

# Belief in Paranormal Phenomena Among Adult Americans

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GEORGE H. GALLUP, JR., and FRANK NEWPORT

Americans express a belief in the existence of paranormal, psychic, ghostly, and otherworldly experiences and dimensions to a surprising degree. These beliefs, including many that contradict more traditional religions, are almost as common among Americans who are deeply religious in a traditional sense as in those who are not.

Also, according to a new Gallup Mirror of America survey, a majority of Americans are unaware of the New Age movement, and those who are aware have a more negative than positive view of its impact on American religion and society.

The poll of 1,236 adults conducted in June 1990 reveals that:

- One of every four Americans believe in ghosts.
- One of every four Americans believe they have had a telepathic experience in which they communicated with another person without using the traditional five senses.
- One in six Americans have felt they have been in touch with someone who had died.
- One in ten claim to have seen or been in the presence of a ghost.
- More than half believe in the Devil, and one in ten claim to have talked to the Devil.
- One in seven say they have personally seen a UFO (unidentified flying object).
- Three in four at least occasionally read their horoscopes in a newspaper, and one in four say they believe in the tenets of astrology.

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*A Gallup national survey shows that paranormal beliefs are widespread. Yet belief in astrology and the reality of UFOs has lessened, superstitions are widely disbelieved, and the New Age movement is unadmired.*

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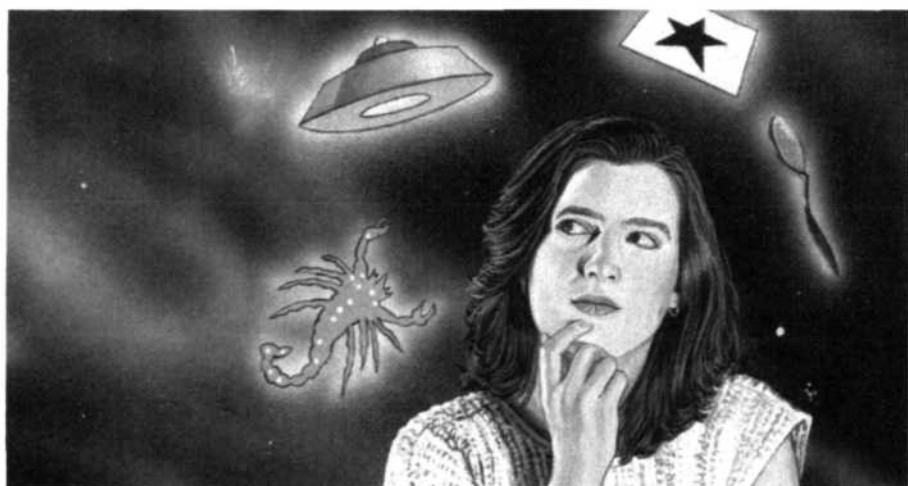
*For each of the following items I am going to read you, please tell me whether it is something you believe in, something you're not sure about, or something you don't believe in.*

	Believe %	Not sure %	Do not believe %
In déjà vu, or the feeling that you have been somewhere or done something before	55	13	32
In the Devil	55	8	37
In ESP, or extrasensory perception	49	22	29
That people on this Earth are sometimes possessed by the Devil	49	16	35
In psychic or spiritual healing or the power of the human mind to heal the body	46	20	34
In telepathy, or communication between minds without using the traditional five senses	36	25	39
That houses can be haunted	29	17	54
That extraterrestrial beings have visited Earth at some time in the past	27	32	41
In clairvoyance, or the power of the mind to know the past and predict the future	26	23	51
In astrology, or that the position of the stars and planets can affect people's lives	25	22	54
In ghosts, or that spirits of dead people can come back in certain places and situations	25	19	56
In reincarnation, that is, the rebirth of the soul in a new body after death	21	22	57
That people can hear from or communicate mentally with someone who has died	18	20	62
In telekinesis, or the ability of the mind to move or bend objects using just mental energy	17	24	59
In witches	14	8	78
In channelling, or allowing a "spirit being" to temporarily assume control of a human body during a trance	11	22	67
That pyramids have a special healing power	7	26	67
That rock crystals have a special healing power	4	20	76

Americans have always been fascinated by the idea that there is something beyond the traditional world of experience. These "out of the normal" experiences can involve many different types of occurrences. Some are called "psychic" phenomena or, as author Bernard Gittelson describes them, "anything that appears to overstep the confines of known physical laws." These include such unusual

mental experiences as telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, déjà vu, telekinesis, and the ability of the mind to control and heal the physical body.

