkler heads. That's perfect," he says, looking up. In case of a fire, "everything will get wet, but at least it will keep the fire in check."

Roden says the true measure of safety is whether a firefighter will live on the top floor of a building, which he does. "I'm very confident in feeling safe, even while I'm sleeping."

To help others feel safe, Roden consults with engineers and builders during the construction process of multifamily buildings. It's what he calls his "micro crusade" to assist fire departments, municipalities, developers, architects, and building engineers in creating the safest buildings possible while helping them to realize "the dreams of our skylines," he says.

He worked with developers of the Ascent MKE, a 25-story apartment building—that also happens to be the world's tallest mass-timber structure—finished in 2022 in downtown Milwaukee. Aside from its standpipes, sprinklers, and fire detectors, the building's multiple, largely unseen features illustrate why a modern high-rise building is safer from fire than a single-family home. Seeing all of the features takes a few hours.

First on the list is the material used to build it.

Turns out, mass timber—assembled pieces of lumber that are glued together, akin to plywood, and used for beams, panels, and columns—takes a while to burn, says Sheldon Oppermann, chief financial officer and general counsel at New Land Enterprises, the developer of the Ascent. "The Ascent needs a three-hour fire rating, so the building has to survive three hours, long enough to get everybody out of the building or the firefighters up into the building," Oppermann says. "You create the same three-hour fire rating as you would by wrapping steel with drywall." But mass timber is much easier to transport, faster to build, and eco-friendly.

In modern apartment buildings, noncombustible stairs are built according to a specific size and equipped with doors that automatically close, which keep fires

An uninhabited home in Milwaukee that caught fire was quickly engulfed and sustained extensive damage. "Apartments built since 2010 are 17 or 18 times safer than pre-1970 homes," says Pew's Alex Horowitz.

and smoke at bay and provide safe exits. Multiple fire alarms, water pumps, and smoke detectors all have built-in redundancies to ensure that they all have power in case of an electrical outage. In emergencies, the elevator system and fire alarms communicate outside the building, warning the fire department and relaying to firefighters what to expect on arrival. Exit lights guide residents outside in case of smoke. All of the systems are managed by professionals who ensure timely inspections, tests, and renewals when needed, says Oppermann. "Your home is protected even when you are not here," he says. If a fire erupted "there's sprinklers designed to put it out."

And there's another key factor in multifamily buildings.

"People," says Oppermann. "There's always a body here whose job it is to keep an eye on the camera system security. If any alarm goes off, there's someone on site who's been trained and knows what to do." Even small buildings have a superintendent, he says.

Neighbors, too, are a second set of eyes and ears, who see or hear a fire or alarm and alert those who haven't, says Oppermann. "Just living around other people makes you safer."

Residents of single-family homes don't enjoy most, if any, of these features. "The single-family home has inherent hazards, particularly the open interior stairs and a limited secondary means of egress," says Roden.

"You would have no understanding of how fast [a fire] happens and how fast it grows out of control and how fast a home you've lived in for years can seem like a maze," says Aaron Lipski, Milwaukee's fire chief, and a fourth-generation firefighter.

Lipski remembers such fires all too well. A 20-minute drive from the Ascent is the site of the city's worst one—and a prime example.

On Mother's Day in May 2025, at around 5:00 a.m., reports of smoke in the area began rolling in, followed by additional 911 calls. He recalls pulling up to the four-story, 85-unit apartment building to find people hanging out of the third- and fourth-floor windows on all sides with heavy smoke pushing out behind many of them. Others were laid out on the bricks below, receiving CPR.

"People had already jumped, so we had to help them with broken limbs," he says. That day, the Milwaukee crews rescued many dozens of residents, either by carrying them down ladders or dragging them through hallways and down stairwells. But despite the efforts of all the available fire crews in the city, five people died.

Because it was constructed prior to 1974, before newer building codes came into effect, the building was not required to have many of the safety features that modern buildings like the Ascent have. But Lipski said that just one of the features would have changed everything.

"There was no sprinkler system, and so that fire traveled extremely rapidly, completely unchecked," he says. "Smoke moved at a dizzying pace, over long distances," which can make getting out of a building near impossible.

Both Lipski and Roden know what a difference a sprinkler system makes.

"When we pull up and can hear the gush of water from a sprinkler head, we know [the fire] is under control," says Roden. "You still have smoke, but [sprinklers] do control the fire. Once you put the fire out, everything improves at a fire scene. It's that simple."

Older buildings were constructed before sprinklers were mandated. Building codes are set by states and local municipalities and vary throughout the U.S. But they only apply to new housing, and with the low rate of homebuilding in recent years, only a small share of housing is new. Horowitz notes that even though modern multifamily housing is the safest type, it only comprises 7% of homes.

Fourth-generation firefighter Aaron Lipski is the fire chief of the Milwaukee Fire Department and has fought fires for 28 years. "We're seeing an increase in fires, and it just keeps climbing," Lipski says about his city. "Old-frame building stock, densely positioned houses, wildly outdated appliances and electrical systems that are antique … all these things conspire to create more fire."

Safety measures also add to the bottom line. But Lipski has seen too many fires and doesn't buy the argument that these features are too expensive to install. "Fire suppression is always held up as the competition for all the other building improvements," says Lipski. "Why is fire suppression always the thing that is thrown up there as a massive problem? Why isn't it granite countertops, central air, the upgraded larger hot water heaters?"

The Pew report on fire safety comes as the nation is looking for solutions to a critical housing shortage. The U.S. also lacks enough housing to meet demand. Currently, the country is short at least 4 million to 7 million homes, be it single-family dwellings or spaces in multifamily buildings.

"Each year we're building less housing than we need because there are so many regulatory barriers in the way of new homes, especially starter homes such as townhouses, duplexes, condos, and apartments where people can live close to the places they go every day," says Pew's Horowitz. "As a result, our housing stock is the oldest it's ever been—and older housing is less safe than newer housing."

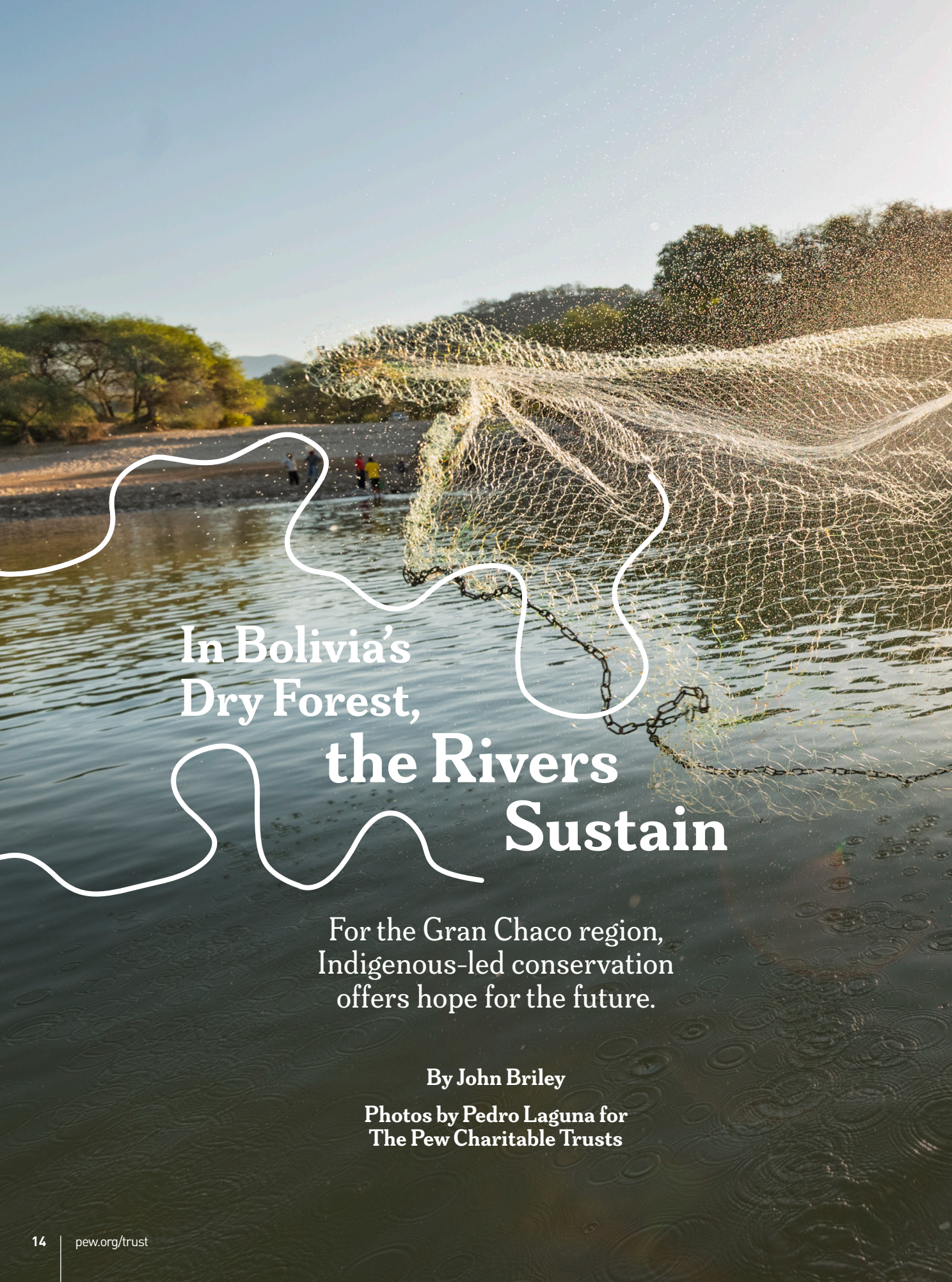
More—and newer—living options would not only increase the housing stock, but would also keep people safer, says Horowitz, because the newer buildings with required safety features would lower the danger of fire.

But most land in cities and towns is only zoned for single-family homes or commercial use. "If a five-story office building is allowed, then a five-story apartment building should be allowed too," says Horowitz. "Allowing apartments without a special-use permit, without a variance, without a rezoning, that's near jobs, transit, stores, and restaurants is the right move." Pew's housing policy initiative is working with state and local policymakers to rethink how strict land-use regulations and statutes drive the housing shortage by limiting lower-cost housing options, such as apartments and townhouses.

Years ago, few states tackled this issue, and from 2011 to 2016, all states combined averaged passing only one law per year to allow more homes, such as by allowing apartments on all commercial streets. But in 2025, Texas, Washington, Montana, New Hampshire, Maine, California, and more than 20 other states set a national record, passing more than 100 different laws to allow more homes, ranging from requiring streamlined permitting to allowing basement or backyard accessory dwelling units. The cities of Austin, Texas; Minneapolis; and Raleigh, North Carolina, are among those that have simplified their zoning to make it easier to build homes—and have kept rents down in the process.

"All this is good news for housing affordability," says Horowitz. "But it turns out, it's also good news for fire safety too."

Carol Kaufmann is a Trust *staff writer.*



In Bolivia's Dry Forest, the Rivers Sustain

For the Gran Chaco region, Indigenous-led conservation offers hope for the future.

By John Briley

Photos by Pedro Laguna for The Pew Charitable Trusts

A Guaraní fisherman from the Tentaguasu community in Bolivia casts his net on the Pilcomayo River. Indigenous communities in the Gran Chaco region depend on catch from the Pilcomayo and Parapetí rivers for food and income but say that the fish from both sources have decreased in number and size in recent years.

Without the river, life here would whither. It's late October in Tentaguasu, an Indigenous community in southeast Bolivia, and the only distraction from the searing sun is the rustle of brittle leaves still clinging to the quebracho trees. This is the end of the six-month dry season in these forested hills, when temperatures can top 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46 degrees Celsius), baking the landscape into submission.

