

Extreme Weather Is Undermining Americans' Sense of Control Over Their Futures, New Gallup Study Finds

New research from the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup shows that extreme weather strains the community conditions, including jobs, housing, trusted neighbors and natural spaces, that help people build better futures.

BENTONVILLE, Ark. (August 18, 2026) – Nearly four in 10 Americans say their community was damaged by extreme weather in the past year, and those residents are notably less likely to feel they can shape their own future. A new [Walton Family Foundation-Gallup report](#) finds that extreme weather is not only a physical and economic threat. It also erodes Americans' sense of agency, the belief that they can shape their own path, which the study identifies as the single strongest predictor of whether people thrive. The findings arrive as part of the [How Opportunity Takes Root Study](#).

The findings land during a summer that has kept extreme weather at the front of the national conversation. July 2026 was the warmest month ever recorded in the contiguous United States, surpassing July 2012. A heat dome around the Fourth of July put more than 165 million people across the Midwest and East at risk of major or extreme heat-related health effects, straining power grids and cutting electricity to hundreds of thousands of homes. Weeks later, a 1,000-year flood tore through the Texas Hill Country in mid-July, the second year in a row such a flood struck central Texas, capping a month of repeated flash flooding from Iowa to Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia.

Thirty-eight percent of Americans say their community was affected by damage from extreme weather in the past year. Adults in those communities are less likely to say they can shape their own path, at 62%, compared with 71% of residents in unaffected communities. That gap matters because agency is the strongest predictor of wellbeing in the study. Adults who feel in control of their lives are more than twice as likely to be thriving overall and nearly twice as likely to say they have a great future ahead of them, a stronger relationship than income or education.

"The good news is that nature itself is our most powerful tool for meeting the challenges of extreme weather. In practical terms, that means nature-based solutions like reconnecting rivers to their floodplains, bringing back forests and wetlands, and letting critical ecosystems return. And it means building resilience that lasts — in the land, and for the people who depend on it," said Moira McDonald, director of the Environment Program at the Walton Family Foundation.

Extreme Weather Damage Is Concentrated in the South

Extreme weather damage is most commonly reported in the South, where 58% of residents of the East South Central Census division say their community was affected in the past year. That is the highest rate in the nation and consistent with weather data showing the Southeast experiences billion-dollar disasters more often than any other region. The West South Central (47%) and Middle Atlantic (43%) divisions also report above-average impact, while the Mountain (26%) and East North Central (28%) divisions report the lowest. Across the Heartland states, 41% of residents report extreme weather damage in the past year. This pattern has continued into the summer: The East South Central states have been among those hit by July's flash flooding, with

damaging high water across Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia, even as a Fourth of July heat dome pushed dangerous temperatures across much of the Southeast.

Most Affected Residents Worry It Will Happen Again

Among Americans whose communities were affected by extreme weather, 57% say they are worried it will happen again. Worry is highest in the Mountain division, where 74% of affected residents express concern, including 24% who are very worried, even though the region reports the lowest overall damage rates. The West South Central and South Atlantic divisions follow at roughly six in 10, while New England is lowest at 43%.

In the Mountain West, Drought Drives Deep Concern

The Mountain division's worry is driven largely by drought. The eight states in and around the Colorado River Basin have been contending with severe, sustained drought: 55% of Mountain-region residents say they experienced drought in the past year, more than double the 24% national average, and 85% of those affected worry about a recurrence. The Colorado River's major reservoirs have fallen to roughly one-quarter to one-third of capacity, down from nearly full in 2000, and water managers are taking emergency steps to keep the river's major dams above the level needed to generate hydropower. These pressures are now playing out politically, with Basin states and Mexico racing to renegotiate the decades-old rules for sharing the river's water before they expire at the end of 2026, affecting the 40 million people who depend on it.

Nature Remains Central to How Americans See Their Communities

The strain comes even as Americans express broad agreement about the value of natural spaces. More than eight in 10 (84%) say access to nature improves quality of life in their towns and cities, and nearly two-thirds (64%) say nature is essential to their community's economy. Three-quarters of adults say their community is worth investing in, even when they acknowledge its shortcomings. That is a sign of resilience, since worry about future weather events does not appear to push people to give up on where they live.

Yet the ability to act on that commitment is unevenly distributed. Among residents whose communities experienced water-access problems in the past year, just 53% say they would know where to voice their concerns, no higher than the 53% of residents whose communities were not affected. When people cannot translate concern into action, the gap between caring about their community and being able to protect it remains wide.

"When extreme weather strains the conditions opportunity depends on, including good jobs, affordable housing, trusted neighbors and healthy natural spaces, it can leave people feeling less in control of their own futures," said Justin Lall, principal at Gallup. "The encouraging news is that communities that invest in those conditions are better equipped to withstand these pressures."

Methodology

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web study completed by 6,732 U.S. adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. All responses were collected between Feb. 26-March 6, 2026. For results based on the overall sample of adults, the margin of sampling error at the 95% confidence level is ± 1.5 percentage points for response percentages around 50%. Margins of error for subgroups are higher. All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

About the Walton Family Foundation

The Walton Family Foundation is, at its core, a family-led foundation. Three generations of the descendants of our founders, Sam and Helen Walton, and their spouses work together to lead the foundation and create access to opportunity for people and communities. We work in three areas: improving education, protecting rivers and oceans and the communities they support, and investing in our home region of Northwest Arkansas and the Arkansas-Mississippi Delta. To learn more, visit waltonfamilyfoundation.org and follow us on [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Instagram](#) and [X](#).

About Gallup

Gallup delivers analytics and advice to help leaders and organizations solve their most pressing problems. Combining more than 80 years of experience with its global reach, Gallup knows more about the attitudes and behaviors of employees, customers, students and citizens than any other organization in the world.

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