Other "out of the normal" experiences involve the belief that our lives can be controlled by superstitious occurrences or, in the case of believers in astrology, by the positions of planets and stars. Still others involve the mysterious realm of death—and



what happens to humans when they die; whether or not they return in various forms and shapes, and whether or not we can communicate with them. And there is the unknown beyond our planet, including UFOs, visits by extraterrestrials, and the possibility of life on other planets.

All of these types of beliefs and occurrences contradict our physical senses and what is known "rationally." Those who follow psychic and paranormal phenomena claim that they are occurring all around us. As Gittelsohn says in his book *Intangible Evidence*, "Evidence of seemingly paranormal goings-on come in from all over—from many different fields, from many different belief systems, and from all corners of the world."

The results of the survey seem to support the fact that Americans are very much aware of this type of evidence. All in all, only 7 percent of Americans deny believing in any of a list of 18 paranormal experiences asked by Gallup. Almost one-half say they believe in five or more. And, even though actual experience is less frequent than belief, three of four have experienced at least one such occurrence, with about half claiming experience with more than three.

Who are these believers in the paranormal?

They tend to be baby-boomers and the middle-aged, particularly those between the ages of 30 and 49. Belief in "paranormal" experiences cuts across conventional religious measures: almost as many deeply religious Americans as those who are not religious profess belief in and experience with the paranormal.

Paranormal Beliefs—Trend  
(Percent who believe in each item)

	1978	1990
	%	%
ESP	51	49
Devils	39	55
Déjà vu	30	55
Astrology	29	25
Clairvoyance	24	26
Ghosts	11	25
Witches	10	14

### *Psychic Experiences*

The idea that our minds alone—without using the traditional five senses—can perform extraordinary feats or are privy to abilities that we

have barely begun to tap has fascinated us for many years. Scientists don't claim to understand fully how the brain works, and therefore most do not rigorously rule out the idea that there are parts of it that we don't routinely use or activate.

The new Gallup survey shows that a good number of Americans believe they are already activating their psychic awareness. By far the most common such psychic phenomenon is the feeling of *déjà vu*, that a person has been somewhere or done something before. [Editor's note: Most psychologists do not consider *déjà vu* a "psychic" or paranormal phenomenon.] Some have attempted to explain this occurrence as a biological one in which brain synapses undergo a brief delay so that we actually sense the same event twice. Others feel that *déjà vu* is evidence of either reincarnation or some form of reliving lives. Whatever the explanation—if any—it is a sensation known to millions. More than one-half of all Americans (57 percent) claim to have experienced *déjà vu*.

Feelings of *déjà vu* are most common among the young. It is almost twice as likely to have occurred among Americans 18 to 29 years of age as among Americans over 50. It also is reported more often among those living on the West Coast and apparently reflects socioeconomic status, in that it is more likely to be reported by college graduates and those with higher incomes than the less well educated and those with lower incomes.

Another very common psychic belief among Americans is that the mind can actually participate in healing the body. This belief is now becoming more common in the orthodox medical community as anecdotal evidence and the experiences from other cultures and religions

accumulate that suggest the mind can in fact have a major influence on the body and its processes.

About one-half of Americans polled by Gallup (46 percent) believe in this spiritual or psychic power, although only one-quarter (25 percent) claim to have actually experienced a situation in which they healed their body by mental processes alone.

The idea of mental communication between two people, living or dead, without using the traditional five senses of sight, hearing, smell, touch, or taste is another form of psychic phenomenon that has intrigued us through the centuries. Tales abound of mothers who rush across town because they sense their baby is in need, or of lovers who somehow know their partner is in danger, or those who know who is on the phone before they pick it up.

Carl Shrager, editor of *American Psychic* magazine, says, "Telepathy is really our sixth sense, the shadow sense that people accept to varying degrees. Knowing who's on the phone when it rings is the most common everyday telepathic experience."

More than a third (36 percent) of Americans say they believe in telepathy, or communicating with others without using the five senses. One of four (25 percent) claim to have actually had a telepathic experience.

Almost one of every five Americans say they believe it is possible to communicate with the dead, and 17 percent say they have felt in touch with someone who has already died.