It is a time when residents center their lives around the Pilcomayo River, which the community cherishes as they would a revered elder. The story is the same throughout the broader Gran Chaco region, a nearly 400,000-square-mile (1-million-square-kilometer) semi-arid area that spans parts of Bolivia, Argentina, and Paraguay. The Pilcomayo and the smaller—but still significant—Parapetí River course from the Andes and through this ecologically rich swath of forests, savannas, wetlands, and salt flats, bringing fresh water, food, nourishment, and relief to the people and wildlife that call the Gran Chaco home.

Together, these two rivers are lifelines for one of South America's last major wild zones. The Gran Chaco's extraordinary biodiversity includes an estimated 3,400 plant species; more than 1,000 bird species, including the helmeted manakin and hyacinth macaw; and an array of reptiles and amphibians. As for mammals, one of the continent's last significant jaguar populations lives here, as do giant anteaters, maned wolf, puma, and the Chacoan peccary, a pig-like animal that was thought to be extinct until researchers "rediscovered" it in 1975.

But the Gran Chaco is under threat from shifts in land use—including encroaching cattle ranching and soy farming—that have driven deforestation, along with wildfires and pollution. The region is home to 9 million people who are scattered among urban centers as well as more rural communities whose inhabitants range from cattle ranchers and beekeepers to commercial fishers and Indigenous weavers.

The Pew Charitable Trusts began working here in 2022, both following and joining regional and local governments in planning creative approaches to conserving this diverse place. Those initiatives are already bearing fruit: Over the past 15 months, portions of both the Pilcomayo and Parapetí rivers and their basins in Bolivia have won major protections—a notable occurrence because, like most countries, Bolivia has few formal legal instruments for safeguarding fresh water. Even with these conservation gains, leaders in Bolivia must do more to safeguard the Gran Chaco's waterways.

Worldwide, rivers, wetlands, lakes, and other fresh water sources rank as the most biodiverse, most threatened, and least protected ecosystems. In fact, rivers host around 10% of all known species and are vital to the migratory routes and habitat connectivity for even more species, though they cover less than 1% of the Earth's surface.

"We are fortunate that our ancestors settled along this majestic river," says Lorgio Bustos, the Guaraní captain of Tentaguasu. Captains serve as their communities' ancestral and cultural leaders, which includes helping sustain the people's connections to nature.

"For us, it is something like … a legacy our grandparents left us, because the river means so much," Bustos adds. "It feeds us, provides us with life and health—we live from it," including by catching sábalo fish for both local consumption and sale. "For us, the Pilcomayo River means everything."

Tentaguasu is in the Chaco dry forest, the predominant ecosystem in the Gran Chaco and the second-largest forest in South America, behind the Amazon. The flora here are tenacious, with stout trees, shrubs, and other plants that have adapted to thrive in extreme heat and aridity.

The Pilcomayo, which is much larger than the Parapetí, runs for 930 miles (about 1,500 kilometers) along the western edge of the Bolivian Gran Chaco before cutting east along the Paraguay-Argentina border and into Argentina's nearly 1-million-acre Bañado la Estrella wetlands. In Bolivia, a healthy Pilcomayo benefits ranchers, whose cattle graze exclusively in native forest, and Indigenous Guaraní, Weenhayek, and Tapiete people who harvest honey from wild hives, as their ancestors did.

On April 7, the government of Bolivia's Tarija Department approved the Pilcomayo River Departmental Corridor Law, which establishes a protected zone for six miles on either side of the river along its 155-mile (250-kilometer) course near the Argentine and Paraguayan borders. This adds up to 868,000 protected acres in an especially significant area, given that the water, fish, and surrounding forests of the Pilcomayo are central to the livelihoods of more than 40 Indigenous, campesino (peasant), and fishing communities in Bolivia. This law is intended to safeguard biodiversity and promote sustainable use while affirming local and Indigenous rights.

Such cohesive protection of a river and its surrounding land, if well managed, can yield significantly greater benefits than protecting just one element, according to a

Top: A Guaraní woman from the Yuati community, on the banks of the Pilcomayo River in southern Bolivia, weaves palm fibers from the local forest into traditional handicrafts. Handicrafts are a vital source of cultural pride and income for the Yuati and other Indigenous communities. Bottom: Cattle cross a road on a ranch outside of Crevaux, a town near the Bolivia–Argentina border. Small-scale ranching is one of many livelihoods in the Gran Chaco region that rely on healthy forests and rivers, which is why local and Indigenous governments in the region have adopted significant conservation measures in recent years.

Bridges cross the Pilcomayo River outside the town of Villa Montes, Bolivia. The river is the main source of fresh water for the millions of people living in the Bolivian portion of the Gran Chaco region and feeds the massive Bañado la Estrella wetlands, which is vital habitat for an array of wildlife.

2019 literature review in the journal *Conservation Letters*.

The government should now adopt implementing regulations and a management plan to ensure that the corridor meets its conservation and social objectives. Many along the river are eager for the new protections to take effect.

"Before, there was plenty of fish—surubí, dorado, pacú—now there is very little," says Eudal Vargas, a fisher in the El Angosto community along the Pilcomayo River. "Before, there were beautiful pools where fish grew. Now they no longer grow here. They're just passing through."

The story is similar along the Parapetí, which enters the Gran Chaco south of the city of Santa Cruz and flows north for 310 miles (500 kilometers) before dissolving into the massive Bañados del Izozog wetland. Locals living along the Parapetí have also reported fewer and smaller fish, declining water quality, and erratic flooding due to upstream erosion of the riverbanks.

But here, too, there has been progress. In April 2025, the Gobierno Autónomo Indígena Originario Campesino (GAIOC) of Charagua Iyambae, which oversees an area roughly the size of Panama, designated the 1.3-million-acre Parapetí River and Isoso (Izozog) Wetlands Integrated Management and Connectivity Area. The Guaraní call the new reserve Yande Yari, which translates loosely to "grand mother."

This followed the 2019 designation of the Ñembi Guasu Protected Area, an important Indigenous-led conservation effort in the region, and the creation of the Irenda Water Management Area and the Guajukaka Wildlife Area, which safeguards habitat of the guanaco, a llama-like animal.

Together, these protections represent a global gold standard in Indigenous-led conservation.

"In Charagua Iyambae, water is not just a physical resource but an element that integrates life, territory, and spirituality," says Mariflor Suárez Angulo, whose title—Tëtarembiokuai Reta Imborika—is the equivalent of mayor of the GAIOC. "The Guaraní see Yande Yari as a sacred being, guardian of the fish, and we always ask permission before taking anything from it. Our

A beekeeper smokes out a colony from a hive in Bolivia's Palo Santo Reserve, which is run by the Bolivian nonprofit Nativa Foundation. Beekeeping and honey harvesting from wild hives are among the industries in the Gran Chaco region that rely on healthy, intact forests, which is why Indigenous and local governments in the region have recently enacted major conservation initiatives.

relationship with the river is based on respect and balance with nature."

For millennia, Gran Chaco Indigenous communities were nomadic, following big game, water, and fertile land through the seasons, which helped ensure the long-term sustainability of the river basins' flora and fauna. This included Bañados del Izozog, which the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands—a 1971 intergovernmental treaty—designated as a "wetland of international importance," in part because of the hundreds of species of flora and fauna that flourish there, including jaguar, tapir, giant river otter, and a kaleidoscopic array of birds.

This special place is yet one more reason that the new protections in the Gran Chaco must hold. Driven in large part by expanding agribusiness and illegal settlements over the past few decades, the region is now one of the world's fastest-deforesting landscapes, losing 27 million acres of native vegetation from 2000 to 2021 because of land-clearing for crop and livestock production. That's the equivalent of losing an area four times the size of Central Park in New York City every day, according to MapsBiomas Chaco, a nongovernmental organization working to document and understand the region's shifting land uses.

This is why many Indigenous communities are hopeful that the GAIOC can help ensure that protected areas are truly safeguarded. And even in the short time since its formation, the organization has proved up to the task.

For example, the government stood up a seven-person team of Indigenous rangers to help enforce conservation laws and prevent and respond to wildfires.

"We try to prevent any misuse of the protected area by actively monitoring and patrolling," says Alejandro Arambiza Segundo, one of the rangers and director of the Ñembi Guasu Conservation and Ecological Importance Area. The team also conducts censuses of settlements, surveys bird and large mammal populations, and seeks ways to support sustainable development for the community.

To control wildfires, which are growing more severe and are often caused by settlers clearing land, the rangers train year-round to prepare for firefighting stints that can stretch for days.

"The Gran Chaco had two of its worst fires on record in 2019 and 2021, destroying dozens of homes and killing and displacing livestock and wildlife," says Natalia Araujo, who leads Pew's work in the region. "Thankfully, the autonomous government and, specifically, the rangers have responded in an impressive way."

When the next big wildfire swept across the Gran Chaco in 2024, the rangers were on duty for up to two days straight, working to keep the flames from reaching Ñembi Guasu. This included setting up firebreaks, overseeing controlled burns in high-risk areas, and using backpack water pumps in front-line battles with the blaze. The rangers held the fire at bay, and the local Indigenous communities suffered only minimal damage.

Today the Guaraní and other local people of the Bolivian Gran Chaco continue to adapt to counter the threats to their environment and culture. Conservation sits at the center of those efforts, with a specific focus on their beloved rivers, along with the surrounding landscapes.

"From the moment the Pilcomayo Corridor project was announced to us, my soul was moved," Bustos says. "For as long as I can remember, I watched its waters flow—waters that today are no longer the same." The corridor, he says, will bring opportunities.

"We want to conserve what still exists and prevent deforestation, because otherwise we would be complicit. If we see what is happening and do nothing … I don't even want to imagine the day when our only source of income and food disappears."

John Briley is a Trust *staff writer.*

Gaby Bonilla/The Pew Charitable Trusts

AUTO-IRAS HELP WORKERS BUILD A MORE SECURE FUTURE

State-facilitated programs have given millions of employees access to retirement savings plans for the first time.

By Stephen Fehr
Photos by The Pew Charitable Trusts

Michelle Gregoire prepares to head to her shift as a server at Purple Toad Social Tap and Grill in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Before the state began facilitating a retirement savings program, Secure Savings, in 2023, Purple Toad had not offered its employees a retirement plan. Now small businesses in Colorado can automatically enroll workers in an auto-IRA program, which makes workers more likely to contribute savings to accounts that help fund their future.

Michelle Gregoire was a server at Purple Toad Social Tap and Grill outside of Colorado Springs in 2023 when the state began facilitating a retirement savings program. Until then, Purple Toad had not offered a retirement plan. Once the plan, called Secure Savings, became available, Gregoire said she began depositing a portion of her paycheck into the Colorado Secure Savings' individual retirement account, or IRA.

"I started with a small amount and increase [contributions] when I can," Gregoire said. "It was easy to do, and I can see the rewards of it as savings grow with time."

Such programs are allowing state governments to gain ground in their efforts to offer millions of workers access to retirement savings plans through their jobs for the first time.

The progress is largely due to a policy innovation called auto-IRA, under which private sector workers who do not have a workplace retirement plan are automatically enrolled in a state-facilitated retirement savings program.

Nine years after the first such plan in the nation—Secure Start—began in Oregon the auto-IRA movement has grown considerably, and and reached a milestone in 2026: Nearly 1.2 million participants across 15 states have amassed more than $3 billion in savings as of early May. When programs start in Hawaii and Washington this year, there will be 17 states offering these programs.

The steady, exponential growth of payroll deduction IRAs comes at a time when many workers are living longer and also are not sufficiently prepared for retirement.

"While the auto-IRA is off to a promising start, we need to keep the momentum going, because the older population is growing," said John Scott, director of the retirement savings project at The Pew Charitable Trusts. U.S. Census Bureau figures consistently show growth in the population age 65 and older, and declines in age groups under 18.

