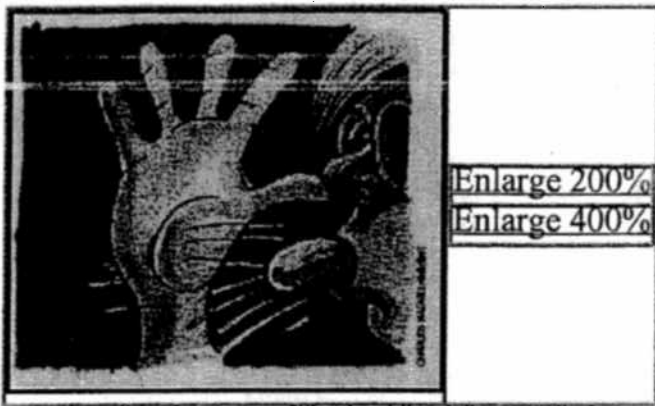


**[Headnote]**

Crassness is increasing in all regions of America, according to a new survey.



A matter of manners: "It's about the daily assault of selfishness," says Public Agenda's Deborah Wadsworth.

The nation's civility and manners have gotten worse, and four in 10 Americans admit they contribute to the pushy rudeness that increasingly characterizes modern life, according to a two-year study and opinion poll by the research group Public Agenda. The report, *Aggravating Circumstances*, is based on focus groups held last year in seven cities, a January survey of 2,013 representative adults and interviews with experts in customer relations, public policy and the media.

"Unhappiness with reckless drivers, cell-phone abuse, poor customer service, swearing and litter came from big cities and small towns," notes the report. "Experiences with bad behavior were virtually the same whether one was from the North or South, rich or poor."

Six in 10 Americans believe the coarseness is worsening. What's more, 79 percent say "lack of respect and courtesy" has become a "serious national problem," and 73 percent believe citizens treated one another "with greater respect in the past."

"Lack of manners for Americans is not whether you confuse the salad fork for the dinner fork," says Deborah Wadsworth, president of Public Agenda, formed in 1975 by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and pollster Daniel Yankelovich. "It's about the daily assault of selfishness - inconsiderate behavior that gets under our skin on highways, in the office, on TV, in stores."

American University professor Donald G. Zauderer, who works with organization leaders on human relations, thinks Americans have shifted from holding value systems to being self-assertive and needing status symbols. They also may live under new stresses. "Incivility in the workplace lowers productivity," Zauderer says. "It can create a psychological separation, and you lose quality people."

But niceness is not always sincere or the best policy. "It is best to operate in a civil manner," Zauderer says, "but still be tough when you must achieve goals or promote creativity for a larger good."

The Public Agenda poll found Americans most resent "aggressive driving," and 71 percent said they had witnessed "out-of-control parents" at sports events. Other notable offenses included loud cell-phone conversations, crude or nasty e-mails and litter. Nearly half of the respondents frequently hear swearing, and more than one-third admitted using foul language.

"In its quest for greater efficiency, American business appears to have left customer service behind," the report states. Eight in 10 Americans say stores now "cut corners" that inconvenience shoppers, and about the same number say sales-people act like "the customer is not even there." This probably hurts business, the report notes. Nearly half of Americans have walked out of a store in frustration, and it happens more often with people who earn more than \$75,000 a year.

In a positive vein, the report found half of Americans "often" see acts of kindness, and 59 percent give their neighbors high marks for friendliness. Four in 10 blacks said their "treatment has gotten better" in America. Nearly three-quarters of respondents felt kindness had increased in the United States after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and 87 percent said Americans "appreciate their country more" after the tragedy.

Alas, only 34 percent believe the good feeling will last, the report adds.

**From: Public Agenda. Aggravating Circumstances: A Status Report on Rudeness in America. New York: Public Agenda, 2002.**