Belief in clairvoyance, or the ability to forecast the future, is reported by about one in four Americans. Not all of these people put their money where their mouth is, however. Only about 14 percent of them say that they have actually consulted a fortune-teller or

*Now, as I read another list, I want you to tell me whether or not you have ever had each of these types of experiences. First, have you ever:*

	Yes %	No %	No opinion %
Had the feeling of déjà vu and felt you had been somewhere or done something before	56	42	2
Felt that you were in touch with or getting a message from someone who was far away without using the traditional five senses	25	74	1
Been able to heal your body using the power of your mind without traditional medicine	25	72	3
Felt that you were in touch with someone who has already died	17	82	1
Consulted a fortune-teller or psychic	14	85	1
Been in a house you felt was haunted	14	85	1
Felt you were talking to or being talked to by the Devil	10	89	1
Seen or been in the presence of a ghost	9	90	1
Felt that you were here on Earth in a previous life or existence in another body	8	90	2
Personally seen someone moving or bending an object using just mental energy	7	92	1
Consulted an astrologer	6	93	1
Bought or used a rock crystal for its special healing powers	3	96	1
Been personally involved in channeling, by participating in a trance during which a "spirit-being" temporarily assumed control of your body	2	97	1
Bought or used a pyramid for its special healing powers	1	98	1

psychic.

A belief in telekinesis—the ability of the mind to move or change physical objects—is not as widespread. Only about 17 percent think it is possible—with a smaller 7 percent saying they have actually witnessed telekinesis.

### *Superstitions and Astrology*

Superstitious people assume that such everyday events or occurrences as a black cat crossing one's path and the breaking of a mirror can affect their

lives. Those who believe in astrology feel that the cosmic forces behind the positions of planets and stars are determining factors in what happens in our daily lives ("The horoscope is a mandala, a symbol of the personal imprint of the quality of energy operable in the universe at the time of birth," according to one New York City astrologer).

Superstitious behavior and astrology are probably the most commonly talked-about aspects of paranormal or "out of the ordinary" phenomena in American society. Yet, the new Gallup

Poll shows that, perhaps surprisingly, belief in these phenomena is no more prevalent than belief in other, seemingly more esoteric experiences measured, such as telepathy and sightings of UFOs.

Fewer than one out of five Americans (18 percent) admits to being very or somewhat superstitious. Another one in four claims to be "not very" superstitious, with over one-half—56 percent—saying that they are not at all superstitious.

It may be that age and experience serve to diminish superstitious behavior. The most superstitious Americans are those under 30 years of age, of whom 28 percent say they are very or somewhat superstitious. Catholics are slightly more superstitious than Protestants, blacks are more superstitious than whites, and, in general, there is a tendency among those who are more religious to claim they are the least superstitious.

The most common American superstition is the fear of bad luck when a black cat crosses one's path. The top six superstitions, as reported to Gallup:

- A black cat crossing one's path (mentioned by 14 percent of those who said they were at least a little superstitious).

- Walking under a ladder (12 percent).

- Friday the 13th, or things happening in threes (9 percent).

- Breaking a mirror (5 percent).

- Attempting to wear certain types of clothing or avoiding certain types to obtain good luck (2 percent).

- Believing that speaking or thinking ill or good about an event or person will make something happen (2 percent).

About one in four Americans say they believe in the basic premises of astrology—that the positioning of stars and planets can have some

*Some people are superstitious and try to behave in such a way as to avoid bad luck or "jinjing" themselves, and others are not. How superstitious are you? Would you say you are:*

	%
Very superstitious	3
Somewhat superstitious	15
Not very superstitious	26
Not at all superstitious	56
No opinion	•
	—
	100

\*Less than 0.5%

*And what one or two superstitions affect you most?*

	%
Black cat crossing path	14
Walking under a ladder	12
Numbers/Friday 13th/Bad things happening in threes	9
Breaking a mirror	5
Wearing a special or lucky clothing/dress in a certain order/avoiding colors	2
Speaking ill or good about a person or event makes it happen	2
Picking up pennies/coins	1
Following horoscope	1
Evil/the devil	1
Knocking on wood	1
Telepathy/ESP	1
Other	11
None	4
No opinion	52

Note: Totals add to more than 100% due to multiple responses.

impact on one's daily life. This is down slightly from Gallup's 1978 measure of belief in astrology. One in four Americans also regularly read their horoscopes (26 percent read it at least once a week or more), about the same as astrology-column measures in 1975 and 1988.