This information echoes a 2023 report from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). The report, created in collaboration with Pew and Econsult Solutions, also warned that the growing number of retirees who lack sufficient retirement savings will strain public assistance programs and could ultimately cost state and federal governments over $1 billion by 2040.

To help address this concern, Pew has been a strong supporter of auto-IRA plans and a leader among nonprofits in providing nonpartisan data, analysis, and technical support to help states implement

these plans. Auto-IRAs are part of the solution to the retirement savings gap.

Some states have quickly embraced the auto-IRA concept. In February, Colorado's program reported that it had enrolled more than 100,000 savers in three years, with assets nearing $200 million. The accounts prove how the state is "fundamentally reshaping" Coloradans' financial future, said State Treasurer Dave Young.

Courtney Eccles, a senior vice president at Vestwell Government Savings in Colorado Springs, specializes in state auto-IRA program management. She attributed the interest in part to the straightforward plan design.

"Sometimes there's an urge in some programs to take something that's working and overcomplicate it," said Eccles. "When you look at these programs and where we are now, one of the greatest achievements of auto-IRA is that states have done an incredible job keeping the design simple."

As a senior vice president at Vestwell Government Savings in Colorado Springs, Courtney Eccles specializes in state auto-IRA program management. She says a big draw of these plans is their straightforward design: "States have done an incredible job keeping the design simple."

The programs are responding to a demand to close the gap in coverage. Of the estimated 6 million U.S. small businesses, about half (49%) employ one to four workers, according to Pew Research Center. Like most companies today, small businesses do not offer their workers defined-benefit pensions and say they cannot afford to put money into alternatives such as 401(k)s. This leaves nearly 60 million Americans, many of them modest-wage earners such as Gregoire, with only their savings and Social Security when they stop working.

"We recognize that American workers are not saving enough for a financially secure retirement, which means these individuals will be living in a precarious state after they leave the workplace," said Pew's Scott.

Automatic enrollment in a state-run IRA ensures higher participation than if the plans were voluntary for the employees. "We've found that workers at small businesses are very likely to set aside money for retirement if they have easy access to a savings plan at work," said Scott. "And then they put away money on a regular basis through payroll deduction."

Rules and structures vary from state to state, but generally the plans are easy for workers and companies to set up with an automatic payroll contribution rate. Although workers are automatically enrolled, they can opt out at any time. Private companies, which cannot match contributions, would need to complete only a small amount of paperwork and handle paycheck deductions in much the same way they already do with payroll taxes. Employers can participate in the state IRA or sponsor their own plan at any time—and federal data shows that states with auto-IRA programs have rates of private plan creation at or above the national average.

Importantly for a generation that changes jobs frequently, the auto-IRA accounts are portable, because the employee owns the IRA. If workers switch jobs or move to another state, they can take their retirement savings with them. There are tax advantages too. Growth and withdrawals in a Roth IRA are tax free, because workers contribute post-tax dollars.

At work recently at Purple Toad, Gregoire checks on an order from the kitchen. Like many workers who gained access to auto-IRAs, Gregoire signed up immediately. "It was easy to do, and I can see the rewards of it as savings grow with time," she says. Such state-facilitated savings programs are growing, and they not only help Americans to put money away for the future but also can reduce future strain on state and federal public assistance programs.

After Rhode Island launched its auto-IRA savings program last fall, it took the state just 90 days to register over 500 companies with the minimum five employees needed to participate.

General Treasurer James Diossa said the state initially connected 3,000 workers to a "simple, affordable" plan, and for many, it was their first experience with a retirement account. "The early registration success reflects the clear need for an accessible retirement savings option among Rhode Island workers," Diossa said.

Rhode Island is partnering with Connecticut, one of several state collaborations on auto-IRA plans that have emerged as officials have realized they can save money by working together. Increasing the pool of participants and assets helps to lower account fees and boosts savings, which aids small state plans in particular.

Jessica Muirhead, executive director of Connecticut's payroll savings plan, MyCT Savings, said the accounts added by Rhode Island create a combined larger pool of participants that could lower program fees in the future.

Partners maintain some autonomy. Although Minnesota currently partners with Colorado, Delaware, Maine, Nevada, and Vermont, the program is administered by Minnesota state employees, with investments monitored by the Minnesota State Board of Investment.

The savings programs are consistent with Pew's belief that the financial well-being of the labor force also benefits the fiscal health of state and local governments coping with increasing social assistance costs for programs such as Medicaid.

"Insufficient retirement savings may mean older Americans will need to request help from federal, state, or local budgets," Scott said. But this is a fixable problem: The NCSL report also found that modest savings of $140 a month over 30 years would erase that fiscal imbalance.

Going forward, governments at all levels are drawing attention to the need to strengthen opportunities for Americans to access employer sponsored-retirement savings plans.

Under a proposal led by AARP, auto-IRAs would expand to a universal access, 50-state retirement savings system called Auto-IRA Plus.

"It's the next generation," said David John, an AARP senior strategic policy adviser who was influential, along with Pew and the Brookings Institution, in the early development of automated plans.

If approved by Congress, Auto-IRA Plus would retain the low-cost structure of auto-IRAs aimed at small businesses. John said he hopes that "Plus" would lead to universal retirement savings coverage in part because it builds on the accomplishment of auto-IRAs.

"We are moving from individual state programs to national coverage," John said. "The first generation showed us the value of automated plans and that they work. The next generation would scale it up so everyone has the opportunity."

"IN A WORLD OF COMPETING COSTS, IT IS HARD TO SAVE FOR RETIREMENT."

JAMES DIOSSA, RHODE ISLAND GENERAL TREASURER

U.S. Representative Richard Neal (D-MA) cited the success of state auto-IRAs when he sponsored federal legislation that would require companies nationwide with more than 10 employees to automatically enroll their workers in a retirement savings plan. Smaller companies would be eligible for tax credits. Although Neal reintroduced the bill in December, it has not advanced since it first was proposed in 2010, in part because of partisan division in Congress.

President Donald Trump acknowledged the access gap in this year's State of the Union address. He said the administration would support increasing private employee access to the same type of retirement plan offered to federal workers. The government's universal plan, which would be separate from Social Security, would match employee contributions up to $1,000 a year. Although the plan would expand access, it would not, as proposed, automatically enroll workers.

Cities are also showing interest in expanding employee access to IRAs. On May 19, Philadelphia voters approved PhillySaves, an auto-IRA savings program in which eligible workers would contribute 3% to 6% of their paycheck into an IRA. New York City and Seattle passed similar initiatives that were later preempted by statewide plans.

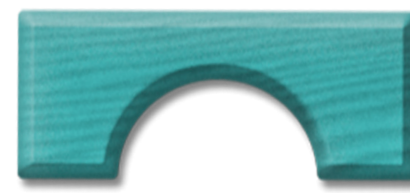
Although the early results are encouraging, auto-IRAs still face hurdles. One is that most of the early adopters are blue states. Historically, lawmakers in GOP-led states have expressed doubts about government-mandated programs, especially those that affect small businesses.

But there are growing signs of interest as policymakers weigh the positive results from state auto-IRAs and respond to constituent pressure to support access to retirement security. Nevada's auto-IRA legislation was approved with bipartisan support, for example. And in 2025, GOP lawmakers sponsored auto-IRA bills in Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, and Tennessee.

In the end, auto-IRA programs are maintaining growth in assets, accounts, and employer registrations.

"In a world of competing costs, it is hard to save for retirement," said Rhode Island's Diossa. "This program puts retirement savings front and center by providing an easy savings vehicle employees do not have to seek out on their own time."

Stephen Fehr is a former state fiscal expert for The Pew Charitable Trusts and a frequent contributor to Trust *magazine.*



Research Leads the Way

BY KRISTA JENKINS AND CARRIE HRITZ

A manufactured house is moved into place in a neighborhood in Petersburg, Virginia. Research from Pew's housing team showed manufactured home residents are more vulnerable to alternative financing loans. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

The Pew Charitable Trusts is known for data-driven work and embraces integrity as a driving principle behind its research. This means that when Pew decides to tackle a problem—whether it's the lack of available housing, the need for retirement savings, how to help protect ocean species, or some 40 other project areas—it makes every effort to provide rigorous research and recommendations that are grounded in data and science. Pew's research is supported by a unit of trained researchers—the research quality and support (RQS) team—whose job is to ensure that every Pew study meets high standards of methodological rigor, transparency, and ethical integrity.

In a typical research process, quality control happens at the end. After a study is designed, the data collected, and a report drafted, the publication is then sent for peer review or internal signoff, with quality considered a final checkpoint.

Pew flips that usual model around. The RQS team is embedded at every stage of the research and works collaboratively with experts across the organization. This helps to ensure that every project is built on a solid methodological foundation—one that asks the right research questions; reaches the right people, groups, states, or nations; and selects the best approach for the goals at hand. The RQS team helps to design the research carefully from the start and to

consider what approach would best serve the intended inquiry. Would in-depth interviews, focus groups, or something else be most appropriate?

An example of how RQS helps to strengthen Pew's research can be found in the team's work with Pew's housing policy initiative team. The housing team explores how regulations contribute to housing shortages and rising costs and what policymakers can do to create more options for housing affordability—one of the nation's most pressing challenges. Part of that work involves understanding how people finance homes. When standard mortgages aren't available, people often turn to alternative financing loans, which can expose them to higher risk and come with few consumer protections.

Manufactured home residents are particularly vulnerable. Many rely on loans with higher rates and fewer protections than mortgages, such as personal property loans. And when those aren't available, some buyers turn to contract financing, which can involve limited transparency, balloon payments, loss of equity in cases of default, and the responsibility to pay taxes and insurance without full ownership.

"By having a built-in research quality team involved at every step of the work, Pew helps ensure that there is an active, consultive process behind its data-driven research."

To help measure the scale of this issue, the housing team turned to RQS survey experts. Together they designed a survey that captured highly technical financing details in ways the general public could accurately understand and relay.

Because many borrowers don't know the formal name of their type of loan, survey questions had to be carefully crafted to help respondents clearly identify their situation. To accomplish this, RQS listened to what the housing team wanted to learn, wrote questions that would shed light on this important and niche population, and found the right vendor who could interview enough respondents (1,200) to make the analysis meaningful. Collaboration here was key.

In addition, RQS was able to translate complex housing finance structures into accessible survey language and also interpret the results. This allowed the housing team to produce reliable national estimates—and give policymakers a clearer picture of how many Americans use alternative financing with limited protections, and why it matters.

The housing team has also worked to assess the safety of single-stairway multifamily buildings as tall as six floors. Such apartments are already more affordable than single-family homes. The team's research shows that single-staircase designs don't compromise fire safety, but they do reduce building costs by 6% to 13% compared with buildings with requirements for two staircases. These construction savings also create more affordable housing options.

A key part of this safety assessment was comparing fire fatalities in single-stairway versus multistairway buildings. This proved to be a complex undertaking: Working with RQS, the housing team built a methodology that draws on publicly available databases and includes a review of every fire fatality recorded in jurisdictions permitting single-stairway buildings—examining, in each case, whether the building's stairway configuration was a contributing factor. As with all housing research, RQS provided quality assurance on the analysis and ensured that the published findings were rigorously vetted.

Summing up the collaboration, housing project director Alex Horowitz said, "There's a reason no one had ever hand-coded more than a decade of fire fatalities before, but RQS provided close guidance and several research assistants so we could better understand how building design and fire safety interact." The result was a win on two fronts—improving affordability and reducing fire deaths.

By having a built-in research quality team involved at every step of the work, Pew helps ensure that there is an active, consultive process behind its data-driven research. This has helped Pew to produce research that is consistent, stands up to scrutiny, and is often referenced by policymakers.

