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Antony Davies & James R. Harrigan: What's really scary

ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN | Saturday, Oct. 28, 2017, 6:24 p.m.



Lillian DeDomenic | For the Tribune-Review

It's Halloween again, the season of manufactured fear. People love being scared, and almost the whole of October is dedicated to the proposition. Unfortunately, we fill the other 11 months of the year with fears that are every bit as fabricated.

We are terrified of something happening to our children. Yet children are safer today than ever. The average American child is five times more likely to die from a dog bite (<http://www.nsc.org/learn/safety-knowledge/Pages/injury-facts-chart.aspx>) than from an abduction. The probability of a child being physically abused is less than half (<http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/poi130100.pdf>) what it was just a generation ago, and child-mortality rates have fallen 50 percent (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/14/theres-never-been-a-safer-time-to-be-a-kid-in-america/?utm_term=.182202611dcc) in the past 25 years.

It is literally safer to be a child in the United States today than at any other place and time in human history.

But, fearing for their safety, we bus our children everywhere and refuse to let them play unsupervised. Not coincidentally, adolescent obesity has quadrupled (<https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/obesity/facts.htm>) .

When we do allow them out by themselves, our children are in greater danger of being taken by Child Protective Services (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/14/theres-never-been-a-safer-time-to-be-a-kid-in-america/?utm_term=.79d0033beb6a) than by strangers. From CPS to nosy neighbors, few appear to understand that an irrational fear of and zealous response to unattended children can be more harmful than the inattention.

As if bubble-wrapping children weren't bad enough, we do it to adults, too. We are so terrified of terrorists that we have all but forfeited our Fourth Amendment rights. We ask the Transportation Security Administration to annoy, delay and even molest us. Yet, by the agency's own admission, the TSA has not stopped a single terrorist. Worse, in Department of Homeland Security tests, screeners failed to find hidden weapons 95 percent (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/investigation-breaches-us-airports-allowed-weapons-through-n367851>) of the time. For this we pay \$8 billion annually.

Meanwhile, our elected representatives talk (<https://www.fedsmith.com/2016/09/23/should-the-tsa-be-expanded-to-cover-all-modes-of-transportation/>) about expanding the TSA to cover trains and subways. When it comes to consuming taxpayers' dollars, there's nothing so successful as a failed government program.

Many of us are terrified of guns. Yet, despite horrific tragedies (<http://www.marketwatch.com/story/these-are-the-10-deadliest-mass-shootings-in-us-history-2017-10-02>) like those in Las Vegas, Orlando, and Blacksburg, Va., the firearm-homicide rate in the U.S. has fallen 50 percent (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/05/07/gun-homicide-rate-down-49-since-1993-peak-public-unaware/>) over the past two decades, and the non-fatal firearm crime rate has fallen by a whopping 75 percent. This isn't because we're getting rid of guns. The number of guns per capita in the country has doubled (<http://www.npr.org/2016/01/05/462017461/guns-in-america-by-the-numbers>) over the past 50 years, and the number of people with concealed-carry gun permits has risen 150 percent (<http://washington.cbslocal.com/2014/07/10/report-number-of-concealed-carry-permits-surges-as-violent-crime-rate-drops/>) over the past 10 years.

Too many of us are terrified of marijuana. Despite a growing legalization movement, we arrest over a half-million people (<http://www.drugwarfacts.org/chapter/marijuana>) each year for its possession. Marijuana really doesn't ruin lives; police, courts and prisons do the ruining. Compared to what the law will do to you, marijuana is incredibly safe. According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than 2,000 people die each year from alcohol poisoning; 25,000 die from prescription drug overdoses; 5,000 die from cocaine; and 11,000 die from heroin. The number who die from marijuana overdoses? Zero (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/marijuana-deaths-2014_us_56816417e4b06fa68880a217) .

It's fun to be scared when we know there is no real danger. But when we legislate based on what scares us instead of what threatens us, everyone loses. Scaring ourselves on Halloween is fun. Scaring ourselves the rest of the year is just plain stupid.

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