## Life After Death

*Do you ever read your horoscope in a newspaper or magazine, or not? (If Yes:) Do you read it every day, a couple of times each week, once a week, once a month, or just every once in a while?*

	%
Yes, every day	10
Yes, a couple of times each week	10
Yes, once a week	6
Yes, once a month	5
Yes, just every once in a while	43
No	26
No opinion	.
	110

\*Less than 0.5%

*Do you happen to read any astrology column regularly?*

	1988*	1975
	%	%
Yes	25	23
No	71	77
No opinion	4	0
	100	100

\*Note: Sample size is 500.

Women are slightly more likely to read horoscopes than men, older people are more likely than the young, and those with less education are more likely than those with college degrees. Belief in astrology is only slightly less common among churchgoers, evangelicals, and those to whom religion is very important in their lives than it is among nonbelievers.

Nonetheless, there must be some passing fascination with astrology even among those who don't profess to believe in it—the Gallup Poll shows that 74 percent of Americans admit to at least occasionally looking at their horoscopes.

What happens when we die? Since the dawn of humanity, this question has been of tremendous importance to humans focusing on their own mortality. Some psychiatrists speculate that dealing with death is the central psychological force in our lives. Anthropologists and sociologists theorize that dealing with death is the common motif among almost all religions studied across cultures and historical time periods.

One thing is clear from Gallup Poll data: relatively few Americans want to admit that it is all over when death occurs. More than 70 percent believe in life after death—a number which is now only slightly less than the percent found by Gallup in repeated measurements since World War II.

If there is life after death, what form does it take? Of course there are the traditional concepts of heaven and hell—and past Gallup Polls show that seven out of ten believe in heaven, and about half believe in hell.

But a good number of Americans believe that there may be less conventional things that happen to us when we die. One out of five Americans (21 percent) believe in reincarnation—the “rebirth of the soul in a new body after death”—a concept significantly different from the traditional life-after-death beliefs that form the central component of mainstream Protestant and Catholic theology in this country.

Despite this, belief in reincarnation cuts across all of Gallup's traditional religious measures: it is believed in by 24 percent of Catholics, 19 percent of Protestants, 21 percent of church members, 18 percent of those who attend church regularly, and 22 percent of all those who are “born-again” Christians. About one in ten

Americans, in fact, go so far as to say that they themselves feel that they were here on Earth in a previous life or existence in another body.

What about communicating with the dead? According to the Gallup Poll, this type of experience is not necessarily out of the question to a good number of Americans: 17 percent feel they have "been in touch with someone who has already died," and a total of 18 percent say it is possible even if they have not experienced it themselves.

Is it possible that after death we come back in a more ghostly or spiritual form? A surprising one in four Americans believes in ghosts—defined as "spirits of the dead who come back in certain places and in certain situations." One in ten claims to have seen or actually been in the presence of a ghost, and 14 percent have been in a house they felt was haunted.

### *The Devil and Witches*

A majority of Americans claim adherence to a form of a Christian religion, in which the concepts of heaven and hell, God and the Devil are central components. It is therefore not surprising that Americans maintain a generally persistent belief in the existence of the Devil. More than one-half of Americans (55 percent) believe in the Devil, a number that has not changed markedly over time. Belief in the Devil is strongly prevalent among American Protestants, those who are "born-again," and those to whom religion is very important.

About half of Americans go so far as to say that people are sometimes possessed by the Devil.

Witches don't fare as well. Only 14 percent believe in witches, slightly up from the 10 percent Gallup measured in 1978.

### *UFOs*

Our "normal" frames of reference and understanding of the world around us would probably undergo the greatest disruptions if we ever discover and/or are visited by intelligent life from planets other than our own.

To about one-half of all Americans, the question is *when* we come into contact with extraterrestrial beings, not *if*. Forty-six percent of Americans believe that there are people somewhat like ourselves living on other planets in the universe." This number is essentially the same as measured by Gallup in 1973, and thus has apparently not been affected by our increasingly sophisticated exploration of our solar system and universe.

Despite this stability in belief in intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, the percent of Americans who believe that UFOs are real has decreased to 47 percent today, down from 57 percent in 1978 and 54 percent in 1973. At the same time, the percent of Americans who say they have seen a UFO is up, to 14 percent from 9 percent and 11 percent in previous years.