Krista Jenkins, Ph.D., is project director and Carrie Hritz, Ph.D., is director of The Pew Charitable Trusts' research quality and support team. Between them, they have some 35 years of experience in applied research.

Where Do Americans Turn First for Information About Breaking News?

BY CHRISTOPHER ST. AUBIN


Tashi-Delek/Getty Images

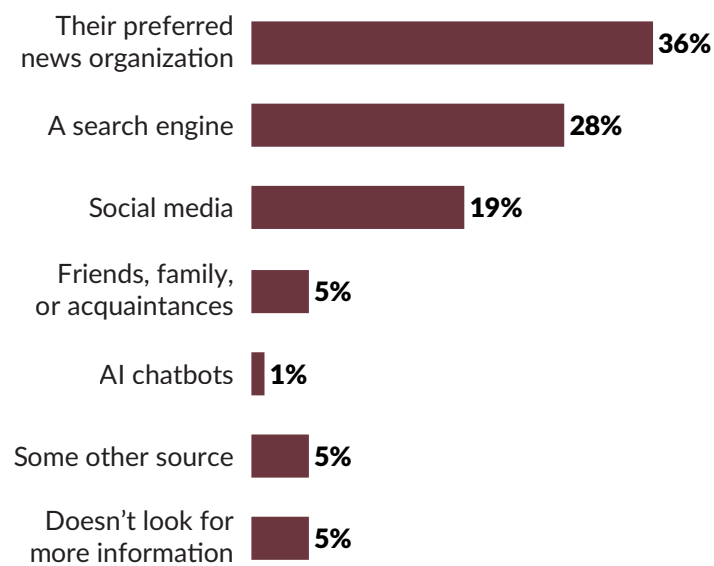
When Americans look to learn more about a breaking news event, they turn to a variety of sources. This mirrors the fragmented way that people get news and information more broadly these days.

When a breaking news event happens, 36% of U.S. adults say they typically turn first to their preferred news organization to get more information, according to a 2025 Pew Research Center survey from the Pew-Knight Initiative. Another 28% look to search engines like Google or Bing, and 19% make social media their first destination. A smaller share (5%) usually asks friends, family, or acquaintances for more information.

In a similar question from 2018, a slim majority of Americans (54%) said they turned to their preferred news organization when they wanted to learn more about a breaking news event. The shares of U.S. adults who said they turned first to search engines (15%) and social media (9%) were both lower than they are today. Similar shares in both survey years said they turn to people in their lives.

Americans turn to news organizations, search engines, and social media to learn more about breaking news

% of U.S. adults who typically go to __ first to get more information when a breaking news event happens



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 8-14, 2025.

PEW-KNIGHT INITIATIVE

Reflecting the evolving news environment, some other response options in the two surveys were not the same. We included an option for news aggregation websites or apps (such as Google News, Apple News, or Flipboard) in 2018 but not 2025. In 2025, we added three response options: AI chatbots (such as ChatGPT or Gemini), "Some other source," and "I don't look for more information."

Relatively few Americans selected these options: 1% said they go first to AI chatbots for more information about breaking news, while 5% each consult another source or say they don't look for more information.

The small share who look to AI chatbots for more information about breaking news reflects the fact that relatively few Americans say they use AI chatbots for news in general. However, those who turn to search engines for this information still might see AI-generated summaries.

Age differences

Where Americans turn first to get more information about breaking news events varies widely by age.

Based on the 2025 survey, Americans ages 65 and older are around four times as likely as adults ages 18 to 29 to say they turn to their preferred news organization for this (59% vs. 14%).

By contrast, younger adults are more likely to say they turn to search engines and social media for breaking news. For example, 31% of adults under 30 say they turn to social media first to get more information about breaking news events. Just 6% of Americans 65 and older say the same.

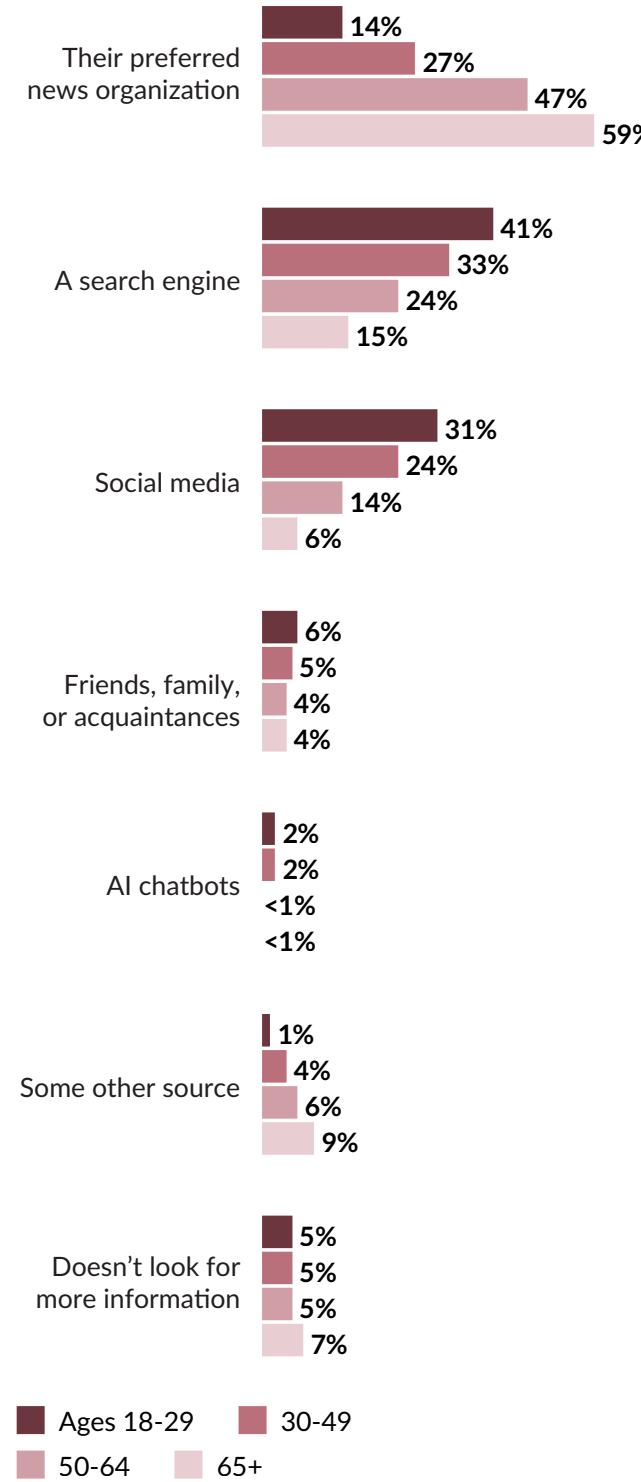
This aligns with a previous Center study showing that the share of younger adults who get news from social media is much higher than the share of older adults who do so. Among adults ages 18-29, 76% say they get news from social media at least sometimes, compared with 28% of adults ages 65 and older.

Younger adults are also more likely than older Americans to trust the information they get from social media. And adults ages 18-29 are now about equally likely to trust information they get from social media and from national news organizations.

Christopher St. Aubin is a research analyst focusing on news and information research at Pew Research Center.

Where Americans go for breaking news varies by age

% of U.S. adults who typically go to __ first to get more information when a breaking news event happens



Source: Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 8-14, 2025.

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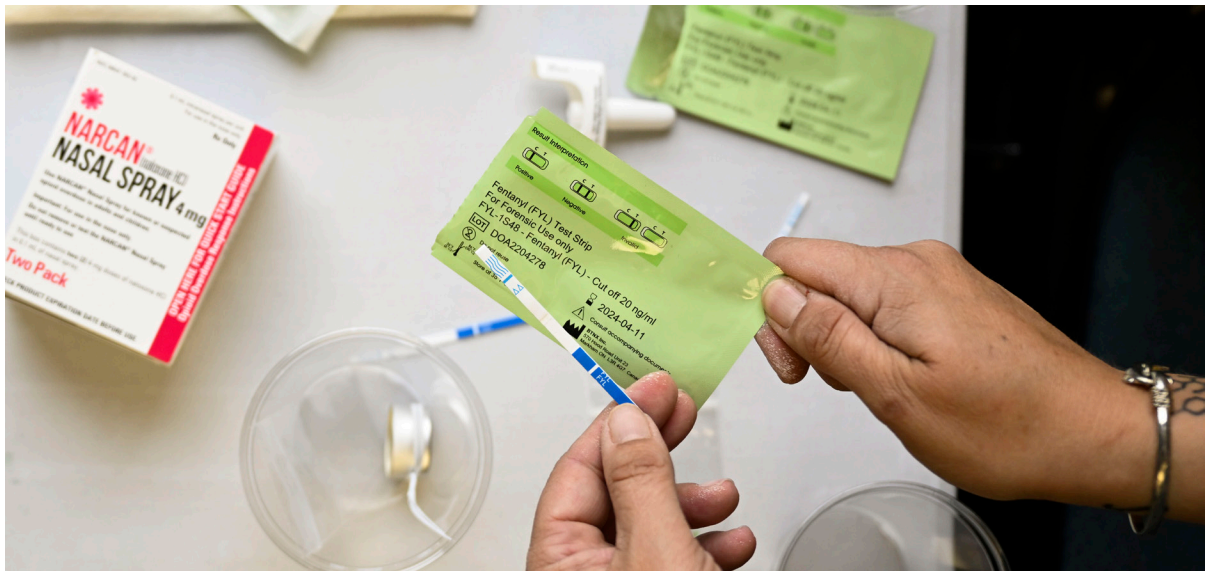
Drug Checking Equipment Can Lead to Healthier Decisions, Saving Lives

Tools offer more information about unpredictable drug supply

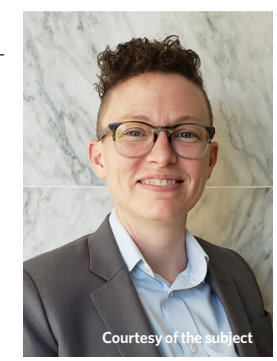


A person holds a fentanyl test strip. *RJ Sangosti/MediaNews Group/The Denver Post via Getty Images*

Strong and dangerous substances such as fentanyl have become increasingly common in the illicit drug supply but often go undetected, causing overdoses. Drug checking equipment—namely test strips or spectroscopy machines such as the Fourier-Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectrometer—are tools that can identify harmful substances and reduce the risk of an overdose by providing valuable, potentially lifesaving information to people who use drugs.

Pew spoke with Dr. Megan Reed, a research assistant professor in emergency medicine at Philadelphia's Thomas Jefferson University, about the role of this technology in addressing the overdose crisis. Reed's areas of study include overdose prevention, barriers for engaging in risk reduction strategies, community-based participatory research, and drug checking. She received her Ph.D. from Drexel University in community health and prevention.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.


Courtesy of the subject

Q: How can drug checking equipment help the overdose crisis?

Our drug supply isn't regulated. If I order a cocktail, I can be pretty certain that what I order is what's actually going to be there, because alcohol is regulated. For many reasons, that's not the case with [illicit] drugs, so users may not know what's in them. In fact, they almost certainly don't.

Drug checking can give people a clearer idea of what is in the drug they're using. And when people have information, they're naturally going to make healthier decisions that can reduce their risk for overdose and benefit their health. They may use smaller quantities of a drug, consume it more slowly, or use drugs around those who can administer naloxone or call for help in case of an overdose.

Q: Why is this equipment necessary?

Substances in the drug supply have become more potent and much easier to manufacture. We've seen the intrusion of veterinary tranquilizers like xylazine and medetomidine, which are not approved for human

use, and other more potent sedatives. This can make use riskier and complicate how to respond to an overdose. These substances can pop up and enter the drug supply, sometimes going away and other times becoming entrenched very quickly.

