

## Overview

The terrorist attacks of September 2001 were not just an assault on the physical infrastructure of the U.S.; they were also a blow to the sense of safety and security of millions of Americans. Some research has examined the immediate consequences for the surviving victims, their families, and people who lived close to the site of the attacks. But there has been little examination of the implications of these events for the general public or their long-term effects. The purpose of this study was to specifically examine the long-term responses and coping responses of individuals who were not necessarily direct victims of the terrorist attacks.

## Participants

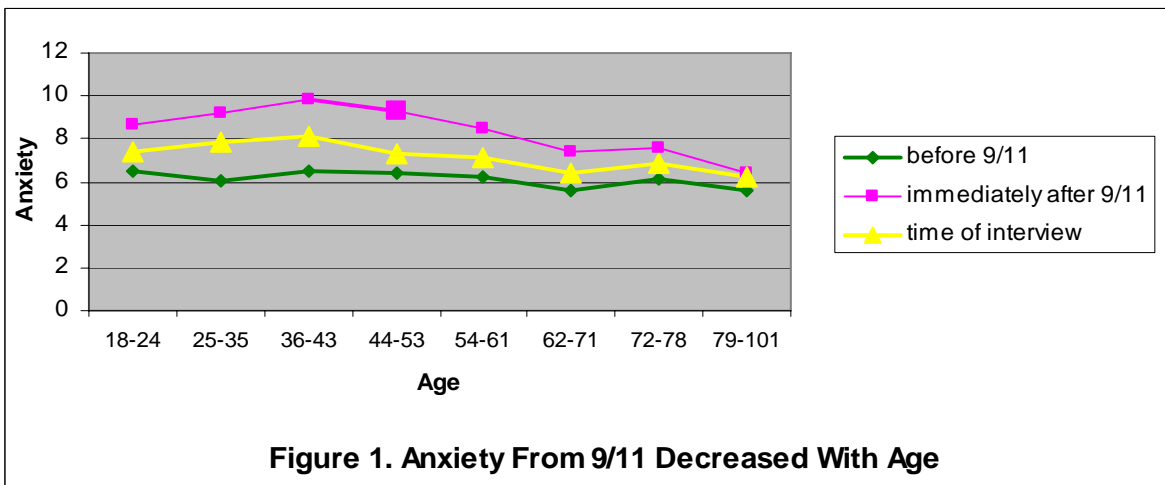
Five hundred and one people between the ages of 18 and 101 (average of 52.9 years old) were interviewed. Most participants were Caucasian (about 70%). Most participants (92.4%) were California residents; however, there were a few who lived outside of the state, some as far away as Massachusetts, New Jersey, and the District of Columbia. The interviews took place in the second year following the attacks (September 2002 to July 2003) and focused on feelings of distress (anxiety, loss of control, personal vulnerability), and fear of flying. Additionally, we asked questions about what people see as the reasons for attacks and fears concerning future attacks.

## Key Findings

The majority of people interviewed (73%) said that the 9/11 events had changed them or their outlook on life. The most common responses were that they now felt more vulnerable, were shocked by the attacks, and experienced a change in how they want to live their lives with a focus on living life to the fullest. For example, one participant said he/she “all of a sudden felt vulnerable in this country...I couldn’t believe it, it is an incredible event and it never crossed my mind that anything like that would happen.” Yet another had this to say: “Immediately after the attacks I found a renewed sense of ‘Carpe Diem.’ When I saw that many people die so instantaneously, I felt a renewed need to live life more appreciatively and to be more aware of each day instead of the future.”