For those who believe they have seen a UFO, the remembrances are vivid. A 40-year-old woman in New Hampshire, interviewed by Gallup, recalls: "We saw a flashing thing in the sky on a hot summer night. There were quite a few of us who saw it. We called the *Boston Globe* and apparently there were quite a few other sightings that night. Of course, everyone thought we were nuts."

Or, as a woman in California recounts: "When I was real small, I was on a trip with my parents. We were out in the country and the car quit and a bright light took off and then the car was able to start again. It was very strange and we never talked about it."



*Have you heard or read about unidentified flying objects—UFOs?*

	1973	1978	1990
	%	%	%
Yes	95	93	90
No	5	7	10
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

*Have you, yourself ever seen anything you thought was a UFO?*

	1973	1978	1990
	%	%	%
Yes	11	9	14
No	89	91	85
No opinion	*	*	1
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

\*Less than 0.5%

*In your opinion, are UFOs something real, or just people's imagination?*

	1973	1978	1990
	%	%	%
Real	54	57	47
Imagination	30	27	31
No opinion	16	16	22
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

*Do you think there are people somewhere like ourselves living on other planets in the universe or not?*

	1973	1978	1989	1990
	%	%	%	%
Yes	46	51	41	46
No	38	33	48	36
No opinion	16	16	11	18
	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>	<u>100</u>

Belief that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe and that UFOs are real apparently does not mean that this intelligent life has

actually touched the Earth's surface. A much smaller percent of Americans (27 percent) feel that aliens have actually touched down and visited Earth.

### *The New Age*

Many of the types of psychic and paranormal phenomena measured in the new Gallup Mirror of America poll have been associated with the "New Age" movement—a hard-to-define conglomeration of beliefs that has spawned a good deal of media attention, and which has been the topic of a considerable amount of concern within more traditional, mainline churches.

It is very hard to pinpoint what the New Age movement is. (One New Age author's attempt goes as follows: "It is the condition that emerges when I live life in a creative, empowering, compassionate manner. It manifests when I recognize and honor both the intrinsic wholeness of my world and the value and importance of everything within it.") But to many it is connected with public figures like Shirley MacLaine, and such psychic activities as channeling, crystal and pyramid power, and belief in reincarnation.

One New Age author's essay on channeling is titled "What Is Channeling and Why Is It So Popular?" and contends that there is "an extraordinary upswing in public interest in the phenomenon we now call channeling."

This upswing is not evident in our national Gallup data: Only 11 percent say they believe in channeling (defined as "participating in a trance during which a 'spirit-being' temporarily assumes control of your body"), and only 2 percent say they have ever participated in it.

Similarly small numbers have used a pyramid or rock crystal for their

*Have you heard or read about the New Age movement?*

	%
Yes	29
No	69
No opinion	2
	<hr/> 100

(The following three questions were asked only of those who had heard of the New Age movement, 386 respondents.)

*Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of it?*

	%
Favorable	18
Unfavorable	49
No opinion	33
	<hr/> 100

*Do you think the New Age movement is good for traditional religions, a threat to traditional religions, or does it not affect traditional religions either way?*

	%
Good for traditional religions	7
A threat to traditional religion	35
Not affect traditional religions either way	36
No opinion	22
	<hr/> 100

*Do you think the New Age movement is good for United States society, a threat to society, or does it not affect society either way?*

	%
Good for society	13
A threat to society	34
Not affect society either way	33
No opinion	20
	<hr/> 100

purported healing powers (1 percent and 3 percent, respectively).

In fact, only about three of ten (29 percent) Americans say they have heard of the New Age movement, and for those who have, their view is decidedly more negative than positive. Forty-nine percent have an unfavorable view of the New Age movement, with only 18 percent professing a favorable view.

Unfavorable opinions may reflect the concern being expressed by many church leaders and theologians. Unfavorable opinions are particularly strong among Protestants, evangelicals, and those who attend church regularly. In fact, about one-third of those who have heard of the New Age movement feel that it is a threat to traditional religions, a sentiment that jumps to 50 percent among "born-again" Christians and is in general higher among the more religious Protestants.

### *Methodology*

The results are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,236 adults, 18 and older, conducted June 14-17, 1990. For results based on a sampling of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sample and other random effects could be plus or minus 3 percentage points.

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.

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