The drug supply is hyperregional, hyperlocal. Philadelphia, Delaware, Baltimore, New York City—they all have different drug supplies that change quickly. This is part of what makes drug checking equipment so critical. It can give people lifesaving information on what can be an unpredictable product.

Q: What would you say to someone who argues that drug checking equipment normalizes drug use and shouldn't be used?

No evaluations have ever shown that these interventions cause the initiation of drug use, an increase in drug use, or a riskier way of using drugs. All evidence shows the opposite: that people decrease their substance use or they use drugs in a less risky way.

At the end of the day, the interventions mean people are alive. And when you talk to people in a very person-centered way, it gives them agency. When people have agency, they make rational decisions that are good for their health.

Q: Describe the different types of equipment.

First are test strips—which can be available in a variety of settings depending on the state and can be used whenever a person has space and time and privacy. If used correctly, fentanyl test strips give reliable results. On the other hand, xylazine tests may be less reliable because they can't easily pick up on low concentrations of this substance, but they're still a valuable tool.

Q: How easy are the strips to use?

They're not as simple as they may look. Public education, awareness, and training are key parts of the success of test strips. Testing has a lot of steps and nuance.

Q: What else?

There's spectroscopy equipment like the FTIR, which would be run by someone, perhaps in a local health program. An FTIR can identify multiple substances in a drug sample, while test strips are used to detect one substance at a time, like fentanyl or xylazine.

Q: How accurate is FTIR?

This technology has limitations. Each sample takes about 10 to 20 minutes to run on the FTIR, and if the substance of concern is less than 5% of the sample, the machine can't pick it up. And some of these substances are extremely potent and may even be deadly in very small amounts. We have to tell people that.

A trained technician should have a conversation about what the tests can tell, what they can't, and the possible impact. Then have a conversation about options.

Q: In a way, a conversation is part of the tool.

Yes. If I'm a person who uses drugs, that's deeply empowering to me to talk about some of the tools and tricks I can use and about what I can do to stay safer.

Q: What can policymakers do to support the wider use of drug checking equipment?

First, drug paraphernalia laws in states need to be written broadly to cover new technology as it emerges. For example, many laws legalizing fentanyl test strips didn't apply to xylazine test strips when they came out. Policymakers had to go back and change the paraphernalia laws to include them.

Second, laws also need to protect not only the person who is operating the equipment but the person providing the sample. Until you have that layer of protection, policies won't have the intended effect of reducing overdose deaths.

Q: What about funding for the tests themselves?

Yes, not only funding for the test strips and the purchase of FTIRs for community-based organizations, but also the training and education on drug checking equipment would also make a big impact. In addition, if a substance can't be identified by the FTIR, we need money in the budget to send off the sample for confirmatory testing at a lab that uses mass spectrometry, which can give a much more granular breakdown of what's in it.

Q: What else should people know?

A major benefit of drug checking is that policymakers and the public will have a better understanding of the drug supply, because we can aggregate results. So much of what we know about the drug supply in Philadelphia now is because the health department has been testing the supply.

When used correctly, these drug checking tools can provide incredibly useful information not only for individuals but for everyone. We ought to approach it as one of the many interventions that are available in the prevention and treatment ecosystem that can be used to keep people alive and healthy.

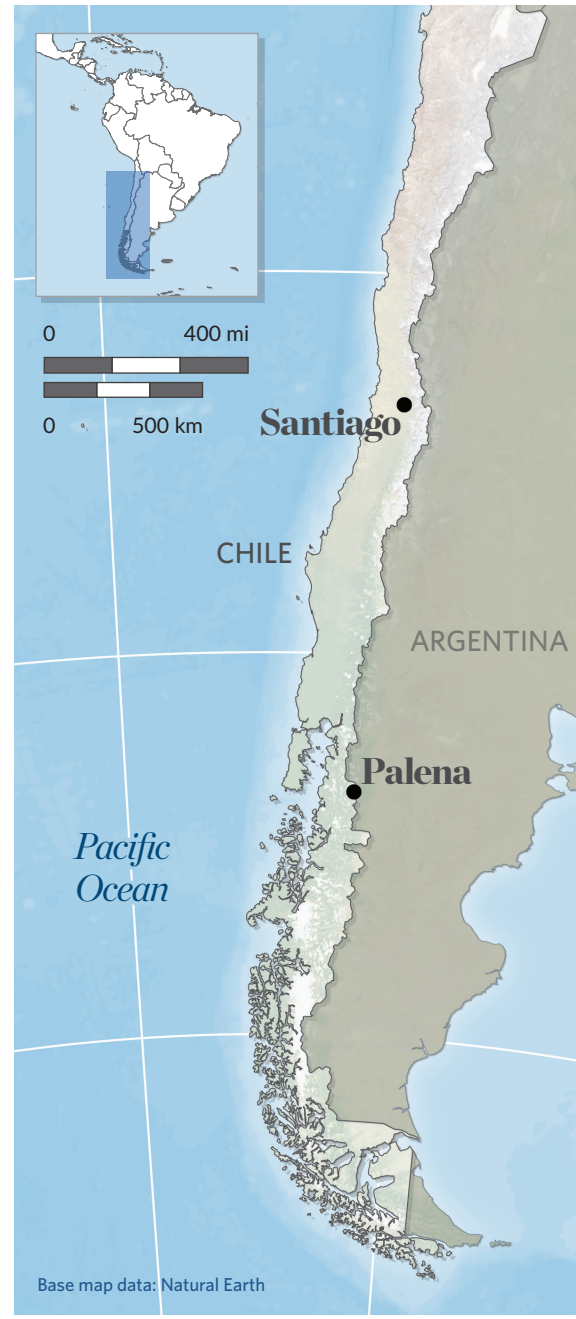
In Chilean Patagonia, a Rugged Traditional Trek

Culture and conservation converge in the Andes' Palena

BY ALEJANDRA SÁENZ

On my journey to Palena, a small town nestled deep within the Patagonian Andes, I had to travel 1,200 kilometers (745 miles) from Santiago, Chile's capital. The trip required a commercial flight, a layover, and another leg on a small propeller plane, followed by a three-hour drive along a winding gravel road. Reaching Palena took 15 hours—and this was the fastest, most direct route. For context, that's two hours longer than a flight from Santiago to Washington, D.C.

I went to Palena, an area in the Los Lagos region with a population of about 1,800, at the beginning of the Southern Hemisphere's summer. And I traveled there to experience firsthand how some of the environmental safeguards that The Pew Charitable Trusts has supported in Chile for years—in partnership with the Universidad Austral de Chile's Austral Patagonia Program—benefit local residents. One of these initiatives, the creation of a multiuse conservation area, was designed to balance ecosystem protections with traditional and sustainable uses of the land, such as the Andean transhumance—the process of moving livestock across difficult terrain to their summer grazing areas. I went to participate in and document one of these migrations.



A 3-day trek through rivers and forests

I joined four arrieros, or herders, in mid-December as they led their livestock to higher-elevation pastures, where the animals would spend the summer months grazing in preparation for winter. The trip entailed a three-day journey on horseback across rivers and through native forests and wetlands—terrain much more rugged than the city streets and paved bike lanes I'm used to navigating in Santiago.

Javier Lavoz, Cristian Galindo, Tomás Videla, and Natalia Ibáñez, who served as the hosts throughout the trek, all grew up around horses, accompanying their grandparents on these summer livestock migrations, or veranadas, as they're known in Chile (stemming from verano, the Spanish word for summer). In fact, up until

Top: Herder Javier Lavoz drinks mate, a traditional Patagonian tea, on a break during a three-day trek to move his cattle herd up the mountains to summer grazing grounds, an activity his family has undertaken for generations. Bottom: The migration took place in the Chilean Andes across rugged, rocky terrain and dense forests that Pew has worked to protect. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

two years ago, Galindo's grandfather, now 95, was still taking part in the veranadas.

As I mounted my horse and began the trek, I was captivated by how seamlessly the arrieros and their animals moved, forging ahead in unison as if they were a single entity. Periodic whistles and shouts from the arrieros served as commands to their herding dogs, which helped them contain the nearly 50 cows and calves in a tight, orderly cluster.

Our group's pace was dictated not just by the animals but also by the terrain itself: The imposing landscape often compelled us to slow down, observe, and gain a deeper appreciation for our surroundings.

It's often said in this region that "he who hurries in Patagonia is wasting his time." We took that message to heart. Consequently, our group learned to move at a deliberate pace, letting the horses carry us along as we took in the beauty of the rugged, glacier-encrusted mountains, centuries-old forests of lenga—an iconic native deciduous tree that can reach a towering 30 meters (100 feet) in height—and emerald-hued rivers. This picturesque landscape also serves as a sanctuary for iconic species such as the huemul (an endangered deer), the puma, and the vizcacha (a chinchilla-like rodent), although we didn't spot any on our trek, as they can be quite elusive. We did, however, hear constant birdsong from the hundreds of native avian species—chucaos and rayaditos among them—as we made our way.

"It's like a dream to find a conservation framework that preserves nature while also respecting our customary practices," said Ibáñez, Palena's tourism manager and a local entrepreneur specializing in horseback riding tours. Indeed, multiuse conservation areas aim to support both conservation and traditional land uses, acknowledging that protections can support traditional practices in an organized, reverent, and sustainable way.

Allies in conservation

For the past three years, Pew has supported Palena's community in working to establish this conservation area, offering technical assistance to the initiative and providing tools and expertise to advance the creation of protected areas that successfully integrate biodiversity conservation and local economic development. And the Universidad Austral de Chile has provided key data on local ecosystems, land use patterns, and opportunities for sustainable resource management.

This type of project not only makes a meaningful impact locally but also helps to position Chile as a benchmark for lasting conservation models that consider communities, local authorities, biodiversity, culture, and development.

Carrying crucial traditions forward

Yet, beyond the research and technical support, what truly sustains this initiative are local residents and leaders—people such as Lavoz, for whom conservation is not an abstract construct but a value he lives every day. People who view the land as a core part of their culture and identity, and who care for it accordingly. Now, this organized and vibrant community—made up of arrieros, tourism entrepreneurs, residents, and public officials—awaits official approval of the conservation area from the Ministry of the Environment.

At nightfall, as I helped with setting up camp and preparing dinner, I watched the livestock scatter across the valley. The wind swept down from the mountains, and the sky threatened rain. And in that moment, I grasped even more firmly what was truly at stake in this expansive and largely untouched region of Patagonia: Conservation encompasses more than protecting an extraordinary landscape; it's also about preserving a unique and important way of life.

Left: On horseback, Lavoz—followed by herding dogs that he instructs through whistles and sounds—pushes the cattle across a river on the journey to higher-elevation grazing grounds. Above: A hat, rope, and horse tack hang from the crook of a tree after a day of trekking. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

Alejandra Sáenz works on The Pew Charitable Trusts' conserving nature for Chile project.

How America's Founding Ideals Are Relevant to Countering Religious Biases Today

Nation's anniversary is a time to reflect on religious tolerance

BY JULIE SULC

Christian Harb/Unsplash

America's 250th anniversary is a time to commemorate the country's formation and the democratic ideals on which it was founded. This milestone also serves as an important time to reflect on who we are as a country, including the values we uphold and how we engage with one another. Our nation's founders pioneered a government system that has, with varying degrees of success, enabled people of diverse faith traditions to live out their convictions and freely express their beliefs.

Religious pluralism is the understanding of and appreciation for diverse religious beliefs—including none at all—and the willingness to engage respectfully and productively with people who have different convictions and worldviews. This concept is a natural extension of the founders' commitment to protect religious diversity. Religious pluralism also serves as the basis for The Pew Charitable Trusts' religion work to support programs that promote pluralism while building an evidence base for approaches that achieve it.