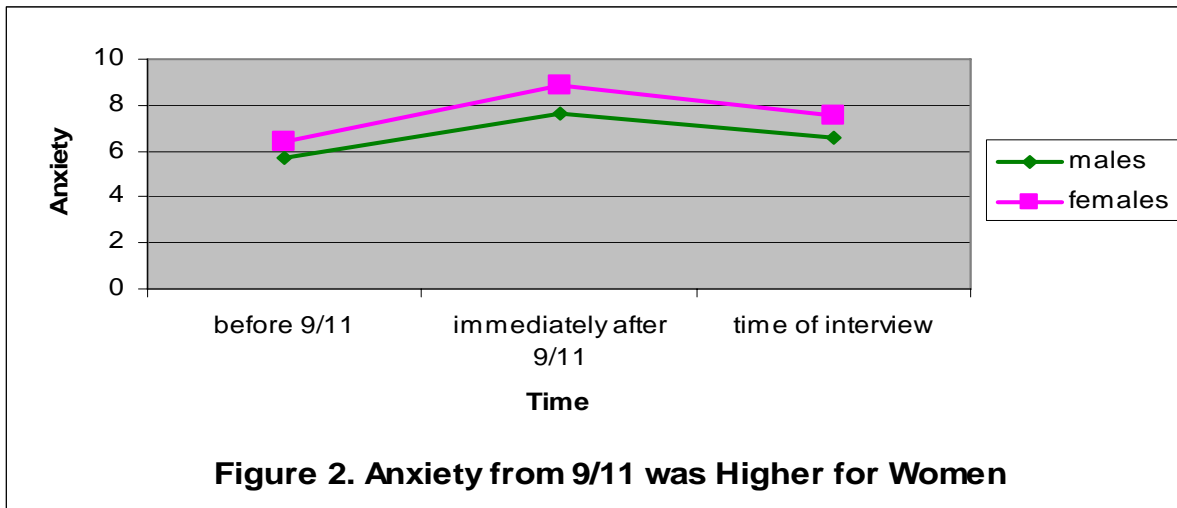
### ◇ *Anxiety*

Most people—about 65%—experienced an increase in general anxiety immediately after the attacks. Although for many this anxiety had decreased by the time of their interview, almost 17% of people interviewed reported *no recovery* from anxiety levels related to the attacks. Additionally, these findings were different for people of different ages. Although overall all individuals felt increased anxiety from 9/11, older people generally were less affected. This finding is shown in Figure 1. This might be due to the fact that older people have more life experiences, which work to help them cope better with an event such as a terrorist attack.



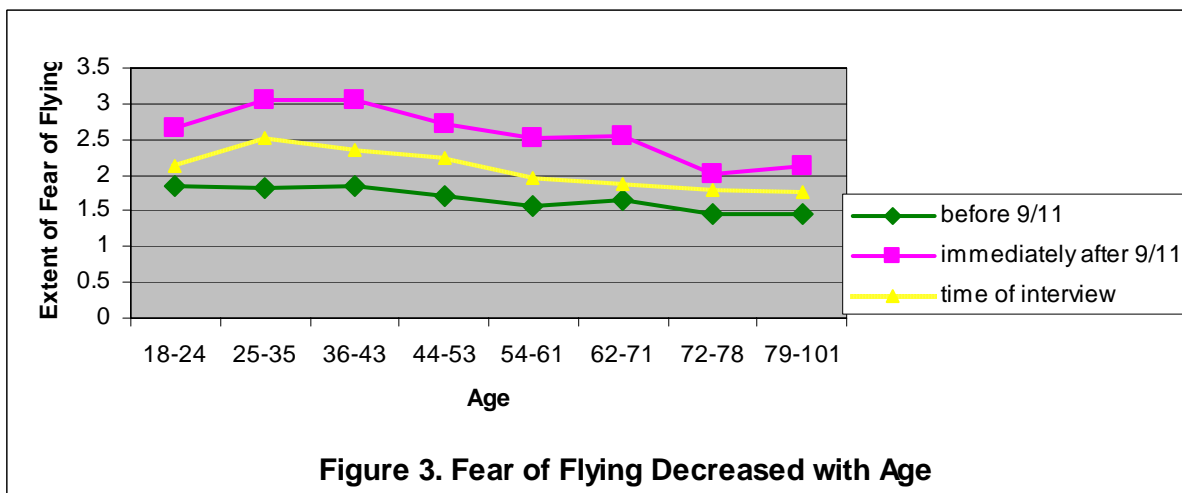
**Figure 1. Anxiety From 9/11 Decreased With Age**

These findings also differed between men and women. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, women reported more general anxiety than men. This was true for before 9/11, immediately after 9/11, and at the time of their interview. There are several reasons why this might have occurred, one of which is that women might be more likely to report the anxiety that they feel.