Long before the United States was created, the acceptance of diverse religious traditions came in fits and starts—and often was not applied to religious minorities. The Puritans sought religious freedom for themselves but failed to extend it to others. Facing religious persecution in Massachusetts, Roger Williams founded Rhode Island as a safe haven for multiple faiths and demonstrated that church-state separation enabled people from different religious backgrounds to live, work, and thrive together.

Today we face similar struggles to apply the ideal of embracing religious differences—whether Sikh, Hindu, Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, or atheist—in America's communities.

While incidents of religious intolerance and enmity understandably command people's attention, much good work is also occurring to encourage an understanding of faith differences. Organizations such as Interfaith America aim to foster healthy engagement across religious differences. For example, the Team Up Project, a collaboration among Interfaith America, Catholic Charities USA, Habitat for Humanity International, and YMCA of the USA, connects people of various faiths through service, such as building homes or playgrounds. Such face-to-face programs that engage people of different faith backgrounds have shown promise in countering biases and promoting pluralism. Research also indicates that educational programs on various religious beliefs and practices and on developing skills that promote positive interaction can be effective at bridging religious divides, although more data is needed to be certain.

Pew's religion work helps to assess and increase the impact of programs that aim to counter religious bias and intolerance and promote religious pluralism. This includes supporting data-driven efforts such as the Interfaith, Spiritual, Religious, and Secular (INSPIRES) Index, designed to measure efforts to accommodate diverse worldviews in higher education. The assessment tool takes an evidence-based approach to isolate specific factors that create a hospitable climate on college campuses for students of different religious backgrounds. For example, for Jewish students, reliable access to kosher food across dining centers signals welcome. Likewise, for Muslim students, dedicated prayer space is pivotal. The research undergirding INSPIRES also shows that improvements for one group (for example, adding prayer space) increases perceived institutional responsiveness among other religious groups and atheists, producing crossgroup benefits.

Pew also supports evaluation that helps programs track and assess the impact of their efforts. For example, Interfaith America is implementing a robust monitoring, evaluation, and learning plan to test the underlying theories that shape its programs to bridge differences on college campuses, in the workplace, and in communities. Ultimately, the goal is to gather data that shows which programs work, under which conditions, and how to replicate approaches deemed effective. By sharing what they learn, such organizations can strengthen the broader movement for religious pluralism.

Programs dedicated to bridging religious divides maintain the spirit that shaped America's founding by creating spaces where people of all faith traditions or none at all can flourish.

"We have to make sure that … people of diverse backgrounds are respecting each other's identities, building relationships across communities, and cooperating with one another to serve the common good," Eboo Patel, president of Interfaith America, observed. "Respect, relate, cooperate—that's American pluralism."

Working together toward this common goal will benefit everyone now and for years to come—hopefully even for the next 250.

Julie Sulc leads The Pew Charitable Trusts' work on religion.

Pedro Lima/Unsplash

We're Losing the Race Against Plastic, But There's a Solution

BY WINNIE LAU

Within 15 years, a garbage truck's worth of plastic could be entering our environment every second. Not every minute. Every second. Plastic is everywhere in modern life and has essential, lifesaving uses, but the proliferation of plastic has also made it one of the great environmental challenges of our time. Plastic pollutes our land, air, and water; costs governments billions each year to manage; and is putting human health at increasing risk.

On the current trajectory, the consequences of plastic pollution are far worse than we understood even five years ago. The latest findings by The Pew Charitable Trusts are sobering, but they also chart a clear path forward using solutions that already exist.

The world already creates more plastic than can be effectively managed. And it is on pace to grow plastic production by more than 50% by 2040—twice the expected increase in waste management capacity over the same period. This means that despite more than $32 billion in additional investment in waste management capacity, plastic production will continue to grow faster than the infrastructure being built to manage it.

And these costs come not just in dollars and cents but also through various health threats linked to plastics—including cancer, heart disease, asthma, decreased fertility, and developmental issues. Microplastics have been found throughout people's bodies, including in placentas alongside fetuses.

The science is mounting on the potential harm from microplastics and the thousands of chemicals that are used in plastic production. Currently, 6 million years of healthy life is being lost each year due to illness, disability, or premature death associated with plastic production and waste. These health risks stem primarily from air pollution caused by production facilities or the burning of plastic waste in places that lack the capacity to properly manage it. By 2040, nearly 10 million years of healthy life will be lost per year—and that's before accounting for any health impacts from the use of plastic products.

However, there is a path to a healthier and cleaner future—a path that transforms the plastic system. With the solutions available today, plastic pollution can be cut by 83% by 2040 and almost eliminated from one of its leading causes: packaging. To that end, governments and companies need to deploy solutions throughout the global plastic system. These solutions' effectiveness depends on transforming the plastic system by reducing production, improving product and system design, enhancing waste management, and increasing the transparency of the supply chain and its impacts.

This path will require unprecedented collaboration among policymakers, businesses, innovators, and communities, and the benefits will be immense. If we commit to this collaboration, in the next 15 years, health impacts will be halved, governments will save billions annually on waste management, and new business opportunities and millions of new jobs—with better pay and better working conditions—will be created as the landscape of jobs shifts from plastic production to collection, recycling and reuse, and the creation of substitute materials.

The urgency is real. If we delay action another five years, even more plastic will end up in our air, land, and water. This delay would result in billions more being invested in "linear economy" infrastructure—in which products are made, used, and thrown away. Instead, those investments could go toward building a "circular economy"—in which materials are reused, recycled, or repurposed, keeping them in use for as long as possible and reducing waste.

Putting an end to plastic pollution is a logical choice for our environment, for our health, and for our economies.

Winnie Lau leads The Pew Charitable Trusts' work to end plastic pollution.

This article appeared in Los Angeles Times *on Dec. 4, 2025.*

Governors Cite Collaboration, Bipartisanship as Key Themes

A recap of the "America at 250 Forum"

BY NASSERIE CAREW

From left, moderator Steve Inskeep and Governors Kevin Stitt, Wes Moore, and Spencer Cox participated in a lively conversation about civic engagement Feb. 18 at The Pew Charitable Trusts. *The Pew Charitable Trusts*

The Pew Charitable Trusts and Disagree Better hosted an event Feb. 18 featuring Utah Governor Spencer Cox (R), Maryland Governor Wes Moore (D), and Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt (R) that was moderated by journalist Steve Inskeep, the host of NPR's "Morning Edition." The conversation focused on how civil political discourse helps foster a strong republic.

Pew's cohost for the event was the nonprofit Disagree Better, which began as an initiative launched by Gov. Cox during his tenure as the chair of the National Governors Association in 2023 and is now an independent nonprofit.

The conversation focused on ways the governors have worked across party lines to find solutions for their states. Each also highlighted that public service and community building were central to their vision for America's future.

The governors talked about finding common ground, reducing divisiveness, and addressing key challenges through civil conversation and bipartisan collaboration—and they noted that mutual understanding and collaboration are critical to creating solutions.

When asked about the importance of collaborating across the aisle, Gov. Moore focused on the strength in numbers. "Individually, [governors] are restrained," he said. "But if you actually choose to move in partnership … there really is nothing that you won't be able to get done and accomplish."

Gov. Stitt agreed with this sentiment. "Here's a Republican and a Democrat governor from different states that literally agree on probably 80% of the things," he said. "And the things we disagree on, we can have honest conversations about."

And more than just being able to work together, Gov. Cox stressed that we must collectively be better. "This experiment in self-government can't work unless we change the incentives," he said. "We have to be civically minded again, and we just have to be good people. If America ceases to be good, she ceases to be great."

The need to make bipartisanship more visible was another important theme the three touched on.

"If we can inspire and teach and share what we're seeing and what we're experiencing and the friendships we have across the aisle, I think that's healthy for America to see," said Gov. Stitt.

The event was part of Pew's celebration of the United States' semiquincentennial. A recording of the governors' conversation is available online.

Nasserie Carew is senior vice president and chief communications officer at The Pew Charitable Trusts.

What the Past Can Teach Us Today

"You can look at our revolution and understand that it can teach us in so many ways."

—Ken Burns, documentary filmmaker

USA 250

USA 250

Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns wants to assure Americans that deep divisions in our country are nothing new.

In fact, according to Burns, the United States was more divided during the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Great Depression, throughout the Vietnam War period, and particularly during the American Revolution, the subject of Burns's latest documentary that debuted last fall. "Being able to have the perspective of history gives you a little bit of reassurance," he said, and "introduces a little bit of optimism."

Understanding the present in the context of the past was the subject of a conversation that kicked off The Pew Charitable Trusts' "America at 250 Speaker Series" for staff. In April, Pew's CEO Susan K. Urahn spoke with Burns and his long-time co-director Sarah Botstein to explore what lessons from the country's founding and what's been called the world's most consequential revolution can offer citizens today.

"You can look at our revolution and understand that it can teach us in so many ways," Burns told Urahn. For example, the founders were hardly perfect—and they were far from united. "They [were] at each other's throats, all the time." The country's architects represented 13 colonies that were as different as separate countries. "Nobody trusted each other," Burns said.

None of the colonies wanted to give up their autonomy, Burns explained. "Democracy at that time was a bad word. It meant the rule of the mob," he said. But the founders realized that they could not win a war without extending to "so-called 'regular people' certain rights," Burns said. When Pennsylvania extended the right to vote to any male over 21, it troubled John Adams and the planters of the South. "You begin to see that democracy is the unintended consequence rather than the intention of the revolution."

Botstein said the concept that all men are created equal set up this "brilliant, totally new idea of what a government should be." And it changed the world forever.

The founders debated heatedly over voting rights, states versus federal rights, and how the three branches of government should function, said Botstein. "And those debates are ... the best guide to understanding today."

Urahn said that exploring the nuanced narratives of America's birth may also help guide us through an era where the media tends to emphasize deep and partisan divides. She explained that Pew's efforts to bridge divides and help people find common ground is something the earliest Americans also struggled with. "Without their determination to overcome their divisions, we would not have a United States of America."

As Burns said, "[We live in] this dialectic where we have red state, blue state, young, old, gay, straight, rich, poor, North, South, East, West." And it's not accurate. "The past and the present are too complex," he said, but people love complicated narratives and teaching these rich stories is key to understanding the bigger picture and a roadmap to engaging with the world today.

"You begin to see that democracy is the unintended consequence rather than the intention of the revolution."

—Ken Burns

Wrestling with America's past is key, Burns said, because when we think "the sky is falling," we subsequently abdicate everything—our reason, perspective, and civic responsibility to be engaged. But he said the opposite is necessary.

Botstein explained that civil debates are at the very heart of America's birth. So is the obligation to vote, be involved, and to know who your local elected officials are and how government works. Citizenship today involves caring about your neighbor, listening to one another, and "trying to understand what's important to each of us."

The founders also wanted, and expected, an informed citizenry. Botstein said that we need to educate people, especially students, on how to discern the information they receive, and to think twice before they believe something.

Burns stressed that democracy is an active verb. "You don't have to agree," he said. "You just have to be involved."

As we approach our nation's 250th anniversary, reflecting on moments from our country's past—like the ones Urahn explored with Burns and Botstein to launch Pew's speaker series—can help us to celebrate our rich history and maybe, also, become more involved in modern-day civil debates.

—Carol Kaufmann

The speakers—from the top, Sarah Botstein, Ken Burns, and Susan K. Urahn—on livestream from their home offices.
The Pew Charitable Trusts

The United States at 250: How the Country Has Changed in the Past 50 Years

In July, the United States will celebrate its 250th anniversary. The country's last major milestone was 50 years ago, at its bicentennial on July 4, 1976.

U.S. society has changed profoundly since then. Over the past five decades, the U.S. population has **aged significantly,** with the percentage of people 65 and older nearly doubling. The country has also become **more racially and ethnically diverse,** as growing shares of people identify as Asian or Hispanic. And following more than 70 million immigrant arrivals, the percentage of **foreign-born people** in the population has more than tripled.

Americans are also **less likely to be married** than ever before. Women—who now have far more options outside of the home than they did in 1976—have contributed to a **boom in higher education** and helped **expand the workforce.** And even though many Americans are financially better off than they were 50 years ago, **economic gaps have widened.**

Ahead of the nation's birthday, Pew Research Center identified some prominent trends across key areas of American life: demographics, work, family, and economics. Our 50-year comparisons are based on U.S. Census Bureau data collected between 1970 and 2024.

Demographics

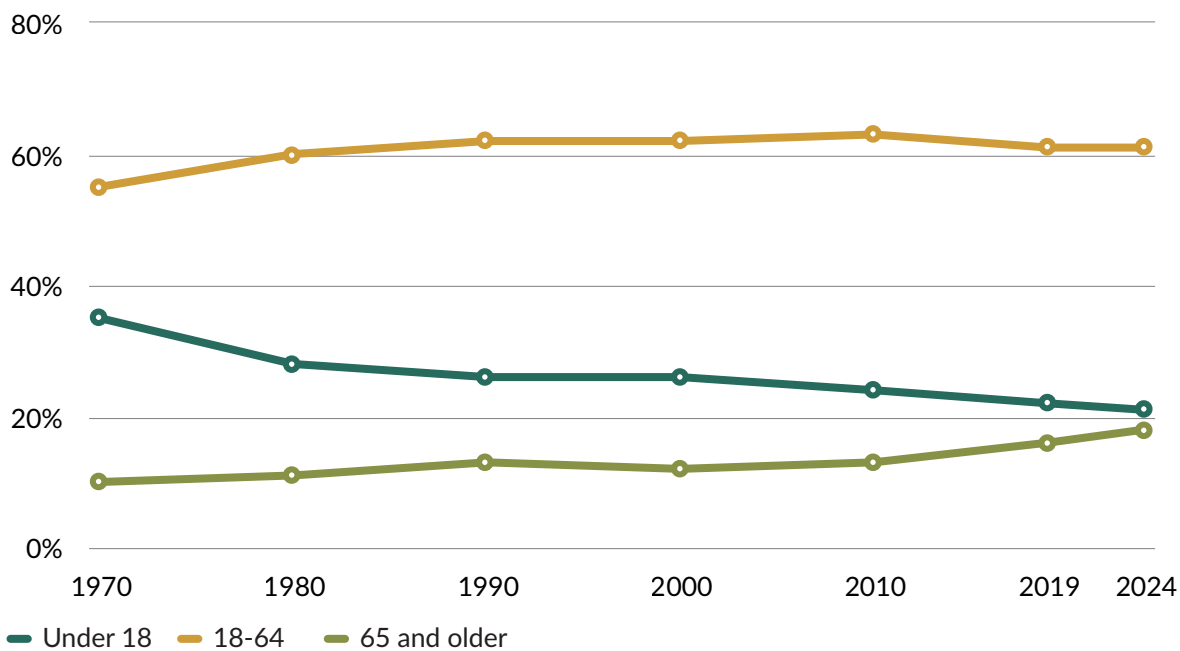
The U.S. population has grown by more than 120 million people to a new total of roughly 340 million over the past 50 years, with much of that growth driven by immigrants, longer lifespans, as well as Asian and Hispanic Americans.

An aging population

Since 1970, the share of Americans ages 65 and older has nearly doubled from 10% to 18%. The median age rose across racial and ethnic groups, but White Americans and Black Americans saw the sharpest increases.

Population

% of total population, by age group

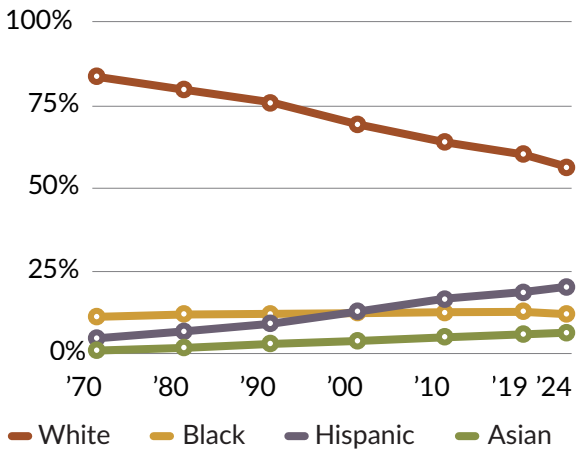


A more diverse America

The share of the U.S. population that is White (and not Hispanic) has dropped steadily since 1970, while the share of Hispanics has more than quadrupled.

Race and Hispanic origin population

% of total population, by race/ethnicity

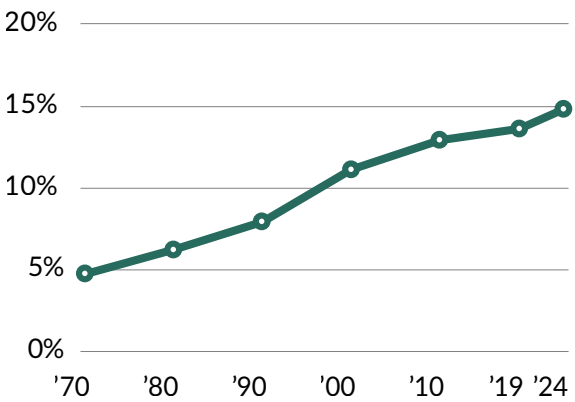


A rising share of immigrants

The share of foreign-born people in the U.S. has more than tripled since 1970—from 4.7% (an all-time low) to 14.8% in 2024. The immigrant share is highest among Asian and Hispanic Americans, as well as those living in the West and the Northeast.

Immigrant population

% of total population that is foreign born



Work

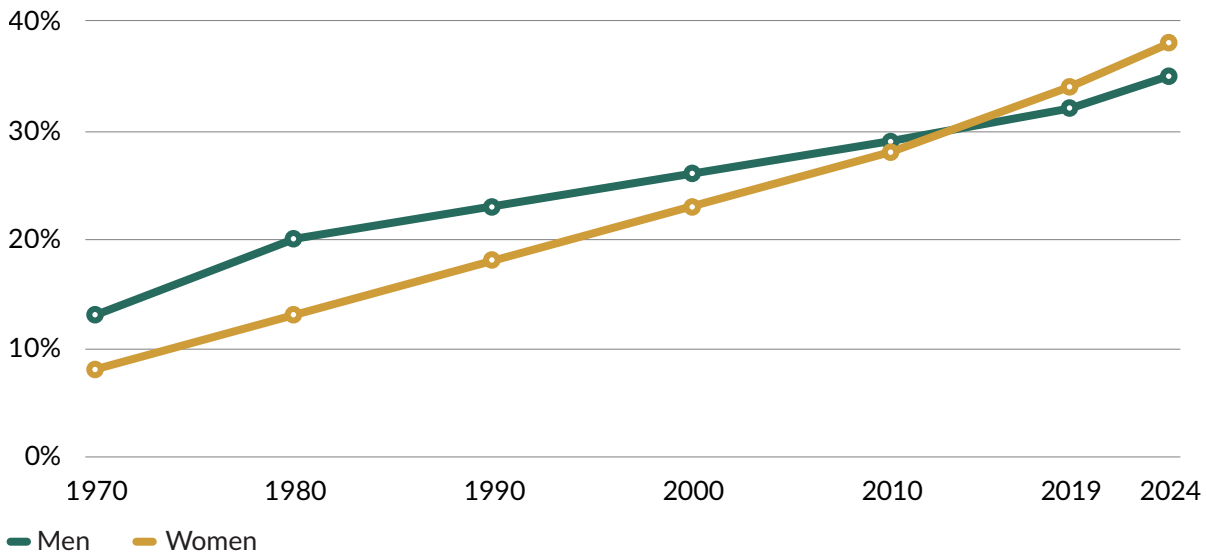
The transformation of the U.S. from an industrial economy to a service- and information-based economy has been accompanied by major changes in the workforce. Higher education enrollments vastly expanded, leading to more adults completing college. The U.S. labor force has grown, in no small part due to the increase in women working outside the home. Overall, earnings for the typical worker have increased.

Gains in higher education

The share of adults who have completed at least a bachelor's degree has more than tripled since 1970, from 11% to 37%. The increase has been greater for women than men.

Education

% of adults ages 25 and older who completed at least a bachelor's degree, by gender

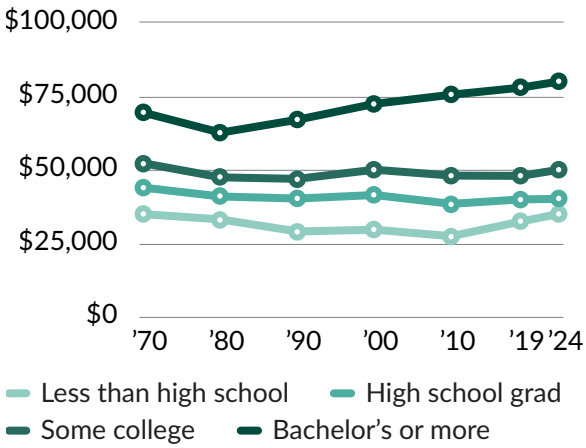


Earnings gaps widen

The median inflation-adjusted annual earnings of workers have increased since 1970. But the gains are uneven, going mainly to workers with at least a bachelor's degree rather than those with less education.

Earnings

Median annual earnings in 2023 dollars of workers ages 25 and older, by education

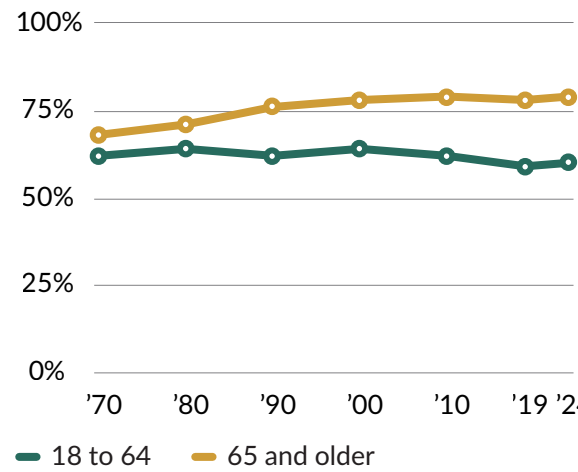


Uneven homeownership gains

Homeownership has increased only modestly since 1970. It has slightly decreased among adults ages 18 to 64 but has expanded significantly for those 65 and older.