◇ *Fear of Flying*

Again for most people (about 55%), fear of flying increased as a result of 9/11. Fear of flying and reluctance to fly remained elevated for a substantial number of people (31%) at the time of their interview. As with the findings related to anxiety, people of different ages differed in their fear of flying. As can be seen in Figure 3 below, older people were generally less fearful of flying. Although most people’s fears of flying increased after 9/11, younger people’s fears were more affected than older people. Again, this might be due to older people’s prior experiences with flying. It is important to note that these findings are probably *not* due to frequency of flying, because older and younger people did not differ in the number of flights they took yearly.



◇ *Coping with the Attacks*

We also examined the actions and coping strategies associated with experiencing anxiety. We found that people who reported that they used avoidance and distraction are currently more distressed and have more fear of flying, while those who tend to think about and deal with their problems are less distressed. In addition, those who felt they understood why the attacks happened and who focused on ways in which their risk is low

have less anxiety. It is likely that thinking about the terrorist attack and engaging with one's fears may have helped people make sense of what happened and find adaptive ways to think about their personal risk.

Because feeling that the attacks were understandable and judging that one's risk was low were both related to good coping, people's perceptions about these two topics were examined in further detail. People identified a wide variety of reasons why the attacks occurred. These ranged from reasons dealing with US foreign relations policy, to the actions of zealots and crazy people. Three reasons were most strongly associated with feeling a sense of understanding and meaning: 1) believing that the attacks were due to misguided U.S. foreign policy (an example of which is the following statement: "[the] US thinks the way all countries are run and work are the U.S.'s business, so they get involved and they don't always belong, and they've made a lot of people angry"); 2) economic disparity between the U.S. and other countries (such as the following statement: "there is inequality in the world. [The] U.S. is powerful and other countries have less and expect something like this to...equalize it."); and 3) the actions of crazy people (as one person succinctly stated, "I think they're crazy."). Although these are very different explanations, a belief in any one of them seemed to satisfy the need for understanding.

Those people who felt that they were at low risk of being involved in a terrorist attack focused on the fact that flying is safer than driving, or felt that due to increased security and the singular nature of the attacks they would not happen again. As one person stated, "the security is pretty good...I do not believe the next attack will be by taking an airplane." People who did not feel that the risk was low were not reassured by the changes in security and felt they could be easily breached by future terrorists. For example, someone else had this to say when describing security changes: "With all the security measures that have been implemented at the airports, people are still boarding planes with illegal items. This shows that security isn't where it should be." Yet another had this to add: "It's so easy for [terrorists] to get on, it happens all the time, we have seen people with knives."

### **Implications**

These findings have implications for understanding people's psychological preparation for and recovery from future unanticipated national events. From 1 to 2 years after the 9/11 attacks, a significant number of Americans are still experiencing increased anxiety, loss of control, and concerns about their safety. In addition, the levels of anxiety are not lower in those who were interviewed a longer time since the event. This suggests that distress is not gradually dissipating in the general public and the long-term effects are more widespread than is usually recognized. People who are still feeling distressed by the events should understand that their reactions are not abnormal. It also appears that more open discussion of people's concerns about the 2001 attacks could be useful. Many people we interviewed commented to us that they welcomed the chance to talk about their reactions and did not have other opportunities. Open discussion can help people find ways to understand why the attacks happened, could expose them to an optimistic perspective that focuses on lower personal risk, and help them feel less personally powerless.

Once again, thank you for taking part in this important research. We feel that these results are interesting and important, and have the potential to help people in our society cope with the threat terrorist attacks pose. We could not have completed this study without your help, and look forward to conducting more research on this and related topics. We would be happy to answer any questions you have about this report, the findings, or the study in general. We can be reached by phone at (909) 607-7734, or by email at [mss14747@pomona.edu](mailto:mss14747@pomona.edu).