Homeownership

% of households that own a home, by age



Economics

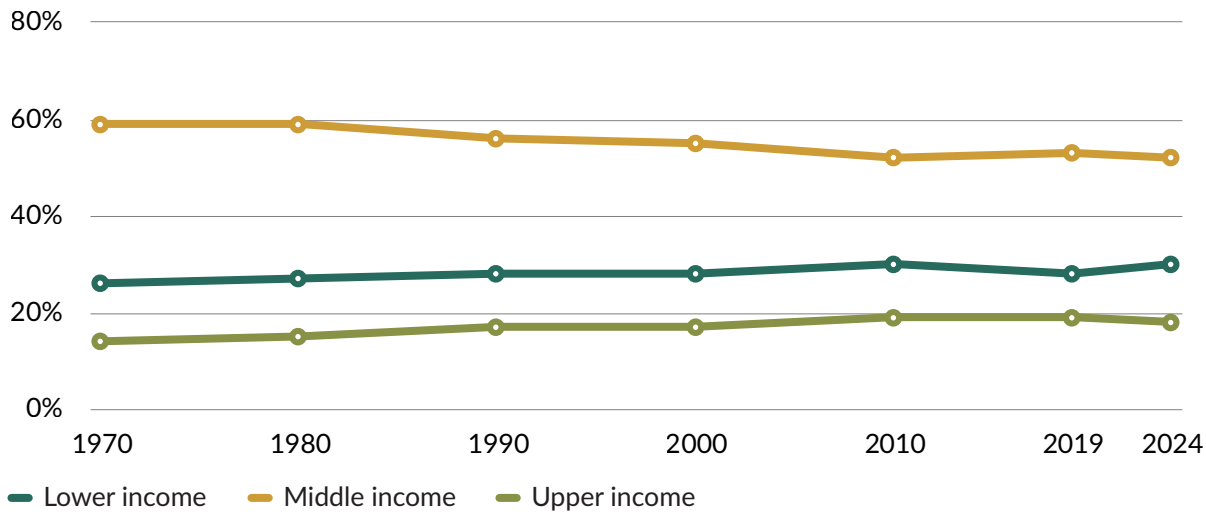
How much American standards of living have improved since 1970 partly depends on the measure. As the economy has grown, the share of Americans in poverty has declined and poverty among older Americans especially has fallen sharply. At the same time, the middle class has shrunk, and a growing share of adults are in the lower class. And homeownership has increased only marginally.

A shrinking middle class

The percentage of adults in the middle class has decreased since 1970, as the share in both the lower-income and upper-income tiers has grown.

Income class

% of adults in each income tier



Family

The American family has witnessed substantial changes since the 1970s. Americans marry and have children at later ages than they once did, and fewer Americans are doing these things at all. Living arrangements have also shifted over this period: A smaller share of children live with two married parents, and a greater share of the population lives in multigenerational households.

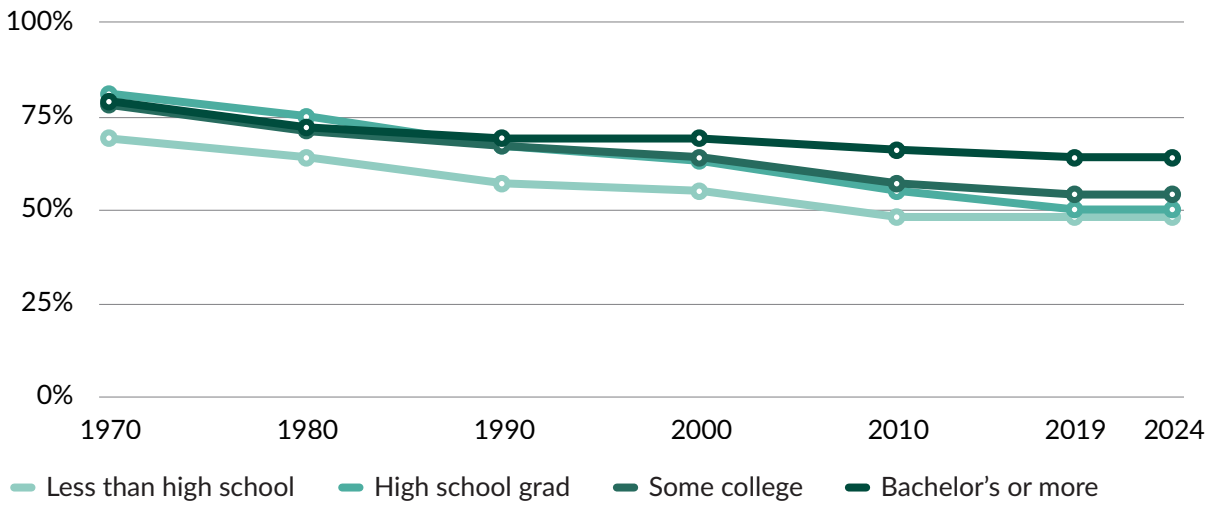
These changes have occurred unevenly across demographic groups, and as a result, gaps by education and race and ethnicity have gotten wider.

The decline of marriage

The share of adults who are currently married is now 50%, down from 69% in 1970. The drop has been steeper for adults without a four-year college degree.

Currently married

% of adults ages 25 and older who are currently married, by education



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial census, and 2010, 2019, and 2024 American Community Survey (IPUMS)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER


Jochen van Wylick/Unsplash

RETURN ON INVESTMENT

The Pew Charitable Trusts applies a rigorous, analytical approach to **improve public policy**, **inform the public**, and **invigorate civic life**, as these recent accomplishments illustrate.

IMPROVING PUBLIC POLICY

Antonio Busiello/Getty Images

New Utah court for high-volume civil cases has bipartisan support

Debt collection and eviction cases dominate the civil court docket, underscoring the need for states to implement more equitable court processes. In March, Utah Governor Spencer Cox (R) signed a bipartisan bill that will create a statewide court dedicated to hearing debt collection and eviction cases. This Collections and Housing Court is intended to provide a more consistent and streamlined approach to managing those cases. Supporters such as the nonprofit Utah Bar Foundation pointed to analyses from Pew's courts and communities project about the impact of debt and eviction litigation in the state, which highlighted procedural barriers and uneven outcomes. The bill's passage advances the project's goal of helping states leverage data to identify and address opportunities for court reform.

Honduras details ambitious conservation commitments to coastal wetlands

In January, the government of Honduras committed to coastal wetland conservation, restoration, and management in its latest nationally determined contribution (NDC) to the Paris Agreement. Honduras' NDC outlines ambitious, science-based targets that include accomplishing the following by 2035: increasing the country's protected marine coastal areas by 5%, establishing a baseline of its seagrasses, restoring at least 10% of its mangroves, and maintaining or improving the ecological integrity of at least 65% of conservation areas. These commitments are significantly more ambitious than Honduras' last NDC submission in 2021. Pew's advancing coastal wetlands conservation project will continue to support Honduras in implementing these targets, including through exploring potential financing opportunities.

Salt Lake City's Scott Matheson Third District Courthouse.
JHVEPhoto/Getty Images

INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Study ranks religious diversity around the world

Singapore is the world's most religiously diverse nation as of 2020, followed by Suriname and Taiwan, according to a Pew Research Center study published in February. The analysis ranked 201 countries and territories from zero (a country composed of a single religious group) to 10 (a country with even distributions of all seven groups included in the study). The United States ranks 32nd globally in religious diversity but places first among the world's 10 most populous countries. Since 2010, the U.S. has become more religiously diverse, largely due to a 14-percentage-point drop in the Christian majority and a corresponding rise in the religiously unaffiliated population.

The least diverse countries are Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia, where Muslims make up 99.8% or more of the population. Globally, it is common for national populations to consist primarily of a single religious group: In 194 of the 201 places analyzed, at least 50% of the population belongs to just one religious category. The study was part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures project, which tracks religious change and its impact globally.

INVIGORATING CIVIC LIFE

Pew data informs Philadelphia mayor, media outlets

Pew continues to provide Philadelphia leaders with data indicating that the city is on track to achieving measurable reductions in homicides. In her Dec. 15, 2025, "State of the City" address, Mayor Cherelle Parker (D) said that Philadelphia is outpacing a national trend toward fewer killings and that residents are feeling safer—citing data from Pew's analysis "Philadelphia's Homicides at Historic Lows," which found that the city's per capita homicide rates are the lowest they've been in more than a decade, as well as a Pew survey, "Pew Poll: Philadelphians Concerned About Public Safety and Financial Well-Being." The mayor commented, "This isn't idle rhetoric; this is data from The Pew Charitable Trusts, national experts." *The Philadelphia Inquirer's* coverage of the city's homicide rates also cited Pew's analysis and poll. Mayor Parker referenced Pew again in her March 12 budget address, when discussing Philadelphia's progress.

A police officer stands on Market Street in Philadelphia. According to Pew research, city residents reported feeling safer last year.
Lexey Swall for The Pew Charitable Trusts

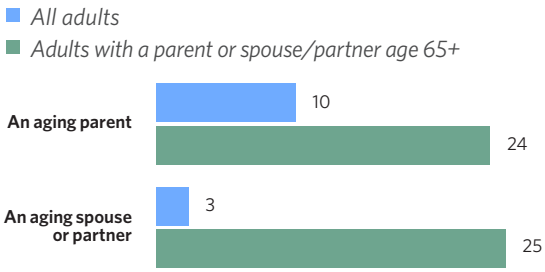

Gaby Bonilla/The Pew Charitable Trusts

Family Caregiving in an Aging America

As the U.S. population ages, the need for caregivers among older adults is on the rise. There's growing evidence that family members are increasingly taking on these roles. In a report released in February, Pew Research Center surveyed 8,750 U.S. adults to learn about the experiences of those caring for an aging parent and those caring for an aging spouse or partner. The report found that the caregiving burden increases as aging family members reach 75 and older. And, among Americans with an aging parent, spouse, or partner, those with lower incomes are much more likely to be caregivers than those with middle and upper incomes.

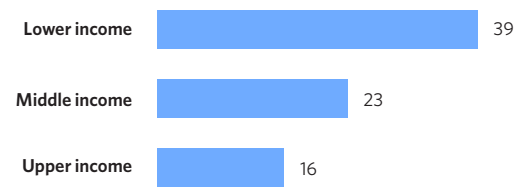
1 in 10 U.S. adults say they are a caregiver for a parent age 65 or older

% of each group ___ who consider themselves a caregiver for ...



Experiences caring for family members differ widely by income

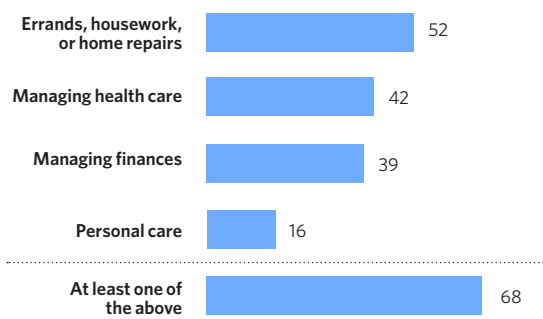
Among those with a parent, spouse, or partner age 65 or older, % saying they consider themselves a caregiver for that person:



Note: Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2024 earnings.

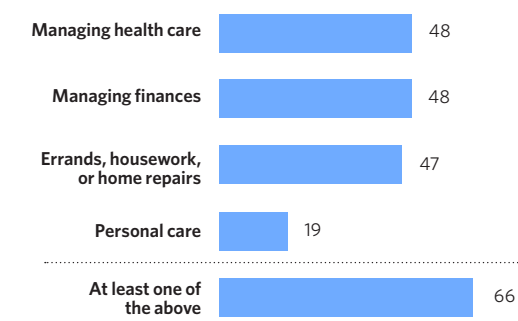
Most adults caring for an aging parent regularly help them with household or personal tasks

Among those who consider themselves a caregiver for a parent age 65 or older, % saying they **regularly** help their parent with each of the following:



About half of adults who are caring for an aging spouse or partner regularly help them manage health care, finances

Among those who consider themselves a caregiver for a spouse or partner age 65 or older, % saying they **regularly** help them with each of the following:



Source: Pew Research Center survey of 8,750 U.S. adults conducted Sept. 2-8, 2025, "Family Caregiving in an Aging America"

DISCOVER DEEP-SEA WONDERS

Otherworldly creatures inhabit the deep sea, adapted to one of the most extreme environments on Earth. And mineral-rich nodules growing on the seafloor could one day power cellphones and electric vehicle batteries. Both resources could be affected by seabed mining. Learn more on a deep dive to the bottom of the ocean in the latest episode of our podcast.

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A traditional fisher on the Pilcomayo River mends his nets.

In Bolivia's Dry Forest, the Rivers Sustain Page 14

Pedro Laguna for The Pew Charitable Trusts